



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 and Lesbian Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

The Blackham Lecture

'How do we raise moral children?' was the title of the lecture given on 17 May by the philosopher Dr Stephen Law, senior lecturer at Heythrop College, University of London. This was organised by Birmingham Humanists as the first in a series of annual lectures in memory of Harold Blackham, the leading British Humanist and writer on philosophical and historical subjects, and one of the founders of the BHA and the IHEU.

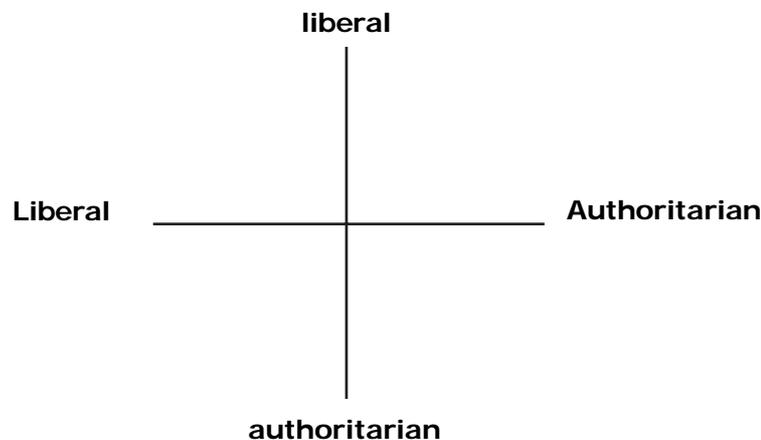


Dr Stephen Law

Stephen began his absorbing and thought-provoking talk by asking how liberal or authoritarian we should be in our approach to moral and religious education. He traced the shift in attitudes that took place from the 1960s onwards, from deference to external authority towards greater moral autonomy.

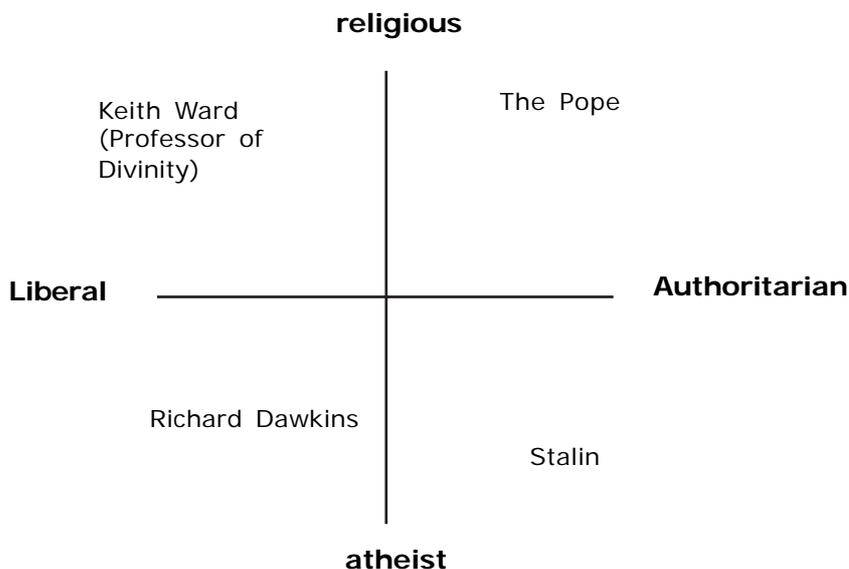
Some people now consider we've gone too far, he said, and think that we've lost our grip and society is falling apart because of what they term a 'moral malaise'. The cure prescribed by these people is a return to a more authoritarian model of child rearing – and particularly towards greater religious authority.

Stephen then went on to put forward the liberal approach to moral education that he would recommend. His first step was to make a distinction between freedom of thought and freedom of action. The former is what he is concerned with, he said. He asked the members of the audience to think about where they would place themselves on the following diagram:



On these two scales, Authoritarians and Liberals (with a capital letter) differ over whether people should obey an external moral authority or make their own moral judgements, whereas lower-case authoritarians and liberals differ over how strict we should be over what we allow people to do.

The next thing Stephen looked at was the relationship between a Liberal–Authoritarian scale and one for religion and atheism. It’s a myth, he said, that liberals are anti-religious. Religions can be liberal, and liberals are free to promote a particular moral code – and atheists can be authoritarian (eg in Stalinist Russia). So his next diagram looked like this:



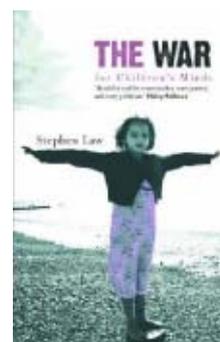
Those arguing for a return to traditional, authority-based religious education often claim that relativism is responsible for the ills in our society, and that this is spread by liberalism, Stephen said. Relativism is the view that all moral points of view are equally valid, so morality boils down to subjective taste. The argument for relativism is that it’s the only way of being tolerant and of acknowledging that we are all fallible and that we can learn from other cultures. However, we can acknowledge our own fallibility, and that there can be much to learn from other cultures, without being relativists. In fact, relativism encourages judgemental attitudes, so we can only condemn the intolerance of others if we reject relativism.

It’s a myth, Stephen said, that a Liberal approach to moral education must promote relativism – Liberals can, and often do, reject it. If relativism were true, there would be no point in bothering to think about moral issues, as no moral view would be more valid than any other. The morality debate has been distorted by the fiction that we have two choices: to stick with the prevailing relativism and slide into moral oblivion, or to return to traditional, authority-based moral and religious educational methods and achieve salvation.

These are not our only options, Stephen said. He stressed his belief in the importance of freedom of thought. Encouraging children to become autonomous thinkers is the only way of raising truly moral citizens. If people blindly follow external authority, they have no moral compass of their own and can easily be led astray: ‘A society of moral sheep is a very dangerous thing.’

Stephen encouraged contributions from the floor throughout his lecture, resulting in a very lively session, with interesting discussions on topics including the basis of morality – whether it is innate or can only be learned.

For a detailed account of Stephen’s arguments about the importance of the liberal tradition of thinking and morality, see his book *The war for children’s minds*, published by Routledge.



Have you renewed your membership?

It’s that time of year again! While many of our members have paid their subscriptions promptly, there still a few renewals outstanding. If this is you (or if you are not sure of the current state of your membership), please contact Jan Woods on 0121 449 0170 or at janet.e.woods@googlemail.com. You can also renew your membership online at www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk.

Other recent events

In search of Jewish ancestry

On 11 April, Dr Anthony Joseph, the president of the Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain, spoke to the group about the history of Jewish people in the UK.

Dr Joseph began by pointing out that he's not a historian or a member of the Jewish religious community. For him, being Jewish is a mixture of ethnicity and belonging to a group with a particular religious tradition. Most of his family roots are Jewish, he said, and he can trace his family tree back for 350 years.

We don't know when the first Jew came to Britain, he said – there may well have been Jews among the Romans in Britain, but there's no evidence of this. The first known Jews in Britain were mediaeval, and came to Britain with the Normans. The community flourished for over two centuries, apart from some isolated incidents, such as the massacre of Jews in York in 1190. However, in 1290, Edward 1 issued the Edict of Expulsion, under which Jews would be put to death unless they were baptised into the Christian faith or left the country.

So the whole community died out and until 1656 there were no Jews living in Britain – officially, though there were a few Jewish merchants who settled here and 'converted', but actually continued to practise their faith. They were known as 'Marranos' (pigs).

In 1655 Cromwell assured Jews that the Edict of Expulsion would no longer be enforced, and the following year Jews living in London as Marranos came out of the closet and set up the Bevis Marks Synagogue. This is the oldest synagogue in Britain, and those who set it up were Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal.

Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe are the other main group in this country, but they didn't arrive here until much later – from the 1670s onwards. One of Anthony's ancestors was among this group, he told us.



Dr Anthony Joseph with Adrian Bailey. The chart in front is of Dr Joseph's family tree.

Eminent members of the Jewish community have included:

- David Barnett, who became the first Jewish alderman in Birmingham in 1939
- James Solomon, a surgeon who was one of the founders of the Birmingham Eye Hospital
- Oscar Deutsch, who founded the Odeon cinema chain
- Sir David Davis, who was Lord Mayor of Birmingham from 1921–1923.

Anthony stressed that, even though he's not a believer, he still feels part of the Jewish community and attends synagogue quite often. The Jewish faith is far more interested in what you do than in what you believe, he said.



Dr Anthony Joseph

By 1700 there were about 3,000 Jews in Britain. It was difficult for them in London, Anthony said, because of the guild system that controlled employment, and because they couldn't work on Saturdays. They therefore migrated out of London to county towns, with many of them becoming hawkers and peddlers. This was the case with Anthony's ancestors, who settled in the West Country, in the Plymouth, Falmouth, and Penzance areas.

This way of life died out with the industrial revolution, when the bigger cities became the sites of Jewish settlement. The Jewish community in Birmingham dates from the early 18th century, with about 20 Jews living here by the 1750s. The Jewish community grew as Birmingham expanded, with Jews gradually coming to play a full part in the life of the city.

'A foot in the door'

On 26 April Mike Lake spoke to the group about representing non-theist views on SACREs, and about visiting schools to speak to students about non-theist beliefs.



Mike Lake

Mike began by emphasising the boundary that exists between finding things out and actually doing things. For him, he said, the point of existence is to change the world, but you need to have specific aims. Mike's specific aim in setting up the Derbyshire Secularists was to change the local RE syllabus.

Mike described the process he went through to get a place on the Derby and Derbyshire SACREs. For Derby he had to write a document saying what he believed and why he wanted to join the SACRE. Although his statement of belief was anti-religious, he was accepted and remained a member of the group for about five years. With Derbyshire, he went to SACRE meetings as a member of the public and then contacted the Chair. There was already a Humanist rep, but Mike now stands in for him when he's not able to attend.

Both SACREs included non-theist/Humanist views when their syllabus came up for its five-year review. However, this is only half the battle, Mike told us. The next step is to make sure that all schools within the local authority are aware of the changes. (NB Not all schools have to follow the syllabus – C of E schools don't have to, and free schools and academies can do what they like.) To make sure the syllabus is implemented, it's necessary to:

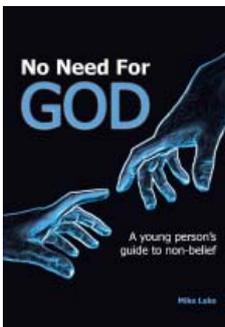
- make sure that teachers know that they should be including non-theist views
- offer assistance to teachers
- give teachers confidence so that they can do it for themselves.

Mike goes into schools as an atheist Humanist, he told us. Because of the bias built in by the nature of teachers of RE, this is often the first time that pupils have had a positive view of non-belief. He stressed the importance of interaction, of building a relationship with the people you're talking to. Going into schools is certainly worth doing, he said – it does cause kids to question, and it gives confidence to some who haven't felt able to voice their opinions before.

Mike spoke about other tasks that SACREs do – they:

- consider the issue when a school wishes to opt out of a daily act of Christian worship
- are supposed to monitor the delivery of the RE syllabus – but how can the SACRE monitor that number of schools in any meaningful way, Mike asked.

Mike felt that attempting to be equal to religions on SACREs is a battle not worth fighting – what's important is actually changing the syllabus and getting it implemented, which is best achieved by forming alliances with people sympathetic to your views. The RE adviser is the most critical person to get on your side.



Mike stressed the importance of using words carefully. He pointed out that, while we may be *atheists*, we should beware of using the word *atheism* – it is not an 'ism', as there is no specific ideology attached to it. The word that unites us, he said, is Humanism. We should also make sure that we define words for ourselves – so, for Mike, an atheist is not 'someone who doesn't believe in god', but 'someone who doesn't need the idea of god to explain things'. And his definition of a Humanist is 'someone who puts people first in the one life we share together'.

We shall be buying copies of Mike Lake's excellent book *No need for god* to offer to local schools.

AGM – contributions to the buffet

We hope to see plenty of you at the AGM on 5 June. This is a reminder to contact Jane Wynne Willson in advance (at janeww1@virginmedia.com or on 0121 475 6508) to let her know what food or drink you can contribute. Food will be available from 6.00pm. We aim to start the AGM promptly at 7.30 and get through the business as quickly as we can.

Birmingham's Green Man trail

Have you noticed how many 'green men' there are on buildings in the centre of Birmingham? If not, you could try spotting some of them with the help of this article. John Edwards came across it recently and thought might be of interest to Brum Hums members.

Green men have been used to decorate buildings throughout Europe and Asia for nearly 2000 years. There are Jain temples in India dating from the 8th century which have faces composed of leaves and sprouting foliage. It is known that the Romans carved leaf masks as long ago as the 2nd century AD. In Britain, green men are often most found on churches and cathedrals from Norman times onwards, but from about 1500 they are also found decorating non-religious buildings.

No one knows exactly what the green man represents and, although some say he represents the spirit of inspiration with the stems and branches that come from him representing creation itself, it seems far more likely that he is a relic from our pagan past. He could well be some sort of fertility symbol – a spirit of nature or an old god of the woodlands. If this is so, why then does he appear on so many Christian churches? Christianity took over several pagan festivals and probably adopted this one as a representation of rebirth or resurrection, maybe in the same way they adopted the idea of a saviour who rose from the dead.

The Victorians loved the green man when it came to decorating their buildings. There was a revival in the highly decorated Gothic architecture of the middle ages and they used many of the symbols and decorations that the medieval masons had used. They also liked to think that their empire was on a par with the Roman and Greek empires of the past and copied many of the features of Roman statues, including gods and goddesses...and the foliate mask of the green man.



There seem to be three main forms of green men in Birmingham:

- A the leaf mask, where the man's nose, eyes, mouth and cheeks have a human aspect, while his hair, brow, moustache and chin turn into – or are made of – leaves
- B the sprouting face, where the face is human but a branch or foliage issues from the open mouth, or sometimes even from the ears, eyes or nose
- C the emerging face, where the man or the face that emerges from or within foliage is not made of leaves, nor does he sprout foliage. Nevertheless he seems to be part of the foliage.



All the photos here are of type A, except for the type B one at bottom right.

Here's a list of the places in Birmingham where you can see green men:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1) Comfort Inn, Station Street | 13) 57 Colmore Row |
| 2) The Victoria, John Bright Street | 14) 43 Colmore Row |
| 3) 81 John Bright Street | 15) St Philip's Cathedral (on each window) |
| 4) Council House | 16) Temple Row entrance of Great Western Arcade |
| 5) Midland Institute | 17) St Chad's Cathedral, west front |
| 6) 50 Newhall Street | 18) 153–161 Corporation Street |
| 7) 56 & 60 Newhall Street | 19) 179–203 Corporation Street (Ruskin Chambers) |
| 8) The Exchange, 19 Newhall Street | 20) Old Fire Station, Lancaster Circus |
| 9) Louisa Ryland House, Edmund Street | 21) 15–17 Corporation Street |
| 10) 133 Edmund Street | 22) Trocadero public house, Temple Street |
| 11) 158 Edmund Street | 23) Burlington Hotel, Stephenson Street |
| 12) Old Midland Eye Hospital, Edmund Street (lots) | |

You can read more about green men at www.greenmanforum.co.uk.

Into the light

If you haven't come across Labi Siffre's website www.intothelight.info, it's well worth visiting for his quirky personal insights and comments on the world from an atheist point of view.

The statement at the top of the website reads: *'It matters little that something is true or not till someone says you must live in a certain way because **they** believe something is true or not.'*

Here are a couple of the poems currently posted on the website.



Labi Siffre

Can there be morality without God?

if God exists
there can be no morality
no right no wrong
all is entrapment

only without God
can WE be responsible

only without God
can morality be

Theologians

Gather to interpret what
The perfect God they invented meant because
The perfect God they invented cannot write so good
As to be without ambiguity understood

Help needed for Moseley Street Festival

Could you spare a couple of hours on 13 July? We need some more people to help on our stall at the Moseley Street Festival, which is usually a lively and vibrant event (weather permitting!).

It's a rare opportunity to promote humanism to the general public and we'd like to make the most of it. We make a rota of helpers, so you won't have to stay all day! If you'd like to help, please contact Jan Woods at janet.e.woods@gmail.com or on 0121 449 0170.

Call for new committee members

We'd really like to get some 'new blood' on the committee! Last year we had two resignations, but only gained one new member, so there are fewer of us to get things done. Would you like to get involved, or do you know someone that you'd like to put forward?

The meeting schedule isn't too onerous – about once every two months. We try to get through the boring bits as quickly as possible, so that we can focus on the important things like planning our programme and campaigning on issues such as the teaching of religion in schools.

So please consider standing for the committee, especially if you've got suggestions for interesting meetings and/or ideas about how we could make the group better. If you'd like to put your name forward (or nominate someone else), please contact Adrian Bailey at baileynagy@blueyonder.co.uk or on 0121 382 8853 in advance of the AGM on 5 June.

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.