



# Suffolk Humanist & Secularist News

June 2009

Next meetings at Pinewood Hall, Ipswich—  
9th June—Teaching the new RE Syllabus  
in a Suffolk Primary School  
14th July—An Introduction to the Cosmos  
Next pub lunch—27th June.  
See back page for details.

Ariane Sherine, of Atheist Bus Campaign fame, has edited a book called "An Atheist's Guide to Christmas". Atheists from around the world give their humorous and serious tips for surviving the Christmas season. You can pre-order it now—price £10.39—all profits to charity.

## Ipswich Hospital survey

Many non-believers have become "C of E" by default when admitted to hospital because admission forms didn't have a box for us to tick. We thought we'd got this straightened out in Ipswich, since the Health Trust consulted Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. However, on a recent visit to the X-ray department, I was asked to complete a survey about my religion and offered a list to choose from—there was no "none", or "Humanist" option. I emailed the Chief Executive (copy to SIFRE) to point out that by offering a limited choice, some patients were likely to incorrectly identify themselves as religious when they're not. No reply so far. I'll keep you posted.

Meanwhile, the BHA is persisting with its campaign to change the 2011 census questions, to correctly identify who isn't religious. These statistics influence government policy, so they are important. *MN*

## PRESS CUTTINGS

*From the Independent, 19th April:*

Religious broadcasting has taken an unexpected turn at the BBC, leaving secularists last night claiming a breakthrough. An important new committee that the corporation will consult on religious broadcasting is to include a humanist.

The move, which some see as a potential threat to the future of slots such as Thought for the Day, will see groups representing secular beliefs offering advice and suggestions to the broadcaster. The move is a significant shift for the corporation, and follows a series of recent victories for secularists in public life, including a legal ruling in favour of the so-called atheist bus, the addition of humanism to a GCSE religious studies syllabus, and the launch of the first major national student secular society.

*From the Observer, 3rd June:*

Sir David Attenborough, winner of the 2009 Observer ethical awards lifetime achievement award—

"One can see a world that's overrun by homo sapiens, where there's almost nothing left in the natural world, which is the way we're going with the increase of population. Three times as many people are alive today as when I made my first TV programme."

*From the Guardian, 1st June:*

Charlie Brooker asks why women aren't running the world yet—

"We don't need a few women in conspicuous positions of

power scattered here and there - we need a 10-year prohibition on all forms of male power. Seriously: a decade in which men don't get to control anything, from the remote control upwards. Imagine the consequences. For one thing, there would be an instant and massive reduction in armed conflict around the globe. Sure, nations would routinely bitch about each other in secret (and with a new, hair-curling viciousness), but there'd be fewer intercontinental punch-ups and a far smaller body count."

*From The Freethinker, May 21st:*

Take a deep breathe ... you are about to be annoyed. Very annoyed indeed. In the same week in which the unremitting cruelty of Catholic institutions towards vulnerable youngsters in Ireland was exposed, the outgoing Archbishop of Westminster had the sheer gall to identify "lack of faith" as "the greatest of all evils."

According to The Times, the rancid Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor—who recently said that secularists and atheists were "not fully human"—blamed atheism for war and destruction, and suggested it was a greater evil even than sin itself.

The following people were elected to our committee at the AGM:

Margaret Nelson (Chair), Andrew Morrison (Vice-Chair), Denis Johnston (Secretary), Louise Armstrong (Treasurer), David Mitchell and John Palmer (committee members).

Photo: The Aldeburgh Scallop by Maggi Hambling, dedicated to Benjamin Britten, on the beach at Aldeburgh, Suffolk.

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## Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource Forum of Faiths on “Community Cohesion”

*Margaret Nelson*

The invitation included the following:

“Diversity, equality, social exclusion, community cohesion” - these words are now common currency, especially in government documents, and we probably have a common understanding of the first three concepts. But the fourth may be more problematic.

As I couldn't attend on May 6th, I wrote some notes about the paper introducing the event, and they've been fully incorporated in a report of the meeting published by SIFRE, with contributions from representatives of various religious organisations. The report is available from SIFRE, c/o University Campus Suffolk, Ipswich, IP4 1QJ, email [forum@sifre.org.uk](mailto:forum@sifre.org.uk). There will be a follow-up meeting at the end of this month.

I ended my notes:

We're most concerned about promoting the value of secularism, which many people don't seem to understand. They think it means atheism, or commercial interests, or is about anti-religion.

Personally, I think the government's initiatives are muddled and unhelpful, and directly at odds with its continued commitment to faith schools, which are divisive. Children should go to the same schools, and learn about each other from being together.

As the BHA has pointed out ([www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/273](http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/273)), the Equalities Bill actually creates inequality, particularly for those without a religion.

Statutory and voluntary bodies without either a religious or atheist agenda, where everyone works to achieve their aims together, are the best model. One's religion, or lack of it, should be irrelevant. The best way to achieve “cohesion” is by encouraging groups or “communities” to think of themselves as British citizens, first and foremost, and to be less inward looking.

Granting special privileges to faith organisations simply on the basis of their beliefs is counter-productive. A deferential, uncritical attitude towards religious authorities is unhelpful. Consulting religious “leaders” who are unelected authority figures is unhelpful, especially when they represent an archaic view of society that's unsympathetic towards women – it's important to consult people as individuals, not through their “leaders”.

The glue that could bind us together is a common interest in achieving all the benefits of living in an affluent, safe society with free and fair access to education, health care and social welfare, without discrimination, and in following the Golden Rule: Don't do to others what you wouldn't like done to you.

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### ***Andrew Morrison was at the forum***

There was a very good turn out that included the usual faces and also representatives from the Police, Criminal Justice Board, Probation Service, NHS, etc.

The main impression I came away with was that nearly every suggestion people made to improve “cohesion” seemed to rely on wholly Humanist and Secular principles.

They all seemed happy to concede the problems that faced a “cohesive ideal” were the many differences and contradictions that exist between and within all the faiths, but that when you take that away we are all human beings and are all part of a larger community in which we should embrace our commonality.



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**A**s the reports above and on the opposite page seem to indicate, the government's approach to “community cohesion” and inter-faith dialogue is full of flaws.

Many of the organisations they've been consulting don't seem to understand much about the various bodies that have been set up to facilitate cohesion, or the way that local government works. Who can blame them? Not many people do. However, without an understanding of these things, there's ample scope for muddle and misunderstanding. Apparently, the BHA has welcomed the news that the government's “Interdepartmental Group on Faith” has renamed itself the “Interdepartmental Group on Religion and Belief,” but whether a change of name will make much difference remains to be seen. It will be interesting to see what will happen now that the Minister for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, has quit, following the MPs' expenses hoo-ha and her falling-out with Gordon Brown.

There are some who favour exploiting the availability of grant funding to set up Humanist welfare organisations (similar to faith-based groups) to counter the perception, encouraged by anti-atheists, that we're not very caring people and never do anything for anyone. Others say that many of us are already busy supporting a wide variety of charitable organisations, without waving any banners. What do you think?

*Margaret Nelson*

## Faith groups and public sector organisations conference

*John Palmer reports from Centre Parcs on May 6th*

A one-day conference for faith and interfaith groups engaging with public sector organisations was convened by the East of England Faiths Council and the East of England Regional Assembly. Its purpose was to explain the workings of public sector organisations, from the Communities and Local Government Department (CLG) through county and parish councils, to local strategic partnerships.

The shorthand of "faith" was continuously used, with only one use of the more up to date and legally framed "religion or belief" description of the communities under discussion.

A member of the faith communities engagement team from CLG, whose minister was Hazel Blears, gave a presentation on faith and public policy. The CLG's objectives were: to encourage interfaith dialogue; to help build community cohesion; to increase the level of collaborative action; to develop the capacity of faith-based organisations (FBOs); to develop faith based organisations as part of the "third sector"; to develop local authorities' recognition of the role of FBOs; to prevent violence and extremism; to eradicate barriers against young people and women; and to coordinate "role consistency". The speaker stated that there is a need to engage hard-to-reach people, and therefore the CLG attempts to contact those who are in touch with them—that is, the FBOs. As is obvious from the above list, understanding the purpose of the Communities and Local Government Department is no easy matter.

A member of the East of England Faiths Council (EEFC) described its role of "helping to shape a consensus".

Acronyms abound in the world of local government: CLG, LSP, LAA, CDRP, EEDA, etc. A speaker from GO-East (Government Office, East of England), whose job was described as a cohesion and faith policy lead, presented DUCK ("Districts, Unitaries, Counties—your chance to Know about them"), analysing sizes and types of local authorities, with descriptions of how they run their "cabinets". It covered finance, delved into current challenges faced by local government, and inevitably presented a large amount of detail on local strategic partnerships (LSPs). Faith groups were told that the benefits of engaging with LSPs were: a recognition of the added value that FBOs could bring to the LSP; the chance of the LSP working with the FBO to change attitudes or behaviour in the wider community; the influence that an FBO can exert on behalf of other FBOs.

The Chair of Fenland LSP presented on "How an LSP works". Among the benefits of an FBO dealing with an LSP or its sub-LSPs were that it was easier for the FBO to get its voice heard through this route, with access to resources and community decision-makers.

The Community Development Foundation (CDF) has commissioned research into faith groups and local government, "to investigate the experiences of FBOs when building relationships with local government". In an apparently well-conducted survey, which "even included humanists", the main challenges for FBOs were: stretched resources; limited understanding of how local government works; competition within the faith sector; over-reliance on specific individuals; lack of faith literacy and understanding of FBOs by local government. Once again, LSPs were highlighted as useful organisations to cultivate.

### Comment:

The conference would probably have interested any FBO seeking funding. Indeed, two representatives of one faith asked several questions about their accommodation project, seemingly finding it hard to understand or accept that a local authority would not contribute to a project which was entirely religiously orientated, such as a temple or a mosque. They were advised that an authority needed value added for wider community use of the project before it could be funded.

There was little awareness of the "religion or belief" approach to law and equality. One Christian delegate was surprised that a humanist had attended the conference. Other Christians accepted that there was some point in trying to understand local government's dealings with religion or belief issues.

Once again, local strategic partnerships were an important part of the presentations and discussions. And once again, people found it difficult to understand the role of LSPs, some never having heard of such organisations.

A question was asked about whether LSPs would survive long after a possible change of government. The opinion of a panel member, admittedly an LSP official, was that they had cross-party support and would survive. It seems that LSPs, introduced eight years ago, were intended to bring influence in local affairs down to the local population's level. Given that most people have never heard of them, it's not clear how this is actually working.

Was the conference of value to humanists at a local group level? Since we are not likely to want to build humanist meeting places and don't show much interest in collectively pursuing "good works", the answer is: probably not. But attendance did provide interesting contact with members of other groups, albeit religious ones, giving more insight into what they are thinking and how they are pursuing their aims. After all, when did you last meet someone whose job title is "community evangelist"?



## SUFFOLK HUMANISTS & SECULARISTS

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### Newsletters & Ceremonies

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The Suffolk & N E Essex Humanist group was founded in 1991 to promote Humanism and Secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We changed our name to Suffolk Humanists when the Essex group was formed, then again in April 2008, to reflect the importance of secularism when religious organisations are being increasingly assertive.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE). The group is a member of SAVO—the Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team, which is independent of the BHA network, has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions. For more information, see the contact details above.

**HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion; Humanists think we can be good without God.**

**SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.**

*Dates for your diary - note them now!*

**Meetings are on the second Tuesday of every month from 7.30-10pm in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Laburnum Close (signed to Pinewood Surgery), Ipswich, IP8 3SL, near the A12/A14 Copdock interchange and Copdock Tesco. The car park is at the end of the close on the right, after the surgery. For detailed directions, or to request or offer a lift, please get in touch.**

**Refreshments are provided. There will be no more raffles at meetings. Members and guests are invited to make small donations, to help pay for the room hire.**

### 9th June—Teaching the new RE Syllabus in a Suffolk Primary School.

The new RE syllabus for Suffolk schools was introduced in September 2007. It includes Humanism and secular world views. The idea is that children should learn about religion and its alternatives, not to be religious. We'll be visited by Julie Coombes, a local teacher, who'll tell us about her approach.

### Saturday 27th June—noon—Pub Lunch at the Seal, Woodbridge, IP12 4BY, corner of Ipswich Road (B1438)

and Old Barrack Road. We can't book a table at the Seal, so please phone or email us by the 24th so we can try to grab enough room for everyone.

### 14th July—An Introduction to the Cosmos.

Our member Tom Boles will talk about astronomy, referring to photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope. Come prepared to be awed.

### 11th August—Ten Minute Topics.

A popular format that allows everyone to spend ten minutes talking about

something that interests, annoys, or pleases them. It might be something you've read about in a newspaper, or an injustice you care about—it's up to you.



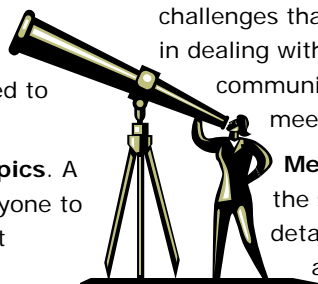
### Saturday 22nd August—noon—Pub lunch at the Seal, Woodbridge

(see opposite). Phone us by the 19th if you're coming.

### 8th September—Policing the Suffolk community.

Lloyd Stewart is a long serving Detective Constable with Suffolk Constabulary and is the Chairman of the Suffolk BPA (Black Police Association). Lloyd knows about the issues that face our community and our police in terms of race and diversity issues. He hopes to talk to the group about his experiences and about the challenges that face Suffolk Constabulary in dealing with an increasingly diverse community and the pressure of meeting government targets.

**Meetings will continue** on the second Tuesday monthly—details to be announced. Guests always welcome.



**MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE OVERDUE.** We had to raise them to a minimum of £10 at the AGM, due to increased costs, but we think we're still good value. If you already pay by standing order, please cancel it and use the membership form sent with this newsletter—please put your bank's full address on the form. You can either increase your payment when it becomes due, or now. Please note: £10 is a minimum—please pay more if you can. Whatever you do, please let our treasurer Louise Armstrong know—her address is on the form. If you tick the box to have newsletters by email, it saves us money.

[www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk)