

suffolk Humanist & secularist NEWS

January 2015

Meeting on Sunday 25th January at 2pm in Hadleigh Library – How much do you know about religion? A quiz to test your knowledge.

For more information see page 6.

Pub lunch at noon on Saturday January 31st at The Duke of York in Woodbridge. Family and friends welcome but book first please.

For more information see page 6.

Celebrating the Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion



Every year the local UN Association invites groups affiliated to Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) to contribute to a celebration of human rights on Human Rights Day. Our secretary, Denis Johnson, contributed on our behalf in December. The theme was Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes

freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.'

As humanists, we support the right of every person to be treated with dignity and respect, and to be allowed to speak, and believe, as they wish.

As secularists we want a country where institutions are separate from religious organisations, and everyone is treated equally, regardless of their beliefs.

I might add that a problem today is that many people – including some who really should know better – do not know what 'secularism' means. It is frequently used to describe a form of repressive atheism that's anti-religion, which it most certainly is not.

The National Secular Society explains it succinctly:

Secularism is a principle that involves two basic propositions. The first is the strict separation of the state from religious institutions. The second is that people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law.

Secularism is the best, possibly the only, means to create a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. It is an essential element in promoting equality and fairness for all citizens.

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The increasing danger today is that we are beset by groups – religious and political, national and international – whose objective is to ensure that certain belief systems are preferenced over others, privileging those people who happen to subscribe to such beliefs and consequently penalising those who do not. We think that such actions serve only to divide our society, stressing and institutionalising differences, rather than championing the equality of all.

The difficulty is that so much of history tells us that the exercising of one groups 'religious freedom' so often tramples upon the rights of others.

The old jibe that "The Puritans loved religious freedom so much that they kept it all to themselves" is the nub of the problem.

Freedom of belief is not the same as 'freedom of my belief', and certainly the right to manifest one's belief – even as a so-called holy ritual – cannot ever extend to justifying the physical or mental abuse of others.

Similarly, just as those who are of one religion or belief have a right to manifest their belief, by preaching, teaching or writing, so they must accept that others have the same right to challenge and criticise that belief in exactly the same way.

And challenging and criticising is not intolerance; disagreeing with someone is not intolerance. Refusing to allow someone to disagree with you is.

In the 60s there was a pop/folk song by Donovan. Some of the words were, "Freedom is a word I rarely use without thinkin', mm-mmm..."

For one person's freedom is so often another's tyranny and this is as true for religious freedom as any other.

For religious liberty is meaningless unless we all have it and there can be no religious freedom without the freedom to dissent.

What are British values?

Prime Minister Cameron, talking about British jihadists, said, "Adhering to British values is not an option or a choice." At our November meeting, members tried to define British values.

John Palmer

We discussed "British values", the concept floated by David Cameron and Michael Gove. It soon became clear that most of us didn't believe that there are such things. Hardly surprising in a group where people tend to think in global terms, encouraging the international nature of morality. The alleged British values were thought to be shared by right-minded people of all nations and that Britain had no more right to them than any other state.

There was also the issue of who is British. One can be a Jewish British citizen or a Sikh British citizen or a Muslim British citizen. The values held by these people are, by definition, British values. But they could be very different in some important respects from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant values that Cameron and Gove were probably talking about.

In fact, the idea of British values was dismissed fairly quickly, in favour of a discussion on whether values, morals, ethics, etc. could be taught, or whether they were instilled by some other process, perhaps in the home. Most people felt that morality or even good behaviour could not be taught in school. A minority thought this was incorrect, as evidenced by the habit in schools of lining the walls with "commandments" like "Bullying is bad" or "Respect other people". Teachers would not do this, presumably, if they didn't think it was useful.

Whatever the method through which values were absorbed, some members thought that the British state was hypocritical in espousing certain values and then doing very little to actually make sure that it enforced them. Examples were the pathetic response to female genital mutilation, the weak

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attitude to faith schools that insisted on bending the national curriculum, and the lazy control of animal slaughter and meat marketing.

It would appear that British values are of very little interest to humanists, atheists or freethinkers, but international values certainly are.

Penny Greenland

Values are often hidden within other things. Values are held in the way you teach, and respond, and everything that surrounds what you teach. Deciding that British values ought to be taught is value laden! Lots of hidden stuff in there ...

They are probably not the stuff of subject matter unless you want young people to reject them. Exploring personal values – and letting children forge their own – with and against and understanding others – would be much more interesting.

The government was addressing a specific anxiety about a few schools. But it became a sound bite that the Education Department had to translate into something do-able; and they did this by referring to things that are already in the curriculum in Citizenship etc. So what will be different? Interesting to watch that space ...

Elisabeth Thomson

British values, it was generally agreed, are difficult to define but there was a need to give children during their education a time to discuss the merits of democracy, freedom of speech, equality and respecting differences. We discussed the difficulty in dictating set ideas on an agenda, but also generally felt there was a need to protect our “culture” from extreme behaviour across all philosophies and religions. The discussion included the part the media, particularly The Daily Mail, had in generating fear and irrational behaviour and in making complex issues simple and thus gave readers the feeling that issues with extremism were easy to solve.



Stephen Evans, NSS campaigns manager, responded to new guidance for schools on the promotion of “fundamental British values” from The Department for Education (DfE):

“It’s essential that all pupils educated in the UK, regardless of the type of school they attend, learn about those values considered key to contributing to mutual understanding and a cohesive society.

“Unfortunately, the advice issued by the DfE appears contradictory. It encourages schools to impose worship on pupils and leaves the problem of some religiously-led schools teaching illiberal views completely unresolved. Such schools are being told that they cannot promote discrimination on the basis of ‘belief, opinion or background,’ but also that they will not be forced to advocate teachings that conflict with their own beliefs. As has been revealed in recent months, many schools are teaching about religion in a wholly partisan way, and sometimes in a way that promotes ideas that are counter-cohesive and contrary to the values outlined in the standards.

“The latest measures also do nothing to address the separatism fostered by the very presence of faith based schools. Without reform in the very structures of the schools system, such as in terms of faith ethos and admissions, these new standards are unlikely to deliver any meaningful change.”

In September members discussed Sunday Assemblies, god-free gatherings that compensate many atheists and agnostics for a feeling that Sunday’s not the same without church. Was it something that appealed to them? And if it did, what would they do about it? There wasn’t a great deal of enthusiasm, with one or two exceptions. It was agreed that anyone who was interested would have to organise one independently of the group. It’s been made clear that Sunday Assemblies have nothing to do with the BHA. The nearest assemblies to Ipswich are in Norwich and Cambridge.

<http://sundayassembly.com>

Secularism – a response

George Bethell

As I read Margaret Nelson's article on 'Secularism' in the September edition of the Suffolk Humanist and Secularist News, I realised I was feeling a little uncomfortable. The reason dawned on me; her attack on anti-theists was aimed at people like me for, as my long-suffering friends and relatives will testify, I am a vociferous opponent of theism and its role in the world. Pricked, I decided to respond to some of the specific accusations made.

Margaret says 'antitheists... (are) forever opining that religion ought to be banned.' Really? If we look at the most vocal and high-profile of modern anti-theists - Richard Dawkins, AC Grayling, Sam Harris et al and, of course, the late Christopher Hitchens - we simply don't hear them calling for religious prohibition. First, they recognise that this would be an impossible quest. Hitchens says "this stuff [religion] cannot be taken away from people, it is their favourite toy, and it will remain so as long as – as Freud said, in *The Future Of An Illusion* – we're afraid of death... which is, I think, likely to be a very long time" [1]. Second, proscribing personal beliefs would run counter to their unswerving support for the principle of freedom of thought and the practice of intelligent debate amongst people holding different views. These passionate and at times, I will admit, strident atheists are happy for religion to be practised by "consenting adults in the privacy of their own home" [2] as long as it isn't imposed on others and doesn't seep out to damage or poison civil society. As Hitchens puts it, "I'm perfectly happy for people to have these toys and to play with them at home and hug them to themselves and so on and share them with other people who come around and play with the toys, so that's absolutely fine. They are not to make me play with these toys. I will not play with the toys. Don't bring the toys to my house. Don't say my children must play with these toys [3]."

That last sentence brings me back to Margaret's piece in which she suggests that "Organised

religion, particularly the established church, is a nuisance...". A nuisance? Well even if we ignore the all too many theocracies where blasphemy, apostasy, infidelity and homosexuality are punishable by death and restrict ourselves to the more tolerant UK, I would argue that organised religion is far more than a minor irritant. Take, for example, our government's support for faith-based schools. A C Grayling, humanist, secularist and anti-theist could not be clearer: "The unacceptable concept of faith-based education should scarcely need explanation. The very phrase is a paradox all on its own. ... Any country that levies a tax on all its citizens to pay for the faith-ghettoising education of minorities is making them bear the cost of creating serious future problems [4]."

Staying with the issue of religion in schools I would like to address Margaret's accusation that "anti-theists ... are forever ... dismissing religious people as stupid." I agree that calling anyone stupid is always undesirable (if sometimes irresistible). The word is generally too strong, too judgemental, too impolite. However, if a faith-based, state-funded school insists on offering its myths and superstitions to impressionable young people as if they were true then I claim my right to challenge them and to say that these religious stories are, at best, 'silly'. And if my seven year-old grandson's teacher tells him that, for example, the universe was created in seven days about 5000 years ago and Charlie (for that's his name) concludes that his teacher is stupid to believe such things, then I won't argue with him!

Finally, Margaret quotes Douglas Todd, "Secularization is the best thing that's ever happened to religion" [5] and concludes 'Hardline atheists might even come to agree.' But they do already! They repeatedly point out that when the enlightened framers of the US Constitution wrote in the First Amendment that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof... ", they did so not to attack religion but to protect the rights of

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all religions. The fact is that the prominent atheists mentioned herein are, above all else, secularists and anti-theism is one of the weapons they use in their fight to defend secularism where it exists and promote it where it does not. If I were Margaret I would welcome having such warriors on my side.

[1], [3] Debate between Christopher Hitchens and Al Sharpton held on 7/5/2007. Transcript available at <http://hitchensdebates.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/hitchens-vs-sharpton-new-york-public.html>

[2] Lucy Craig. Letter to the Observer, 22/10/2006 quoted by Margaret Nelson.

[4] AC Grayling, 'Worship in Schools is Insidious', in Times Educational Supplement, 19/09/2014

[5] Douglas Todd in a Vancouver Sun blog 6/8/2011, quoted by Margaret Nelson.

To answer some of George's points:

I admit I was sloppy in my reference to atheists who are anti-theist, who'd like religion banned (they tried that in China, and it didn't work), and who regard religious people as stupid, but I wasn't thinking of the high-profile so-called New Atheists – Dawkins, Harris, Grayling and Hitchens – but the army of anti-theist atheists, mainly male, who write a lot of aggressive nonsense in social media of all sorts. However, I'm not a great fan of Richard Dawkins either, who's much better at writing about evolution than about people, as he doesn't seem to understand the latter. He reminds me of Prof. Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion*, who gets exasperated and wishes that everyone might think like him, then life would be so much easier. Then there's the problem of male "warriors" who ignore the history and sociology of religion, so don't really understand it. You can read what I think about that on my blog: <http://goo.gl/eN1ibC>

Calling organised religion a "nuisance" was, perhaps, a mistake, but sarcasm doesn't come across well on the page. However, I wouldn't dismiss all organised religion as harmful. Those that don't proselytise or expect special privileges,

for example the Quakers and the Bahá'ís, don't bother me, or anyone else, in general. How people behave is more important than what they believe. A lot of recent anti-Islam rhetoric, otherwise referred to as "Islamophobia", tends to portray Muslims as a homogenous mass who think and act alike, but just as a majority of nominal Christians in the UK have adopted a personalised version of the religion they choose, ignoring the nasty bits in the Bible with only a vague understanding of the rest of it, many British-born Muslims are equally casual about their religion. I've heard Muslim, Sikh and Hindu parents despair of their offspring's lack of interest in attending the mosque or temple. Like most young people, they're more interested in socialising.

I've become rather bored by atheists who blame religion for all the ills of the world – and before George tells me they don't all do that, there are many who do. I think you'll find it's more complicated than that. I agree with CJ Werleman, who's written on www.middleeasteye.net:

"The fixation on religion as the root of the world's problems is completely at odds with reality. In fact, it's utterly delusional. What is at fault in the Middle East is not Islam, but despotic, autocratic regimes that rule with the benefit of America's patronage. What is at fault in the West is not Christianity but free-market fascism: free trade, mass pollution, climate change, income inequality, wealth disparity, racism and immigration overflow from countries that have descended into social chaos – many as a result of Western policies (free trade, climate change, war on terror and the drug war). And what is at fault in Israel is not Judaism – as many of Israel's founding fathers and current leaders were or are atheists – but apartheid, land theft and humiliation of the Arab populace."

You'll find what I've written about secularism and religion in schools on our website: <http://suffolkhands.org.uk/65/> & <http://suffolkhands.org.uk/2007/10/530/>

Margaret



Suffolk Humanists and Secularists

For the good life, without religion

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Founded in 1991, we're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource.

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.

Dates for your diary

Unless stated otherwise, we meet in the Henslow Room in Arlington's Brasserie, 13 Museum Street, Ipswich, IP1 1HE. Parking is in one of the nearest car parks. Meetings start at 7.30pm and end at 10pm. Guests are welcome. Get in touch if you need or can offer a lift and we'll try to help.

Sunday 25th January from 2pm to 5pm in the seminar room on the 1st floor at **Hadleigh Library**, on the corner of Duke Street and the High Street – **a quiz**. How much do you know about religion? There is a free public car park, accessed via Magdalen Road, opposite the library, which is almost empty on Sundays.

Saturday 31st January at noon – Pub lunch at The Duke of York, Ipswich Road, Woodbridge, IP12

4BY. Let us know if you'd like to come by emailing mail@suffolkhands.org.uk or phoning 01394 387462 or 01473 658828, as we have to book.



Tuesday 10th February at 7.30pm – Is there a limit to free speech? In view of recent events in France and their consequences, should we exercise caution over our right to free speech?

Tuesday 10th March at 7.30pm – Is artificial intelligence really a threat to humanity? Prof Stephen Hawking has joined a roster of experts worried about what follows when humans build a device or write some software that can properly be called intelligent. Well, we'd only have ourselves to blame, wouldn't we? A presentation by Denis Johnston, followed by a discussion.

Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies

Suffolk Humanist Celebrants have provided non-religious funerals, weddings and baby-namings for thousands around Suffolk and NE Essex since 1991. David Mitchell and Sophie Lovejoy are currently active, with occasional help from Margaret Nelson. For information, phone 01473 658828 or email ceremonies@suffolkhands.org.uk.

Why not join in the conversations on our website (URL below), on Facebook (www.facebook.com/suffolkhands) or Twitter (@suffolkhands)?

Humanism is an ethical approach to life without religion; humanists think we can be good without God. Secularism is the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com

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