



NEWS & VIEWS



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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.

Past events

Blackham Lecture – Towards a theory of moral education

On 11 March we were delighted to welcome Michael Hand, Professor of the Philosophy of Education from Birmingham University to give the second Blackham Lecture.

Following on from Stephen Law's lecture last year on 'How to raise moral children', Michael put forward his theory of moral education. The distinction Stephen Law makes between authoritarian and liberal schooling is a useful one, Michael said, but that's only half the picture – it looks at *how* we teach, but not *what* we teach. The problem faced by anyone trying to teach morality is the tension between two ideas:

- that morality must be learned (and can therefore be taught)
- that morality is controversial (and can therefore not be taught).

Stephen feels that all the standard responses to this problem – such as that you could educate children just 'about' morality, or teach only about moral issues on which there is general agreement – are inadequate. He has therefore sought an alternative approach. His starting point was to see whether the distinction made by Harold Blackham between social morality (public standards of conduct) and personal morality (private ethical ideals) would help to solve the problem – he concluded that it doesn't, because controversy is not confined to the field of personal morality.

Stephen then looked at how to define what a moral standard is, and felt they had two distinguishing features:

- moral subscription is universally-enlisting (ie people want everyone else to subscribe to them as well)
- moral subscription is penalty-endorsing (ie violations are seen as deserving punishment or censure).

Michael identified two kinds of moral education:

- moral formation – teachers try to bring it about that children subscribe to moral standards
- moral enquiry – teachers investigate with children whether/which moral standards are justified.

If the aim of moral education is to bring about full commitment to moral standards, then it must include both formation and enquiry, Michael said. Moral enquiry can be either directive (where the teacher aims to persuade pupils that subscription to the moral standard is justified, or is not justified) or non-directive (where the teacher neither encourages or discourages the view that subscription is justified).



Professor Michael Hand with Adrian Bailey, Chair of Birmingham Humanists

Michael's next question was whether persuading children that moral standards are justified is an exercise in indoctrination. His answer was that there is a subset of moral standards (such as those relating to stealing, cheating, causing harm to others) on which there is broad agreement about their justification because of the part they play in averting conflict in society. In these cases directive moral education can be fully rational without recourse to indoctrination.

Michael closed by presenting us with a table showing the various categories of moral standards and what, according to this theory of moral education, would be the appropriate teaching method for each.

Class of moral standard	Pedagogical approach
Justified moral standards	Moral formation and directive moral enquiry
Moral standards whose justificatory status is a matter of rational dispute	Non-directive moral enquiry
Unjustified moral standards	Directive moral enquiry

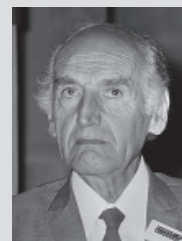
In the question and answer session which followed, much of the discussion revolved around the remaining problem of who decides which standards belong in which categories. All teachers are moral educators, Michael said – there's no school subject called 'moral education' or 'ethics'. All teachers need to engage with these questions. Whatever body is responsible for the curriculum could give general guidance, but still individual teachers need to decide in the moment what they regard as morally justifiable standards.

About Harold Blackham

Harold John Blackham (31 March 1903 – 23 January 2009) was a leading British Humanist philosopher, writer and educationalist. He has been described as the 'father of modern Humanism'.

Born in Birmingham, Blackham worked in farming and teaching before turning to philosophy and adult education. Though never a professional philosopher, he tutored adult education courses on philosophy and the history of ideas, and made substantial contributions to 20th century Humanist thinking in his many articles and books.

In the early 30s, Blackham became prominent in the British Ethical Union, and with leaders of the main churches set up a moral education programme in Great Britain. Later he played an important part in the development of the Ethical Union into the British Humanist Association, becoming the BHA's first Executive Director in 1963. He was a founder of the *Journal of Moral Education*. He was also a founding member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) and was IHEU Secretary from 1952 to 1966.



About Michael Hand

Michael Hand is Professor of Philosophy of Education and Director of Postgraduate Research in the School of Education. He is the Editor of IMPACT, a pamphlet series offering philosophical perspectives on contemporary education policy. Michael's research interests are in the areas of moral, political, religious and philosophical education. He has published books and articles on education for patriotism, the nature and aims of religious education, the justifiability of faith schools, autonomy as an educational aim, philosophy in schools, teaching about sexuality and controversial issues in the classroom.

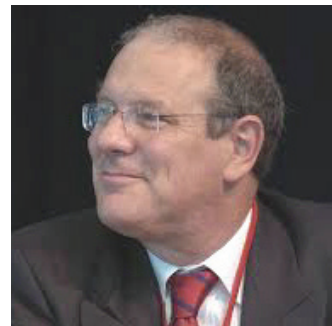
Michael is a member of the research team at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Values, an interdisciplinary research centre which promotes a moral concept of character in order to explore the importance of virtue for public and professional life. He is currently working on a theory of moral education.



An evening with Theodore Dalrymple

At our meeting on 4 February we had an entertaining and thought-provoking session, when Adrian Bailey interviewed the columnist Theodore Dalrymple (real name Anthony Daniels) about his life and views.

Adrian first asked Tony about his pseudonym. He explained that, when he first started writing, he needed to keep this separate from his work as a doctor. He purposely chose a name that sounded old-fashioned and bad tempered, and he has continued to use his pseudonym even though it's no longer necessary. He started writing when he was working on the Gilbert Islands, when he had an unsolicited article accepted by the Spectator.



Tony qualified in 1974 and worked as a doctor until his retirement in 2005, apart from a year as a correspondent in South America. In the early part of his career he worked in various countries around the world, including sub-Saharan Africa. In 1990 he returned to the UK, working at Dudley Road Hospital and Winson Green Prison.

Tony told us that he tries to avoid putting himself on a political spectrum – he doesn't want people to pigeonhole him. He's a cultural conservative, he said, but he has no consistent philosophical viewpoint. Here's a summary of some of the views that he expressed in the course of the evening:

- Freedom isn't viable unless people have some kind of internal limits that they have absorbed.
- Prejudices are what keep people behaving well – but we should examine our prejudices. For example, he's had to rethink his prejudice against people with tattoos. At one time tattooing was mainly associated with sailors and criminals (90% of prisoners have tattoos). However, the social significance of tattooing has changed and a high proportion of people are now tattooed.
- Education is not valued in large parts of the country. There was a time when there were plenty of jobs that uneducated/unskilled people could do. This has gone, but people haven't changed their attitudes about the need for education and skills. The job situation is disastrous now for people who are functionally illiterate. 20% of jobs in the UK can't be filled because there aren't people with the necessary skills/education. You can't reduce benefits dependency if there are no jobs that unemployed people can do. No politicians have tackled this problem.
- It's an indictment of society that about a third of prisoners in this country prefer life inside to life outside. They feel safe because of the structure and predictability of life inside, and because everything is provided for them.

Tony said that he is an atheist, but that he is not anti-religious. He feels that we shouldn't regret religion because of what it has given to our culture.

Social events

New Year's meal

There were fourteen of us at Ming Moon. We were sorry that Adrian was ill and wasn't able to join us, and that Jane and Harry had to leave early. As last year, we had a room to ourselves, giving us plenty of chance to chat, especially after we'd finished to-ing and fro-ing to fill our plates at the plentiful buffet. We were interested to hear from Ben's about his experiences with and future hopes for 'Defence Humanists' (the new name of the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association).



In our own room at Ming Moon!

Pancakes at Percy's

Last year's meeting at Percy's house on Pancake Tuesday was so successful that we decided to repeat the exercise this year. As before, we combined pancakes (from chefs Bill and Adrian) with good company and the chance to browse through the books in the Birmingham Humanists library. Many thanks to Percy for hosting a very convivial evening.

Whose 'Thought for the Day'?

Andrew Pakula, who defines himself as an atheist Unitarian minister of religion, wrote in the Guardian about the BBC's refusal to allow him to present Thought for the Day on Radio 4. His article is reproduced below.

As an atheist minister, I was barred from Radio 4's official Thought for the Day. But such a valuable meaning-making slot shouldn't be open only to theists and the language we use to discuss religion is outdated.

Sir Tim Berners-Lee invented the worldwide web. His creation, given freely to the world, has changed the way we interact, work, shop – and even the way we think. We have had to find new language to describe new ways of being, rather than to force old paradigms upon new ways. We don't describe 140 character social messages as telegrams.

Berners-Lee could be forgiven for expecting the way we describe religion to shift in a world very different from the one that created traditional labels. When he had the opportunity to edit BBC's Today programme on Boxing Day, Berners-Lee invited me, a Unitarian minister of religion, to present Thought for the Day. I am a 'religious' person who does not believe in a supernatural entity that intervenes in our lives. In language no longer helpful or precise, I am an atheist.

Berners-Lee's selection was overruled by the BBC's religion and ethics department whose head, Aaqil Ahmed, declared in 2012 that Thought for the Day should not be opened up to people of no faith. A theistic Unitarian minister was chosen instead. I presented an 'alternative thought for the day'.

It is easy to empathise with the BBC's quandary. Traditionally, religious people feel threatened about the diminishing role of their perspectives in the public discourse, while a fiercely anti-belief strand of atheism seemingly aims to make religion disappear entirely. So theists are deemed acceptable, while non-theists are not – unless they are Buddhists. This stance is as absurd and unhelpful as insisting that Britain can be meaningfully divided between those who do and do not send telegrams.

The word 'religion' itself has no precise definition. At the end of last year, Britain's supreme court ruled that Scientology was a religion. Lord Toulson, giving the judgement, wrote that 'religion should not be confined to religions which recognise a supreme deity.' Toulson describes religion as 'a spiritual or non-secular belief system, held by a group of adherents, which claims to explain mankind's place in the universe and relationship with the infinite ...' Unfortunately, the terms Toulson uses – spiritual and non-secular – are no clearer than the one he aims to clarify. His ruling reflects a futile struggle to use outmoded language to describe a changing world.

What we historically described as religion is but one embodiment of our human yearning to make meaning. Life is full of challenges and paradoxes. We have a short time to live – a time full of both joy and sorrow. We must live knowing that we will die and struggle to find meaning to make our brief appearance on the stage of eternity purposeful, happy and significant.

Today, meaning-making takes many forms. Some fit into definitions of religion or spirituality; most do not. A 2005 poll revealed that only 37% of UK citizens believe in 'God'; another 33% believe in 'some sort of spirit or life force'. Most of the rest believe in neither, but everyone has a need for meaning-making. Given low UK religious participation rates, it's clear that most of that need is not met by traditional religious communities.

Much meaning-making takes place on Berners-Lee's creation, with websites, videos and mobile applications increasingly serving as sources of inspiration and guidance. 'Real-world' meaning-making is not gone. It has simply changed form. Lectures, non-traditional religious communities such as New Unity and Sunday Assembly and educational models such as School of Life have emerged to provide resources for the many who no longer find the traditional ways helpful.

It is tempting to look at the changing face of meaning-making and conclude that, amid such diversity, it doesn't matter what the BBC does with Thought for the Day. After all, we will all continue to find meaning in our own way. But guidance matters all the more. Our hunger for meaning can lead in destructive directions. Many today find meaning in pursuit of financial success and material acquisition – ways of making meaning that are increasingly destroying the planet and exacerbating inequality. Fascism, Stalinism and many of the most harmful movements of the last century resonated with and satisfied human meaning-making needs.

It matters, not just that we make meaning, but how we make meaning. And this is why Thought for the Day and other meaning-making resources are important. They are so important, in fact, that they should not be restricted to the increasingly small proportion of the population that believes in traditional deities. If we are to be a society of people who make meaning in constructive, compassionate and just ways, we need to engage together in seeking and offering the resources with which people can do this very human work.

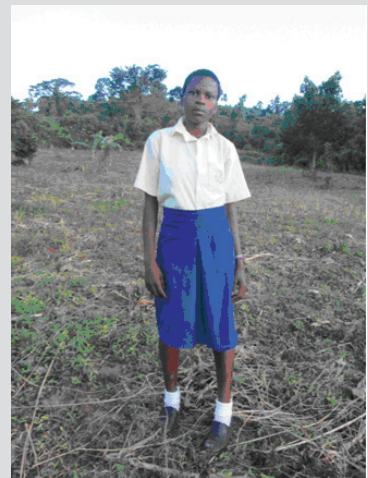
Viola Nassuna

Last year, as an 80th birthday present to Jane Wynne Willson, Birmingham Humanists began sponsoring Viola Nassuna, a student at the Mbute Campus of Isaac Newton High School in Uganda.

Viola is 16 years old and lives in the village of Mbute in Mpigi District. It takes her 50 minutes to walk to school each day. Her father is dead and her mother lives away. She has four brothers and four sisters and they live with their grandmother, who is a subsistence farmer and cannot afford school fees. Viola's favourite subjects are Biology, Chemistry and English and she wants to be a nurse. She enjoys music, dance and drama but wishes the school had some drums to perform traditional music. She is very appreciative of the bursary she has received.

Her first year report says that Viola is a very good student who has made excellent progress this year. She has a particular talent for drama.

We look forward to receiving more news about Viola as we continue to support her education.

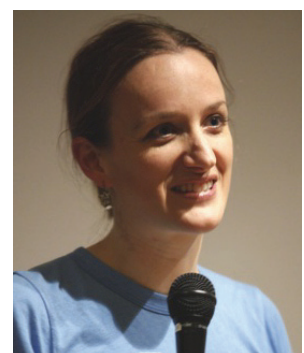


Over 50 years of Humanism in Birmingham



Colin Campbell

Come along and help us celebrate our first 50 years – we're holding a day of talks and discussion on Saturday, 7 June, when we'll be looking back at our first 50 years and forward to the next 50! Helping us with that will be Colin Campbell, who was the first Chair of our group back in the early sixties, and Kate Smurthwaite, the stand-up comedian and political activist. We'll also be considering the future of Humanism more widely, with inputs from the Sunday Assembly movement, local Skeptics, the BHA and others.



Kate Smurthwaite

The event will take place at MAC (Midlands Arts Centre) at Cannon Hill Park, from 10.30am to 3.30pm. The cost will be £10 (£5 concessions). If you'd like to join us, you can book by contacting our treasurer, John Edwards by post (157 Welford Road, Shirley, Solihull, B90 3HT), phone (0121 744 7340) or email (jaejed@hotmail.com). We'll also be taking bookings at our April meeting – please speak to any member of the committee.

We need to confirm numbers by 30 April, so please book up by that date if you want to come – hope to see you there!

Ex Cathedra

I'm really excited about our 50th anniversary event on 7 June. Humanism has been developing quickly as a movement in the last few years, and it'll be great to look back over the good times we've had and consider what the future might bring.



Of course a lot of that is in our hands. Some of the meetings I've had recently have highlighted that we need to make some tricky decisions as Humanism grows. With Francis O'Regan from the Secular Fellowship I met Birmingham City Councillor John Cotton, who is responsible for social inclusion. And then I was in Berlin where I met Werner Schulz and Arik Platzek from the local and national Humanist associations there. The theme of both discussions seemed to be: should we interpret secularism to mean maintaining (and campaigning for) public unsegregated provision of services such as education, counselling and pastoral care, or should we interpret it as 'If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.' In other words, where religious and other organisations are providing services for the community, shouldn't we apply to do the same? Berlin has certainly adopted the latter course: there are 1300 people working as Humanists in the city, as kindergarten nurses, as ethics teachers, as pregnancy advisors, as hospice workers and so on...

And is it possible to interpret secularism both ways without being hypocritical?

See you on 7 June if not before.

Adrian Bailey
Chair

Help needed for Moseley Street Festival

The Street Fair in Moseley Festival is due to take place on Saturday, 5th July this year. We have discussed this opportunity at a committee meeting recently and decided consult with you about what our presence should be. It's a chance to promote Humanism to the general public, so it would be good to make the most of it. Our 'table' could do with a revamp and we need some ideas and some volunteers.

Please could you email or ring me if you think you would like to be involved and could spare some time either in planning beforehand or on the day itself – or preferably both!

Jan Woods janet.e.woods@gmail.com 0121 449 0170

Annual General Meeting 2014

I hereby give notice that the 2014 AGM of Birmingham Humanists will take place on Friday, 13 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 2013 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.