

## Dates for your diary

**Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> July**, 7.30 pm at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich— **2500 years of Free-thought**— European Humanist federation video of the history of freethought in Europe. Guests and raffle prizes welcome. Phone 01473 658828 to offer or ask for a lift (though we can't guarantee to provide one).

**Tuesday, 10<sup>th</sup> August**, 6pm in Elmsett — **Blasphemy and fish 'n chips**. Supper from 'Ye Flying Frier' (don't blame me—it's what it says on the van), and a viewing of Monty Python's Life of Brian—the story of poor Brian Cohen, mistaken for the Messiah. Phone 01473 658828 for directions and to order food by the 9th, please.

**Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> September**— our next meeting at the community centre, to be announced. What would you like to do? Members are always welcome to organise a meeting or social event— phone if you have any ideas.



### SUFFOLK HUMANISTS

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For a humanist funeral, wedding or baby-naming, tel. 01473 658828, or email ceremonies@suffolkhumanists.org.uk.

The Suffolk Humanist Group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association (BHA), the National Secular Society (NSS), and the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE).

## SUFFOLK HUMANIST NEWS

July 2004



### 2500 years of Freethought

At our meeting on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> July we'll be watching a 50 minute video — the European Humanist Federation's exploration of the rise of freethinking in the West, "2,500 Years of Freethought" — followed by a discussion (see p 8).

*Giordano Bruno, a hero to Italian freethinkers, burnt at the stake in 1600.*

### The BHA AGM, 10th July 2004

*An 'informal report' by Michael Imison, who found time to write it on Sunday 11th July—thank you Michael!*

The 2004 BHA AGM was notable in two particular respects. It was the last over which retiring Chair Chris Butterworth presided, and it was the first at which comedian Linda Smith spoke as the association's new President. Linda spoke last and her witty and forthright speech aptly summed up not only the afternoon but the current state of the association. She began by expressing her surprise at receiving the invitation. She had asked what had led to the offer of the presidency and was told it was a result of her speaking on the programme Devout Sceptics. She had had to play the tape back before she could remember what she had said but now supposes she has long been an 'unconscious Humanist'. She was also pleased to be asked to follow Claire Rayner, whom she has long admired. She said her presence at the AGM was to ensure good attendance. Looking round the half-empty hall she added, "So that didn't work then". Clearly the asso-

ciation needed more members but she concluded bluntly, "You're not going to get them with events like this".

Indeed up to that point the afternoon had not been very stimulating. Linda may have been surprised that an early intervention from the floor was a complaint that the members were not allowed to elect their own Presidents or Vice Presidents (who've included Simon Blackburn, Bernard Crick and Richard Norman).

The word from the platform was that 2003 was an interesting and rewarding year which had seen useful media coverage and growing awareness of the BHA in Government circles but this had to be seen in the context of falling income and rising expenditure. One member considered that the management of funds was grossly inadequate and pointed out that the accumulated losses over the past five years came to around £500,000. However Sir Herman Bondi, speaking from the floor, considered that to reduce expenditure further (25% of staff were cut last year) would render the BHA impotent. It would be much more expensive to have to start again from scratch. This was indeed the attitude of the platform who reiterated that current losses were investments in the future and covered by substantial reserves. The real solution was to increase income from donations and membership. Research showed that the average churchgoer in the Church of England paid £350 pa to the church compared with £17.50 pa from BHA members.

Another area showing mixed results was that of ceremonies. Fees had to be raised as currently the fees levied did not cover the cost of administering the service. Higher fees had coincided with a number of resignations including some very experienced officiants (though not always for that reason). One member took exception to the view that accreditation established a contract and said that it was unacceptable that humanists should threaten to sue other humanists for non-payment of the levy.

Chris Butterworth responded that the BHA had counsel's opinion that accreditation did establish a contract and that as

## Oxfam Sudan appeal

There'll be the usual raffle at our July meeting, but this time can we send the money (and any extra you care to donate) to the Oxfam Sudan appeal? A catastrophe is unfolding in Darfur in Western Sudan—thousands killed, over a million driven from their homes. Despite the recent joint statement by the UN and the Government of Sudan, reports from Oxfam staff on the ground are that the situation is getting worse not better. Time is running out for the people of Darfur, whose plight has been largely ignored while the media and government have been preoccupied with Iraq. If you're not coming to the meeting and haven't already made a donation, you can do so through the Oxfam website at [http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what\\_you\\_can\\_do/give\\_to\\_oxfam/donate/western\\_sudan.htm](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_you_can_do/give_to_oxfam/donate/western_sudan.htm), or send a cheque for the Sudan appeal to Oxfam, 274 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DZ.

This is what the BBC website says about Sudan: "Apart from an 11-year period of peace, it has been torn by civil war between the mainly Muslim north and the Animist and Christian south since independence in 1956. Talks aimed at ending the conflict were held in Kenya in 2003 and 2004 ... Lt-Gen Umar Hasan al-Bashir came to power in 1989 in a military coup backed by the National Islamic Front." He's introduced Islamic Sharia Law, which has been rejected by the non-Arabic speaking, non-Muslim section of the population, and given free range to the *Janjawid*, or militias, who've been terrorising the villages of mainly agricultural ethnic groups, such as the Fur, Masali and Zaghawa. As with many other conflicts, the marauding thugs have looted, raped, beaten and killed at random.

*Sources: Oxfam, Amnesty & the BBC.*

*"Hate is a sentiment that leads to  
the extinction of values"*

ORTEGA Y GASSET

are not sure what to include then feel free to use the content of the BHA briefing.

The campaign is being run in association with VES, 13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG and the message has been sent by Keith Reed on behalf of Edwin Savitt.

The BHA briefing note is available to anyone who wants it — please ask. I'll draft a letter to be sent on behalf of those attending the next meeting, should you wish to sign it. MN

### **Catholics to pay for school buses**

We sent a submission to the county's school transport department on the school bus issue—Catholics were protesting at the possibility of having to pay for their children's fares to voluntary-aided schools, rather than send them to the nearest community school.

As you may have read in the East Anglian Daily Times, Suffolk County Council's executive committee agreed to start charging for the cost of home-to-school transport for Roman Catholic voluntary-aided schools. The decision was made on mainly financial grounds; home to school transport costs 40% of the education budget, and savings had to be made.



### **Humanism on BBC Radio Suffolk**

BBC Suffolk would like to include some stories with relevance to Humanism in their programmes.

Producer Luke Deal says: 'All we ask of you is to try and provide us with one story a month... It has to be a story that will not only be of interest to you and your community, but also to our listeners. It can be about an experience, it could be serious, if not funny, but most of all we want to hear from real people with real stories!

'The material provided by you, once sourced and confirmed, will more often than not appear in Nick Risby's Sunday Breakfast programme, but it may also be considered for one of our other programmes.

'This is a new and exciting opportunity for us all and I'm glad that you have agreed to be part of an award-winning team.'

trustees of a charity they were required by law to do all they could to recover monies owed to them. Another member queried how many officiants were genuine humanists. They often seemed to operate independently of local Humanist groups. It was also suggested that applicants for training should have their criminal records checked. Maria Maclachlan (BHA Community Services Officer) responded that this was not a legal requirement and was expensive but it was being borne in mind.

There was a lot more detailed querying of the accounts but they were eventually adopted by an overwhelming majority. After this demonstration that humanists can be as sceptical of each other as they are of the proponents of religion, Linda's speech came as a breath of fresh air. She finished on a very positive note. She will make herself personally responsible for organising a fund-raising Gala for the BHA with major stars at a popular venue in the West End or elsewhere. This could also help attract younger members who were badly needed. All the grey-headed members present applauded enthusiastically.

### **Comment**

*Margaret Nelson*

If the 'average' C of E member pays £350 a year to the church, they're obviously better off than a lot of humanists. The church's money goes to maintain some very expensive buildings and pay for a lot of clergy.

Membership of the BHA's been static for years and it expects its officiants, who (unlike the clergy) don't have a salary, to pay them, partly because they now employ a Community Services Officer. The levy is currently £10 per funeral, and as the fee for most funerals is between £100 and £120, this represents between 8% and 10% of the officiants' income, before expenses (mine have usually swallowed up over half my income). As has been pointed out by one disgruntled

officiant, if you tried to impose that sort of levy on the average trades union member, you'd be voted out of office.

However, it was news to many officiants that they have a 'legal contract' with the BHA and are obliged to pay the full levy, which used to be voluntary. As one said, 'I don't recall signing any such thing.' Another, who recently decided she'd had enough of the BHA and resigned her accreditation, received an estimated invoice based on her income last year (which was less) telling her that if she didn't pay up, they'd take legal action. The same threat's been made to others. Whatever the legal advice given to the BHA, I can't see how its officiants can have a contract by default, by simply renewing their accreditation without indicating that they understood what they were letting themselves in for. As Michael wrote, the levy issue isn't the only reason people have quit, but it's been the last straw for some.

Those of us in the Suffolk ceremonies team who aren't BHA officiants can only be grateful that we're out of it, yet Michael has indicated that he wants to join the BHA network and has applied to begin training later this year, while continuing to work with us. David, Sophie and I have expressed our reservations about this, as we don't see how it will work. Apparently, Michael would be expected to include any funerals he does in his BHA totals and pay the levy on them, whatever the source of the referral. Since we've done all our own groundwork and paid for our publications, and most funerals come through our contact number, this hardly seems fair. Only a few months ago, Chris Butterworth of the BHA accused us of 'freeloading' off them—by which we thought she meant that we were taking advantage of their publicity and reputation. In fact, the success of Suffolk Humanist ceremonies owes very little to the BHA and a great deal to the reputation we've earned in the community. There's more to it than all this, but suffice it to say we feel that the BHA has a lot of issues to sort out with the ceremonies and their financial management before we'd feel comfortable about being involved in any way. What do you think?

A letter from: **Humanists for Patient Choice**, Office 185, 56 Gloucester Road, Kensington, London SW7 4UB.  
campaign@ukactnow.org

June 2004

Dear David Mitchell,

Time for us to stand up for what we believe. I am an 83 year-old, long-standing member of the British Humanist Association and of the Committee of Hampstead Humanist Society. I have actively campaigned on humanist issues for over 50 years. I am also a long-standing supporter of the law being changed to give terminally ill patients the choice of asking for medical assistance to die. This is why I am writing to you.

As you may be aware, proposals by Lord Joffe to change the law in this way are currently being considered by a Special House of Lords Select Committee. The British Humanist Association and 80% of the population support these proposals. Nevertheless religious organisations across the UK are working hard to prevent terminally ill patients who are suffering unbearably, like Diane Pretty, from being given this choice.

I hope you agree it is Time for US to Stand Up for what we Believe, so please help end this suffering by taking a couple of minutes to write a short letter supporting changing the law.

Please send your letter to: Humanists for Patient Choice, Office 185, 56 Gloucester Road, Kensington, London SW7 4UB by 31st August 2004 and feel free to raise it with your group. I will then ensure these submissions are submitted en masse to the select committee. Thank you for reading this.

Yours sincerely  
Edwin Savitt

PS. Please do help end this suffering by sending a short letter in support of Patient Choice. If you