



# NEWS & VIEWS



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

New series

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

**We send our best wishes for the festive season to all our readers. We hope to see you at our New Year's meal on 17 January – see page 6 for details about booking your place.**

## Past events

### Asian Rationalist Society

**On 20 September, a small group of our members met up with eight or nine members of the Asian Rationalist Society (Britain) (ARSB), at their premises on Soho Road, Handsworth. John Edwards reports on the meeting, to which some of the ARSB members had travelled from Derby.**

Sachdev Virdee, the secretary of ARSB, described the history of Asian rationalism and outlined some of the Asian Rationalist Society's aims, achievements and problems. It started in Sri Lanka in 1963, spread to India in 1970 and to the Punjab in 1980. About 80% of the population in these parts of the world are struggling with poverty and not getting three meals a day, but such is the power of religion that most accept this fatalistically or put this hardship down to misdemeanours in their previous life/lives. Even graduates there are unfamiliar with concepts of equality, so promoting rationalism and Humanism is much more difficult in India. Even though the society is slightly more liberal than in Pakistan, prominent rationalists have to be far more cautious than in the West, a fact sadly reinforced by the murder of Narendra Dabholkar in August 2013.

The Asian Rationalist Society (Britain) was formed in 1997 as freethinkers realised that the lives of many Asians in the UK were blighted by religious superstition and exploitation. It is estimated that around £94,000,000 is taken from the Asian population in the UK by deceitful tantrics and shamen. ARSB became a charity four years later. Currently it has a team of fifteen workers dedicated to making their societies more equal and individuals more aware of scientific matters, personal health and the choices open to them.

Over the last sixteen years, they have imported pamphlets and magazines in Punjabi and distributed these widely within their communities, run health awareness campaigns and tried to minimise exploitation by fraudulent 'god men'. In the fifteen years from 1980 to 1995 there were five fraud convictions, but 2010 saw as many again in just twelve months. One of the biggest fraudulent tantrics, who had stolen over £3 million, was tried at Wolverhampton Crown Court that year and was sent to prison.

In 2012 ARSB started a blood and organ donation project. This year they have organised Ghadar Centenary celebrations. Raj Pal explained that this was designed to make UK Asians aware of

the discrimination faced by Indian migrants to the USA and Canada in 1913, which led to the formation of the Hindustan Ghadar Party, the first modern political, social and cultural organisation. Not only did it campaign for an independent, secular India but it also put the case against caste discrimination. ARSB felt this was an important but little known centenary.

Then followed a discussion on what should be the focus of their future programme of action. Should it be promoting responsible actions in this life (such as organ donation), challenging religious fundamentalism, promoting rationalism or taking political action? And should it be targeted at communities in the UK or in Asia? Balbir Rattu, the President, pointed out that the major problems were not in the UK – on the subcontinent 77% of households had no basic facilities such as toilets, 60% of women were anaemic and 44% of children were underweight. Set against these figures, campaigning against the 'god men' in south east Asia might seem less important. In answer to a question, he stated that around 7% of the population in India were atheists, roughly comparable to the 5% in Saudi Arabia.

We then adjourned to The Faircroft in Rookery Road, where the discussion continued over drinks, until food arrived at 10.30pm. The meeting finally broke up at around 11.15 after a few songs had been sung. Thanks to our friendly hosts in the north of the city, this proved to be a very convivial and interesting meeting.

**A fuller account of the history and work of ARSB appears on pages 5–6, along with a tribute to Dr Narendra Dabholkar, whose murder is mentioned above.**

## Human rights, Humanist rights?

**On 11 October Dr Ruth Wilson led a thought-provoking session about some of the implications of equalities and human rights legislation. It was disappointing that there was such a poor turnout for this event (probably due to the bad weather), as this was different from many of our other meetings, with a very participative format and lots of opportunities for discussion.**



Ruth began by handing out a series of 'true or false?' statements about inequality of various kinds, for the group to debate. Many of us were shocked to discover the actual levels of inequality and discrimination that some groups of people have to contend with – for example, people from Gypsy or Roma backgrounds, transgender people and those with special educational needs.

The second activity was about stereotypes – Ruth asked us to say what the common perceptions are of particular groups of people, such as young black men, lesbians and disabled people. What can we do to counteract these stereotypes, she asked.

Ruth then outlined her own background. After starting out as an English teacher, she moved first into adult education, teaching English to speakers of other languages, and next to work with refugees and asylum seekers. She then became an adviser on gender and disability equality, and went freelance as an equalities consultant five years ago.

Ruth summarised the legislation on equality, which aims to reduce levels of inequality and to change public attitudes. The main pieces of legislation are:

- the Human Rights Act 1998
- Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006
- the Equality Act 2010, which replaces much of the equality legislation passed during the previous 40 years on separate issues, such as race relations and sex discrimination.

Ruth went on to define some of the terms used in equality legislation, such as direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, victimisation and hate crime.

Under the Equality Act, Ruth said, public bodies have a duty to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination
- advance equality of opportunity
- foster good relations between those who share a 'protected characteristic' (eg in relation to disability or race) and those who don't.

## 'Gangology'

**On 12 November Raymond Douglas spoke to us about the work that he does with the organisation Anti Youth Violence, which uses education programmes to counteract the rise in gang-related violence in the UK.**



Ray explained that he began working in this field because, as a youth worker, he had seen an increase in violence among young people, and wanted to try and find out what was causing it, and what could be done to stop it. In an area of 3 square miles in inner city Birmingham, he said, 42 young people have died through knife crime.

He felt that there were lots of contributory factors, including the way that young black men are treated by the police and are viewed by society generally, and a pop culture (films, music, computer games) that glorifies violence. Young people who come from a stable background are better able to resist, but those who lack home support and feel they have no stake in society are more likely to succumb to gang culture. If you have no family, the gang becomes your family, so violence is often territorial.

The system is failing young people, and government policies do little to help, Ray said. There are huge financial costs (never mind emotional ones) when someone is stabbed or shot, yet public spending on preventative measures is minuscule or is being cut – for example, Birmingham has just closed 28 youth centres.

Anti Youth Violence tries to bring about change, Ray told us, both by working directly with young people, and by providing training for practitioners wanting to gain the skills needed for working with young people in inner city settings.

## A Humanist Christmas?

**On 6 December we made an early start to the festive season. In between plentiful helpings of mince pies and mulled wine, we found out about the pagan origins of Christmas, looked at alternatives to Christmas and sang some 'irreligious' Christmas carols and songs, with new words to old tunes.**

### Pagan origins of Christmas

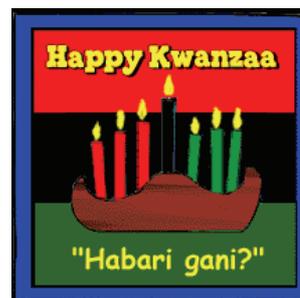
Jane Wynne Willson began by pointing out that Christians have no monopoly on Christmas. It's a multicultural, inclusive festival, so those who accuse Humanists of being hypocrites for sending Christmas cards are in the wrong! People all over the world have been holding winter celebrations for many centuries. Cultures that celebrated the winter solstice include Ancient Egypt, Greece (Brumalia), China, Japan, Korea and Persia.

Mithraism, the worship of the Persian sun god, Mithra, was brought to Europe by the ancient Greeks and had a strong following in the Roman empire, especially among soldiers. There are striking similarities to the story of Jesus – for example, Mithra came from heaven to be born as a human being, to save people, and shepherds were the first to hear of his birth.

Customs associated with Christmas – such as exchanging gifts, the Christmas tree, the Yule log, putting up mistletoe and holly – are common to many different cultures and are not necessarily associated with a 'Christian' Christmas.

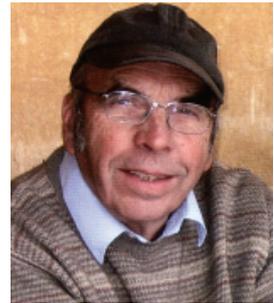
### Alternatives to Christmas

Adrian Bailey took us through some of the alternatives to Christmas, both traditional (St Nicolas Day, celebrated on 6 December; Saturnalia, the ancient Roman festival; Hogmanay) and 'made up', including Kwanzaa, based on African teachings and mainly celebrated by African Americans; Human Light, started by Humanists in New Jersey; and Festivus, celebrated on December 23 as an alternative to participating in the commercialism associated with Christmas. The symbol of this is an unadorned 6 foot aluminium pole, and the celebration includes practices such as the 'Airing of Grievances' and 'Feats of Strength'!



## Richard Crane

The news of Richard Crane's death came just before we sent out the last issue of News and Views, so there was no time to include anything but a brief announcement. Several of our members attended Richard's funeral, which was a fitting and moving celebration of his life. I am grateful Richard's family and to Victoria Denning, who conducted the funeral, for allowing me to draw on the funeral script for this obituary.



I feel sure that those of you who came across Richard at our meetings will recognise him from the description given by his son Steve, who said that that 'the strengths of my father's character were his sincerity, his generosity and his willingness to help anybody out'. Richard was 'a rebel at heart' and it was 'this sense of rebellion that led him to always support the underdog, which is what made him such a good probation officer'.

Remarkably, Richard made a complete career change in mid-life. Having worked for many years as a farmer in the West Country, he eventually decided, after a day castrating piglets, that 'there must be more to life than this!' After volunteering for the Samaritans, he decided to train for the probation service. With his wife and two sons, he moved first to Chester and then to Birmingham, where he worked for 17 years, until his retirement.

But his work and family weren't the only things in Richard's life – he had a wide range of interests, which he continued with even greater enthusiasm after he retired. His great passion was gardening. He grew vegetables, fruit and flowers – he had four (!) allotments, and was involved with the Moseley in Bloom group. He was an enthusiastic supporter of Moseley Rugby Club, of which he had been a member long before coming to Birmingham.

Richard expressed his love of music through playing in brass bands – a tradition carried on by both his sons. Steve Crane said: 'One of the greatest gifts he gave my brother and me was music, which has completely shaped our lives and has also been passed on to his grandchildren, who are who they are because of this gift.' One of the most moving moments at Richard's funeral came when his sons played a piece of music called 'Song for my father' during the committal – a truly fitting tribute.

Carolyn Sugden

## Ex Cathedra



**Adrian Bailey, Chair of Birmingham Humanists, reports on the latest developments in our attempts to get Humanist representation on Birmingham's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education.**

In September we were disappointed by Birmingham SACRE's decision yet again not to have a Humanist rep. This saga has been going on for years, and has a lot to do with the influence of Guy Hordern, Marius Felderhof and Les Lawrence. Unfortunately the new Labour Chair, Barry Henley, is more concerned about reducing the size of the committee than about making it more representative. This may not matter too much in the medium term, because many schools are now leaving local authority control. In addition, the marketing of the Birmingham syllabus to other authorities is not going as well as Hordern et al had hoped. However, at the moment we are left with a syllabus which associates religion with all that's wonderful in the world, which implies that lack of religion must be pretty miserable. One of the councillors on the committee, Valerie Seabright, has agreed to act as a representative for our members and supporters in the city. So if you have any concerns or questions about RE or assemblies in Birmingham schools, you can email her at [Valerie.Seabright@birmingham.gov.uk](mailto:Valerie.Seabright@birmingham.gov.uk).

I passed on the bad news at the British Humanist Association's SACRE meeting last month, where many reps from around the country had gathered. There was some excellent news, though, which was that the new framework issued by the national RE Council puts

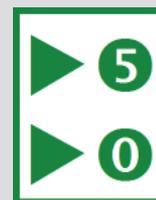
non-religious world views such as Humanism on an equal footing with religious beliefs – see <http://resubjectreview.recouncil.org.uk/re-review-report>. There was quite a bit of discussion about what RE should really be called (my preference is 'Religion and Ethics' – everyone has their hobby horse!) but the priority is to get the teaching right first and worry about the name afterwards.

The guest speaker at the BHA meeting was Stephen Shashoua from 3FF (aka Three Faiths Forum – [www.3ff.org.uk](http://www.3ff.org.uk)). This organisation began as a place for dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims, but now helps to educate people about all life stances. One of its main activities is to send groups of speakers into schools, where they tell stories from their lives. Afterwards the children quiz them about their beliefs. Stephen says that Humanists are among the most requested speakers. 3FF and the BHA are both keen to have more Humanists available to speak in schools. There will be a BHA training day in Derby on 22 March – please let me know if you'd like to take part, or if you'd prefer something on another date or closer to home.

In 2014 we'll be celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with special events such as the talk by Theodore Dalrymple in February and a day conference in June (details about this will be available in the next issue of News & Views).

Happy New Year!

Adrian



## The Asian Rationalist Society of Britain (ARSB)

We arose from a society and culture where the word 'rationalism' is broadly missing. A majority of graduates don't even know the word, let alone its meaning. Most Indian people are accustomed to accepting inequality and poverty as natural phenomena. They believe that nobody but God can help. The structure of society is based on a strict social hierarchy. According to Christianity, God created Adam and Eve. But in Hinduism man(kind) is divided into four equal parts or 'vernas': head, shoulders, belly and feet. One from the feet has no rights and is only there to serve the upper three. Over the passage of time this mythical, unethical idea has been accepted as the reality of people's lives. This sorry state of affairs is promoted and kept in place because of the vested interests of specific people who want to benefit from it. Otherwise the 80% of the people who are living a life of misery wouldn't stay silent. Hence the cunning formula which has become the norm to exploit vulnerable people by telling them that their past lives are the reason for their good or bad life now.

There is a dire need for rationalism, and for raising awareness among the general public, particularly among Asian people. For that we needed organisations, and the Rationalist movement was started in the early 1960s by Dr Abraham Kovoor in Sri Lanka. It spread to India in 1970 and to Punjab in 1980 (Tarksheel). The Asian Rationalist Society (GB) was set up here in July 1997 with the help of B S Barnala, becoming a registered charity in June 2001.

The ARSB has been raising scientific awareness in Asian communities for sixteen years, with one of its main aims to move towards a healthy society where respect for human dignity, openness, tolerance and acceptance of differences should prevail. We have a team of fifteen dedicated colleagues who have been working in our offices in Handsworth since 2003. The majority of Asian people who come to live in Birmingham from India are vulnerable village people who are prone to exploitation. One might accept this type of exploitation back home, where the rule of law does not exist, but why did it go unnoticed for almost four decades in this country, where people accept the rule of law and the principle of human equality? It is believed that around £40 million is milked from the British Asian community every year. No organisation, local authority or community leaders noticed what was going on, and the exploitation continued. Even the officers working in the enforcement agencies were either oblivious to the problem or unprepared to deal with it. It was believed that Tantrics were helping to improve the community's mental health. (Mental illness is not thought of as such in the Asian community.) So there was a need for an organisation like ours.

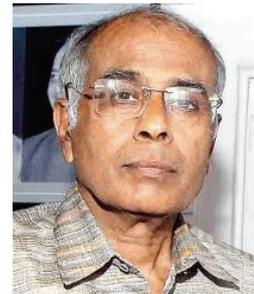
We have branches in some other cities (Coventry, Derby and Leicester) and supporters all over the UK. Magazines from Punjab are the regular source of scientific awareness, distributed in the

community. These magazines guide people through aspects related to daily life: health, society, scientific studies, etc. We write articles, we run bookstalls and public meetings, and take part in radio and TV discussions. We undertook a Mental and Physical Health project in 2003/4. In 2007 we exposed three Tantrics with the help of the BBC Inside Out TV programme. In 2008, new and revised legislation came into force replacing the 1951 Act on Mediums and Faith Healing, bringing them under the category of trades. That historic victory was achieved through the efforts of Rationalist and Humanist organisations. Working with Trading Standards, in 2010 we helped to put one of the biggest Tantrics behind bars after he stole £3 million from vulnerable people. In 2011/12, working with the NHS and the city council, we undertook a Blood and Organ Donation project with money from the Lottery Fund.

## **Narendra Dabholkar**

### **Sachdev Virdee of ARSB pays tribute to the rationalist Narendra Dabholkar, who was assassinated on 20 August 2013.**

The death of Dr Narendra Dabholkar is a great loss not only to the Rationalist and Humanist movement in India but to the whole world. This vicious attack is not only to silence the voice of Dr Dabholkar but to threaten the entire movement of which we are a part. I appreciate the role of IHEU and the BHA in raising this issue in the world's media – otherwise it would have been taken very lightly.



Democracy in India is not of the same measure as we enjoy here. The promotion of Rationalism and Humanism is far more difficult there and we salute the boldness and bravery with which Dr Dabholkar struggled. His son Hamid, a psychiatrist, said: 'The Anti-Superstition and Black Magic Ordinance was passed the very next day after his murder, but we have paid a hefty price for it. This is not just our story: the common man is caught between incompetent politicians and the fear of his life.'

Though Rationalism was a way of life for Dr Dabholkar, he was aware that the struggle between emotions and reason was a long one. His work was never limited to the eradication of blind faith. He wanted to make his people aware of irrationality in all forms, be it alcoholism, gender inequality or environmental damage.

His wife, Dr Shaila, said he believed in making scientific temperament easy to access: 'Just ask why, how, where and who and you will know how to lead your life.'

'We got married with the commitment that we would work for society. I was idealistic and I found the right partner,' she said. 'People think that I, as a wife, had expectations, as children they had demands. But our efforts were always towards ensuring that he got maximum time for his work. We were activists first, and family later.'

## **Don't forget...**

Our New Year's meal is on 17 January. It's at the same venue as last year – the Ming Moon, 16 Hurst Street, Birmingham B5 4BN, at 7.00pm.

To book your place, contact John Edwards at [jaejed@hotmail.com](mailto:jaejed@hotmail.com) or on 07837 198355.

For full details of all our other meetings, see the events diary.

## **Contributions to News & Views**

We're 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](mailto:carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk), 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB.