



NEWS & VIEWS



www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New series

Number 41

March 2013

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.

Past events

What can you say?

On 12 December 2012, David Allen Green, who is a lawyer and journalist, the legal correspondent of the New Statesman and the writer of the Jack of Kent blog, spoke to the group about freedom of speech, blogs, Twitter and libel laws.

David prefaced his talk by telling us (or reminding those of us who have been with the group for a while) that in the 1990s he was the Secretary of Birmingham Humanists. He's proud of being a Brummie, he said. Birmingham has always been a place of great energy, with a tradition of free speech and free expression. Historically it's been both a commercially thriving centre and an intellectual hothouse, with many freethinkers coming here, especially those from Unitarian and Quaker backgrounds. At the Lunar Society the greatest minds of the age came together to discuss ideas.

David outlined his own background as a lawyer and journalist. He explained that he acts for the defence in free expression cases. He pointed out that it's easy to defend people who've made grand declarations, but less easy to defend those who, when talking casually to their friends, say something that others take exception to. People making incautious statements in blogs or on Twitter are becoming increasingly vulnerable to legal challenge.

David spoke in detail about the Twitter joke trial at which he was the solicitor for the defence. Frustrated at the closure of Robin Hood airport when he needed to get to Northern Ireland, Paul Chambers tweeted a message that was patently meant as a joke, about 'blowing the place sky-high'. The message wasn't sent to the airport, but was picked up by a security manager who happened across it when doing an online search for 'Robin Hood airport'. This was graded as a non-credible threat, but was nevertheless handed to airport security police. It was then passed on to South Yorkshire police and eventually to the Crown Prosecution Service, which decided to prosecute Chambers under the law that makes it an offence to send a menacing communication. He was at first convicted, but then cleared on appeal before the Lord Chief Justice. The consequences of this case were severe for Paul Chambers – he lost his job and remained unemployed for two years.

The case points up the difficulty of setting boundaries over free expression in social media, and over how seriously apparently joking comments should be taken. Would we prosecute John Betjeman now for writing 'Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough', David asked, or Shakespeare for exhorting 'Let's kill all the lawyers'?



David Allen Green



Paul Chambers with Al Murray and Stephen Fry outside the High Court

A lively Q & A session followed, covering topics which included:

- the need for the CPS to put better guidelines in place, to prevent such stupid decisions being made in the future – once a decision to prosecute is made, it's very hard to get it reversed
- defamation – everyone has the right not to be defamed, David said. He didn't believe in abolishing the law of libel, but that it should be kept in its proper place and shouldn't be used as a weapon to close down fair criticism.
- free speech – this is not an absolute, David stressed, but you should be able to say what you want unless you are causing 'clear and present danger'.

David referred to several recent cases, including those of:

- Vaughan Jones, a blogger who was sued for libel after he posted unfavourable reviews of the self-published book *The attempted murder of God* on Amazon
- Simon Singh, who was sued by the British Chiropractic Association for criticising chiropractors in an article in the Guardian, stating that they promote bogus treatments for childhood ailments such as colic and ear infections, without a jot of evidence. The BCA eventually dropped the case, leaving Simon Singh many thousands of pounds out of pocket, having spent two years fighting the case.
- Sally Morgan, a prominent psychic, who is suing the Daily Mail for libel, following an article by Paul Zenon, in which he accused her of perpetrating a deliberate fraud on the public. The case is due to come to trial in June 2013.

David ended by reiterating his disdain of the idea of the law being used to clamp down on free thought.

A community of women

On 12 March 2013 Professor Ruth Watts gave an engrossing talk about the educational, medical and social reforms brought about by a group of women in Birmingham in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Professor Watts told us, there was a fascinating group of women in Birmingham who are often ignored in the history of the city. Coming mainly from Quaker and Unitarian backgrounds, these women brought about considerable changes, both nationally and internationally.



Professor Ruth Watts

Many of these women lived in the Moseley, Edgbaston or Harborne areas of the city and knew each other through being involved in campaigns such as Birmingham's Female Society for the Relief of the Negro Slave, where they learnt civic and political skills. They were very humanitarian in their concerns, and the idea of social class was important to them – not in any 'Lady Bountiful' sense, but because they recognised that social change could only come about through improving the circumstances of people living in poverty.

Professor Watts described the lives of two women as examples of this group: Mary Sturge and Julia Lloyd.

Mary Sturge (called 'Maida' by her family) was the second permanent woman doctor appointed at Birmingham Women's Hospital. She came from a leading Birmingham family – her father was Mayor of Birmingham. She was in the first intake of pupils at Edgbaston High School for Girls, many of whose students went on to university or took up a profession. She was also one of the first four women scholars at Mason Science College (the precursor of Birmingham University). Sturge helped to form the students' union there, then went on to London University, where she was one of the first women to take a medical degree.



Dr Mary Sturge

After a few years in London hospitals, in 1895 she returned to take up general practice in Birmingham, also working as anaesthetist at Birmingham Women's Hospital. In 1905 she was appointed to a permanent position as honorary physician at the hospital.

Mary Sturge was a much beloved doctor, who was particularly noted for her work with children and with terminally ill women, for whom she established a

home of rest. Part of a growing community of women medics in Birmingham, Mary was President of the Medical Women's Foundation. She was also active in Birmingham Women's Suffrage Society, and involved in peace and refugee work during her later years. She was a strong advocate of temperance and wrote an influential book, *Alcohol and the human body*, which sold thousands of copies in the UK and the USA.

Julia Lloyd also came from a prominent family – the Lloyd banking family – and, like Mary Sturge, was an early pupil at Edgbaston High School for Girls.



Julia's central concern was the education of young children. She was interested in the ideas of Froebel, who stressed the importance of training women to educate young children. In 1888 she became a student at the training college of Caroline Bishop, who had been trained at the Pestalozzi-Froebel Haus in Berlin. Later Julia herself spent a year at the Pestalozzi-Froebel Haus, following which she became determined to open 'People's Kindergartens' in England.

Her aim was to change the lives of children from poor families, and those of their mothers. She thought a kindergarten should be like the best home a mother could supply, enabling children to learn through play.

Julia Lloyd

In 1903 the Birmingham People's Kindergarten Association was formed, and the first kindergarten opened in Greet in 1904, with backing from local Quakers and Unitarians, and with Julia Lloyd in charge. It was a great success and a second kindergarten was established in 1907 at the Birmingham Women's Settlement in Summer Lane, eventually followed by a third in Sparkbrook.

After the 1918 Education Act moved the provision of nursery education to local authorities, Greet became a nursery school and moved to Selly Oak, where it remains to this day.



These two women, Professor Watts said, exemplified the pioneering spirit and activism of a new generation of professional women, many from non-conformist backgrounds, who played an important part in bringing about social, educational and medical changes in the early twentieth century.

Social events

New Year meal

There were sixteen of us at the New Year meal at Ming Moon. It was a very convivial occasion – we were able to use a separate room, so there were plenty of chances to move around and socialise as we went to and fro to fill our plates at the varied and plentiful buffet.



In our own room at Ming Moon!

'Pancakes at Percy's'

In February the meeting we had planned at Percy's house coincided with 'Pancake Tuesday', so we decided to change the name and nature of the occasion accordingly. (Yes, we know the the tradition has religious origins, but so do lots of other occasions we continue to celebrate – there's no reason why why atheists can't have fun too!) It turned out to be a very enjoyable occasion, with excellent pancakes provided by chefs Adrian and Bill, lots of good conversation and a chance to browse among the books of the Humanist library, which is housed at Percy's. We hope we didn't leave any sticky finger marks on the books! Thank you for your hospitality, Percy.

An evening with Sanal Edamaruku

On 22 March about twenty members and visitors braved snowy conditions to hear Sanal Edamaruku, President of the Indian Rationalist Association, in conversation with Adrian Bailey, the Brum Hums Chair. John Edwards reports on the meeting.



Sanal Edamaruku

Life in India has become rather too exciting for Sanal – after years exposing the tricks of India’s gurus and ‘godmen’, he is now threatened with jail for offending the Catholics of Mumbai and for the last nine months he has been touring Europe, North America and Argentina publicising the organisation Rationalist International, which he founded in 1995, and debunking superstition in the West whenever possible.

A quietly spoken man, he explained at the start that his mother and father were not humanists – in fact, theirs was a Christian-Hindu mixed marriage. Perhaps because of this, they were concerned that Sanal should not be indoctrinated with any beliefs and determined that he be allowed to make up his own mind. This caused problems at school, as religion was a compulsory subject. His father had to argue with the Education Department for two weeks before they agreed to allow Sanal to become the first student in the history of India to be recorded with no particular caste or religion. So he was not taught any religion at school, but was exposed to lots of different people of all faiths and none through his parents. An early experience that set him against religion was when relatives forced his mother to convert to Christianity when she was eight months pregnant –or else they wouldn’t take her to hospital, they said.

However, it was the death of a young neighbour from a blood cancer that turned Sanal into an activist at the age of 15. The girl’s parents refused to believe it could be cured, so she died without treatment. Sanal was so angry he formed a student group which later became the Rationalist Group of India. This group got lots of media attention in the 1990s when it put on a road show called ‘Gurubusters’ – a national miracle exposure campaign in which Sanal and a group of students visited over a hundred districts in India exposing the tricks of the godmen.

He explained that Indian people are very superstitious because they are scientifically illiterate, even in states where 100% can read and write. Con men use what are basically magic tricks to demonstrate their religious power – for example, they claim that they can pierce their cheek or tongue only because they are blessed by a goddess or god. We watched a You Tube video of a loudspeaker-bedecked minibus arriving and volunteers showing that, contrary to appearances, piercing does very little damage or pain – the pain is more in the mind of the beholder, and little damage is done, as there are no major blood vessels or bones in these tissues. The clip showed that fire-eating is another trick that can easily be demonstrated. It is usually performed with pieces of camphor, which catch fire at a very low temperature and are easily extinguished by the carbon dioxide in the person’s breath. You can see this video and many more by Googling ‘Sanal’. He has so many ‘hits’ that his full name pops up almost immediately. The film was made by a Channel 4 team which travelled with the minibus for fifteen days. The film wasn’t shown on Indian TV until about thirteen years later.

Sanal was then asked to recount how he came to make perhaps his most celebrated TV appearance, the one when he dared to challenge tantric Pandit Surendra Sharma to prove his claim that he could kill anyone with magical powers. He admits he was a bit concerned when the tantric, having failed at the first attempt, had another try but this time said he needed a knife. After 1½ hours Sharma had still failed to kill Sanal and claimed this was because Sanal was protected by some other gods, which was patently untrue, as Sanal is an atheist. The whole process was repeated the following night with a ‘more lethal’ Ultimate Painful Death recital in front of 50 million viewers. When Sharma failed after sixteen minutes of trying, he claimed that Sanal would die later that night. This was later changed to ‘in three days time’, then to within 27 days. Since then four years have passed. By foolishly accepting Sanal’s challenge, Pandit Surendra Sharma has conclusively been shown to be a fraud.

Finally Sanal was asked to recount the story of how he came to be in exile: about twelve months ago he exposed the ‘miracle’ of the water-dripping statue of Jesus in Mumbai. You can see on YouTube how Sanal gave his scientific explanation on TV, arguing so convincingly against a panel of Roman Catholics that the Bishop of Mumbai felt compelled to take part in the programme via a telephone link. He did his cause no good at all by claiming that Sanal was ‘ignorant’ and that ‘the development of science owed everything to the Catholic church’!

You can tell who people believed: before the debate there were queues of people every day to see the miracle and taste a drop of the 'holy water' (which was in reality backed-up sewage), but the day after the show nobody turned up at the church. No wonder the church was angry. Vengeful church leaders vowed to harass him with an array of blasphemy cases. Several petitions based on Article 295 of Indian Criminal Procedure Code 1816 (Indian Blasphemy Law) were filed at over twenty police stations in Mumbai. All but three of the police stations rejected the petition out of hand, but a few accepted it and one police officer wishes to arrest him. Sanal explained he's in no danger of being found guilty of blasphemy – that's not the real aim of his enemies in the church. They want to get him behind bars for even just one night, so that he can easily be killed without any reprisals. His lawyers tried and failed to get 'anticipatory bail' and eventually suggested he should go underground while they fight the case as, although he's defending reason, science and common sense, he could be arrested at any moment in India.

Sanal said that he was using his time in exile productively, training up his successors from afar so to be certain that he is not indispensable, and disproving miracles such as the 'Swaying Madonna' in Ireland. Overall he said he was satisfied that the situation was getting better in India. The Indian Rationalist Association is concentrating on the country's young people, those who might come under the influence of the religious charlatans, rather than the old who are already believers in superstitions. This is because the average age in the subcontinent is 22 years, and in ten years time it will be just 18 (as opposed to 43 in Europe). There are now lots of rationalist groups in India and more and more science camps are being set up. There are other areas, however, where progress is disappointing, Sanal said.

Visit the website www.rationalistinternational.net for details of petitions of support and the 'Sanal Edamaruku Defence Committee'. Please spread the information to gain more support for this courageous rationalist who is challenging superstition with reason, science and common sense.

The evening concluded with a short but lovely slide show produced by Ruth Wilson. This depicted the life, from birth to the present, of her mother Jane Wynne Willson, whose 80th birthday is at the end of March. Jane was presented with a card, a bowl of spring flowering plants and a potted orchid and was told that we would be sponsoring a child at a Humanist school in Uganda in her name. Jane thanked everybody who has contributed to the gifts.

A birthday present for Jane

Jane Wynne Willson has been active in the Humanist movement – locally, nationally and internationally – all her life. We wanted to mark her 80th birthday in a special way, and have chosen something close to her heart – the sponsorship of a child at a Humanist school in Uganda. We hope that many of you will want to contribute. If you'd like to do so, please send your contribution to the Treasurer (John Edwards, 157 Welford Road, Birmingham B90 3HT) or use PayPal – go to <https://www.paypal.com/uk/webapps/mpp/send-money-online> and enter the payee as birminghamhumanists@googlemail.com.



Jane Wynne Willson

Ex Cathedra

Following on from last Friday's meeting (see above), Adrian Bailey, Chair of Birmingham Humanists, reports on his three days with Sanal.

I'm exhausted. I've just spent three busy and happy days with Indian rationalist Sanal Edamaruku; this was the first time I've seen him since I met him in Delhi and Birmingham in 1991. It was great to bring him here again, and on the occasion of Jane Wynne Willson's 80th birthday we had an excellent event at the Moseley Exchange. Many thanks to Bill and Jan Green for hosting Sanal while he was here. If you're unaware of the work that rationalist organisations do in India, you can see Robert Eagle's 1995 film 'Gurubusters' at <http://vimeo.com/18820938>.

While Sanal was here, he wasn't just talking; in an effort to expose the way in which the 'shaikhs' who advertise their counselling services in the Metro newspaper prey on the vulnerable, we went to visit one of them. Sanal quickly discovered that their services don't come cheap: £450 to help him with the bad dreams he was having... More about this in the next newsletter.

Adrian

The god debate



Chris Smith, one of our members, who also chairs the Shropshire Humanist Group, reports on the recent debate about the existence of god between Andrew Copson from the BHA and Richard Lucas from the SOLAS Centre for Public Christianity.

The long-trailed debate has taken place. From the time I saw Andrew, as he came off the train at Gobowen station, I felt I could relax a little. The venue was very pleasant, and we had plenty of Humanist information to add to the religious books on a side table. The room was far from full, but the bar was open and the atmosphere was relaxed.

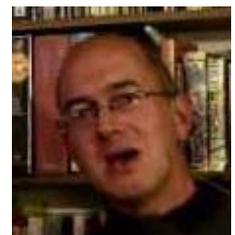
A timely start was made, Richard Lucas gave five reasons for the existence of god. My notes are not very clear – there were a lot of words, and even more numbers with many zeros, and there was a weird video representing DNA(?) doing something complicated. Andrew

(cleverer than a box of monkeys) gave reasons to support the belief that god (gods, goddesses, etc) was a human construct, before addressing the five points. The chair was even handed – when running out of time, he gave Andrew to the end of his sentence. It was a very long sentence, and the chair congratulated him humorously. Further to and fro followed. Andrew entertained as he explained, with dung beetles and rainbows, and lots of quotes from ancient and modern times. Richard quoted too, from scientists who had found that their researches led them to the inevitable conclusion that god must exist.



Andrew Copson

Then there were questions from the floor. The first was from an Angry Scientist, who challenged what Richard had said. (Unfortunately I didn't manage to speak to him, so don't know whether he was from any of the local groups we had contacted.) More questions were addressed to Richard than to Andrew. Only two seemed to come from believers.



Richard Lucas

There was not to be a vote and, with the usual thanks all round, people were free to continue their conversations, look at the book table, etc. I asked Richard whether he

could tell me about anything I could do to prove the existence of god which would be as convincing as my demonstration of gravity. He explained that god was in our heads and would show himself (if he so chose) in response to our prayers. That response satisfied me as, at least from my point of view, it acknowledged that there is no evidence.

The debate was recorded and we can have a copy of the DVD in time. It will be interesting to hear what others there thought.

Here's a further report from a physicist member of the audience:

Lucas' effort was little (if anything) more than the God of the Gaps; 'all this stuff is so improbable that it must be the work of something even more improbable'.

His gaps were spurious, whether as a result of ignorance or mischief. Simon's exchange with him, regarding consciousness, was entertaining. Had there been time, I'd have had a go at his cosmology, though I know less of it than Simon does of neurology.

Specifically:

- **First cause** – as Andrew pointed out, the Universe as a whole does not necessarily follow the common sense based on our own experience. Physics has had to acknowledge this for at least a century, since Boltzmann, Planck et al began to see beyond the Newtonian model in quantum physics.
- **The Upper Probability Bound** – this is on a par with the tortoise and the hare. It is trivially easy to construct situations in which the number of possible outcomes exceeds the upper P bound, for example, with two packs of cards (1×10^{166} possibilities), but this doesn't mean that they can't or don't arise. See <http://scienceblogs.com/goodmath/2006/06/28/dishonest-dembskithe-universal-1/>, and note that Lucas is both a maths teacher and (according to the website of the school where he works) an amateur magician.

- **Fine tuning** – all that his tiny, wee percentage changes tell us is that chemistry would be different if one of the several constants that form part of the Standard Model of particle physics had different values. This has been known for several years and, not surprisingly, physicists have gone on to consider what would happen if several of the constants had substantially different values. The answer they offer is that, while some combinations of values do appear to be make matter as we know it impossible, many combinations lead to quite different, but quite stable, universes.
- **Mithras** – the links between Mithraism and Christianity are much discussed. A Wikipedia article claims that the link was made by St Justin in the second century CE. A quick Google will show that it is much more than 'something made up for a few YouTube videos'. I felt that Lucas was particularly rattled by Andrew's familiarity with classical religion, and his objection to what he described as the 'Santa Claus question' was not surprising. It was noticeable that he never mentioned the Bible; perhaps he has given up trying to defend the use of folk tales as a basis for a world view, and doesn't want to be pushed back towards it.

Humanist monarchy

Following the meeting in November about the links between secularism and republicanism, Richard Crane writes:

Thank you for the article on the talk by 'Republic' in the December issue of *Humanist News and Views*. I was very sorry to have missed the talk, as I wanted to ask any Humanist royalists how they manage to sing our so-called 'national anthem' (monarchist anthem actually, since it concentrates on 'God' and the 'Queen', not even mentioning the nation), without feeling just a touch hypocritical.

While on that subject, it does mean that we have to sing 'Swing low, sweet chariot' at Twickenham when we play the All Blacks with their performance of the Haka (I bet that scares them!), while the Welsh sing about Wales or the French sing the Marseillaise!

I can usually avoid royal occasions by spending the day at the allotment, but on the occasion of the jubilee we were treated to a four-day event, prolonged by the Duke's illness, complete with TV pictures of the outside of the window of his hospital room. In any event, there being nothing else to do on the day of the river pageant, because of the rain, after hearing for the twentieth time what a 'wonderful job' the queen was doing I became so heartily sick of the sycophancy that I Googled 'Republic', came up with their website and instantly joined.

Just to prolong the agony, as I write we are going through the nauseating press coverage of the royal nausea. As I said on the 'big' day – 'Please make it stop!'

Now there are a number of very pertinent issues around this subject, starting with the question of what the job description is so that we can tell whether someone is actually 'doing a wonderful job' or not (we know about the qualifications!) and ending with who might make a good President – which again begs the question of what they are required to do. Republic recommends the Irish model. In that context, perhaps someone above or beyond politics would be the answer. Possible contenders might be people like Shirley Williams, David Steel, Chris Patten or Betty Boothroyd, for example. Even Prince Charles, or William or Harry could apply.

One thing joining has made me aware of is the insidiousness of the monarchy in this country – it's like a giant octopus with its tentacles penetrating every orifice, from 'royal' Mail to the RSPCA, from HM ship to HM prison, from the QE hospital to the QE Conference Centre. I suppose you could call it subliminal brainwashing!

The upshot and indeed importance of this is that by those means the monarchists have managed to equate the royal family with the country itself, the country personified – the result being that anyone who disputes their right to supply the head of state on a hereditary basis is branded as being unpatriotic.

Anyhow, joining Republic is one way to get on to the police computer at least – but there goes any chance of an OBE, I guess! In any event, it seems to me that, although the number of republicans is growing – 20% at the last count, I believe – it is clear that an elected head of state isn't going to happen any time soon. Apart from the brainwashing described, logic very rarely, if ever, triumphs over emotion.

The church of fear

This is the title of a book on Scientology by John Sweeney, and of a recent Skeptics in the Pub event, at which John Sweeney spoke. 'Zaphod Beeblebrox' reports on both the meeting and the book.

I went along to The Victoria for the February Skeptics talk on Scientology, not realising that the speaker was the Panorama reporter who famously 'lost it' in an altercation with Tommy Davis, who was until 2011 head of the Celebrity Centre International of the 'church' of Scientology.

It was not a typical talk by any means. From the start, John got the crowded upstairs auditorium warmed up by asking us to chant 'Bigot, bigot, bigot' and other derogatory phrases such as 'John Sweeney is genuinely evil' – things he had been called repeatedly by followers of the 'church' when in America in 2007.

He then explained a little of what he and the BBC team experienced – being overtly followed, being covertly spied upon, being recorded and filmed, having Scientologists laying in wait for them at midnight in their hotel lobby, being lied to, being shouted at within inches of their faces – things that it seems incredible that any member of a true religious order would do.



John Sweeney

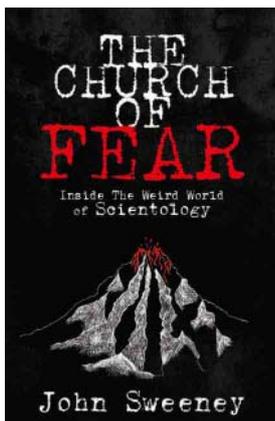
Of course, he helped to bring these things on himself by repeatedly saying to interviewees things such as 'Some people say that Scientology is a sinister brainwashing cult' and 'Some people say the leader of Scientology, David Miscavige, is a bully who goes around hitting people.'

The one thing that really seems to get up the noses of Scientologists is the suggestion that they are a cult and not a real religion. In their eyes, the fact that the US Inland Revenue Service has recognised Scientology as a religion for tax purposes proves it is a religion! Fortunately the UK tax authorities haven't followed suit, yet many local councils have given the organisation financial breaks – for example, it is said that Birmingham Council has agreed that the 'church' is not required to pay council tax on its empty buildings in Moseley!

As his talk went on, John started giving out envelopes to members of the audience, who had to role-play different characters in his book by reading out the words and periodically reciting them in an 'Old MacDonald had a farm' sequence, after which the audience had to join in by yelling the 'Bigot' and 'Genuinely evil' quotes. One of our members was called upon to play the role of the 'Pope' – or 'COB' (Chairman of the Board), as Mr Miscavige is also known. For the leader of a 'church', this guy seems to have a really weird limited vocabulary, full of obscenities and unusual acronyms.

One of the most interesting parts of the book, I thought, is the 'Sci'gy Leaks' – copies of text messages between the COB, or at least his 'Communicator', to Tommy Davis and Mike Rinder as they were trying to keep tabs on the BBC team and capture incriminating footage of Sweeney or his boss. These messages appear to be genuine, as the time differences across the States would be hard to fake consistently, but the 'church' of Scientology denies they are genuine, just as it denies being a brainwashing cult.

These texts are full of hectoring abuse and name-calling, often in acronym form, maybe to conceal meaning or make texting more rapid, and sometimes in capitals for emphasis. One ranted: 'I basically wanted to vomit on that call ... The act of treason yesterday ... Now answer my comm you CICS!' CICS apparently stands for 'counter-intentional cock sucker'! See if you can work out what 'YSCOHB' means!



If you can't find it on the internet, it's certainly decrypted in Sweeney's book *The church of fear: inside the weird world of scientology* (ISBN 978-1-909269-03-3, £12.99, www.silvertailbooks.com). So litigious is the 'church' that it has taken John Sweeney five years to find a publisher who would dare to print his book. So of course I had to buy a copy for the Brum Hums library, and John kindly signed it.

Much of its contents brought back to mind things that our Chair, Adrian Bailey, mentioned in his talk about Scientology a couple of years ago –

the Sea Org, being 'audited' with the E meter, the 'bridge' to becoming a 'clear' and Xenu, the galactic warlord. Oops! I shouldn't have mentioned that – unless you have paid out a fortune to become an Operating Thetan Level 3, knowing the truth about Xenu could kill you!

The repetitive chanting and shouting at the 'talk' made me wonder what Sweeney was trying to achieve, and I ended up shouting out: 'Are we brainwashed yet?' This raised a laugh. As John was one of those laughing, I don't think this was his intention – rather to give us a good time and to demonstrate what the cult, sorry 'church', does to try and make people lose their cool when they are on camera.

Having had some indirect involvement with Scientology through a friend whose eldest son 'disconnected' with the family after entering the 'church', I am most concerned that we Humanists do all in our power to stop the business organisation (because that's what it seems to be to many people) from gaining a power base in the West Midlands.

My friend's son was stopped by a Scientologist in Birmingham city centre, offered a personality test and ended up living in East Grinstead, owing thousands of pounds to the 'church' and forbidden to contact his family or use the internet. Thanks to his father finding an ex-Scientologist who was willing to help, and us allowing this stranger to use our house while we were away, they managed to free him from the 'church' on our neutral ground, while their house was being watched.

Fortunately the internet seems to be making it harder for Scientology to gain adherents. Although it claims to have millions of followers, the true number may be 'something like 40,000'. Its properties in London and Birmingham all look empty, or to have very infrequent use.

'Dianetics' doesn't sound so dangerous, though, does it? Neither does the principle which Scientology claims as its own 'the greatest good for the greatest number', until you realise that, to a Scientologist, the single most important good is probably the expansion of the 'church'!

And, by getting famous people involved, Scientology ensures it will always have a ready-made audience through the media. So I'll leave the last word to Tom Cruise, who is quoted in the front of the book: 'Some people, well, if they don't like Scientology, well, then, fuck you. Really. Fuck you. Period.' So says a devout member of the 'church', which denies all of the allegations put to it by Sweeney and repeated above!

Religion may not survive the internet

Below is a short extract from an interesting article by Valerie Tarico on the Salon website, about how and why the internet is a threat to religions. Her basic thesis is that 'A traditional religion, one built on "right belief", requires a closed information system.' So the internet constitutes the greatest threat that organised religion has ever faced.

This might sound odd, but one of the threats to traditional religion is interfaith communities that focus on shared spiritual values. Many religions make exclusive truth claims and see other religions as competitors. Without such claims, there is no need for evangelism, missionaries or a set of doctrines that I call donkey motivators (ie carrots and sticks), like heaven and hell. The web showcases the fact that humanity's bad and good qualities are universal, spread across cultures and regions, across both secular and religious wisdom traditions. It offers reassurance that we won't lose the moral or spiritual dimension of life if we outgrow religion, while at the same time providing the means to glean what is truly timeless and wise from old traditions. In doing so, it inevitably reveals that the limitations of any single tradition alone. The Dalai Lama, who has led interspiritual dialogue for many years, made waves recently by saying as much: 'All the world's major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether.'

The power of interspiritual dialogue is analogous to the broader power of the web in that, at the very heart, it is about people finding common ground, exchanging information and breaking through walls to find a bigger community waiting outside.

You can find the full text of the article at www.salon.com/2013/01/16/religion_may_not_survive_the_internet.

Greening up our cities

John Edwards reports on a Cafe Scientifique event.

If you thought that growing plants in towns was all that you needed to do to improve the environment a little, you would be wrong. Professor Rob McKenzie of the University of Birmingham explained that the use of trees and other decorative plants can actually do more harm than good to overall air quality, if their location is not considered properly. Many plants give off volatile organic compounds (VOCs), some of which are undetectable to our senses, and these can sometimes react with chemicals in vehicle exhausts to produce ozone. High-level ozone is very good at cutting out harmful UV, but at ground level it is a toxic pollutant generating smogs which are implicated in many human health issues. It turns out that the air quality in many tropical countries is extremely poor because of extensive oil palm plantations, which emit lots of aromatic terpenes and isoprenes, at the side of busy roads.



Professor Rob McKenzie

So which are the best trees to plant in order to minimise the chances of this happening? It turns out that oak is one of the worst and that Leylandii (horror of horrors!) is probably the least damaging to air quality.

Another problem comes if trees are planted on both sides of roads in the centre of cities. When fully grown, the canopies meet overhead and form a sort of tunnel which traps any poor-quality air inside, and pedestrians walking on the pavements then breathe this in. Yet if you dig up trees and verges and replace them with concrete, this prevents water draining properly and you get flash flooding.

Researchers have found that, because pollution cannot easily escape street 'canyons' (roads flanked with high-sided buildings), 'greening up' our streets can give a massive 30% reduction in pollution. 'Green walls' of grass, climbing ivy and other plants can serve as an air pollution filter and are far more effective than rooftop gardens at removing fine particulate matter. If you haven't seen it yet, a green wall is currently being constructed at the side of Snow Hill Station. Apparently cladding the side of buildings with carpet-like material would serve equally well as a particulate filter and might need less engineering, but would not, of course, oxygenate or remove carbon dioxide. Keeping plants alive requires watering systems to be built in to such walls, but rainfall is enough to wash off the particles down into the drains. Deciduous plants also have their own 'self-cleaning' mechanism, of course. All in all, an interesting talk and Q & A.

Annual General Meeting 2013

I hereby give notice that the 2013 AGM of Birmingham Humanists will take place on Wednesday, 5 June at 28 Garland Way, Birmingham B31 2BT. The formal business of the meeting will start at 7.30pm.

The agenda will be sent out in May, along with the accounts and the minutes of the 2012 AGM.

If any member wishes to put a motion to the meeting, this must be received in writing by the Secretary at least 14 days before the meeting. All motions must have a proposer and a seconder.

Carolyn Sugden
Secretary
on behalf of the Committee of Birmingham Humanists

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, 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB.