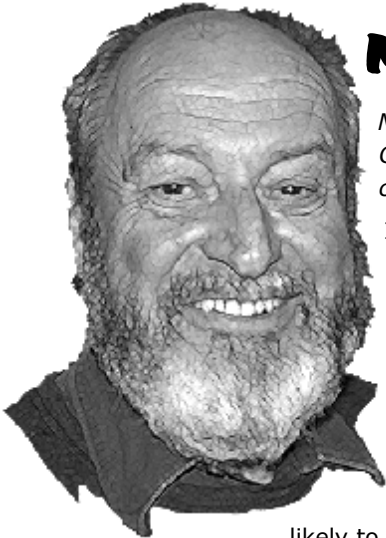


Suffolk Humanist & Secularist NEWS

March 2010



March meeting—ethical jury

Member Michael Imison first tried out his ethical jury idea at our May 2007 meeting in Colchester. Since then, he's had ethical juries at Humanist group meetings all over the country. Now he's back for another ethical jury in Suffolk. Michael explains:

It's puzzled me that religions such as Christianity and Islam, which were invented for the use of unsophisticated societies centuries ago, have survived as strongly as they have into the post-Darwinian age. One possible explanation for their continued existence is that they are generally regarded as repositories of morality. Religions are seen as setting standards of behaviour, without which communities would decline into anarchy.

In rejecting religion, Humanists claim that their behaviour towards their fellow men is guided by reason and experience. They however decline to issue commandments, regarding each individual as responsible for their own actions. The furthest they are likely to go in the way of moral pronouncements is to say that everyone should act towards others as they would wish others to act towards them. A consequence of this, to my mind, is that the moral basis of Humanism is generally felt to be quite vague. A stronger commitment to promoting "good" behaviour might be a lever that would prise away from the religions those followers who do not see any alternative source of morality.

But what is "good behaviour" if it is not defined by the pronouncements of a supreme being? In an attempt to examine this question and also, I admit, to get Humanist bodies such as the BHA more associated with the idea of morality, I have been experimenting with what I call "ethical juries". I attended a number of Socratic Dialogues held under the auspices of the Society for the Furtherance of Critical Philosophy. These examine general questions such as "Is it ever right to tell a lie?" by assembling a dozen or so people who are each asked by a facilitator to recount an incident from their own lives which has a bearing on the question. A vote is then taken to select one of these examples, which is then discussed in great detail, sometimes over the course of several days, in the hope of formulating an answer. Often this is not successful but the emphasis on personal experience and the care taken by the facilitator to ensure that the debate is orderly and that the example giver is not exposed to unfair or embarrassing questions seemed to have potential.

I wanted to see what would happen if a similar size group were asked to bring examples of real moral dilemmas they had faced in their own lives so that the group could discuss one of them and reach a conclusion if necessary by voting. The objective would be to look critically at the possible or actual consequences of the action contemplated to establish which would cause least harm. The participants would have to examine what moral principles they were using in making a decision, without assuming these would be applicable in every case. Humanist morality would therefore lie in examining each case on its merits, without attempting broad generalizations. It would be interesting to see how far these random groups would reach a consensus. I decided to call them ethical juries because of the parallels with the ethics committees operating in medical practice, who have to find practical answers to difficult issues, and with the juries in criminal cases who have to reach conclusions in the face of conflicting evidence.

My first attempt was with the Suffolk Humanist Group, where a particularly personal dilemma was discussed. The verdict unanimously condemned the action of the example giver who expressed himself well satisfied in having his own doubts confirmed. Those who took part found it interesting and even enjoyable. Since then I have worked with several other Humanist groups and this year returned the compliment by conducting a jury at the international conference of the SFCP. What seems to be emerging is that generally there is a consensus about what is a right action though this may not be reached by relying on reason or experience.

I hope that you will come prepared to offer a personal moral dilemma, though of course no-one should feel they have to, or even to take part in the discussion if they simply prefer to observe. Depending on the examples offered it may be possible to discuss more than one in the evening.

The final part of the meeting will be a brief discussion of the process to see how effective people thought it was.

We'll be in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Ipswich, at 7.30pm on Tuesday 9th March.

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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. Members and guests are invited to make a small donation to help pay for our expenses.

9th March—Ethical Jury (see front page).

3rd April (Saturday) - Pub lunch at The Seal, Woodbridge, noon—2.30. If anyone is interested in meeting for lunch, please phone 01473 658828 or email margaret@suffolkhands.org.uk by Monday 29th March.

13th April—Visit from the Mayor of Ipswich & AGM.

Mayor Councillor David Goldsmith has been visiting all the faith groups in the town during his term of office, and now it's our turn. We have, of course, explained that we're not a "faith", but are happy to welcome him and to explain who we are and what we do. We might raise some issues that concern us, such as the annual Celebration of Community, which includes a church service, and why local

government should be completely secular.

We don't expect the mayor to stay for the whole evening (though he's welcome to). This will be our AGM, so we have some business to get through. An agenda will be sent nearer the time. Among other things, we need to elect a new treasurer, as Louise Armstrong has indicated that she won't stand for re-election. He or she must be familiar with book-keeping and know how to use (or be willing to learn) Google Documents and Excel (or something similar). We also need to elect a new chairperson in my place. If you're willing to join the committee, note that we usually meet online using Skype, rather than face to face, so there's no travelling involved.

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

In brief . . .

My apologies (again) for failing to deliver a full newsletter, due to other commitments. There will be reports on recent group activities and progress on the car stickers in the next newsletter.

I'm sorry to report that our member Pamela Oldroyd's husband Bill died on 23rd December. His funeral was conducted by Suffolk Humanist Celebrant David Mitchell on 7th January at Oakfield Wood green burial site, Wrabness. Our condolences to Pam, who hasn't been able to attend a meeting for some time.

A few Suffolk Humanists and Secularists

met a few Cambridge Humanists for lunch at The Linden Tree, Bury St Edmunds, on 13th January. I've heard that they enjoyed themselves, once they'd found somewhere to park—not easy on a Saturday!

SH&S Vice-Chair Andrew Morrison is getting married on 10th April, somewhere down in the South West, so he's sent his AGM apologies early. We wish Andrew and Angela a warm and sunny wedding and a very long and happy marriage.

The Ceremonies Team currently has two trainees. If they're successful, they'll join the team and help us to meet increasing demand for Humanist ceremonies.