



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.

Over 50 years of Humanism in Birmingham

Reminder: if you haven't done so yet, please book up for our anniversary conference as soon as possible.

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, Pavan Dhaliwal from the BHA, 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 and others.

The draft programme is as follows:

- 10.30 Arrival
- 11.00 Humanism, then and now: Colin Campbell
- 11.30 The history of Birmingham Humanists
- 12.00 Ways ahead: short presentations on topics including Sunday assemblies, Skeptics and secularism
- 12.30 Pavan Dhaliwal
- 1.00 Lunch (people can eat in the MAC cafe or bring their own picnics)
- 2.00 Discussion groups
- 2.45 Panel Q&A
- 3.30 Kate Smurthwaite
- 4.00 Close



Colin Campbell



Pavan Dhaliwal

The event will take place at MAC (Midlands Arts Centre) at Cannon Hill Park. The cost will be £10. If you'd like to join us, you can book by sending a cheque, made out to Birmingham Humanists, to Carolyn Sugden (37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB), or by making a payment to our PayPal account (www.birminghamhumanists@googlemail.com). We'll also be taking bookings at the meeting on 13 May – please speak to any member of the committee.

We've still got places left, but we need to know numbers in advance, so please book up as soon as you can if you want to come – hope to see you there!



Kate Smurthwaite

The 'Christian nation' saga

The BHA has been much in the news lately, along with assorted Humanists and atheists (or 'militant atheists' as Eric Pickles would have it), following the statements that Pickles and David Cameron made about Britain being a Christian nation.

Here's the BHA's initial reporting of this in its newsletter, followed by the Guardian article about the letter to the Daily Telegraph, and a link to a dissenting article by Julian Baggini.

Why do politicians keep insisting this is a 'Christian nation'?

We were dismayed last week by two statements made by high-level Government officials. First of all, Communities Secretary Eric Pickles MP came out and said that we are a 'Christian nation' and that he was proud to stand up to 'militant atheists', including by defending compulsory prayers at council meetings.

Then later, at his Easter reception, Prime Minister David Cameron repeated the 'Christian Britain' line, and called for British 'evangelism', 'more faith' and for the handing over of yet more public services to religious groups in Britain. He praised Michael Gove's Free Schools programme for giving more schools to churches than ever before. Somewhat more amusingly, he said that 'Jesus invented the Big Society 2000 years ago' and promised to be a 'Dyno-Rod' for Christians in the country. Putting that mental image aside for a moment, it beggars belief that these kinds of statements of Christian exceptionalism are being made in modern-day Britain.

This is not least because they're massively out of step with reality. The highly respected British Social Attitudes Survey estimates that roughly half of the population professes no religion, and places Anglicans at an all-time low of 20%, with Catholics and other Christians at 9% and 17% respectively. With only 14% of religious people attending services every week, and religious groups and leaders topping a 2006 Ipsos MORI poll of which domestic groups have too much influence in society, on what grounds are the Prime Minister and Communities Secretary possibly basing their claims?

We're continuing our fight for a more equal Britain, where humanists and non-religious people are on an equal footing with religious people, regardless of what the Prime Minister says.

BHA e-newsletter, 14 April 2014

David Cameron accused of fostering division in 'Christian' UK

More than 50 prominent public figures including novelist, diplomats, Nobel prize winners and playwrights have accused David Cameron of fostering divisions in the UK by repeatedly referring to Britain as a Christian country. Signatories to the letter asserting that Britain is not a Christian country include Philip Pullman, Ken Follett, Prof Alice Roberts, Prof Harold Kroto and Sir Terry Pratchett. The authors say they respect Cameron's own religious beliefs but say they 'object to his repeated mischaracterising of our country as a "Christian country" and the negative consequences for our politics and society that this view engenders'.

In a letter to the Daily Telegraph, they assert: 'Apart from in the narrow constitutional sense that we continue to have an established church, we are not a "Christian country". Repeated surveys, polls, and studies show most of us as individuals are not Christian in our beliefs or our religious identities and at a social level, Britain has been shaped for the better by many pre-Christian, non-Christian, and post-Christian forces.

'We are a plural society with citizens with a range of perspectives and a largely non-religious society. To constantly claim otherwise fosters alienation and division in our society. Although it is right to recognise the contribution made by many Christians to social action, it is wrong to try to exceptionalise their contribution when it is equalled by British people of different beliefs. It needlessly fuels enervating sectarian debates that are by and large absent from the lives of most British people, who – as polls show – do not want religions or religious identities to be actively prioritised by their elected government.'

Signatories also included the novelist Maureen Duffy, the Nobel prize-winning scientist Sir John Sulston, the scientist Sir John Blundell and the former diplomat Sir Richard Dalton.

The Guardian, 21 April 2014

On 22 April Julian Baggini argued in the Guardian that the prime minister's comments were harmless, and that there are other issues of church and state that it's more important to make a fuss about – such as the expansion of religious schools, automatic seats in the House of Lords for bishops and the increased involvement of faith groups in delivering state-sponsored public services. You can read his article at www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/22/david-ferman-vague-faith-christian-country.

Help needed for Moseley Street Festival

This year the Street Fair in Moseley Festival is due to take place on Saturday, 5th July. I'm grateful to the people who have agreed to help with the planning for our stall. We now need more volunteers to help on the day. It won't be too arduous – we usually have a rota with two-hour slots. It makes an enjoyable day out, with the chance to take in the rest of the stalls and other festival events before or after your stint on our stall!

Please ring or email me if you would like to be involved and could spare some time on 5th July.

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

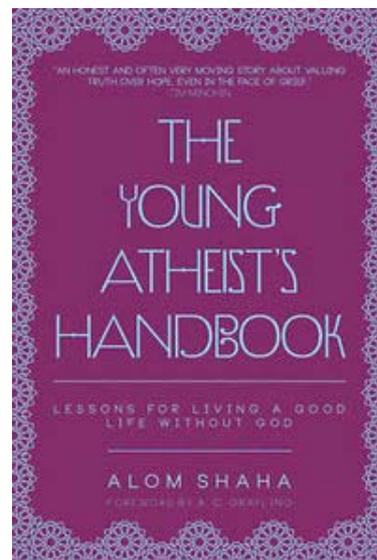
The young atheist's handbook sent to schools

Following its fundraising campaign, to which Birmingham Humanists contributed, the BHA has now sent copies of *The young atheist's handbook* to all secondary schools in England and Wales.

This has been widely reported in the press, not just in this country but abroad as well. In addition to articles in the [Guardian](#) and [Independent](#), there has been coverage in local papers in Plymouth, Newham, Cornwall, Swindon, Exeter and Milton Keynes, among other places. The [East Anglia Daily Times](#) website even has a poll on 'Should school libraries stock *The Young Atheist's Handbook*?' So far 80% of respondents have said Yes. Why not go to their website and add your vote? In the article, which you can read online, the majority of spokespeople for schools (including those from church schools) were in favour of stocking the book. Only a Catholic priest opposed it.

The articles in overseas newspapers – in Spain, Italy, Ireland, Germany and the Netherlands – were mainly (but not exclusively) in the religious press.

We're not aware of any coverage in the Birmingham papers, though the Post and the Mail have been sent press releases. If you see anything in the local press, please let us know.



Help needed with coffee mornings

Following my attendance at the Fair Brum Summit ([blog: fairbrum.wordpress.com](http://blog:fairbrum.wordpress.com)) and my meeting with Councillor John Cotton, we are hosting a free weekly community coffee morning at Perry Common Library, at 11.00am every Monday. If you can help sometimes, please let me know! Buses: 7, 28 and 907. Please also let me know if you can make a small donation towards our costs. Thanks!

Adrian Bailey dadge@hotmail.com 07505 381666

Annual General Meeting 2014

The agenda for this year's AGM, and the minutes of last year's, are being sent out with this issue of *News & Views*. The accounts will follow shortly. The meeting will take place on Friday, 13 June at 28 Garland Way, Birmingham B31 2BT. The evening will start at 6.00pm with a buffet meal – everyone is asked to bring some food or drink to share. Please contact Jane Wynne Willson in advance (at janeww1@virginmedia.com or on 0121 475 6508) to let her know what you can bring. The formal business of the meeting will start at 7.30pm.

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. Below you will see a series of motions that the committee is putting forward about subscriptions. Subscription levels have remained the same for some years now.

Carolyn Sugden, Secretary
on behalf of the Committee of Birmingham Humanists

Motions for AGM 2014

Motion 1

That Birmingham Humanists membership fees are increased from 1st April 2015.

Proposer: John Edwards

Secunder: Carolyn Sugden

(If this motion is not carried, Motions 2 and 3 will not be debated.)

Motion 2

That, as from 1st April 2015, annual membership of the group will be £15 and triennial membership £40.

Proposer: John Edwards

Secunder: Adrian Bailey

(If this motion is carried, motion 3 will not be debated.)

Motion 3

That, as from 1st April 2015, annual membership of the group will be increased by £1 to £13 and triennial membership by £3 to £36.

Proposer: John Edwards

Secunder: Jane Wynne Willson

Motion 4

That new individuals joining after 30th September in any year, on paying the full annual (or triennial) subscription then in force, shall immediately become full members of the group, but their subscription shall be deemed to start on 1st April of the following year.

Proposer: John Edwards

Secunder: Jan Woods

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.