



NEWS & VIEWS



www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk

New series

Number 49

March 2015

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.

2015 Blackham Lecture

Do come along on 12 March to hear distinguished Nigerian human rights advocate and Humanist Leo Igwe give the third Blackham Memorial Lecture. The title of the lecture is 'How should we live: exploring moral dilemmas in contemporary Africa'.

Witch hunting, religious extremism and superstition-based atrocities are some of the manifestations of deep moral challenges in Africa. In a rapidly changing world, these local problems are taking on global dimensions, and hampering intellectual and moral progress. Resolving these moral dilemmas is critical to the development of Africa and the world.

In his lecture, Leo Igwe will address the following questions: How can Africans achieve a morally meaningful life in the 21st century? What are the moral choices open to them? How should an African live in a world where moral and educational choices are constrained by powerful local and international religious interests? Is there a secular way of addressing these moral challenges?

The lecture will take place at 7.30pm on Thursday, 12 March at Moseley Exchange (149–153 Alcester Road, Moseley, Birmingham B13 8JP).

Entry is free but, if you'd like to attend, it would be helpful if you could register in advance by going to the Events section of the BHA website: <https://humanism.org.uk> or by texting to 07505 381666 – this will give us an idea of how many people will be coming.



Asian Rationalists' social – everyone welcome

As Leo Igwe will be staying in Birmingham for several days, other groups are taking the opportunity to meet up with him. On 13 March, the Asian Rationalists will be hosting a social for him at the Farcroft Hotel in Rookery Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, B21 9QY, from 7.30pm onwards. Everyone is welcome – the Asian Rationalists are keen for our members to join them for this event, so please do come along.

Reminder

Subscriptions become due in 1st April. Jan Woods, our Membership Secretary, will shortly be sending out reminders. It's really helpful if members can renew promptly – it saves Jan a lot of time and effort sending out further reminders, and means we know what our income is!

Past events

Too many people?

Davis Spilsbury reports on Birmingham Humanists' February meeting.

There were not too many people present to hear Edmund Davey's talk 'Human population – or is it over-population?' on 17th February, but that did not detract from its effect.



He represented Population Matters, an organisation set up in 1995, with patrons such as David Attenborough, Jane Goodall and Chris Patten, to monitor and publicise population trends, ensure that accurate data informs the public debate, differentiate projections from prophecies, and rescue a serious issue from apocalyptic doomsayers and religious fatalists.

His audience was rather overwhelmed by the detailed statistics he deployed on the number of humans spreading across the planet and our impact on the environment, but nobody could be in any doubt about the importance of the subject.

United Nations projections anticipate that, on present trends, the world would grow from 6.7bn people in 2007 to 9.2bn in 2050, if there were no significant change in fertility or mortality (that's 9,200,000,000 people, remember). The ever-burgeoning economic activity of those communities is increasing CO2 levels, resulting in a level of global warming which threatens our very survival. He gave documented examples of what is already happening, such as the earlier and longer summers in Australia, the shrinking ice-caps and rising sea levels across the world, and soil erosion reaching irreversible levels in lands bordering the Mediterranean.

Activities such as industrial sea-fish harvesting are denuding the oceans of many large species and reducing mature, breeding stocks of commercial fish, so that they become less sustainable. Soya crops, largely used to feed livestock for human consumption, are being grown on land where once stood rainforests, which act as the lungs of the world. Many seas, such as the Baltic, have growing 'dead' zones, where phytoplankton feeding on sewage discharges block sunlight and oxygen from what were formerly rich, bio-diverse environments.

The population of the United Kingdom shows no sign of stabilising at its current level of 64m, yet there is no serious discussion of how many people there should be in the country. He said that we have an ethical problem, needing people to think out the needs of their own families, local communities and the world as a whole.

The 20-odd people present joined in a lively discussion, raising issues such as how to encourage people to reduce fertility rates voluntarily, how to reduce meat eating and encourage vegetarian or vegan diets – basically how to get people to think differently. Someone said that recognition of over-population is likely to be retrospective, only recognised when it is too late. Maybe that was a bit pessimistic, but it summed up how most listeners felt.

Reference website: populationmatters.org

New Years' meal

On 16 January seventeen of us met up at Café Soya for our New Year's celebration. We had a room to ourselves, and it was a buffet meal, so there was plenty of chance to circulate and chat – though there was a very noisy party in the room next door to us, so sometimes we were rather drowned out! There was a good mixture of long-standing and more recent members – it was good to have the opportunity to get know some people who are newer to the group.

Join the Fair Admissions Birmingham Campaign

Birmingham Humanists support the campaign against unjust and discriminatory faith-based criteria for school admissions. Carl Wells explains why he feels so strongly about the issue and encourages others to join the campaign.

Last year my partner and I were required to select a school for our 4 year old daughter, so, having researched and visited the schools in our area, we made the decision based on how suitable we believed particular schools to be and on how likely they were to be oversubscribed. We knew that she probably wouldn't get into some schools due to their popularity and our distance from the school gates. However, after we'd talked to other parents at numerous children's birthday parties, it became apparent that some parents were having to attend church in order to have the opportunity to send their child to the local or 'better performing' school of their choice. This didn't sit well with me and I began to look into why this was required.

I had never gone through the admissions process before and, if I'm honest, it wasn't something that I took an interest in until we were involved in it ourselves – like a lot of parents, I'd imagine. I was appalled to find that a large number of schools in the Birmingham area require parents to have some form of religious affiliation in order to give their child a chance of being admitted to the school. Because of exemptions from Section 85 of the Equality Act 2010, faith schools are able to set their own faith-based criteria in order to prioritise the admission of pupils. It is surely wrong to deny a child access to state-funded education based on a parent's belief, but it seems not to be so in the eyes of these religious institutions.

So why is this wrong?

Only parents with the means or inclination to attend church are able to get their children into the best faith schools. Evidence suggests that this increases the division between children on socio-economic lines. Faith schools select the more able pupils, which improves the school's results, making them more popular, and enabling them to be still more selective. No doubt the churches enjoy the extra revenue when the collection plate comes round.

The parents we met at parties weren't joyous after completing their stint at church. Relief at completion and anxiety at not knowing whether they had done enough were more the order of the day. It would be interesting to know how many parents continue to attend church after getting the requisite attendance.

Segregating children based on their parents' belief can't be good for the community. It can only increase a feeling of 'us and them'. My 4 year old doesn't care about her friends' culture or religion. It's a learned behaviour.

This is discrimination, which would be outlawed on other grounds. I've never heard of a school being able to give priority to the children of heterosexual parents. Parents of every belief pay for state-funded education, so why should their children be denied access to their local school?

When I researched this issue, I quickly came across the Fair Admission Campaign. The more I read, the more I agreed with the idea that selection based on faith is wrong. The Fair Admissions Campaign wants all state-funded schools in England and Wales to be open equally to all children, without regard to religion or belief and I wholeheartedly agree with this. It's supported by the Accord Coalition and the British Humanist Association, among others.

We've recently begun a Fair Admissions Birmingham Campaign in order to raise awareness of this issue specifically in the Birmingham area. Incredibly there are several schools under the jurisdiction of Birmingham City Council (ie not voluntary aided church schools) that have faith-based selection criteria.

If you would like to get involved in the campaign, please join us at <https://www.facebook.com/fairadmissionsbham>, visit us at <http://fairadmissionsbham.org.uk/> or email us at contact@fairadmissionsbham.org.uk.

I would argue that the majority of people don't realise that this happens until they are required to navigate the school admissions process. I believe it's important that people know about this disgraceful state of affairs.

Is one religion worse than another?

Over the years I have become ever more convinced that God is mankind's worst invention and religion its greatest mistake. The continuing atrocities committed by militant Islam reinforce my belief that this is true. Though moderate Muslims claim to disown their vicious counterparts, they have yet to show any real will to take practical measures to prevent their murderous activities. A recent letter from the British government to Islamic leaders asking for their co-operation was met with expressions of resentment from the recipients that it should ever have been sent.

A translation of the Koran by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (recommended to me by a Muslim) softens the more forthright language of Rodwell's much earlier version, but it does not disguise the fact that even moderate Islam retains a lot of undesirable features. The faithful are told 'Marry women of your choice, two or three or four' (Surah 4:3) and 'As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands' (Surah 5:38). Though moderate Muslims claim to be friendly (and I have met some very pleasant examples), their holy book tells them 'Take not the Jews or Christians for your friends.' The Islamic attitude to women reveals itself in passages which suggest that a man may have sex 'with those joined to him in the marriage bond, or the captives whom their right hands possess' (Surah 23:6). We have become used to the sight of women wearing veils which reveal nothing but their eyes, yet there is no justification for this in the Koran. Women 'should draw their veils over their bosoms' (Surah 24:31) but that is all that is required; the rest is a later imposition by their menfolk. I could go on, and it is only fair to admit that there are equally unpleasant passages in the Old Testament.

By now you will have branded me as an Islamophobe, a term which I have long believed to be misunderstood. The word 'phobia' means fear, not hatred. If you are claustrophobic you fear confined spaces and if you are agoraphobic you fear open ones. So, yes, in the sense that I fear Islam, I am an Islamophobe. I am afraid that even moderate Muslims would like to achieve world domination and foist their noxious laws on us all.

It seems unlikely that any improvement can be made until Muslims give up their petulant oversensitivity to criticism of any kind, a display of weakness not strength, and learn to laugh at themselves.

John Lester

Secularist of the Year

The National Secular Society is keen for Humanists to attend its award ceremony, which will take place on Saturday, 28 March in central London. Here's the message we received from Terry Sanderson, the NSS President.



Each year the National Secular Society awards a £5,000 Secularist of the Year prize to a group or individual who has contributed something significant to the secular cause. The prize will be presented at a special lunchtime event in London by the famous cartoonist and free speech advocate Martin Rowson. We would love to see you or your members there.

The cost of tickets – which include a three-course lunch and a welcome cocktail – is £40 for NSS members or £50 for non-members. As a special offer, we can offer tickets at the members' rate to any members of the Birmingham Humanists who'd like to come, even if they haven't joined the NSS.

It's a convivial event usually attended by a selection of our distinguished honorary associates, and features individuals who have worked hard – sometimes with enormous courage – to defend the principles of secularism. We'd love you to join us and enjoy an inspiring and sociable afternoon.

You can book tickets at <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/secularist-of-the-year-2015-tickets-14160296829> or by cheque to the NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL (remember to tell us if you have any dietary requirements).

Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

Here's some news about the students that we sponsor.

Viola Nassuna

Until this year, Viola was a student at the Mbute campus of Isaac Newton High School. However, we have received the following information from Hilary Hurd of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust:

'We have had ongoing problems with the school we have been supporting on Mbute Hill. Two year ago we were optimistic that problems concerning the management of the school and its long-term viability were being addressed, as the running of the school was taken over by the Director of another of the schools we support, the Isaac Newton High School. Since then we felt conditions had improved greatly and the student's education was greatly improved. This was reflected in the results obtained by Senior 4 students who took the Ugandan National exams in November. However, in December issues regarding the ownership of the site and the management of the school, that we had considered solved, arose again. To date these issues have not been resolved and the school did not open in February for the new school year. As a result, many of the students we supported last year have transferred to the main campus, about 50 miles away, and are now boarding there. I am pleased to say the student you are supporting is one of these. We hope this move will improve the prospects of this student and are very grateful for your continued support.'

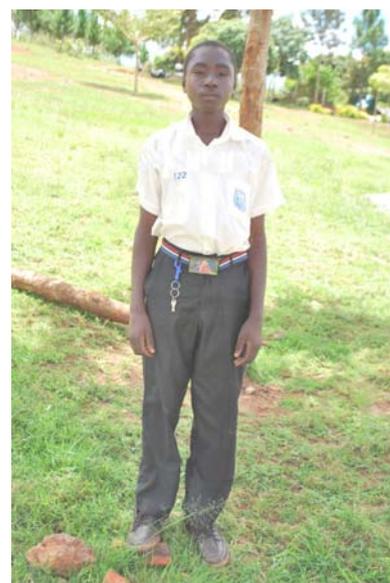
The Second Year Report on Viola says:

Viola attends regularly and is very focused on her studies. She is good at painting and acting and drama. She is now resident at the school and is a sociable, loving and caring student.

Robert Semakula (Bwambale)

Robert is a boarder at the Kateera Campus of Isaac Newton High School in Masaka. The First Year Report on Robert says:

Robert is good academically and is keen to study. He is interested in learning more about Science and animals. He is sociable but shy and comes from a good, stable family.



Help needed

On 19th May, the pharmacologist David Colquhoun is coming to speak to the group about homeopathy. He will be travelling here from London, and we'd like to offer to put him up for the night. This seems friendlier than booking him into a hotel (and will keep expenses down to a manageable level!). Committee members would be very grateful if someone would be willing to offer him a bed for the night – we've recently hosted other speakers ourselves, but would now welcome some support from members over this.

David Colquhoun will certainly be an interesting person to talk to – have a look at his website, [DC's Improbable Science](#), which won the UK Science Blog Prize in 2012. It's devoted to criticism of scientific fraud and quackery, with a particular focus on alternative medicine, including such homeopathy, traditional Chinese medicine and herbal medicine.

If you can help us out with this, please contact Adrian Bailey at dadge@hotmail.com.



BHA conference

If last year's World Humanist Congress, which the BHA organised, is anything to go by, its forthcoming Annual Conference will be a lively and inspiring event. It will be held in Bristol from 19-21 June 2015, running from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon, with a busy weekend of lectures, plenaries, debates, interviews, an awards show, live entertainment and a gala dinner with a cast of amazing speakers from the worlds of entertainment, science, history, philosophy and the arts. Speakers confirmed so far include Jim Al-Khalili, Alice Roberts, Leo Igwe, Julian Baggini and Kate Smurthwaite.

Tickets are already on sale and the BHA has reported that they are selling fast. Standard (non-dining) tickets cost £99 for BHA members and £89 for students. Another £40 on top of that buys you a Dining ticket, which entitles you to attend the Gala dinner event where Alice Roberts will be speaking, and where the BHA will announce the winners of the 2015 BHA Humanist of the Year and Services to Humanism awards. All tickets include a buffet lunch on Saturday.

The BHA will be providing a link to a special portal for purchasing space in nearby hotels and will distribute this to all ticket-holders.

For more information or to book a place, go to the events section of the BHA website <https://humanism.org.uk>.

Birmingham Humanists are keen to encourage members of the group to attend the BHA conference. With this in mind, the committee has agreed to offer a bursary of half the conference fee (ie £50) for one person to attend. If you'd like to be considered for this, please apply to the committee by contacting the Secretary, Carolyn Sugden, at carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk, by 30 April at the latest.

Annual General Meeting 2015

I hereby give notice that the 2015 AGM of Birmingham Humanists will take place on Friday, 12 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 2014 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 Carolyn Sugden – carolyn.sugden@blueyonder.co.uk, 37 Devonshire Road, Birmingham B20 2PB.