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The Suffolk Humanist group was founded in 1991. Members receive [regular newsletters](#), with news and views. We promote the ideas of Humanism and Secularism. We provide [speakers](#) for schools and adult organisations. We raise awareness of Humanism through the press, through involvement with other organisations, and through educational activities. We meet in Ipswich usually 2nd Tuesday of the month in the Thomas Wolsey pub in St Peters st. Ipswich . Sometimes we welcome guest speakers, and sometimes we simply enjoy socialising. Because our members are widely scattered and transport can be a problem, we try to arrange for members to give and be given lifts to meetings. We're in the process of becoming partners of [Humanists UK](#), and we are affiliated with the [National Secular Society](#) and we're members of the [Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations](#). We're represented on Suffolk County Council's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), ensuring that a non-religious world view is included in RE. For many years Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team provided a service to the people of Suffolk and NE Essex, supported by the group. However the group is not active at present. We welcome new members. If you're not sure we're what you're looking for, come and meet us before you make up your mind. You can find out more by browsing our site but in a nutshell Humanists think that:

- this world and this life are all we have;
- we should try to live full and happy lives ourselves and, as part of this, make it easier for other people to do the same;
- all situations and people deserve to be judged on their merits by standards of reason and humanity;
- individuality and social cooperation are equally important.

A J Ayer, as President of the British Humanist Association, 1960s

"I'm an atheist, and that's it. I believe there's nothing we can know except that we should be kind to each other and do what we can for other people."

Katherine Hepburn

Secularists think that:

- religion should not be part of the affairs of the state
- religious organisations should not be privileged or given a special status in law
- education should not be based upon religious beliefs
- political systems should not be based on religion.

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You will see this web site has a small  symbol on the right-hand side of the home page. If you click this little orange square you will be taken to a strange looking web page which looks like it has another version of our home page.

What's all that about?

It's really quite simple. RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication, and is a system that allows you to 'subscribe' to a web site, so that you are automatically informed when that web site is updated. If you look at a lot of web sites for information, it can sometimes be hard to keep up with all of the updates - that's where RSS comes in. You can choose to be notified when a web site is updated without having to go and check for yourself.

To use RSS, you need a news reader - a piece of software or a web page which you can add all of your 'subscriptions' to, and that will keep you informed if one of your favourite web sites is updated. Look at the section on [RSS News Readers on this web page](#) for links to some useful tools, as well as more information on RSS. Lots of web sites use it, including the [BBC](#).

The easiest way to use RSS is if you use the [Firefox web browser](#) - look for the little symbol in the address bar of Firefox...



... click on the symbol, and add a Live Bookmark to your bookmarks folder, that will always be up to date with the latest headlines from our site.

Content syndication for your website

Registered users of the Suffolk Humanists site can read headlines from the BHA, NSS, IHEU and other websites, aggregated automatically every day. You can also grab our content if you wish - [RSS feeds are available for every category and topic](#) - feel free to include our content in your site.

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The short version

Humanism is an ethical approach to life without religion. Humanists think we can be good without God.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DZN8Ne1nmr4>

The longer version

"A rationalistic system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters." (Oxford English Dictionary) "The rejection of religion in favour of the advancement of humanity by its own efforts." (Collins Concise Dictionary) "...a non-religious philosophy, based on liberal human values." (Little Oxford Dictionary) "...seeking, without religion, the best in, and for human beings." (Chambers Pocket Dictionary) "...an appeal to reason in contrast to revelation or religious authority as a means of finding out about the natural world and destiny of man, and also giving a grounding for morality... Humanist ethics is also distinguished by placing the end of moral action in the welfare of humanity rather than in fulfilling the will of God." (Oxford Companion to Philosophy)

Unlike religionists, Humanists have no faith. Having "faith" means having a strong belief in something without proof. Humanists are essentially sceptics. Where religious people might offer supernatural answers to some of the fundamental questions about life, the universe, and everything, we prefer to leave a question mark. Humanists are atheist (meaning "without god"), or agnostic (a term coined by the 19th century biologist, [Thomas Henry Huxley](#), to mean "without knowledge", since Huxley said one cannot prove or disprove the existence of God). Humanists reject the notion of an afterlife; we think that this life is the only one we have, and we must make the most of it. Humanists don't have the equivalent of the Bible or the Qu'ran, or a book of rules to guide us through life, though we may refer to great works of history, philosophy and literature. You don't actually need to have read the history of Humanist ideas to be a Humanist, but most, being inquisitive, thoughtful people, will investigate the ideas that interest us. We can trace Humanist influences over 2,500 years to the Chinese sage Confucius and to the philosophers, scientists and poets of antiquity. One was the Greek philosopher [Epicurus](#), who, starting from Aristotle's principle that human happiness depends on good conduct, defined the good life as one of pleasure and friendship, absence of pain and peace of mind. His disciples included women and slaves, which was almost unheard of at that time. Epicurus said, "Of all the means by which wisdom ensures happiness throughout life, by far the most important is the possession of friendship." For centuries, it was unsafe to openly express unorthodox views about religion, but with the dawn of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, it gradually became possible to do so, with caution. Some described themselves as "rationalists", "secularists" or "freethinkers", terms that are still used by Humanists today. [Charles Darwin](#), whose theory of evolution made a huge impact on our understanding of where we come from, has been a strong influence on Humanism. The scientist Marie Curie, the 18th century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, the authors Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, the first Prime Minister of Independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the American creator of the Star Trek TV series, Gene Roddenberry, are just a few of the influential people who've lived by Humanist principles. [Professor Richard Dawkins](#), a tireless advocate of secularism, said, "I arrived at my beliefs, as everybody should, by examining evidence." Many Humanists have worked out their own beliefs and are delighted to find that others have reached similar conclusions. Because we are independent thinkers, Humanists differ about many things, but most of us agree about some basic principles. We believe that we should accept responsibility for our own behaviour and how it affects other people and the world we live in. Because we think that this is the only life we have, we believe it's important to try to live full and happy lives, and to help others to do the same. Humanists were involved with the establishment of the United Nations; we value human rights, freedom of communication, freedom from fear, want and suffering, and education free from bias and the influence of powerful religious or political organisations. In his book "Humanism, an introduction", [Jim Herrick wrote](#), "Humanism is the most human philosophy of life. Its emphasis is on the human, the here-and-now, the humane. It is not a religion and has no formal creed, though humanists have beliefs. Humanists are atheists or agnostics and do not expect an afterlife. It is essential to humanism that it brings values and meaning into life." In 1996, the [International Humanist & Ethical Union](#) General Assembly adopted the following resolution. Any organisation wishing to become a member of IHEU is now obliged to signify its acceptance of this statement:

Humanism is a democratic and ethical life stance, which affirms that human beings have the right and responsibility to give meaning and shape to their own lives. It stands for the building of a more humane society through an ethic based on human and other natural values in the spirit of reason and free inquiry through human capabilities. It is not theistic, and it does not accept supernatural views of reality

See also

- [Articles on this site related to Humanism](#)
- [Humanist parenting](#)
- [Inter-faith and Us](#)
- [A Good Life Without Religion](#)
- [The Really Simple Guide to Humanism](#)
- [The Golden Rule](#)

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Margaret Nelson provided a Humanist Thought for the Day every few weeks on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) from 1995 until 2007. Since then, the slot has been moved to a very early time on weekdays (recorded in advance), and then dropped. It's now only on Sundays.

Dawn

Previous "thoughts" are listed in this section - you can also download a collection of Margaret's [thoughts from 1995 to 2003 in PDF format](#).

[Help with PDF files](#)

Margaret's an owl, not a lark, so it took effort to get up early and drive into Ipswich for a two minute broadcast. Still, it meant being able to take pictures like the one above on the road into town.

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Membership is a very reasonable minimum £10 per year and gives you a regular newsletter. Members can buy a copy of Humanists UK [Short Course on Humanism](#) at the special discount price of £4. You will also be supporting our work to raise the profile of Humanism and Secularism in Suffolk and N E Essex, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in education, politics and public life. [Click here to download a membership application form](#). We will shortly be providing you with the facility to join the group online, meanwhile if you would like to make a donation to the group with your credit or debit card, please click the button below:



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There have been rite of passage ceremonies since antiquity to mark the significant events in our lives – birth, the transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage, and death. These ceremonies have varied according to the customs and beliefs of the time. Religion has no special claim to them, and an increasing number of people are choosing ceremonies free from religion. The Suffolk Humanist team of Celebrants provided baby-namings, weddings and funerals in Suffolk and N E Essex from 1991 until 2015, as well as civic and other public ceremonies. We're no longer able to offer a service covering Suffolk and N E Essex due to retirement, though we may be able to help with a few funerals in the Colchester and Ipswich areas. However, we can help those who want to have [a DIY ceremony](#). [Get in touch](#) for more information. A Suffolk Humanist funeral and a Suffolk Humanist welcoming ceremony feature in the 'Why Atheism?' DVD by [Team Video Productions](#) for schools, available from the [National Secular Society](#). The DVD also features young people talking about religion, and their rejection of it. We recommend it for secondary schools' RE lessons. To find a Humanist Celebrant in any part of the UK [see the Humanists UK website](#).

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Suffolk Humanist Celebrants no longer offer wedding ceremonies. As humanist weddings aren't legally recognised (though the British Humanist Association is campaigning for a change in

the law), you have total freedom to have them however and wherever you like. You'll need to go to a register office to make your marriage legal but most couples treat this as a formality, with just a couple of witnesses. There's no legal obligation to exchange rings during a civil ceremony. An accredited celebrant isn't necessary for your humanist wedding. DIY ceremonies can be wonderful, personal occasions, with family and friends contributing to make it a day like no other. A friend or relative can act as your celebrant, or you can do it between you. Unless you use a microphone (which can be intrusive and distracting), everyone involved needs to be heard clearly. [The British Humanist Association has published a book of guidance for humanist weddings called 'Sharing the Future'](#). It was written by Jayne Wynne Willson as a resource for couples who want to organise their own weddings, as well as for trainee celebrants, and includes suggested formats and readings. However, we advise that it's only used to give you ideas, not as a strict template for your ceremony. If you'd like some help and advice from an experienced celebrant, we can provide that in return for a donation towards our humanist group funds. [Get in touch to find out more.](#)

Illustration © Margaret Nelson 2005

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Is it all a bit overwhelming? Are you having difficulty finding what you need?

It's OK. As it says in big letters on the Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy, *Don't Panic*.

Take a look through the help section to find the information you need, and if you still have a question about the web site, e-mail webmaster@suffolkhands.org.uk. Also, please get in touch if something on the site isn't working.

[Click here for some information if your group is thinking of setting up its own website.](#)

To contact the group about ceremonies, membership enquiries, or anything else, [use this page to e-mail us](#)

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We will occasionally make documents available for download from our web site for you to print and keep - usually they will be available as PDF files. If you don't know what a PDF file is, this page may be useful to you. PDF stands for Portable Document Format - it's a kind of document which you can easily download, view and print, but you usually cannot edit. It is very simple to view and print PDF documents - you just need to download and install a free piece of software from the Adobe web site. [You can get Adobe Reader by clicking this link](#), or the button below: When you have downloaded the Adobe Reader software, simply install it on to your computer, and you will then be able to open, view and print PDF documents.

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Our systems automatically log visits and record users' IP addresses and domain names.

How do we collect and store information?

This depends on the activities that you choose to participate in and the services provided by us. We may ask you to provide information when you sign a petition, make a donation or request certain services such as newsletters and news updates. You can supply information

to us when you vote or take part in a poll, online activism or advocacy and other interactive parts of this web site.

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Summarised information that does not personally identify you may be used in several ways. For example, we may combine information about your usage patterns with similar information obtained from other users to help enhance our site and services, such as to learn which pages are visited most or what features are most attractive to our users.

We give a high priority to using information collected on this site responsibly. Because of this, with your prior consent, we may contact you from time to time about developments in this web site and important issues in which we are involved. In each message that we send to you, we give you the opportunity to unsubscribe from future messages.

We may use your IP address to diagnose technical problems and to administer our web site. We may also use your IP address to gather demographic information.

How do we use the information that we collect?

Your financial information will be securely stored by us in order to process standing order payments for your membership with our bank.

Security measures

We have security measures in place on this web site to prevent the loss, misuse and alteration of the information under our control. Site logs are maintained in secure areas accessible only to nominated staff.

Retention and disclosure of information that you submit

We will keep the information that you submit to us for as long as it is needed for the operation of our web site and other functions to which you have subscribed. Your information may be retained for an undetermined further period of time to allow us to maintain contact with you during the course of your membership.

It may be impossible in practice to prevent the disclosure of the information that you submit, and which is logged by the system, to third parties, either intentionally or unintentionally, if we have a need to do so to investigate a problem with the system or software, to determine the origin of any attack launched against the web site or the any providers of the services upon which it depends, or in response to a query from a bona-fide law enforcement agency. The information you submit may also be disclosed due to either system malfunction or intentional penetration by malicious individuals. You agree that we are not liable for any such disclosure. No warranty or claim of security is made for the database systems used in this application.

How to contact us

We can be reached through the contact form here, or by e-mailing mail@suffolkhands.org.uk.

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This Agreement will be governed by the laws of England and any user of the Website hereby agrees to be bound exclusively by the jurisdiction of English and Welsh courts without reference to rules governing choice of laws.

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We've aimed to make this web site as straightforward as possible for you to use, and would appreciate any [feedback](#) you have.

This web site has been designed to work in a different range of Internet browsers, and has been tested for use in [Mozilla](#) , [Firefox](#), [Internet Explorer](#), and [Opera](#). We recommend Mozilla Firefox as the easiest, fastest and most secure web browser available - and it's free.

This web site has been successfully tested as valid XHTML 1.0 according to W3 standards. We aim to ensure that it is accessible to all users regardless of visual or physical ability, so we would ask that you [e-mail us](#) if you are having any difficulty using the site, and we will do our best to resolve your issues.

Text sizes

If the text size of this web site is too small, you can change it so it is larger. You can also change it so it is smaller!

To change the text size of this website:

Mozilla Firefox

Options:

1. Go to View > Text Size > Increase or Decrease. To reset text size choose Normal.
2. Hold Control (CTRL) and hit + or - on your keyboard. To reset text size hit CTRL and 0.

Internet Explorer

Go to View > Text Size > Largest, Larger, Medium (default), Smaller or Smallest.

Opera

Options:

1. Go to View > Zoom > 120% (or more). To reset choose 100%.
2. Hold down shift and hit + or -

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“The human race is the only one that knows it must die, and it knows this only through its experience.” Voltaire

Humanist funeral celebrants are sometimes asked for advice about planning a funeral in advance. You might just want to get an idea about whether we can be trusted to do the job properly – that we’re reasonably personable, sensible people. You might want to know what is or isn’t possible. Or you might want to plan things in detail, so no one has to do much except follow a plan when the time comes. The most you should expect is that those who arrange your funeral should do it respectfully and with integrity. If you’ve lived without religion it isn’t appropriate that your death should be marked with religious ritual. It might be helpful to provide your family with suggestions about music and readings, and you might book a burial plot, or pay for everything in advance. You might even write something to be read at the ceremony, along the lines of ‘Bye-bye, it was good to know you’. Otherwise, best leave it to those who’ll mourn you to do what needs to be done. What sort of questions might you ask? **Are there any rules about funerals?** There are common sense rules about the safe disposal of a body and there are restrictions on the time in a crematorium or public cemetery, otherwise hardly any. You don’t have to have a funeral at all – it isn’t a legal requirement – but if you do have one it can take any form. It’s up to you or your next of kin. **Can I plan it all myself?** Your funeral may be about you, but it’s not for you; it’s for those who’ll mourn you. If you plan your funeral in too much detail, leaving nothing for your family or friends to do, you’ll be denying them an important role. You might want to save them the trouble or prevent their distress, but leaving them little to do could actually make them feel worse, not better. I’ve known people who didn’t seem to trust their next of kin to do things properly, or who wanted to have the last word... but when we’re dead, everything’s out of our control, isn’t it?

What’s a Humanist funeral like? A Humanist funeral is entirely non-religious, though there’s usually a pause for reflection when religious mourners are invited to say a private prayer if they’d like to. I wouldn’t expect to be asked to say or do anything as a celebrant that conflicted with my beliefs – no hymns, prayers, religious readings, or references to an afterlife. Nothing is said or done at a Humanist funeral that might offend or upset a reasonable religious person. A Humanist funeral includes everyone, whatever their beliefs. Most Humanist funerals are held in a crematorium chapel where the ceremony can take up to 25 minutes – usually about 20 minutes. My usual pattern is:

Entry to music
Opening words, referring to the celebration of a life
Thoughts on life & death, incorporating appropriate prose or poetry
A tribute to the deceased
A short silence or some quiet music – the pause for reflection
The committal
Closing words
Exit to music

You can have any music you consider appropriate. It might be solemn at the beginning, more upbeat at the end. People don’t usually sing at our funerals, but if you’d like to, we can help with secular words set to a familiar tune. If anyone wants to make a spoken contribution, we’ll need it in writing in case they become too emotional to continue and because we have to be conscious of the time at a crematorium. Your family will get a copy of the script afterwards. You can have live music, but it’s not always practical to get a lot of musicians into a small chapel – maybe one or two at most. Your family and friends might conduct the ceremony themselves. [The BHA](#) publishes a book, ‘Funerals without God’, that provides guidelines.

Where can my family hold the ceremony? Other than in a crematorium or cemetery chapel, venues have included village or community halls, private gardens, and function rooms. I’ve held Humanist funerals in the Ipswich Unitarian Meeting House in Friar Street, which seats several hundred people and doesn’t have any obvious religious symbolism. Memorial ceremonies, after private committal ceremonies, have been in held in a pub and a school hall. I’ve conducted ceremonies entirely at a graveside, in local authority cemeteries or ‘green’ burial sites.

Can I book a Celebrant to conduct my funeral? None of us could guarantee to be available when you die, though one of us ought to be, provided your next of kin are prepared to be flexible about the date and time.

If you plan your own funeral, discuss your plans with those who’ll have to make the arrangements, or at least let them know where you’ve left your notes or instructions.

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We can provide speakers for schools, colleges and other organisations on Humanism, and subjects relevant to Humanism.

This section will always be up to date with information from our latest public speaking engagements. If you would like us to contribute to your event, please [contact us](#).

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Many thanks indeed for getting in touch. Don't forget to [register](#) if you haven't already, and even if you don't, we hope you come back soon.

Best wishes,

Suffolk Humanists

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This article may be of interest to local Humanist groups who wish to set up a new web site or update their existing site. It includes a summary of the benefits available to a Humanist group of running a web site, as well as links to some recommended resources, tools and services.

The previous version of our website went live in March 2006, but we've had a website online in one form or another for the last six years. Most local Humanist organisations have a web site, and there are obviously the websites of national organisations such as the [BHA](#), [NSS](#), [IHEU](#) and [American Humanists](#). See the [links](#) page for more links to other Humanist organisations.

Why have a website?

- They're cheap (even free!)
- They allow you to communicate with your group, but also with supporters, people who need ceremonies, people who are curious, other groups, and individuals all over the world, giving you access to audiences you might otherwise find it very hard to communicate with
- They are easy to update as often as you wish
- Depending on what you set up, they can allow you to hold discussions, surveys, polls and chats
- They allow you to distribute newsletters, educational resources and information
- It is now easier than ever to publish a wide range of media through your website, including documentation, audio (podcasts), and video.

Links and recommendations

A variety of solutions are available, depending upon your group's budget and technical knowledge.

Website hosting

Hosting for your website is available from a variety of different places, and is usually cheap, and sometimes even free!

- Hosting is often provided as part of a package by your Internet Service Provider
- Free hosting is available for local Humanist groups from [humanists.net](#) (not available at the time of writing)
- If you set up a blog (see next section) with [Blogger](#) or [Wordpress](#), this is hosted free of charge
- Free hosting is also available from [geocities.com](#), a Yahoo service, and several other places
- Paid hosting is available for anything from about Â£2 a month from hosting companies. By paying for hosting, you tend to get more features (including e-mail accounts).

Blogging

A blog, or weblog, is essentially an online journal. People have kept personal blogs for some time, but now more and more organisations, and the media, are blogging as well. Blogs are, or should be, immediate, fresh and lively. It is easy to start and maintain discussions - interesting blog posts will be followed by a stream of comments. You can moderate (remove) unsuitable comments.

Services like [Blogger](#) and [Wordpress](#) are free, very straightforward to run, and allow you to maintain a constantly updated journal, including images, documents, links and other media. You can even set Blogger to publish your blog to your own group website, so all of your information is presented in the same place.

I'd highly recommend blogging as a cheap way to maintain updates for a group site - the only weakness of a blog may be that the chronological arrangement of content may not work so well when it comes to presenting static information such as group member profiles, ceremonies info etc.

See also the note below on BlogJet.

The latest version of Blogger allows you to have some static information on your page (MN - Jan 2007)

Online web publishing

Depending on what hosting package you get, it may include a "site builder" which allows you to build your website online. These systems tend to limit you to a small number of pages, have proprietary, inflexible designs, and don't let you do a great deal with the site other than add static pages with simple images. Not highly recommended. Hosting companies who provide online site builders include [Fasthosts](#) and [land1](#), and this facility is also available with [Yahoo's Geocities](#) service.

Web publishing software

FrontPage

The standard software for easy web publishing is Microsoft FrontPage, which comes packaged with Office, or is available to buy

separately. FrontPage is good for most beginners.

Dreamweaver

Suitable for web designers with a bit more confidence, Dreamweaver has a lot more flexibility.

[Nvu](#)

Free web publishing software can't be a bad thing.

[BlogJet](#)

Highly recommended for updating your blog - BlogJet is a simple and reliable way to compose new posts on your own computer and upload them when you are ready.

Image manipulation software

Programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Fireworks are very expensive, but are the standard professional tools for working with photographs and creating things like buttons and icons. There are a lot of cheaper, or free alternatives:

Picasa

Free photo manipulation software from Google, [Picasa](#) is very straightforward to use, and can even produce photo albums ready to publish to a website.

Adobe Photoshop Elements

Free with many new computers and printers, or available to buy for about seventy pounds, Photoshop Elements is a cut down version of Photoshop which does everything most people need.

[PXN8](#) is a free online photo editing tool.

[This web page has a large list of free software.](#)

Content Management Systems

The Suffolk Humanists web site is driven by a Content Management System (CMS) - this allows us to compose and edit content online, accept comments, run polls and surveys, and provide content and services to registered users. We use the [Drupal](#) CMS (as do the [IHEU](#) and [The Onion](#)). It's not too straightforward to set up, so isn't recommended for beginners, but the system itself is free, and widely supported. Drupal needs a database to run, and web hosting including that feature can be slightly more expensive.

Tutorials, support and resources

I've put together a simple presentation on what any Humanist group considering setting up a new web site should consider, as well as some basic notes on creating accessible content. [Download the presentation here \(PowerPoint slideshow 450kb\).](#)

- [Webmonkey](#) - resources for webmasters
- [W3schools](#) - various free tutorials
- [Humanists.net](#) - free hosting and resources for Humanist groups
- [Setting up a website on Humanist Groups](#)

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You can download Suffolk Humanist newsletters in [PDF format](#) here.

[September 2007](#): Reports on recent activities, BHA AGM report, preparing for the next census, full diary.

[May 2007](#): A Humanist Thought for the Day on Radio 4, and community cohesion.

[April 2007](#): Peter Tatchell, and our AGM.

[December 2006](#): Meeting Rachel Sloane and RE in Suffolk.

[September 2006](#): Humanist Ceremonies confusion, Tom Blount's obituary, 'success', and a reluctant nomad.

[June 2006](#): Summer News Update.

[April 2006](#): Announcing the new website, Easter, and the AGM report.

[March 2006](#): Linda Smith obituary, letters, and a giant spaghetti monster.

[January 2006](#): A movable commemoration, around the world in 60 minutes, and funerals 'for the worst of us'.

[November 2005](#): On blogging, the God movie with fish 'n chips, a stupid boy, and whether animals have souls.

[October 2005](#): Announcing our first meeting in Colchester.

[July 2005](#): Why we weren't happy with West Suffolk Crematorium, BHA AGM report, and a game with Romford 6th Form girls.

[May 2005](#): Why Pam is happy to pay income tax, AGM report, and what Suffolk Humanists talk about.

[January 2005](#): Education plans, members' news, and the [Salt of the Earth](#) appeal.

[November 2004](#): A Humanist grandmother on her alternative midwinter festivities, and a report on the new Colchester Inter-Faith Network.

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This page features links to various online media resources of interest, including audio, video, and podcasts. Podcasts are downloadable audio programmes usually including music and discussion, and are often updated on a regular basis, like a radio show.

[Team Video](#)

Click on the 'religious education' link to see more information on the 'Why Atheism' DVD for schools, including ceremonies conducted by SH's Margaret Nelson, and interviews with students from Kesgrave High School.

[Humanist Network News](#)

A regular podcast from the [Institute for Humanist Studies](#)

[Freethought Multimedia](#)

An excellent repository of freethought multimedia from Richard Dawkins, James Randi, Michael Shermer and more, including more Podcasts to load up your iPod with freethought goodness.

[Infidel Guy](#)

A regular podcast/radio show from the Infidel Guy, featuring interviews and discussion with various free thinkers.

[Contact us](#) with any other recommendations.

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Apr 2006
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This page has links to various websites concerned with activism, online campaigning, human rights issues and equal rights.

[Peter Tatchell](#)

His gay and human rights campaigns.

[Write To Them](#)

A straightforward way to contact your MP using the web.

[They Work For You](#)

Information on Parliament and MPs.

[Pledgebank](#)

Register a pledge, get support from others, make a difference.

[Contact us](#) with any suggestions.

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Find here links to various international websites related to Humanism, Secularism, philosophy and ethics.

[Humanist Studies](#)

US-based Institute for Humanist Studies advances human rights, secular ethics and the separation of religion and government through advocacy, innovation and collaboration. IHS also produces the [Humanist Network News](#) podcast.

[Naturalism](#)

A resource for those interested in scientific naturalism and its personal and social implications.

[Definition of Humanism on Wikipedia](#)

A detailed explanation of Humanism.

[Atheist Resource](#)

A comprehensive UK-based web resource for atheists and Humanists.

[Philosopher's Magazine Online](#)

Online home of the Philosopher's Magazine, with articles and discussion.

[Contact us](#) with your recommendations.

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Links to local services, news, events and more.

[Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#)

We are affiliated to SIFRE, and one of our members is a SIFRE tutor.

[BBC Radio Suffolk](#)

Suffolk Humanists give a regular [Thought for the Day](#) on Radio Suffolk.

[Woodbridge website](#)

Almost all you need to know about the Suffolk town.

[Contact us](#) to recommend a local site.

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May 2006
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Here are some links to interesting, informative and essential websites related to science, evolution, and debunking myths.

[James Randi Educational Foundation](#)

Debunking myths, investigating the paranormal.

[Talk Origins](#)

An excellent resource on evolution, particularly recommended is the [list of creationist claims and responses](#).

[The Skeptic's Dictionary](#)

Resources of everything from alternative medicine to critical thinking.

[Jerry Coyne](#)

A leading expert in the origin of the species.

[Richard Dawkins](#)

The UK's greatest flag-waver for secularism and scientific understanding of our origins... and

[The Richard Dawkins Foundation For Reason And Science](#)

Squarely aimed at rescuing US-based atheists from the 'faith-heads', and providing discussion and supporting material for his latest book, The God Delusion.

[Wikipedia](#)

A comprehensive user-edited encyclopedia.

[Atheist Resource](#)

A comprehensive UK-based web resource for atheists and Humanists. **Recommended.**

[Contact us](#) with your recommendation.

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May 2006
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In the 1950s the [Humanist Margaret Knight](#) contributed two ground-breaking BBC radio broadcasts on morals without religion, aimed at non-religious parents. In her first broadcast, Mrs Knight said that her talks were aimed at ordinary men and women who wondered what to teach the children about moral behaviour, when they didn't have any religious beliefs. Her second broadcast ended with the words, "I have never yet met the child – and I have met very few adults – to whom it has ever occurred to raise the question: 'Why should I consider others?' Most people are prepared to accept as a completely self-evident moral axiom that we must not be completely selfish, and if we base our moral training on that we shall, I suggest, be building on far firmer foundations than if we base it on vague and obscure and dubious statements about the supernatural government of the universe." The reaction to Mrs Knight's broadcasts was predictably hysterical and abusive from those who believed that children must be indoctrinated as good little Christians. One journalist described her as "a dangerous woman" and "a menace". There are still people who think like that today – if anything, there seem to be more of them. Their reaction to the liberalisation of Religious Education shows this. Humanists feel very strongly that children should be taught about right and wrong, and set an example of good behaviour. However, we also feel that a child has a right to be taught these things without the indoctrination of religion from the age of five or younger. A Humanist approach to parenting is a balanced approach, thinking through any course of action rather than slavish adherence to someone else's rules. It means being consistent; not swinging between extremes of total indulgence or total repression. It means teaching children to understand themselves as co-operative individuals, part of one human community, with all the responsibilities and rewards that entails. Parents can't be perfect; they can only do their best. The golden rule of Humanism is 'don't do to others what you wouldn't like done to you', which can be applied to parenting as to all other relationships. Despite all the publicity given to so-called family values and the alleged perils of single parenting, children will usually do well if they're loved and cared for, whatever sort of family they come from. Good role models aren't stereotypes. To help a child face life with confidence, teach him or her to think, answer his or her questions. Often a questioning, critical attitude is seen as a problem; it holds things up, interferes with timetables and commitments. Harassed teachers and parents brush questions aside with impatience, conditioning children to regard asking questions as a nuisance. In adulthood people who've learned to react, not think, become bigots, ready to accept any suggestion of 'them' being different from 'us'. A leading Humanist, the philosopher [Bertrand Russell](#), said 'Many people would sooner die than think. In fact they do'. In her book, 'Morals without Religion' (now out of print), which includes the scripts from her broadcasts, Margaret Knight wrote, "The essence of Humanism is that it is non-supernatural. It is concerned with man rather than God, and with this life rather than the next. Its morality derives from altruistic principles, reinforced by training, not from divine commands; the moral act, to the Humanist, is the act that is conducive to human well-being, not the act ordained by God." See also "Parenting without God - experiences of a Humanist mother" by [Jayne Wynne Willson](#), available through online book sites.

Child painting

Comment from a friend, after reading the above, "...we also feel that a child has a right to be taught these things without the indoctrination of religion from the age of five or younger". My friend wrote that this struck a chord, "...because today, on Radio 4 I think, there was a programme about [Dave Allen](#), and one of the subjects discussed with him was his anger at religion and his Catholic religious up-bringing. He recounted that he had been admonished by a priest not to do naughty things 'because God is not only three beings (God, Father, Holy Ghost), he is everywhere, and sees everything that everybody does, do you understand?' Dave Allen had found it difficult to understand because, at the time, he was four years old!" (Dave Allen died in March 2005).

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Some Humanists and Secularists are strongly opposed to having anything to do with religious people, so they won't get involved with inter-faith organisations. Suffolk Humanists don't take that view; one is a member of Suffolk County Council's [Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education](#) (SACRE). We are also active in the Ipswich Faith and Community Forum ([IFCF](#)) and some are tutors with the East of England Faith Agency ([EEFA](#)). We've contributed to several local publications: a directory of local faiths (and Humanism), with descriptions of their activities; a collection of writings by women; a Community Handbook, updated several times; a similar publication for the North Essex Mental Health Trust. We have been involved with promoting "Diversity", a board game originally developed by the Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE) which teaches players about the beliefs of people who live in the county. It's been popular in schools and for training with the police, local authorities and those in the caring professions, who can hire a team of tutors to play with them. A survey commissioned by Suffolk County Council a few years ago demonstrated what I already knew: that racism is rife in the rural areas. Religious differences are often mainly cultural, and they're poorly understood in rural Suffolk.

School students playing Diversity

SIFRE Forum of Faiths Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource's Forum of Faiths meets occasionally to consider their teachings and views on a variety of topics. They've talked about various subjects, including justice and the environment. For copies of the booklets containing all the contributions to each forum, contact the [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#). **More on Interfaith events** You can read the text of Humanist contributions to Interfaith events in our region on our [Public Speaking](#) page. **EEFA & SIFRE - change of status** From April 2010, SIFRE reverted to being a purely

voluntary organisation and all the educational work was handed over to EEFA, which provides tutors for schools and other organisations from a variety of faiths and Humanism.

The photograph shows 6th form girls from a Catholic school in London playing Diversity at a convent retreat in Suffolk, with help from a local Humanist and SIFRE.

Update: Summer 2015 Until the end of 2014, SIFRE was accommodated by University Campus Suffolk. However, now that UCS needs these rooms for other activities, SIFRE no longer has a base but is a "virtual" organisation, operating online, and hires space for activities such as couple of recent events at West Suffolk College in Bury St Edmunds. One of these was to launch the latest book, ['Sharing Our Stories'](#).

Update: 2016 Due to lack of funding and a base, [SIFRE has been wound up](#) and replaced with smaller groups around the county, including Ipswich. We still have a connection with the [East of England Faiths Agency \(EEFA\)](#). **Update: 2019** When SIFRE was wound up some of its activities were absorbed into EEFA (see above) but a new small charity which did not have the administrative overheads of SIFRE was formed to carry on some of the other functions. This is the [Ipswich Faith and Community Forum](#).

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Mar 2006
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[The East of England Faiths Agency](#) arranged and hosted a half-day conference on 'What do the Faiths teach about the Environment?' on Sunday March 5th at the University of Essex. The theme was chosen after a consultation on the Faiths and the Environment with staff from the Environmental Agency, who attended the conference. There were contributions from some of the faiths and philosophies in the region, including Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, and Sikhs. Margaret Nelson, supported by Michael Imison and Nathan Nelson, offered a Humanist Perspective.

The Humanist Perspective

In the sixties, we used to say, "The personal is political", so perhaps I should state how I relate to the environment. I compost, recycle, use sustainably generated electricity, conserve water, keep my car use to a minimum (as a disabled person, I need one), feed the birds, plant trees, try to shop ethically, and try to avoid waste. I'm probably not doing enough to minimise my impact on the environment – making my ecological footprint smaller – but I will try harder. We all must.

In the notes I was given about the sort of things we might be expected to talk about today, there were some questions.

How do we grow and prepare our food? Since Humanists observe no rituals of any sort, we have a free choice about this. However, since we know that practically everything that we do has some effect on other people and on the environment, many Humanists try to follow ethical guidelines about what we eat. Some of us try to use our purse power to influence retailers by shopping ethically, by avoiding excess packaging, buying organic food that hasn't been transported long distances, and, if we eat meat, by checking the welfare standards of the producers. There are so many considerations, if we want to avoid harming the environment, that it can be quite difficult to keep up with developments. For example, how many people know about the damage caused by the production of palm oil, which is used in a wide range of foodstuffs and cleaning products? When it comes to enjoying food, the Greek philosopher [Epicurus](#) offered some wise words. He lived a simple life, enjoying the company of friends over good food and wine, and taught that peace of mind requires "moderation in all things". Of course, two and a half thousand years ago, Epicurus didn't have to deal with the sort of issues that we do today.

How do we use water and energy? Any Humanist who aims to live ethically will aim for a sustainable approach, avoiding waste and excessive use of fossil fuels.

How do we live our daily lives? As independent individuals.

How do we dispose of our dead? This question is of more interest to me than most, since I conduct Humanist funerals. [I'm planning to donate my body to the nearest medical school](#) for dissection by medical students – there's a serious shortage of cadavers in the teaching hospitals. After they've finished with it, it might be consigned to a green burial site or cremated, but there's no Humanist rule about this either. There's a new option available in Sweden, where [freeze-drying is now possible](#). A body is frozen in liquid nitrogen and then broken into granules that can be dug into your garden or mixed into your compost heap – I quite like that idea. You might expect me to say that I expect my next of kin to arrange a Humanist ceremony to mark my death, but that's up to them. I'll be dead, so I'll know nothing about it. Not long ago I attended a Quaker funeral for a friend, and I liked that. No fuss, just an opportunity for her friends and family talk spontaneously about her, and no religion.

Humanists are atheists or agnostics who are concerned about ethical issues. We reject religious or supernatural beliefs – they have no relevance to our lives. The Greek philosopher and teacher [Protagoras](#) said, "Man is the measure of all things"; in other words, human values are solely derived from human experience and sensibility. American President Harry Truman had a sign on his desk that read, "The buck stops here", derived from the term "to pass the buck". That's a Humanist principle, in a nutshell.

There is no Humanist rulebook, no Humanist authority to tell us what we should do. Humanists are freethinkers; we make up our own minds about ethical issues and how to live our lives, but we share common values. One of the members of my Humanist group says she thinks we ought to call ourselves 'Planetists', because those who misrepresent us might say that being a Humanist means that we're only interested in the human race, which isn't true. We alone are responsible for the future of this planet and everything that lives on it. Only we humans can deal with any mess that we might make, and we must be aware of the consequences of our actions. Our descendants must

live with them, so we must think of the future. If we lived on a spaceship and continually fouled our atmosphere so that life became very difficult, we'd expect to have to do something about it. We do live on a spaceship – Spaceship Earth. It took millions of years to build up a store of fossil fuels, and we're burning it up in a few hundred years. In the mid-1700s the Industrial Revolution started to alter the composition of our atmosphere. In 1885 Gottlieb Daimler constructed the prototype of the modern internal combustion engine, and now most families in the developed world expect to have at least one car, possibly several. In the last few years, cheap flights have become widely available, consuming vast amounts of fossil fuel and adding to air pollution. Carbon dioxide emissions are increasing at an alarming rate. They've gone up by over 30% in the last 250 years. To stop the increase, we need to cut emissions by half, but the people of densely populated countries like China and India, envious of our living standards, are increasingly buying cars and throwaway goods as their economies develop. How can we say to them, you can't have what we have? We can only do that if we can persuade those who live in the developed world to consume less.

I have little interest in religion, which has no relevance to my life. I'm more interested in how people behave than what they believe, and that includes how they behave as members of one race – the human race – and citizens of one planet – Planet Earth. Anything that causes division and conflict, whether it's nationalism, religion, politics, or any of the other ideologies that people adopt, is a distraction from the urgent business of saving the planet. It's too important to be left to chance, which is why the failure of some of the world's worst polluters, particularly the United States, to ratify the [Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) – the Kyoto agreement – is so depressing. This failure is the result of arrogance, and it's a very dangerous form of arrogance.

There have been many Humanist role models who've celebrated the beauties of the natural world through their work. One was the West Country poet and novelist [Thomas Hardy](#). His view of life was that there is no God. He wrote, "Man is alone in the Universe, no better and no worse than other creatures who live or have lived for a brief moment on this speck called Earth." In his poem *Transformations*, Hardy wrote about what happens to us after we die. It's really about recycling – human bodies being returned to the earth. Nothing physical ever disappears completely; it's just reused in other forms. He wrote,

Portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned into a green shoot.

The changes that have taken place since Hardy's death in 1928 have been rapid. I think that, if he were still alive, Hardy would have been horrified by what's going on. [Sir David Attenborough](#) is deeply concerned. In his book *Life on Earth*, based on the 1979 TV series, he wrote about the last chapter in the story of evolution,

"This last chapter has been devoted to only one species, ourselves. This may have given the impression that somehow man is the ultimate triumph of evolution, that all these millions of years of development have had no purpose other than to put him on earth. There is no scientific evidence whatever to support such a view and no reason to suppose that our stay here will be any more permanent than that of the dinosaur. The processes of evolution are still going on among plants and birds, insects and mammals. So it is more than likely that if men were to disappear from the face of the earth, for whatever reason, there is a modest, unobtrusive creature somewhere that would develop into a new form and take our place.

"But although denying that we have a special position in the natural world might seem becomingly modest in the eye of eternity, it might also be used as an excuse for evading our responsibilities. The fact is that no species has ever had such wholesale control over everything on earth, living or dead, as we now have. That lays upon us, whether we like it or not, an awesome responsibility. In our hands now lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth."

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Mar 2006

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The battle for hearts and minds between creationism and Darwinian evolution theory goes on and on. And on. [Charles Darwin's theory of evolution](#) offers an explanation for the development of modern man, and all life on Earth, over millions of years, by a process of natural selection and mutation. Creationism suggests that, essentially, the world and everything therein was created in between six days and ten thousand years, by God. Scientists, academics and clerics are all getting involved in the argument as to which is the definitive explanation for the development of life on Earth. The argument is raging on as it has been for years, and it looks like it shows no sign of slowing. What are the basics of Darwinian evolution theory? What are the creationists' main arguments, and why is creationism dangerous?

Creationism v Evolution

The pseudoscientific offshoot of creationism, basically creationism in a lab coat, is [Intelligent Design](#), or ID – which "holds that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause rather than an undirected process such as natural selection", and claims to be backed up by scientific research. Creationism is not restricted to Christians as a theory for the development of life – some [Muslims](#) also believe that, as an example, animals were created from water by Allah. Let's get my position on this clear from the outset, as if it wasn't clear already. Evolution theory is the best explanation we have for the development of life on Earth, backed up by an overwhelming amount of fossil evidence as well as the physiological evidence present in numerous species, including humans. Creationism is untenable, unproven hokum; an attempt by religion to ascribe our development as a species, our entire lives, to

the work of a divine entity. I find the idea that millions of years of struggle, survival, mutation and development by life on Earth, and that we have become Earth's most successful species, awe-inspiring – and the idea that it was all the work of a divine creator abhorrent and laughable. Creationism versus evolution has become a central issue for debate between religious fundamentalists on one side, and rational people on the other. Indeed, in the future, the reality could be that people define themselves as Creationists or Darwinists even before they define themselves as Christians or Atheists. The thing is, Darwinian evolution theory is not just supported by Atheists, but also by many moderate clergy, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Pope.

Letters and more letters

In February 2006, the [Discovery Institute](#), a US conservative Christian think-tank, released a [letter](#) signed by 514 'doctoral scientists', saying:

We are skeptical [sic] of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged.

This letter was released in response to another letter issued a day earlier by [the Alliance for Science](#), a coalition of scientists and clergy members, in which they stated:

We believe that the theory of evolution is a foundational scientific truth, one that has stood up to rigorous scrutiny and upon which much of human knowledge and achievement rests. To reject this truth or to treat it as "one theory among others" is to deliberately embrace scientific ignorance and transmit such ignorance to our children.

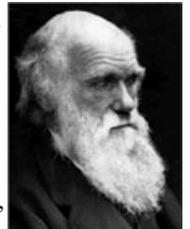
The Discovery Institute letter was signed by 514 scientists. The Alliance for Science letter was signed by over 10,000 clergy, scientists and educators. Furthermore, an [article](#) in the New York Times printed a day after the release of the Discovery Institute letter revealed that most of the scientists who had signed it were evangelical ID proponents. Here lies the essential problem with creationism. There is no proof for creationism as a theory, other than anecdotal evidence from scripture, which is no scientific evidence at all. To say that religious explanations of creation are simplistic is an understatement:

His command when He desires a thing is just to say to it, "Be!" and it is. (Qur'an, 36: 82)

So, in the absence of any useful theories as to how we evolved to where we are today, the position of most creationists is to dispute Darwin's theory of evolution.

Evolution, common descent and the 'tree of life'

One of the central principles of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is called 'descent with modification' or 'common descent'. This says that all living organisms on Earth are essentially descended from a common ancestor – maybe an amino acid at the earliest stage. Theories exist as to how life began through a process called abiogenesis – that biological life began from non-living matter. Sparks fired somewhere in the primordial soup, skip four billion years, and here we are, all digital TV and Chinese takeaways. [Aristotle](#) expounded on an early theory of abiogenesis, suggesting that life appeared through a process of 'spontaneous generation', as a by-product of the decay of organic substances – giving examples such as mice appearing from old hay stacks or maggots in rotting meat. This explanation, needless to say, didn't catch on – but it wasn't refuted until the 17th century, when [Francesco Redi](#) finally got around to proving that maggots on rotting meat had grown from eggs laid by flies. Modern theory for abiogenesis centres on the development of amino acids, simple molecular building blocks for life, and how the perfect combination of conditions on early Earth led to the evolution of single-celled organisms. As the original, simple organism evolved, minor differences would appear in individuals until eventually those differences became sufficiently great to classify them as separate species (known in Darwinist theory as 'speciation'). Those species would evolve and diversify enough to be classed as different genera; those genera would then evolve apart to become separate families, families evolving into separate orders, orders to classes, classes to phyla, and phyla to kingdoms. This is the [classification of all living things](#), which incorporates humans, plants, fish, birds, fungi and bacteria.



Such successive splitting yields the common metaphor of an evolutionary 'tree of life,' whose root was the first species to arise and whose twigs are the millions of living species. Jerry Coyne

All living organisms sit somewhere on this 'tree of life'. Humans sit on the primates branch of the Animal Kingdom, making us cousins to gibbons and almost brothers and sisters to gorillas, chimpanzees and orang utans. The classification of living things was obviously applied retrospectively by Darwin – he hadn't been present with a clipboard to spot when a protozoa was a sufficiently different shade of purple that it belonged to a new species – but it is the best taxonomy available to categorise living things as they have diversified and developed over millions of years, and is used by biologists today. For a very long time indeed on Earth, life was nothing more than a mush of bacteria and other single-celled organisms. Fossil records exist for bacteria from 3.5 billion years ago – three quarters of the age of the Earth. From then on, various different fossil records appear for progressively more sophisticated organisms – algae two billion years later, but nothing much more than that. Along the timeline from the formation of life to the present day, fossils have been found which have been given a classification, a family, and which support the principle of common descent through their age and makeup. Organisms have become more and more sophisticated as they have evolved over millions upon millions of years. In the grand scheme of things, looking at the history of the Earth as a 24-hour clock, humans have arrived on the scene in the last two minutes, and change has been imperceptibly slow. Nevertheless, occasionally, evolution appears to leap forward. [Richard Dawkins](#) said "if we arrange all our available fossils in chronological order, they do *not* form a smooth sequence of scarcely perceptible change". One such apparent leap was the Cambrian Explosion, and it is this phenomenon that is one of the main points for attack by creationists.

The Cambrian Explosion – creationist’s delight

The Cambrian Period is one of many periods of Geological Time, that is, time periods measured in millions of years, over which life has been evolving. The Cambrian was between around 545 and 495 million years ago – recent, considering the Earth’s 4.5 billion year age. From the beginning of the Cambrian Period, there was seemingly an explosion of life – the Cambrian Explosion. Beginning 545 million years ago, there are fossil records of molluscs, starfish, worms and vertebrates, sponges, brachiopods and echinoderms. However, when Darwin wrote his 1859 book ‘On the Origin of Species’, there were relatively few fossil records predating the Cambrian Period. Darwin admitted in the Origin of Species that there was “no satisfactory answer” to the problem of having no rich fossil record predating the Cambrian Period. His problem was that, if there were not enough fossils predating the Cambrian, it was difficult to prove that, as he theorised, all of those diverse life forms had in fact evolved from a common ancestor - he’d apparently gone from primordial soup to a wide array of different creatures in a single leap. Creationists identify the Cambrian Explosion as the point at which the ‘sudden’ apparent biological diversity of life on Earth could not be explained away by the absence of fossil evidence proving common descent, and that this diversity was in fact due to intelligent design. They [claim](#) that the sudden “appearance of many new body plans [physiological characteristics] in the Cambrian” was evidence that there just must have been too much going on for the slow process of evolution to account for. This is the nub of creationism – it’s all too sophisticated, therefore *God did it*.

Countering creationist arguments

Firstly, since the time of Darwin there has been a significant increase in the amount of fossil evidence supporting his theory of evolution. If he wrote ‘On the Origin of Species’ with today’s fossil records, there would be almost no doubt about the validity of his theory. As it was, his findings at the time were convincing enough to encourage several ‘natural theologians’ (creationist scientists) to abandon their theories and accept his. One possible explanation for the relative paucity of fossil records from before the Cambrian Period was, well... squishy bodies. Before the Cambrian Period it appears that many fewer animals had hard protective shells or skeletons, meaning that they would have simply been pulped, rather than accurately preserved, over time. The evolution of predators in the late Precambrian Period may have resulted in the coevolution of harder shells on prey animals by the Cambrian Period, leading to better preservation of fossil records. An explanation for the relative boom in development seen in the Cambrian Period is that an increase in temperature on Earth around the beginning of the period, due to the end of a global ice age, led to a jump in the pace of development as creatures exploited a change in their environment. There are numerous other explanations, including increased levels of atmospheric oxygen and water oxygenation. Apart from anything else, this ‘boom’ in biodiversity happened over a period of ten to thirty million years – not exactly a flash in the pan. The idea that the Cambrian Explosion was some kind of Genesis for life, as suggested by creationists, is absurd – after the Cambrian it would take many more millions of years for most of our recognisable animals and plants to show up;

...bony fishes and land plants first appeared around 440 million years ago, reptiles around 350 million years ago, mammals around 250 million years ago, flowering plants around 210 million years ago, and human ancestors around 5 million years ago. Jerry Coyne

The creationist argument, that God designed anything, would make God the most clumsy, five-o-clock-on-a-Friday-night, suck-through-your-teeth, dodgy cowboy operator going. As the human race and the natural world have evolved, signs are abundant of functionality and features in living things that, while once useful, are now useless. These features are literally evolving out of existence before our eyes. Take the appendix. This shrivelled organ now serves no other purpose than to explode once in a while, killing its owner – but there was a time when it was an essential component of the digestive systems of our ancestors, who ate plant diets that were somewhat harder to digest than Starbucks skinny sunrise muffins. Other examples of ‘left-overs’ in nature are legion: birds grow teeth buds in their embryonic stage, but haven’t gone on to grow teeth since their ancestors hunted; kiwi birds have tiny wings they cannot fly with; human babies grow a coating of hair called lanugo, which usually disappears by birth, but which remains on today’s young apes after birth. All of these phenomena are evidence of a process of evolution that is still going on right now. Evolution and natural selection, most simply put as ‘survival of the fittest’, are the reason we are here in the shape we are. Virtually any argument put forward by a creationist for intelligent design can be [countered with a scientific response](#), with evidence. If it cannot, however, it does not follow that the explanation is intelligent design. Scientists don’t claim to have all the answers. When a scientist reaches a dead end, they accept that they have exhausted all of the possibilities open to them in a line of enquiry at that time, re-examine their assumptions, and continue to look for evidence to support their hypotheses. God, however, is a great get-out for creationists – God is the all-singing, all-dancing answer for all of our gaps in knowledge. Where science says, “I don’t have the answer now but I will keep looking”, religion says, “The answer is God, therefore we don’t need to keep digging for evidence, as God is all the evidence we need”. A case in point:

“God is...the one who established all scientific laws, and good science will point to Him. That's why we needn't fear that there will ever be a discovery of some scientific fact that contradicts the Bible properly interpreted.” Rev. Mark Creech, exec. director Christian Action League, North Carolina

Creationism and ID

How do you turn creationism into Intelligent Design? Simple. ID is creationism without the G word. The central argument of ID is that life is too complex to have developed without the hand of an intelligent designer. Intelligent designer – is that God? Nooooo... well, OK, yes. Well spotted. Creationists encourage the questioning of Darwinian evolution theory, based on weaknesses in the evidence that supports it - in some US schools, stickers like Parental Advisory notices are put in the front of text books containing Darwinian evolution theory, advising students that Darwin’s is ‘just another’ theory and is ‘unproven’. Darwinian evolution theory has been questioned, tested and revised in line with the evidence that has become available, ever since ‘On the Origin of the Species’ was published. Even Darwin admitted there were gaps in his evidence, but a scientist admitting that they can’t prove everything is just the opportunity a creationist needs to jump up and down shouting that the entire theory is rubbish, and putting stickers in school books is only concerned with

nurturing a questioning mind for long enough to introduce a student to ID. The arrogance and the temerity of creationists is staggering. Where the Darwinian theory of evolution has scientific proof and physical evidence to support it, creationism's best weapon is not evidence of its own, but finding weakness in existing scientific evidence, engendering doubt, and then addressing that doubt with an implausible explanation, predicated upon belief in a supernatural entity. The Darwinian theory of evolution is supported by 10,000 plus clergy, the Anglican and Catholic Churches, as well as most of the secular world. [Archbishop Rowan Williams](#) went as far as to say:

"I think creationism is...a kind of category mistake, as if the Bible were a theory like other theories. If creationism is presented as a stark alternative theory alongside other theories I think there's just been a jarring of categories."

Nevertheless, in the face of all of this, 64% of adults surveyed recently in the US believe in the literal truth of the Bible as an explanation of creation, and [22% of adults in the UK](#) (less than half believing in Darwinian evolution theory). Nearly half of UK adults believe that Intelligent Design should be taught in school science lessons, and faith schools in the UK, such as those run by creationist Sir Peter Vardy's [Emmanuel Schools Foundation](#), are doing precisely that.

What's so wrong with ID?

The battle over ID is being fought just outside the classroom door – creationists want ID to be taught in schools as a scientific theory alongside, rather in competition with, Darwinian evolution theory. George W Bush indeed suggested that "Both sides ought to be properly taught...so people can understand what the debate is about". Tony Blair also favours the teaching of ID, and supported Sir Peter Vardy in opening his new faith schools in the North of England. So what's so wrong with accepting ID in the science classroom? **Firstly**, proponents of ID can present no evidence whatsoever to substantiate their theory – it has no footing in science or fact. ID, as I have already said, relies on finding weaknesses in evidence for Darwinian theory, and offering a supernatural explanation for those areas of ambiguity (and let's face it, Darwin's theory of evolution is the only one on trial here as it is the only accepted theory we have). **Secondly**, ID attacks Darwinian theory on the basis of identifying gaps in fossil evidence – but new fossils are found all of the time which fill in those gaps. If ID is based on a scientific approach as it claims, it must therefore accept physical evidence which contradicts its assertions. ID has one less argument for every fossil found which supports Darwin's theory. **Thirdly**, creationists' arguments against Darwinian evolution theory are not driven by scientific curiosity – they are not driven by genuine concerns about gaps in fossil evidence. That much is obvious. Creationism wishes to suppress science, to paper over the cracks of human knowledge with the god of gaps, to remove any suggestion that man is descended from apes, and to strengthen the authority of a particularly old-testament form of religion:

...it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.
Tennessee Butler Act 1925, not rescinded until 1967

Many of the same Christian parents, however, are not concerned about the teaching of evolution in public schools. Falling SAT scores and increasing drug abuse, violence, abortion, and homosexual activity are the concerns of these parents. Why the fuss about creation being taught in public schools anyway they ask. As we shall show, there line of reasoning which usually lies hidden when either the subject of origins or morality is discussed, but which actually ties the two concerns together. Once this reasoning is understood it becomes evident that not only does the exclusive teaching of evolution encourage our children's rejection of Judeo-Christian morality, but it also prepares young minds for the reception of religious view which these same parents find unacceptable. Our commitment is to see the monopoly of naturalistic curriculum in the schools broken. Presently, school curriculum reflects a deep hostility to traditional Christian views and values and indoctrinates students to a mindset through subtle but persuasive arguments. This is not merely a war over ideas, but over young people and how their lives will be shaped. The current deplorable condition of our schools results in large part from denying the dignity of man created in God's image. Even junior high students recognize that if there is no creator, as textbooks teach, then there is no law giver to whom they must answer, and therefore no need of a moral lifestyle, much less a respect for the life of their fellow man. The message of the foundation is that this is simply unacceptable. *Jon Buell, president of Foundation for Thought and Ethics, publishers of Of Pandas and People, a leading ID textbook*

Creationism and ID have been repeatedly rejected by teachers, academics and scientists as unable to provide any plausible explanation for evolution, and have been [judged](#) as a ruse to foist religion into school science lessons, indoctrinate children, and violate the separation of church and state. That ID was even categorised as a separate theory from creationism in a recent BBC survey for the Horizon program, however, shows the ingenuity involved in having re-branded creationism to make it more palatable to a modern audience. The statements of the likes of Jon Buell demonstrate that fundamentalist creationism is, rather than encouraging curiosity, concerned with fostering ignorance. To suggest that learning Darwinian evolution theory leads to drug abuse, promiscuity and even homosexuality is insulting and ludicrous, but these are the true colours of the creationist. Creationism is an offshoot of religious fundamentalism – intolerant, ignorant and dangerous.

The new schism

When it comes to evolution, moderate Christians are alongside atheists and the scientific community in agreeing that the Darwinian theory of evolution is the best explanation that we have for our biodiversity. Religion may encourage teachers of evolution theory to suggest that man's soul is imbued by God, but they can still respect the scientific basis of Darwin's theory of evolution. As we move forward, the problem is less likely to be about the schism between religion and atheism, and more about the schism between moderate, rational people and religious fundamentalists – and creationism versus Darwinian evolution theory symbolises just that divide. Religion isn't going anywhere, but at least the rational thing to agree on is that we're all basically monkeys.

Related reading and resources

- [The Sceptic's Dictionary](#)
- [Discovery of the missing Precambrian record of life](#)
- [The case against Intelligent Design \(Jerry Coyne\)](#)
- Royal Society talk '[Why Creationism is Wrong and Evolution is Right](#)'
- [Geological Society](#)
- [Wikipedia](#)
- [Creationist claims and scientific responses](#)
- [Evolutionary Timeline](#)

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Mar 2006
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Suffolk Humanists at the Friends' Meeting House, Colchester, on 16th February 2006. Report of a talk by [Jules Pretty](#), FRSA, FIBiol, Professor of Environment & Society at the University of Essex, by Peter Davidson Professor Pretty's talk was on sustainable development. He began by focusing on the general theme of human development, then assessing what the world looks like now, and trying to get a balance about how things might change, not only over a long period of time, but over the next forty years or so. In his view, there are some crises, such as oil shortages and rising sea levels, that are current or imminent, and that must be addressed as a matter of urgency, regardless of arguments over whether the cause is human behaviour. For five million years, humankind was a species of hunter-gatherers and remained so until only 100,000 years ago, when we started co-operating in bigger settlements. These grew to bigger groupings or civilisations with recognisable cities appearing, such as Babylon and Ur in Mesopotamia, now part of Iraq. These evolved to what might be termed "mega-cities" in the present. However, the modern industrial age began only six to eight human generations ago, compared with the 300,000 generations that preceded it. If we were to fit the last five million years into one week, the industrial age would be represented by the last three seconds. Our experience of an industrial environment, rather than an agricultural or hunter-gatherer environment, is very recent. So how has human evolution shaped us, and how are we now shaping the environment? The biologists report that we have had five mass species extinctions. In Professor Pretty's view, we are now in the sixth, due to human behaviour. As well as species extinction, there is language extinction. About one-half of human languages have disappeared. Another half will disappear by about 2020, along with their associated cultures, such as those in South America and Papua New Guinea. The language extinction is tied into the culture extinction, and it is culture extinction that is the impending crisis, because it progressively removes the world of "cultural literacy"; knowing how to cope in a wide range of environments. Professor Pretty used photographs to show remnants of earlier civilisation decay, drawing initially on well-known examples, such as the remains of Inca settlements in South America. His commentary drew attention to two features: their abrupt ending, and the way in which the natural environment quickly takes over abandoned cities. He underscored this last point by slides of [Prypiat](#) in the Ukraine, the site of the Chernobyl accident. The site has been extensively monitored to track how nature responds to the abrupt disappearance – literally overnight – of a city. Striking features are the rapid return of species normally considered people-shy, such as wolves, and the species diversity that emerges in a short space of time; some twenty years. Turning to population issues, Professor Pretty pointed out that, contrary to popular opinion, current forecasts predict levelling out and decline over the next few decades, mainly due to fewer births in the developing world and in China, and to historically low levels of infant mortality. In 1987, the Norwegian [Bruntdland Commission](#) defined the concept of "sustainable development: the meeting of the needs of the present generation without denying the needs of the next", which has caught on politically, at least in rhetoric. One of the most iconic photographs from the early space shots was the sight of a blue-green Earth floating in space, the message being that there is only one earth; there is no back up. However, it is less easy to see tangible results on the ground. One way of getting the message across is to condense the 6,400,000,000 million world population into an imaginary village of one hundred people; the "global village". In population terms, we see that in 1950, the village had 36 inhabitants; in 1980, 68; in 2000, 100; in 2050, 150; and in 2150, about 100 (note the falling away in 150 years time). To provide for our village we need about 25 hectares of crops, 30 hectares of degraded surface, 57 hectares of good pasture and 69 hectares of forest. In the sea, we have a problem. The Atlantic fish yield per person declined 25-fold between 1970 and 2000. These are massive changes over a short time; if we do not adapt quickly we are deep trouble. Professor Pretty then returned in more detail to the Prypiat study as an icon or microcosm of what can happen, and used it as thought-provoking touchstone. At the time of the accident, some 20,000 people were removed immediately, and over the next ten days, 100,000 were removed from the exclusion zone the size of Suffolk. Surprisingly, deaths resulting from the accident were few. There were thirty immediate deaths, mainly fire fighters. Close monitoring has disclosed no significant increase in radiological mortality, such as leukaemia and other cancers. In some respects, people from the zone have gained life expectancy from the increased monitoring, enabling early detection and treatment of cancers. However, some Prypiat people suffered new or variant psychiatric illnesses, variously dubbed dislocation disorders, seemingly a diffuse chronic problem stemming from the sudden complete collapse of their society. Many of these self-regulated by returning to the exclusion zone where they are much less anxious, reforming relationships and leading a self-sufficient life, isolated from the outside. If the rest of the world's civilisations disappeared overnight, it wouldn't affect these people in the slightest. However, they are all elderly people. They will die out as they are beyond reproductive age. Professor Pretty suggested what we might learn from this: 1. Nature does not need us; it is resilient; 2. We need nature; 3. Civilisations can end abruptly. His suggestions for the way forward include an international acceptance that the way forward is an "attractive economisation", in which all countries accept that the environment is incapable of sustaining the rate of industrial growth to which we're currently addicted. In the question and answer session, there was a debate about the role of China, which is apparently working at breakneck speed to convert from an agricultural economy to an industrial one, and as such is likely soon to have more environmental impact than the whole of America.

Jules Pretty

"There were 176 operational staff on duty at the Chernobyl plant that night, and the subsequent efforts to contain the results of the disaster would eventually involve more than half a million men and women. Many of them were subjected to enormous doses of

radiation; some were killed instantly; others died agonising deaths soon afterwards in the Ukrainian capital Kiev, and in the specialist radiological wards of Moscow's Hospital No 6. The doses received by the hundreds of thousands of soldiers and reservists - 'liquidators' - who decontaminated the poisoned landscape of Ukraine and neighbouring Belarus were either classified or never officially recorded."

[The Observer magazine, March 26th 2006](#)

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
events@royalsoc.ac.uk
Event description:

A free lecture at the Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace London SW1Y 5AG.

Led by Professor Steve Jones, University College London, a debate on the case for evolution and creationism, and why creationism does more harm than good.

Update 14/04/2006 - [The lecture is now available on the Royal Society website](#) (Realplayer needed).

[Related article on SH](#)

Further info:
www.royalsoc.ac.uk/event.asp?id=4140
Map link:
tinyurl.com/n2f48

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Mar 2006
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The charity Rethink is the largest voluntary provider of mental health support in the UK and conducts many high profile campaigns in a continuing effort to achieve a greater understanding of mental illness.

In March 2006 such a campaign was targeted at the city of Norwich, as explained on the Rethink website:

During March, Rethink is taking the fight against prejudice, ignorance and fear to the streets of Norwich. The campaign will involve ads on buses, bus stops, billboards and on the radio together with a major statue unveiling in the Forum on March 10th. Make sure you put this date in your diary as we need your support on the big day!

Little did they realise just what sort of impact the campaign would have.

The statue mentioned on the website was, as pictured here, one of Winston Churchill in a straitjacket, and on the basis that no publicity is bad publicity, the profile of Rethink was certainly raised several notches.

Churchill statue

There was a storm of protest as members of the public took to the airwaves and the press to complain about the great man being portrayed in this fashion and the management of the Forum in Norwich, where the statue was displayed, were persuaded to demand its removal. Even Churchill's grandson Nicholas Soames MP toured the TV studios to condemn the offending piece.

I know a bit about Manic Depression since my wife, whom I've known for forty years, has suffered from it for the whole of that time and I was incensed that so many people seemed, by their utterances, to have no understanding at all about the condition, of which Churchill was a lifelong sufferer.

I signed a book of comments on the Rethink stand, generally deploring the action of the Forum in bowing to the demand of the vociferous and ill informed, and was encouraged to be told that many people agreed with my position.

On Thursday 23rd March, the following letter appeared in the East Anglian Daily Times under the heading "Belittling image of great war leader":

Sir, the disgraceful episode of belittling the name of Sir Winston Churchill, our greatest war leader by dressing a statue of him in a straitjacket is unbelievable. The people who thought this up should be ashamed of themselves. Our freedom today is due to his leadership in the last war.

R.S.Ashford, Aldeburgh

I responded immediately and the next day the following letter appeared:

I'm afraid R.S.Ashford (EADT Letters 23 March) and others, including Churchill's grandson Nicholas Soames, have completely

missed the point in their uninformed and knee jerk reaction to the statue of Churchill in a straitjacket.

Churchill was not a superman or a demi-god, as many like to portray him. He was just a flesh and blood man, albeit an exceptional one, and one of the things that made him exceptional was the mental illness from which he suffered. He was a lifelong manic depressive, one of the most common forms of mental illness and one which, to listen to so many, is still completely misunderstood.

The manic phase of the illness has stimulated the extraordinary creativity of so many famous people from Van Gogh to Spike Milligan and there can be no doubt that the inspirational speeches and their unique delivery that did so much to inspire the country in it's darkest hour owe almost everything to this aspect of Churchill's illness.

The statue is a tribute to the fact that Churchill was able to do so much while suffering from a mental illness and that it didn't put him in a strait jacket, and shouldn't put anyone else in one either.

While agreeing with R.S. Ashford that our freedom today owes much to Churchill's leadership, that freedom also includes the right to shock the "Disgusted of Aldeburgh" tendency .

Sometimes I think if Churchill were around today he'd wonder why he bothered.

In truth, I am saddened that mental health appears to be an area of which a large majority of the population have little or no understanding and, seemingly, little desire to change that sorry state of affairs. If you would like to show that Humanists have a rather more enlightened outlook on life please make the pledge to Stamp Out Stigma by going to [the Rethink website](#).

David Mitchell

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Why religion? An exploration of the religious instinct, led by Michael Imison, with reference to '[Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast](#) - the evolutionary origins of belief' by Lewis Wolpert, and '[Breaking the Spell](#) - Religion as a Natural Phenomenon' by Daniel Dennett.

Venue is Hexagonal Room, Friends' Meeting House, Colchester.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/gknqf

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Radio Times quiz by Marie Haworth, who says, "How's your memory for the olden days? Bring yours along for all to share. If your memory's not that good, or you're not that old, bring a new favourite tape or CD."

The meeting will be held in the hall, Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Richard Stock, University Records Manager of the University of Essex, will talk about his work, with particular reference to Freedom of Information.

The meeting will be held in Room 1, Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Mar 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

The meeting has been cancelled due to illness.

Map link: tinyurl.com/gknqf

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Not the Antiques Roadshow, but...



Richard Andrews has an antiques and collectables shop in Ipswich called 'Déjà Vu'. He and his wife Lynn will bring some items of interest, while members are encouraged to bring things that they'd like to know more about. Richard writes,

Neither of us profess to be experts - we just like collecting.

This meeting will be held in Room 1, Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Mar 2006
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It's possible, maintains Esther Rantzen, to have a good death. In a thoughtful, interesting and surprisingly optimistic documentary, Rantzen, whose experience of bereavement is still raw after the deaths of her husband, mother and father, looks at the beginnings of a movement to change the way in which hospitals treat the dying.

How to Have a Good Death
9:00pm - 10:30pm, Thursday 30th March BBC2

Link: [Radio Times | Programme details](#)

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Mar 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Radio Times quiz prepared by member Marie Haworth. What do you remember of the 'olden days'? Bring yours along for all to share. If your memory's not that good, or you're not that old, bring a new favourite tape or CD.

This meeting will be held in Room 1, Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. It's been postponed from June 2006.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Apr 2006
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Suffolk County Council's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) met on Friday 31st March to put the finishing

touches to the new Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education in Suffolk. It will be presented to the county council's cabinet for approval on 6th June.

Humanist SACRE representative Margaret Nelson reports that Humanism will be included in the syllabus, as recommended by the Qualifications & Curriculum Authority's 2004 non-statutory [national framework for RE](#). Her suggestions regarding the Suffolk syllabus were incorporated in the final draft, such as ensuring that '[Humanism](#)' is spelt with a capital letter throughout – it might seem a trivial issue, but signifies that Humanism is a life stance, like Christianity, Hinduism, and the other religions.

Margaret has reservations about the teaching of RE in primary schools and special education. This is not a criticism of the Suffolk syllabus; RE is a statutory requirement for all children, including those who are too young to appreciate the difference between fact and faith. She will pursue her interest in the teaching of RE to this age group, offering suitable material for story telling to counter the influence of Bible stories and other religious resources.

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Apr 2006
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Humanism isn't just about challenging the religionists, or faith schools, or funerals. It's also about values – about doing the right thing – so if we're serious about saving the planet (and most would say we are), should we be using traditional light bulbs? Shouldn't they be banned? Have you got rid of yours?



A [2001 survey](#) of public attitudes to Quality of Life and to the Environment showed that only a third of the respondents regularly used low energy bulbs, which use 67% less energy than traditional bulbs. You can buy low-energy bulbs from all good home supplies retailers, or online from [Energy Savers Direct](#), amongst others. They don't just help to save the planet – they save you money too.

Link: [BBC NEWS | Science/Nature | Light bulbs: Not such a bright idea](#)

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Apr 2006
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Crucifixion stories for children & the AGM report. [Download the newsletter](#) as a PDF file and leave it lying around for your friends to read.

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Apr 2006
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Rebecca Smithers, Guardian education editor
Friday April 7, 2006

"Teachers are to call for an end to state funding for faith schools in an attempt to halt the growing influence of religious organisations in education and end the controversial teaching of creationism. Britain's biggest teaching union, the National Union of Teachers, warned yesterday that religious fundamentalists were gaining control of state schools - predominantly through the government's city academy programme - and some private businesses had too much influence over the curriculum."

Link: [EducationGuardian.co.uk | News crumb | Curb influence of religions in schools, says NUT](#)

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Apr 2006
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In this summary of Internet highlights, some useful tips on avoiding scams and staying secure online. Some of this may sound obvious, but we hear feedback from people who aren't so confident using the Internet, so this is a straightforward introduction to safe surfing, with some links to great free tools to protect you while you enjoy the web.

Question: Which of these e-mails is actually legitimate?

- Send this message on to ten of your friends and Microsoft will track them and pay you!
- Send this e-mail on to as many people as you can and AOL will track them and donate a dollar for each e-mail to help this sick baby
- ALERT: new virus – destroys your computer. Forward this message to everyone you know!

- Send this e-mail on to ten of your best friends and you will have good luck. Delete it and your ears will fall off, your nose will turn green, no-one will talk to you and you will be haunted by a faint smell of fish for the rest of your days.

Answer: None of them – and yet people send these messages on to everyone in their address books with gay abandon on a regular basis. Microsoft, AOL and the like cannot track e-mails. No donations are made. No money will be showing up in your bank account any time soon. Most virus warnings sent by e-mail are hoaxes, and even if they aren't, as long as your anti-virus software is updated every day, you have little to worry about. Finally, sending e-mails to all and sundry with an endless list of saccharine truisms about friendship or the secret for happy living does little more than irritate everyone that gets the message. A true friend shouldn't be offended if you ask them to stop sending you rubbish!

The next time you receive such a message, here are some websites you can check to see if a message is authentic:

- [Snopes Urban Legends](#) – the [Inbox Rebellion](#) section contains popular e-mail scams
- [About Urban Legends](#) – revealing the truth behind one-eyed kittens and more 'mysteries' of the Internet
- A quick search on [Google](#) often tells you straight away if an e-mail is legitimate
- [McAfee](#) and [Symantec](#) both have extensive lists of virus hoaxes, before there is any need to start panicking and throwing your computer out of the window.

While most of these e-mails are harmless annoyances, some are more ominous in nature; phishing is a popular way to defraud people of money by demanding bank account or card details disguised as a bank, viruses are rife in e-mail, and spam (unsolicited e-mail) still accounts for half of all e-mail traffic, selling suspicious goods from herbal viagra to commodity stocks.

Here are some essential tools we recommend for preventing problems and staying safe online:

- [ZoneAlarm](#) – a **free** firewall program. Firewalls act like guard dogs for your computer, preventing unauthorised people from accessing your computer and leaving malicious software on it, or stealing your data. All computers with broadband connections should have a firewall installed, and ZoneAlarm is the best free firewall going.
- [Ad Aware](#) – this program scans your computer for spyware – software left on your computer by websites designed to monitor your activities online. This program is again **free**, simple to use, and the best at what it does.
- [AVG Anti-Virus](#) – another **free** program that provides excellent anti-virus protection for your computer. Always have anti-virus installed, and check for updates at least once a week, ideally every day.
- [Cloudmark Desktop](#) – this software, available for a fifteen day trial and then costing around £25 per year, is the best solution available for capturing and quarantining spam and phishing e-mails.
- [Firefox](#) – a safer, faster alternative to the buggy and insecure Internet Explorer for browsing the Internet. Firefox is also **free!**

Be good, BCC

Of course, a lot of messages are valid, useful and safe, and you may wish to send them on to your contacts. If you do send a message to a group of people, use Blind Carbon Copy or BCC in your e-mail program to ensure that all of your recipients e-mail addresses are concealed from one another.

- To view your BCC box in Microsoft Outlook, click 'View' in your new message and choose 'BCC field'
- To view your BCC box in Outlook Express, click 'View' in your new message and choose 'All headers'.

[Get in touch](#) with any queries, meanwhile, happy and safe surfing!

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Apr 2006

A message from Andrew Copson of the BHA - email your MP about faith schools.

The Government's current Education and Inspections Bill will inevitably lead to a proliferation of 'faith' schools and city academies controlled by religious interest groups. Polls show from 64% to 96% of the UK is against this policy. Why then, do most MPs continue to ignore this issue? We need to convince them that opposition to the creeping gift of our education system to religious interests is genuinely and widely held in their constituencies.

The BHA has set up a special online service to allow supporters to email their MP directly with a standard letter on the Education Bill, sign an online petition against faith schools and religious academies, and vote in our online poll. You can find the site at <http://tinyurl.com/esp27>. If you would prefer to send a more tailored message to your MP, or write to them by post, please do still take a look at our campaign site above, but we have also provided some notes for letter writers at <http://tinyurl.com/pqdaz>.

Please take action today (emailing your MP from the BHA site only takes a minute), and pass on this message to anyone else you think will be willing to join us in this campaign.

Andrew Copson
[British Humanist Association](#)

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Apr 2006
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E-mail:

mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or [listen again](#) the same day.

Apologies if you tried listening on 12 April - the event was listed in error.

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Apr 2006
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E-mail:

mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or [listen again](#) the same day.

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Apr 2006
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Suffolk Humanists met in Ipswich on Wednesday 12th April to talk about what it means to be a Humanist.

The small but select gathering (there were absences due to illnesses and holidays) was lively. Some spoke of their frustration that Humanism was not well known, saying they'd heard about it by attending a Humanist funeral. Why aren't more people aware of Humanism, they asked. There are many reasons for this, including the attitude that since Humanism is common sense, why give it a name or join an organisation? The current religious revival appears to be stirring people out of this sort of complacency, however.

Some spoke of their religious upbringing, on how it dawned on them that none of it made any sense, on how religion is related to power and control, and how much they appreciated finding others who felt the same. Several commented that they'd enjoyed the discussion. All were reminded that they should write to their MPs about the faith schools issue.

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Apr 2006
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We had visitors at the weekend. They'd been to a family reunion where some of their relatives were very old. One of our guests said she'd enjoyed hearing some of an uncle's reminiscences and about the hardships he'd experienced, without complaining. She felt that younger members of the family had no idea what his life was like at their age. I agreed with our guest that there's an enormous difference between today's young people's expectations and those of their great-grandparents. We wondered how some of the young people we know would cope if they had to do without many of the things they take for granted, like a varied diet, central heating, washing machines and fridges, cars and televisions. Have we produced a lot of softies, we wondered?

Once you start on this theme, it's easy to sound like the Four Yorkshireman in the Monty Python sketch that ends, "I had to get up in the morning at ten o'clock at night half an hour before I went to bed, drink a cup of sulphuric acid, work twenty-nine hours a day down mill, and pay mill owner for permission to come to work," and so on, then "And you try and tell the young people of today that ... they won't believe you."

I do sometimes wonder, however, about today's young people in the developed world and their discomfort and frustration threshold. I remember an older friend, years ago, telling me that the difficulties I was experiencing at the time were "character building". It's not just our experiences that make us who we are; it's how we deal with them. Maybe, if some young people are softies, it's because their parents and grandparents have shielded them from any kind of hardship and have given them more toys and gifts than any child could possibly need, even if they think they want them, so that they haven't had a chance to grow up.

The Swedish writer Ellen Key wrote, "At every step the child should learn the real experiences of life; the thorns should never be plucked from the roses." Maybe we wouldn't want today's children to endure the hardships that many experienced before and during the war, but perhaps some might benefit from what my mum called "a little healthy neglect".

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segregation. If you agree, [write to your MP](#).

Margaret Nelson
Secretary, Suffolk Humanists

([Learning Together](#) - resources for the campaign against faith schools.)

On 26th April, a letter from Richard Martin of Soham was published, ending with "the Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. (Proverbs 1:7)" I don't expect to persuade religious people like Mr Martin that they're wrong, but it's still worth responding for the benefit of those who may not have thought much about the issue, so I wrote -

In response to my letter against faith schools, Richard Martin (26th April) claimed that "they provide ... a more moral framework for life than is given in many secular schools," adding, "We have plenty of evidence for this in the amount of crime and family break-up nowadays." What evidence? According to a Home Office report, 68% of the prison population has a religious faith, including 39% who claim to be Anglicans and 17% who say they're Catholics – about the same proportions as the population as a whole. Fear of God doesn't appear to deter criminal behaviour.

A positive school ethos is the result of firm leadership and caring staff. If some faith schools appear to have fewer problems than others, it's for a good reason; they have a selective admissions policy. Recent statistics from the Department of Education & Science show that Anglican and Catholic primary schools take fewer children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds than the average, and Prof Anne West of the LSE found that voluntary aided and foundation schools that decide their own admissions are more likely to use selection interviews and less likely to give priority to pupils seen as being harder to teach, such as those with special needs.

The principle of secular education for all is supported by religious people, not just atheists. At the recent Association of Teachers and Lecturers' conference, the Rev Chris Wilson, Cambridge Regional College chaplain, said, "We need to be concerned that some of the faith communities have agendas which are at odds with reason and progress and the interests of science. My aspiration would be to have a secular education system in which all faiths are honoured and respected."

[Read more about the faith schools issue.](#)

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Apr 2006

E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Margaret Nelson will review the Sunday papers with Rachel Sloane on [Radio Suffolk](#), 95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm.

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Apr 2006

As someone who in the distant past worked in a bank and has tried to keep up with developments in banking, I find the [Little Britain](#) sketch of the bemused customer being told that, whatever he wants, ['The computer says no'](#), not only hilarious but rather too close to the truth for comfort.

It's also becoming nigh on impossible to shop these days without the ubiquitous bar code reader standing between you and the exit. Most of us will probably have had at least one experience of being told by a check-out operator that the bill for our sandwiches and bottle of pop is £883.99. It must be, because the till says so. The fact that everyone knows a sandwich and bottle of pop can't cost that doesn't come into it.

It seems that the most basic thought processes are, as far as many people are concerned, being suspended. The answer is what the computer says, and that's an end to it.

Now there's a computerised gadget that opens up a whole new world of possibilities in the elimination of thought; the Satellite Navigation System. A couple of weeks ago it was reported that because road works had closed a popular road in the West Country those drivers with Sat Nav were being technologically re-directed via a village that contained a ford. Unfortunately, this was not your average [ford a la Kersey](#) but a river in full spate and around four feet deep where it crossed the carriageway. A non-technological driver would approach with caution, assess the situation and, unless driving a tractor, would turn back. The Sat Nav brigade? You've guessed it; the technology says this is the way, so this way it is. The silver lining came for enterprising locals who did a roaring trade in towing people out and then drying them off. One local woman had some explaining to do when her husband came home to find a van driver's trousers drying on the cooker.



These tales, to which I'm sure many other experiences could be added, do have some relevance to Humanism. Most Humanists have come to their views on life, the universe and everything by thinking about the world around them. They are not Humanists because a prophet, priest or 'wise' man told them to be, or an uninvited visitor came to their door and 'converted' them. At the last meeting of Suffolk Humanists, it was generally agreed that having a Humanist outlook on life was probably the hardest option because Humanists like to work things out for themselves and accept the consequences of their own actions right or wrong. I like the term some Humanists use to describe themselves; free thinkers. If Humanists do something wrong they can never say that God, or a computer, told them to do it. They've only themselves to blame.

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Apr 2006
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Link: [National Secular Society - National Secular Society - NSS Shop](#)

They say "An exciting new DVD, exclusively available at this price [£16.99] from the NSS, examines atheism as it applies to the lives of real people. The DVD consists of six films, originally intended for schools, but far too good for such a restricted audience." The [Team Video](#) DVD features a funeral and a baby-naming by Suffolk Humanist Celebrant Margaret Nelson, and interviews with students from Kesgrave High School near Ipswich.

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Apr 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

International celebration of [Darwin Day](#) (the anniversary of the great man's birth).

To mark this special occasion, there'll be a supper of primordial soup (suitable for vegetarians), birthday cake, and readings from Darwin and some of his admirers, in Elmsett, from 7 to 9.30 pm.

Email for an invitation and directions.

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Apr 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

The summer solstice (in the northern hemisphere) and the winter solstice (in the south) is [World Humanism Day](#).

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Apr 2006
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It's time for some more of the best content available on the web at the moment – if you have any recommendations, [let us know](#). This week, video and podcast highlights – a TV time warp, the banana as the atheist's nightmare, and what is a podcast anyway? Broadband recommended.

[YouTube](#) is a great alternative to watching TV if there's nothing else on, or like me, you have to contend with a housemate whose remote control has somehow jammed on to a channel which only shows murder mysteries. A lot of YouTube videos are of American teenagers talking about how depressed they are, but there are gems amongst the dross. One such gem is [this edition of CNN's Crossfire](#) discussion programme from the mid-eighties, where a bemused Frank Zappa discusses censorship of rock music with right-wing loony John Lofton. A highly amusing debate, where Zappa declares that the US is becoming a 'fascist theocracy', and a great snapshot of TV, eighties style.



While you're on YouTube, take another look at the recent Channel 4 programme ['The Root of All Evil?' with Richard Dawkins](#), Ken Miller's fantastic [dissection of the case for Intelligent Design](#), the controversial [South Park episode that prompted Isaac Hayes to quit the show](#), and finally feel free to watch a [video from my canal-boating holiday last week](#). That last one hasn't got anything to do with Humanism, but I made it.

It turns out that all atheists are wrong. The proof? The humble banana. According to [this video clip on the excellent onegoodmove](#), bananas are easy-opening convenience food designed specifically to fit into the human hand, and even have a ripeness indication system to let you know when you can eat them – which is all apparently down to God. It would appear it's just man that gets it all wrong when it comes to packaging foodstuffs – I've yet to find a yoghurt pot that doesn't spit yoghurt at me when I open it, and I can't get in to most sandwiches.



Moving on to audio recommendations, there is a wealth of great audio available on the Internet of interest to Humanists, atheists, or just people who like me get bored of listening to surreal Radio 4 dramas, the pointless whittings of Chris Moyles on Radio 1, or James Blunt singing 'Beautiful' for the millionth time. [Podcasts](#) are audio programmes that you can download and listen to on your own computer, in your own time – you just need simple, free software to download and listen to the programmes. I recommend this [BBC guide to downloading podcasts](#). Podcasts are (usually) free, quick to download, can be copied on to an MP3 player, and are available all over the Internet, from the [BBC](#), the [Guardian](#), and many more programme makers.

The latest [Humanist Network News podcast](#) includes an interview with Roar Johnsen of the Norwegian Humanist Association, as well as a discussion around how the Humanist movement can attract more young people.

Other podcast and audio highlights include [this huge repository of freethought audio](#), good enough to waste away several hours, the [SETI](#) podcast, and the [Infidel Guy](#).

Listen to most of the media above, and you will hear a lot of American accents. While we hear about how the US has a worryingly high percentage of creationists, rampaging religiosity in media and politics, and that atheists in the US are a marginalised, distrusted minority, one thing is abundantly clear – US-based web sites are bursting with freethought and atheist media and discussion, compared to a relative paucity of offerings from the UK. Maybe it is precisely because atheists in the US have more of a battle on their hands, maybe the material that we take for granted as being available in the UK mainstream media would not be so easily found in the US media, but we don't seem to have as much going on here as our American cousins.

We'll be running a poll in the near future to gauge opinions on setting up a new UK-based freethought podcast – meanwhile comments and correspondence are welcome.

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Apr 2006
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The Guardian's [Comment is Free](#) website was recently introduced in the UK, aiming to emulate the highly successful US-based discussion website the [Huffington Post](#) as a home for comment and discussion on a variety of topics, mainly political. Comment is Free, like the Huffington Post, aims to attract a more eclectic readership than would usually take part in discussions on the Internet, with articles written by journalists, politicians and playwrights.



Since Comment is Free has been in business, one topic which consistently attracts more comments, discussion and all-round vitriol than virtually any other is, unsurprisingly, religion.

There are few topics for discussion that do such a good job of getting people steamed up as religion, whether you're religious or not – it's easy to get a whole load of people worked up and leaving comments practically dripping with angry spittle and tears. Recent articles on Comment is Free include

- [What is God for?](#) – James Randerson questions the argument that a religious society equates to a moral society
- [Secular supremacists should sort out their own schools](#) – Peter Franklin confronts the denunciation of faith schools by so-called 'Secular supremacists'
- [This is a clash of civilisations](#) – Polly Toynbee argues against 'indoctrinating and divisive' religious schools
- [God is what we make Him](#) – Dave Hill suggests that hardline atheism is too crude a response to religious extremism.

These articles have all attracted dozens, and in some cases hundreds, of comments from readers. A piece on the Huffington Post called [If You're a Christian, Muslim or Jew - You are Wrong](#) by Cenk Uygur attracted a huge amount of attention and comment. The pattern is familiar – when the topic of religion is emotive to begin with, all you need to do is take a stance for or against religion, set your stall – the more robust your language, the better – and then watch the diatribes flow in. That said, I have observed from most of the articles I've seen on Comment is Free that, having written their piece, most contributors are then happy to leave their readers to slug it out, passing back comments, responses, pithy comebacks and insults with gay abandon.

Do these discussions ever get people anywhere? Not often. The topic of religion is always guaranteed to raise temperatures, discussions on religion very rarely ending in agreement by all parties. If, as an atheist, you've ever got into an argument about religion with a religious person, you'll know exactly what I mean – those conversations usually end in comments along the lines of "We'll have to agree to disagree", and that's if they went well. Such conversations are as likely to end in insults and even physical violence. There are notable exceptions, when moderate people on both sides of the fence find enough to agree about, but many people don't even get involved in debates about religion – maybe because they are not sufficiently confident of their arguments, but mainly because people think that such arguments are akin to shouting at a brick wall for all the good they do.

So why all these arguments, if they aren't getting us anywhere? People like to get their point across, and even if it's half-baked, they're entitled to it. The discussion can be fun, or at least good exercise for the brain. Simply making a comment one way or the other gives everyone an idea of the balance of opinion in an argument. Even if people found Peter Franklin's piece on Secular supremacists to be ignorant tripe, a lot of them joyously leapt on the opportunity to tell him so, more than supported him, which said something more interesting about the balance of opinion of those who read the article than what Peter Franklin thinks.

A friend of mine adopts the position of devil's advocate in almost any political discussion, deliberately taking the opposite viewpoint to mine just for the sake of watching me go red in the face – but I'm glad he does, if it makes me think about my opinions, and what evidence I have to back them up. That religion attracts so much comment is partly attributable to the fact that religion encroaches so far into everyone's lives, be they religious or not – politics and education are two areas where religious pressure groups seek greater influence, and no-one can escape the effects of changes in these arenas. It's essential now more than ever to balance the debate, wherever it is happening, and tackle ignorance and sloppy thinking. For Humanists, it is also a fantastic opportunity to show that absence of religious faith does not mean absence of thought or morals.

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May 2006
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From all we hear about Christianity in America - creationism, intolerance, ignorance and so on - it appears to be devoid of rational Humanism. Not so. Among others, there's a local [Humanist group in the Greater Sacramento area](#), California. HAGSA's President and newsletter editor is Bill Potts, who was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire. Bill says he didn't discover Humanism until 1963, while he was living and working in Canada. He recently joined the BHA and takes a keen interest in British Humanism. We exchange newsletters with HAGSA. [You can download their latest in PDF format.](#)

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May 2006
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Link: [Biography - Alan Johnson MP - Labour MP for Kingston Upon Hull West and Hessle](#)

Having lost nearly 300 local council seats in yesterday's elections, Blair has shuffled his cabinet and Alan Johnson's in charge of education. Will he be a better Education Secretary than the very religious Ruth Kelly? Will it make a difference to the faith schools issue? Probably not. Johnson voted against a rebel amendment requiring faith schools to take 25% of their pupils from 'other backgrounds', which doesn't bode well. I can't find anything online about his personal religious background – can anyone provide any info on this?

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May 2006
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Suffolk College affirms that minority ethnic individuals are entitled to the same equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities as the majority population. This is outlined within the College's Equal Opportunities Policy. The College strives to ensure that, whatever the heritage and origins of members of the College community, everyone is equally valued and treats one another with respect.

This policy serves to remind us all that diversity in our society is a strength and we must ensure equality and equity having regard to issues of gender, age, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation and culture.

Link: [Suffolk College](#)

The above is from the college's Racial Equality Policy, yet the college's Civic Celebration of Community will be a Christian service, not a religiously neutral secular ceremony. I've had an invitation from Prof. Dave Muller, Principal of Suffolk College, to the event on 9th June. The covering letter begins,

I am delighted to enclose for you an invitation to attend the above event on Friday 9 June 2006 at 1200 noon at St Mary le Tower Church, Ipswich. This Christian service is being held in collaboration with Ipswich Borough Council and St Mary le Tower Church, and is celebrating the involvement of the college with the local community.

Last year, as a representative of Suffolk Humanists, I wrote to decline the invitation, pointing out that Ipswich's community is diverse and that the college isn't a religious institution, so why have a Christian service? Instead, it should be a secular ceremony, I suggested. Prof. Muller didn't respond. I believe that he's had a similar response from Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. So this year I shall decline again, and will explain why.

If you'd like to support Suffolk Humanists in calling for a secular Civic Celebration, please write to:

Prof. Dave Muller, Principal, Suffolk College, Ipswich, IP4 1LT.

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May 2006
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It's the weekend, so it's time for the near-weekly roundup of the stimulating and the stupid on the Interweb.

"Intellectual infancy": the phrase reminds one that religions survive mainly because they brainwash the young. Three-quarters of Church of England schools are primary schools; all the faiths currently jostling for our tax money to run their "faith-based" schools know that if they do not proselytise intellectually defenceless three and four-year-olds, their grip will eventually loosen.
AC Grayling

As if to prove my point in an earlier post about religion and what a stink it always kicks up, [AC Grayling's excellent piece on the Guardian's Comment is free blog](#) has attracted much comment. Grayling tackles the oft-used criticism levelled at atheists of being fundamentalists akin to the kind that blow up restaurants, a barking mad angry bunch who would have religion wiped off the face of the Earth and replace it with some kind of Stalinist hell. Henry444 comments "Excellent article AC, but you're wasting your time - I don't think that it's possible to have a rational discussion about these things with religious types." – quite true maybe, but 135 more people still have a go.

Speaking of discussion, we are looking to further develop fora for discussion on this website (thank you Mark for your e-mail), and would appreciate any [suggestions](#) you have – see our [poll!](#)

Jesus Christ stars in possibly the shortest musical yet...

Other Internet highlights include a [mind-bogglingly detailed timeline of evolution](#), [a truly beautiful picture of Earth](#), and a [new competitor for BBC News](#).



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May 2006
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Clouds

I've been trying to avoid joining things because I'm already a member of too many organisations to give them all the attention they probably deserve. By joining an organisation you might feel obliged to participate in some way, so if you don't, you feel guilty. However, I've recently joined an organisation that won't make me feel guilty because I'm already doing what it stands for, every day. I've joined the [Cloud Appreciation Society](#). All that being a member of the society involves is appreciating the beauty of clouds and rejecting what its founder, Gavin Pretor-Pinney, calls 'blue sky thinking'. In a previous thought for the day, I've spoken about my irritation with weather forecasters who apologise for wet weather. What is there to apologise for? And isn't an unbroken blue sky boring?

The downside of cloud appreciation is a tendency to bump into things because you're always looking up at the sky. It's become a bit of an obsession. I rarely go out without my camera. I envy people who live in places where cloud formations we never see are common. [Lenticular clouds](#) can be seen near mountains. They sometimes resemble flying saucers. [Mammatus clouds](#) are weird, covering the sky

with a layer of oppressive bulbous shapes. The scale of the [King of Clouds, Cumulonimbus](#), which reaches up to ten kilometres into the sky, is awe-inspiring.

What has any of this to do with Humanism, you may ask. When asked what spirituality meant, an anonymous Humanist said, “To me, spirituality is what you feel when you're uplifted by a piece of music or a beautiful sunset.” An appreciation of the beauties of Nature, including the skies, is one of the things that make us more fully human. It takes us above and beyond ourselves, quite literally, though not because we think that there's a deity up there in the clouds, as some children imagine. Looking at the stars in a clear night sky can make us feel free; so can the sight of ever-changing clouds – water in the sky. They can help us forecast the weather, alter our mood, and stimulate our imagination.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote,

O! It is pleasant with a head of ease,
Just after sunset, or by moonlight skies,
To make the shifting clouds be what you please.

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May 2006

THE Church of England has debunked the widely held view that young people are spiritual seekers on a journey to find transcendent truths to fill the “God-shaped hole” within them.

A report published by the Church today indicates that young people are quite happy with a life without God and prefer car boot sales to church.

If they think about church at all, the images young people come up with are “cardigans”, “sandals and socks”, “corrupt”, “traditionalist” and “stagnant”.

Link: [Church seeks spirituality of youth . . . and doesn't like what it finds - Britain - Times Online](#)

The new publication, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, published today by Church of England publishing arm Church House Publishing, tells an unsurprising tale – young people between 15 and 25 are happy with life as it is, and view the Church as “boring as irrelevant” – and these are the words of Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, who sees the report as an “urgent” wake-up call. According to the Times article, only 5 percent of those aged 20 to 29 attend church.



Clerics are apparently shocked to find that even if the young have little or no knowledge of Christianity that they still have no religious or spiritual yearnings, and are generally unbothered by feelings of sin, or fear of death – but why should they be shocked? The anachronistic and outdated Christian church looks thoroughly unappealing to many, but beyond that, many young people now are simply too well informed and too curious to find any satisfactory answers in religion. The gist of the report in fact indicates that many young people are adopting a personal credo – that happiness is more important than religion, and that “this world, and all life in it, is meaningful as it is”.

This is all borne out by several interviews with Kesgrave High School students, and others, in the [‘Why Atheism?’ DVD](#), available now from the NSS Shop.

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May 2006

The newly appointed government minister responsible for equality is facing controversy after she refused to say whether she believed homosexuality was a sin.

Ruth Kelly, the Secretary of State for Communities, a committed Catholic and member of the Opus Dei group, was embroiled in a renewed row over her religious beliefs yesterday.

Link: [Independent Online Edition > UK Politics - Scene_1](#)

Kelly's last job was Minister for Education, where she favoured faith schools. Now she's going to be responsible for 'equality' issues, but maybe some sexual orientations will be more equal than others. Is Ms Kelly's loyalty to her role as a Government Minister, or to the Catholic cult she belongs to?

Ruth Kelly

[Matthew Parris on Ruth Kelly last year](#)

[Scientists alarmed by Ruth Kelly in December 2004](#)

[Wikipedia on Ruth Kelly](#)

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May 2006
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I've met quite a few people I've come to think of as 'seekers'. They're religious people without a religion. They may try out various religions or sects, rejecting each one in turn when they fail to come up to expectations. We even had a C of E rector in our village who'd done this – he'd tried various denominations. The last I heard of him, he was doing missionary work in Africa. Poor Africans.

feng shui crystals

A woman who contacted me about joining our Humanist group was keen on crystals. She clutched them, apparently, because they did something or other to calm her. I'm afraid she lost interest in joining the group when I commented that I didn't think that clutching crystals was any more likely to benefit me than clutching a pair of wellies. Stroking the cat's a different matter; there is evidence that cat stroking (or stroking any furry pet) lowers your blood pressure. As my blood pressure is already very low (an effect of ME), I have to ration my cat stroking for fear of going comatose. Being stroked by someone you love is quite nice too!

But seriously: if you're looking for spiritual guidance or some sort of transcendental enlightenment, we're not for you. Humanism is for free-thinkers, with the emphasis on thinking. We don't do emotional manipulation, or any of that new-agey, blot out the world and feel good stuff. We do thinking, talking, reading, arguing, friendship, and laughing. We don't do gurus, but we often feel good anyway.

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May 2006
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A new TV series starts on BBC2 on Friday 26th May at 9pm. Terry Jones promises to expose the truth about the 'Barbarians'. It seems that the Romans and the Catholic Church gave the Barbarians a reputation they didn't deserve.

Terry Jones pieces together new archaeological evidence to reveal the startling truth about the Barbarians, in the process discovering how the Roman propaganda machine was able to pull off a great con-trick and turn their enemies into monsters fit for children's stories.

Link: [Radio Times | Programme details](#)

There's an interview with Jones in the Radio Times. The article ends:

So who's responsible for the smear campaign against Huns and Goths and the rest? The main culprit is the Roman Catholic Church. In the fifth century, Leo, bishop of Rome, confronted Attila the Hun and his army and struck a deal, which resulted in Attila withdrawing. Leo claimed it as triumph, and that turned him into the most powerful figure in the Roman Church. Attila's only lasting legacy was the creation of the Pope! The Roman Empire transmuted into the church. Pagan materials, or anything that didn't fit with its traditions, were ignored or destroyed. So for 1,500 years the church has kept this propaganda going: Romans good, barbarians bad. It's just not true.

Sounds interesting...

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May 2006
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For once, an evolutionary biologist and a creationist agree on something. Professor Steve Jones, the author of an updated version of Darwin's Origin of Species, and John Mackay, an Australian preacher who believes the book of Genesis constitutes literal truth, are both convinced that creationism is making a comeback in British classrooms.

Link: [Independent Online Edition > Schools](#)

It's difficult to understand how this can happen, but it seems that we need to be vigilant. So far, we haven't come across creationism in Suffolk schools, but that doesn't mean there isn't any. In Kansas, they've fought creationism and the teaching of 'intelligent design' with ridicule. 'Concerned citizen' Bobby Henderson has established the [Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster](#). Can we sign you up, brothers and sisters?

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May 2006
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It's the end of the week again, so it is surely time to postpone whatever it was you were planning on doing and spend the rest of your day getting nicely relaxed for the weekend. If you're at work we obviously don't advise misappropriation of company resources to fuel your own amusement when you should be working, but... well, actually we do. Go on. So here's a summary of some of the best content we've found on the web this week... click *read more* below to find out about the strange religious things people find in their food, blasphemous cartoons, and health warnings for bibles.

[A recent BBC headline has highlighted the recovery of a 'Koranic' fish](#) in Kenya, after it was feared stolen. The fish, with markings that resemble a Koranic text, has been the talk of local mosques, and offers have come in to buy it for as much as \$150. There is no mention of how bad it must be smelling by now. The best thing about this story is the mention on the same page of a tropical fish with an 'Allah' marking, a 'Christ-like' shell going on sale, a 'Virgin Mary' toasted cheese sandwich fetching \$28,000 at auction, a message from Allah in a tomato, and a man who has found Jesus in a frying pan. It truly appears the gods are trying to communicate with us through our food. Only a month ago, I found the answer to life, the universe and everything in my bran flakes, but then the dog stuck her nose in my bowl while I wasn't looking, and it was gone.

Cartoons have been doing a marvellous job of prodding fun at religion lately... the [cartoons of the prophet Mohammed](#) were one thing, but now mainstream family cartoons have something to say in the debate over creationism in the US, and are surely all the more effective for reaching a far wider audience with an easily accessible and humorous message. Recent episodes of the excellent [Simpsons](#) and [Family Guy](#) have both lampooned creationism – the highlights are available through the [One Good Move](#) blog.

Sir Ian McKellen courted controversy at a recent interview at the Cannes Film Festival, while promoting new thriller [The Da Vinci Code](#). When asked by the interviewer what the stars of the movie thought about the idea of submitting to religious pressure groups and adding a disclaimer to the beginning of the movie stating that it was fiction, McKellen said:

“Well, I've often thought that the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying 'This is fiction'... I mean, walking on water... it takes... mmm.. an act of faith.” ([video clip](#))

The bible disclaimer might look like the one on the right. Mark Lawson has further [attempted to simplify matters](#) on Comment is Free.

Neveah has become one of the most popular new names for baby girls in the US, according to [this article](#). Neveah is 'Heaven' backwards, which works quite well. Less successful names include 'Legna', 'Dog', 'Leirbag' and 'Susej'.

In a previous roundup of the best on the web, I highlighted the banana as the atheist's nightmare. The full-length programme that bombshell came from is [The Way of The Master](#), with evangelists Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron. The programme claims, “Never again do you need to be intimidated by an atheist. Learn how to prove God's existence and effectively witness to these so-called 'intellectuals'”. [Watch the programme, and see what you think](#).

Finally, you may have seen it before, but [this video makes that case that we're all monkeys](#).

Registered users of the site can now see daily 'best of the web' recommendations on the home page of the site – meanwhile feel free to send in your recommendations. Have a great weekend.

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May 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Summer food, summer music and conversation in summery Suffolk, near Hadleigh. It's a bring-a-plate tea - everyone brings a plate of food to share. Ask what's needed.

Members and invited guests only. If you want an invite, email us.

Members, please email anyway ASAP to let us know you're coming.

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May 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

The midsummer social announced for today has been postponed until Saturday, 24th June.

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May 2006
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A group of leading British doctors called today for the NHS to stop using "unproven" complementary treatments such as homeopathy, sparking complaints of "medical apartheid" by proponents of the therapies.

Link: [Guardian Unlimited | Special reports | Top doctors accused of 'medical apartheid'](#)



It's reported that 'groups representing complementary practitioners reacted angrily' to the call for an end to funding for unproven alternative therapies, but then they would, wouldn't they?

The doctors' have been prompted to write to every hospital and health trust in the country in response to Prince Charles's appeal to the World Health Organisation today, to back a 'more holistic approach' and not rely on conventional medicine. The royal family has been resorting to [homeopathy](#) for years. It's based on the [placebo](#) effect, and is not proven. Homeopathic medicines are just water, though homeopaths claim that the water retains a 'memory' of whatever substance was diluted in it to begin with.

Prince Charles, the [snake oil](#) salesman?

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May 2006
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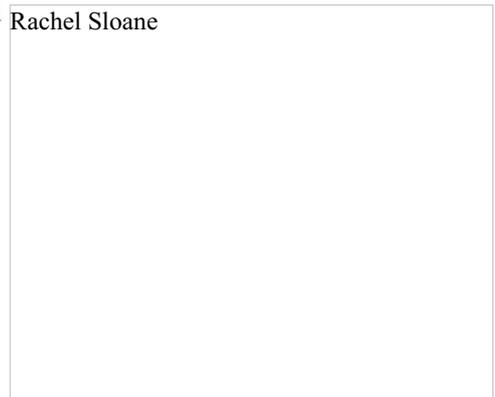
E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Tea in Halesworth with members of the Norfolk Humanist group. Email for an invitation and directions.

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May 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

BBC Radio Suffolk presenter [Rachel Sloane](#) is doing a series of features about faiths and philosophies in Suffolk for her Sunday morning programme. She's been invited to come and meet us and will record her encounter. Please don't be shy but come prepared to talk about why you're a Humanist, and what Humanism means to you. In return, Rachel will tell us about her work.



We'll be in Room 1 at Castle Hill Community Centre from 7.30pm to 10pm.

Map link: tinyurl.com/tham2

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May 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Regret this event has been cancelled.

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May 2006
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At Suffolk Humanists' May meeting, Michael Imison talked about the origins of religious belief.

Two books relevant to the subject were published this year. The first was by the American philosophical writer Daniel C Dennett, called [Breaking the spell – Religion as a Natural Phenomenon](#). The spell Dennett wants to break is the widespread taboo on subjecting religion to scientific examination, which seems to arise from a fear that, without religion to impose morality, society would fall apart. On the contrary, Dennett argues, “now that we have created the technologies to cause global catastrophe our jeopardy is multiplied to the maximum. A toxic religious mania could end human civilisation overnight. We need to understand what makes religion work so we can protect ourselves.” He points out that the currently established religions are not that old in terms of the history of mankind and that new religions spring up every day, mostly only lasting a decade. He quotes three common explanations for the need for religion –

Daniel Dennett

- To comfort us in our suffering and allay our fear of death.
- To explain things we can't otherwise explain.
- To encourage group co-operation in the face of trials and enemies.

Dennett finds these insufficient. He looks for explanation in the evolution of the human mind and quotes much current research which sees evolutionary advantages in minds bred to seek causal explanations for all phenomena and minds which readily subject themselves to powerful beliefs because they responded to faith healing, often the only sort available to primitive man. With modern scientific knowledge these characteristics are no longer valuable and religion is unnecessary, says Dennett.

The second book was [Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast](#) by Louis Wolpert, the British academic and broadcaster. He too sees religious belief offering genetic advantages to primitive man. But he goes further and quotes research that shows religious experiences being brought on by stimulation of certain parts of the brain, just they can be brought on by certain forms of epilepsy.

Lewis Wolpert

These are three thoughts of mine. Firstly, that a purely mechanistic universe calls into question free-will so that it is necessary for us to import a non-material element, a spirit or a soul, to prevent us simply being the slaves of cause and effect. Secondly, that all our early life-experience is of being protected and nurtured by superior beings so that it is natural we should continue to look for such beings when we become adults. And thirdly, clever but weakly members of primitive society could find themselves a role by offering to interpret the forces of nature and intervene with them. They had a vested interest in promoting religion and thus priesthoods were born.

A lively discussion followed in which, for example, it was pointed out that dreams were probably an important element in promoting belief in the supernatural. It was also argued that social causes were as important, if not more so, than genetic causes in the development of religion.

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May 2006
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The Satanic Verses, Behzti, Theo van Gogh's Submission, Jerry Springer: The Opera, the Danish cartoons of Muhammad ... now we can add the London exhibition of the work of Maqbool Fida Husain to the rapidly expanding list of works of art and satire targeted by militant religion.

Link: [The Observer | Comment | Yet again we cave into religious bigots. And this time they're Hindus](#)

It seems that every religious fundamentalist, of every religion, wants to get in on the act. It only takes a few determined trouble makers, threatening the destruction of people or property, and theatres and galleries give in! Give them an inch and they'll take a mile. Unfortunately, the Blair Government gave more than an inch with its [Religious Hatred Bill](#). Taking offence has now become a full-time occupation for many religious extremists.

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May 2006
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Documentary following the freshmen class of Patrick Henry College, a conservative Christian college that has provided the current White House administration with more interns than any other college in America. All the courses, from biology to political science, are taught from a biblical point of view.

Link: [Radio Times | TV listings grid](#)

Channel 4, Monday 5th June, 8–9pm.

That's America, you might think – what's it got to do with us? It's just a *little* scary, considering that some US ideas, like Creationism in

schools, have caught on here.

If anyone who watches this would like to write a review of the programme, please [email us](#).

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Jun 2006

The US Senate has blocked a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. President George W Bush had backed the ban, saying marriage between a man and a woman was the most fundamental institution of civilisation.

Link: [BBC NEWS | World | Americas | US Senate blocks gay marriage ban](#)

Depends what you mean by 'civilisation', Mr Bush. The Oxford dictionary defines it thus:

civilization

(also civilisation)

- **noun 1** an advanced stage or system of human social development. **2** the process of achieving this. **3** a civilized nation or region.

Perhaps the recognition of same-sex marriage *is* advancing human social development? Perhaps it *is* civilised to accept that the gender of two people is irrelevant, if they want to be legally married? Perhaps the senate *is* more civilised than we thought?

According to [Newsweek](#), George Bush's opposition to gay marriage is a cynical ploy to regain reactionary Republican votes:

One of his old friends told Newsweek same-sex marriage barely registers on the president's moral radar. "I think it was purely political. I don't think he gives a s--t about it. He never talks about this stuff,"

Meanwhile, here in the UK, [a lesbian couple fight for equality with heterosexuals](#):

Two British women who were married in Canada have gone to the High Court in a test case to win legal recognition for same-sex couples who marry abroad.

The University professors Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger, who live in north Yorkshire, argue that UK laws which validated their union as a "civil partnership" do not go far enough.

For more about an enlightened, rational approach to homosexuality, visit the [Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association](#) website.



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Jun 2006

The women of Basra have disappeared. Three years after the US-led invasion of Iraq, women's secular freedoms - once the envy of women across the Middle East - have been snatched away because militant Islam is rising across the country.

Link: [Independent Online Edition > Middle East](#)

The BBC reported that [Iraqi women feared for their rights](#) in July 2005.

Human Rights Watch provides information on the status of [Iraqi women before the fall of Saddam Hussein](#).

Iraqi women are being persecuted and killed for failing to conform to Islamic extremist notions of how women ought to behave. They're told that women ought not to work, to expose bare flesh, to wear make-up, to drive, or to be seen in public without a close male relative as their escort, and so on. In other words, to do anything other than bear children. This is another consequence of the ill thought out invasion of the country by the US and UK. "Democracy" is a joke for Iraqi women. Religious and tribal leaders are exploiting the situation.

We shouldn't be surprised. The history of world religion is one of patriarchy gone mad. The Muslim misogynists who impose their anachronistic super-sexism are seriously and dangerously weird, but Christianity has its sexually obsessed madmen, and Hindu men are responsible for bride-burning, female infanticide and domestic violence – [using acid to burn women](#) as a punishment is common.



What makes men use religion to justify their misogyny? Boys are indoctrinated with a dangerous mixture of religious fundamentalism and misogyny from an early age. They never learn how to relate to women as equal human beings. It's a kind of sexist sickness, and it afflicts a large proportion of the world's male population. Early religions, in the pre-Judeo-Christian era, were primarily matriarchal. They were dominated by priestesses and goddesses, and women were dominant in society. If you have to have a deity, doesn't it make more sense to have a female one? We're all born of woman. Human life begins in a woman's womb. That's what misogynist men hate and fear. To them, we women are merely a vessel. When we assert ourselves, we are labelled harlots, witches, and bitches, and considered unworthy of any respect or consideration. That's what's happening to women in Iraq, just as it's happening to women all around the world.

Simone de Beauvoir wrote the following in her book *The Second Sex*, in 1949. Over fifty years later, nothing much has changed.

Man enjoys the great advantage of having a god endorse the code he writes; and since man exercises a sovereign authority over women it is especially fortunate that this authority has been vested in him by the Supreme Being. For the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians among others, man is master by divine right; the fear of God will therefore repress any impulse towards revolt in the downtrodden female.

To read about some of the women I admire, [see my list](#)

The illustration is a goddess seated on an animal throne, sixth millenium BCE, Catal Hüyük, Anatolia.



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Jun 2006
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Both the [National Secular Society](#) and the [British Humanist Association](#) do weekly e-newsletters.

The following is from the latest National Secular Society's e-newsletter, Newsline. If you're not already a subscriber and would like Newsline to drop into your inbox every Friday, send a blank email with "Subscribe to Newsline" on the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk.



Quotes of the Week

If all the achievements of scientists were wiped out tomorrow, there would be no doctors but witch doctors, no transport faster than horses, no computers, no printed books, no agriculture beyond subsistence peasant farming. If all the achievements of theologians were wiped out tomorrow, would anyone notice the smallest difference?

Richard Dawkins, quoted in *The Guardian*

If Europe is no longer big enough for Ayaan Hirsi Ali, we are all in trouble. It is sad that the home of the Enlightenment can no longer cope with her right to free speech.

Jasper Gerard, *Sunday Times*

I believe that the idea of God has been a disaster for humanity, and any person who bases their morality on the writings of hallucinating pre-modern nomads is going to have pretty warped values.

Johann Hari, *Attitude*

There is no process to decide who British Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims are represented by. The ordinary man or woman does not have a vote to decide who runs the Muslim Council, Sikh Federation or Hindu Forum. So what gives them the mandate to speak on our behalf?

Sunny Hundal, *Asians in Media*

Essays of the Week

[The Caged Virgin](#): preface to Ayaan Hirsi Ali's new book.

[Islamic banking will only work if it applies worldwide](#), which is the plan – Dr. Aqdas Ali Kazmi, *News on Sunday*.

[CofE must be disestablished](#) – Theo Hobson, *Guardian*.

[Keep the fascist cult of Islamic supremacy out of our mosques](#) – Tarak Fateh, *Toronto Star*.

For the weekly BHA e-bulletin, email member@humanism.org.uk, with 'Subscribe to ebulletin' in the subject line. For this week's copy, [get in touch](#) and we'll forward it.

Among other things, they announce:

[GALHA](#) and the BHA have taken a stall at this year's Europride in Trafalgar Square (Saturday, July 1st) and we are looking for Lesbian, Gay, Bi or Transgender Humanists to take turns on the stand. This co-operative venture marks a welcome return to Pride for humanism after a number of years, congratulations to everyone who has made this possible.

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Jun 2006
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Current security policies assume international terrorism to be the greatest threat to global security, and attempt to maintain the status quo and control insecurity through the projection of military force.

Link: [Oxford Research Group - Global Responses to Global Threats: Sustainable Security for the 21st Century](#)

Paul Rogers from the Oxford Research Group was interviewed about this new report at 0845 on this morning's BBC Radio 4 Today programme. What he said made a lot of sense – if only the Powers That Be would read it, and consider the alternatives to their current policies! You can buy a copy of the report for only £5 from their website (link above), and/or listen to Paul Rogers via the [Today](#) website.



One of the issues Rogers mentioned was the social impact of climate change. I wrote about this in a Thought for the Day after the 1999 Turkish earthquake. The script – “One World” – is included in the [Thought for the Day compilation PDF](#), but here is part of it:

At the end of the last Ice Age humanity numbered only about 10,000 people — less than a quarter of the numbers estimated to have perished in Turkey. The world's population has just reached 6 billion. It's taken less than 40 years to double in numbers. It means, among other things, that there's nowhere to go for those who live in vulnerable places, like earthquake zones and flood plains. The recent hostilities between Kosovan refugees and local people in Dover demonstrate that, however sympathetic and generous British people might be when foreigners are displaced, they don't necessarily want them to turn up on their doorsteps. Those who are fortunate to live in the developed world guard their privileges.

... the world's population is still growing, fast. Within 50 years it will double again, according to some scientists. There ought to be better ways of reducing our numbers than allowing thousands to die in disasters. It's ridiculous that an intelligent, resourceful race — the human race — should continue to be divided into nations who behave as though other nations' problems are nothing to do with them, unless they choose to get involved.

...However uncharitable you might feel about sorting out other people's problems, if we don't do something about them within fifty years there'll be a lot more refugees from man-made or natural disasters banging on our doors. It will take a complete change of attitude. Other people's problems are our problems. Distinctions like nationality, race, party politics, gender, religion and age will have to matter far less to the next couple of generations than being citizens of the world, because the world's getting smaller every day.

[Help with PDF files.](#)

Photo courtesy of NASA National Space Science Data Center.

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Jun 2006
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At a Humanist wedding recently, the bride's mother made an unusual speech. It's reproduced with her permission, but the names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

Quote

The following piece is offered, with apologies to Bill Bryson, whose book 'A Short History of Everything' put me firmly in my place.

Welcome – and congratulations. I am delighted that you could make it. Getting here wasn't easy, I know, in fact it was tougher than you perhaps realise. This is a very special group of people come together to celebrate Susan and John's Wedding and each of you is more special than you may think.

For instance – for any of us to be here now, trillions of atoms had to assemble in a curiously obliging manner – to create you – just this once. For the years they are together, they will obligingly co-operate to keep you intact and able to experience the agreeable, but hugely under-appreciated state known as existence.

Why atoms do this is a bit of a puzzle. It is not a gratifying experience at an atomic level – for all their devoted attention atoms don't care about you or even know you are there – or that they are there. They are mindless particles – not even alive. If you were to pick yourself apart with tweezers you would end up with a pile of fine atomic dust – all of which had once been you and which, somehow, for the period of your existence combine with a single impulse – to keep you as you.

But rejoice that this has happened at all. Generally, looking at the whole universe, this is a rare occurrence. Atoms do not usually flock together congenially to form living things. The atoms on Earth are the same as anywhere else in the universe – carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, oxygen a dash of calcium, a little sulphur – and a few other elements is all that is needed to make up you – the only thing that is special about the atoms that make you – is that they make you – this is the miracle of life.

Survival is a tricky business, too. Of all the species that have ever existed, 99%, are estimated to be extinct; any one species tends to last about 4 million years; however life always carries on; at some stage in your past you have floated in the sea, had fins, a jaunty sail, a forked tongue, a tail, fur, lived underground and then up in trees; the tiniest slip and you might not have been you at all. You have been on the winning team for millions of years. You have miraculously clung to a favoured evolutionary line in your personal ancestry. Since life began, every one of your ancestors has been attractive enough to find a mate, and healthy enough to reproduce; none of your ancestors have been squashed, eaten; drowned, starved, or fatally wounded before finding the right partner and passing on that tiny charge of life that ended up being you.

However, atoms are fickle; a long human lifetime amounts to 650,000 hours and for some reason, at the end of this time, they silently disassemble, close you down and go off to be something else; once again joining the great river of life which flows down the millennia on Earth. This is something so very special to be part of.

This is all by way of saying how wonderful it is to be here with you all and to be part of the continuing life of Susan and John.

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Jun 2006
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Since the 1980s, many Humanists have celebrated World Humanism Day yesterday, the 21st June, but since Humanists, in general, are independent thinkers, it's not surprising that some have questioned the need to have a special day. However, it's a good excuse for me to talk about World Humanism.

[The International Humanist & Ethical Union](#), based in London, was founded in Amsterdam in 1952 as an umbrella organisation for Humanist, atheist, rationalist, secularist, freethought and similar organisations worldwide. There are hundreds of Humanist groups in many countries, all committed to raising awareness of a human-centred scientific outlook and to challenging dogmatic religious claims, cultivating the use of critical intelligence, developing ethical values appropriate to our human condition and encouraging the ideals of tolerance and dissent, and of resolving differences rationally.

Humanist organisations are involved with a diverse range of activities, including defending democracy, protecting civil rights, providing sheltered housing for the elderly and helping the victims of religious and sexual intolerance and persecution. In countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands, hundreds of Humanist moral educators and counsellors are employed in schools, hospitals, prisons and the armed forces, as a non-religious alternative to a religious chaplaincy. In Asia, Humanists work for women's emancipation and the eradication of superstition, while in Canada and Europe, they've fought for contraception and abortion rights. In Norway, and here the UK, we offer non-religious rites of passage (naming ceremonies, weddings and funerals) as a service, not just for the Humanist community, but for anyone who lives without religion. Around the world, Humanist groups fight for the separation of religion and state, promote a scientific, naturalistic world view, and fight for human rights – we've been strongly committed to the ideals of the UN since its inception, and Humanist values form the philosophical basis of human rights as formulated in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).

Organised Humanism is necessary to promote and preserve what many in this country assume is the norm, but which is denied to millions; the freedom to think, express ourselves and act independently while aiming for social justice, fundamental rights and the rule of

civilised law. We don't proselytise, but we're doing our best to change the world.

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Jun 2006
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Creationism - the belief that the biblical story of creation is scientific fact - is beginning to make inroads into the science curricula of UK universities, The Times Higher can reveal.

Leeds University plans to incorporate one or two compulsory lectures on creationism and intelligent design into its second-year course for zoology and genetics undergraduates next Christmas.

At Leicester University, academics already devote part of a lecture for third-year genetics undergraduates to creationism and intelligent design.

Link: [Education news & jobs at the Times Higher Education Supplement](#)

In Leeds, staff claim they're responding to 'student feedback'. Apparently,

...lecturers intend to present the controversial theories as fallacies irreconcilable with scientific evidence.

So that's all right then.

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Jun 2006
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It's good to hear that my 'Thoughts for the Day' are appreciated. I get feedback from Radio Suffolk listeners and from people I meet in the street, and yesterday I heard from someone who'd found the scripts here, on our website.

She wrote,

Just wanted to say that I've spent a very enjoyable evening reading the transcripts of some of your radio Suffolk thought for the days. Haven't done the washing up as a result but never mind.

Began looking at humanist sites tonight because my eight year old daughter has been under pressure from school friends recently to say that she believes in God, angels and fairies. She has no problem with the fairies but is not convinced by the rest. The little bit of humanist reading I've done tonight has given me some ideas for ways of supporting her.

Thanks for an interesting and though provoking evening.

Glad she liked them.

Read [Thoughts for the Day](#).

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Jul 2006
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That's what his attitude to collective worship in schools amounts to. [We wondered whether he'd be a better Education Secretary](#) than Ruth Kelly – that is, whether he'd be less inclined to promote faith schools and religion in general – but no, he won't.

[The National Secular Society](#) reports that Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood wrote to Mr Johnson, having heard that faith leaders were pressing him to enforce collective worship more vigorously. Mr Johnson wrote back that collective worship provides an opportunity for pupils to "worship God". NSS Newline (7/7/06) reports,

In a letter to the National Secular Society, Mr Johnson makes clear that he has no intention of addressing the question of legally enforced worship in schools. "Our view remains that there are benefits associated with collective worship in schools", Mr Johnson wrote. "It can provide an opportunity not only to worship God but also to consider spiritual and moral issues and to explore their own beliefs. Collective worship can also help to develop community spirit, promote a common ethos and shared values and reinforce positive attitudes,"

Alan Johnson, and all the faith leaders who are so keen to enforce the law on collective worship, fail to see that you cannot force anyone to 'worship', or to believe, or to be religious. However, they may be doing us a favour. The evidence suggests that British school children are being put off religion for life by enforced religious assemblies.



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Jul 2006
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I turned on the TV to see the Regent's park commemoration of the 7/7 victims, expecting the usual irrelevant religious ceremony, and was pleasantly surprised to see that it was a secular occasion, created by the families and friends of those who'd died, where political leaders and royalty took second place to the bereaved.

So why did the BBC insist on referring to it as a 'service' in all their bulletins and reports? The Oxford Dictionary defines a 'service' in this context as 'a ceremony of religious worship according to a prescribed form', which this most definitely was not.

It was refreshing to see that the people involved had found a new, more honest way to mark the deaths of so many people with poetry and music, some written especially. What a pity they had to use an old term to describe it. It was a ceremony, or a commemoration, not a 'service'. I emailed the BBC about this. It may seem pedantic, but this was one public occasion that religious leaders didn't take over with the usual maudlin irrelevancies, and the BBC appeared at a loss to describe it.

If you've got broadband, you can watch [the BBC News on 7 July](#).

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Jul 2006
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US website 'God Hates Shrimp' challenges Christians who quote the Bible to justify their homophobia to consider all the other things the Bible says we ought to abominate, including shrimps. Leviticus 11: 9-12 is quite clear about this.

Shrimp, crab, lobster, clams, mussels, all these are an abomination before the Lord, just as gays are an abomination. Why stop at protesting gay marriage? Bring all of God's law unto the heathens and the sodomites. We call upon all Christians to join the crusade against Long John Silver's and Red Lobster. Yea, even Popeye's shall be cleansed. The name of Bubba shall be anathema. We must stop the unbelievers from destroying the sanctity of our restaurants.

Link: [God Hates Shrimp](#)

My thanks to the secular Humanist monthly magazine [The Freethinker](#) for bringing this to my attention. I love shrimps. Yet another reason to be a heathen.

Long John Silver's, Red Lobster and Popeye's are all US seafood restaurants. Christians ought to boycott them, if they take the Bible literally.

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Jul 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or [listen again](#) the same day.

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Jul 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or [listen again](#) the same day.

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Jul 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

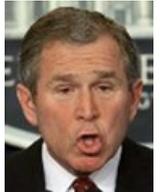
Sorry, cancelled due to illness. Watch this space for future T4TDs.

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Jul 2006
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The Norwegian Humanist Association has taken the lead in protesting the rapid fall of the United States of America from a defender of Human liberties to one that is threatening them. The following powerful statement issued by the current and all the former Secretary Generals of the Norwegian Humanist Association has been printed in the Aftenposten in Norwegian.

Link: [USA – A Civilisation in Decline | International Humanist and Ethical Union](#)

[The Norwegians](#) refer to the Guantanamo base on Cuba, the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and the Baghram-base in Afghanistan. Most right-thinking people would say that the American Government led by George W Bush has absolutely no moral authority. In [the current Middle East crisis](#), the Americans could have used their considerable influence to persuade Israel that its military response to provocation by Hezbollah is disproportionate, and is having the greatest effect on Lebanese civilians. And what is George Bush's opinion? Not realising his microphone was on, he was overheard telling Tony Blair (at the G8 summit), "What they need to do is get Syria to get Hezbollah to stop doing this s**t."



Before anyone accuses me of being "anti-American", would like to point out that many Americans are deeply critical of [George Bush's agenda](#), and the damage he is doing to the US's international reputation.

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Jul 2006
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Think before you enjoy it. The near-record temperatures expected today are a sign of things to come, and will become commoner and hotter in future years as man-made global warming takes hold, scientists predict.

Link: [Independent Online Edition > Environment](#)

The planet appears to be cooking as a result of human activity. If it's hot here, imagine how hot it will be in sub-Saharan Africa in the next few decades. Elsewhere, rising sea levels will flood large areas of land, including [coastal areas and the Fens of East Anglia](#). Millions of people will be displaced through drought and flooding.



What are *you* doing to save the planet?

Save energy at home with low energy light bulbs – you can [buy them online for 99p](#) each. Avoid all those cheap gas and electricity offers – they'll probably put the prices up soon after you switch – and buy from the companies that do the least environmental damage. [Good Energy's](#) electricity is the most environmentally-friendly – it comes from wind power. There's no such thing as totally environmentally-friendly gas, but you can buy through [the RSPB scheme that aims to put something back into the environment](#). To save the most money while saving the planet, turn your thermostat down and wear more jumpers indoors when the weather's cold.

Save energy while shopping. Check the [Good Shopping Guide](#) for a company's environmental credentials before you buy. Think about [food miles](#) – avoid out of season imported fruit and vegetables that have been produced using huge amounts of scarce water in their country of origin, then flown here. Some imported products (like tea, coffee, and chocolate) that can't be produced in the UK, should only be bought from [Fair Trade](#) suppliers – all the supermarkets stock Fair Trade produce now.

[Save energy while travelling](#). Use your car less, avoid flying (the proliferation of [cheap flights](#) is having a serious effect on air pollution), use public transport, walk and cycle more often.

[The Kyoto Protocol](#) has failed to make much difference, mainly thanks to the American Government's refusal to co-operate, but it's still important to keep up the pressure on politicians. But being a Humanist means being accountable for your behaviour – for the effect it has on other people and on the planet – so do what you can. It may not seem much, but if everyone did their bit, it could make a huge difference.

How far will you go to save the planet? [Your answers in a forum discussion](#) please.

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How can you choose an appropriate funeral, and someone to conduct it? There's an increasing choice of funeral styles, but also more confusion. Many still choose traditional Christian funerals, with familiar hymns and so on, but this isn't appropriate for a significant proportion of the population. Various surveys indicate that only a minority attend church regularly and that few are interested in organised religion. [Many young people aren't religious](#), while many older people have developed unconventional personal religious beliefs. Many say that they're 'Christian', but what they mean by that varies. Of those who say that they don't believe in God, some will say they believe in an afterlife. Because of these changing attitudes and beliefs, many are choosing funerals that are more personal, with modern music and family tributes, but with one or two familiar hymns and maybe a prayer as well. So now there are traditional church funerals with the traditional liturgy (a prescribed form of worship), non-conformist Christian funerals, religious funerals in the manner of a minority faith, unconventional semi-religious funerals, and non-religious funerals. Humanist funerals fall into the latter category, but to add to the confusion, there's more than one type of Humanist Celebrant. In the 19th century, the only people who were likely to be given secular Humanist funerals were atheist members of the labour movement and of the ethical societies, which sought social change without religion. [The British Humanist Association](#) was founded in the mid-20th century and its members were given Humanist funerals. They set up a ceremonies sub-committee in 1978, but until 1991, atheists and agnostics in Suffolk and N E Essex were unlikely to be given a Humanist funeral unless they did it themselves. When I started conducting funerals, I was the only secular celebrant in the area. Over the next few years, I covered most of Suffolk and Essex, as far south as Chelmsford, on my own. One of my first clients became a celebrant, concentrating on weddings and baby-namings. The Suffolk Humanist group was founded in 1991 and began to raise awareness of Humanism in the local community. Meanwhile, the BHA ceremonies network was being run by a volunteer. As demand increased, it was decided that a more formal structure was needed, a training and accreditation scheme was introduced, and eventually a staff post was created. The two of us who were already providing ceremonies in Suffolk were awarded accreditation on the strength of our reputation. I, in turn, contributed to the training of other celebrants, acting as their mentor. We expected trainees to join our group and to work as a team, but in other areas, BHA celebrants worked independently of any group, though there were regional meetings a couple of times a year. 'Accreditation' means to be officially authorised to do something - in other words, with the approval of the parent body. BHA accreditation should ensure competence, high standards and adherence to a code of conduct. As far as the local funeral directors were concerned, we already provided high quality ceremonies. We'd built up a strong reputation and they were getting lots of positive feedback. The BHA Ceremonies Network has had problems and over the last five years or so, many of its most experienced celebrants have resigned. Until last year, the BHA failed to acknowledge this, or to address the reasons for it. At the 2005 BHA AGM, a motion was overwhelmingly carried that directed the BHA to investigate the drain of experienced celebrants and to find a way to rebuild the network. A Ceremonies Working Party was set up, consisting of three people. They produced their report earlier this year, and it will be considered at a special meeting of the BHA in September. Some of us will be there. BHA ceremonies have only been available to a small proportion of the population, as there are still only a small number of celebrants. We know that demand for non-traditional funerals will continue to increase, because of the demographic evidence. More and more people are keen to fill the gap in the market. An offshoot of the registrars' service, known as [The Institute of Civil Funerals](#), has been training celebrants to conduct funerals. Their website says that they offer "a funeral which is driven by the wishes, beliefs and values of the deceased and their family, not by the belief or ideology of the person conducting the funeral." They will include some religion, such as a hymn, though we understand that they have guidelines about how much religion they should include, so that they shouldn't be accused of trying to do the clergy's job. There are peripatetic "ministers", whose credentials are sometimes a bit vague, who go around doing funerals for anybody, anyhow. There are independent celebrants who're either former BHA celebrants, or who started from scratch; some of them will do what we call "pick 'n mix" ceremonies, with a bit of religion thrown in. So how can you choose a celebrant? If you want a non-traditional funeral with a hymn or two, your funeral director should be able to advise you. If you want an entirely non-religious funeral, you can choose a BHA or ICF celebrant, or one of us, or you can do it yourself - the BHA's book, "[Funerals without God](#)", provides useful guidelines. How do you know if the celebrant is any good? There is no nationally recognised qualification or standard. Funerals are not a legal requirement, so it's unlikely there will be, at least in the short-term. Word of mouth recommendation can be a good guide, though some small funeral firms can be a bit lazy about referrals - they tend to direct most of their clients to a few favoured ministers, or just leave them to do their own research. Since the problems with the BHA network began, some celebrants have joined The Association of Humanist Celebrants - the Suffolk team keeps in touch with them. However, the AHC isn't a formal organisation but a loose network, without a constitution or accreditation scheme. Membership of the AHC doesn't signify anything, as far as the client is concerned. Confusing, isn't it? However, if you're in Suffolk or N E Essex, we can make things simple for you. Our small team is supported by the Suffolk Humanist group. We train people through an apprenticeship, after they've joined the group and we're all happy that they're reliable, trustworthy, and have all the right qualities. We have very high standards. In fact, we have an unblemished record for quality. One senior funeral director who's known me a long time says that the feedback he's had from clients about our service has been overwhelmingly positive. [You can read about us](#) on a separate page of this website and we're always happy to answer any questions. We do what we do because we care about people and about promoting Humanism, though we never proselytise. We don't do it to make money, and we gain great satisfaction from the thousands of unsolicited testimonials we've had from grateful clients. The funeral directors' professional bodies are: [The National Society of Allied & Independent Funeral Directors](#) [The National Association of Funeral Directors](#)

Crematorium

Cemetery

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Jul 2006
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If we can't thank God, who do we thank? Ronald Aronson, Distinguished Professor of Humanities at Wayne State University, writes in [The Philosophers' Magazine](#) about gratitude in a Godless age.

Living without God today means facing life and death as no generation before us has done. It entails giving meaning to our lives not only in the absence of a supreme being, but now without the forces and trends that gave hope to the past several generations of secularists. We who live after progress, after Marxism, and after the Holocaust have stopped believing that the world is being transformed by reason and democracy. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the modern faith that human life is heading in a positive direction has been undone, giving way to the earlier religious faith it replaced, or to no faith at all. Alone as never before, in a universe scientifically better understood than ever, we find little in its almost-infinite vastness to guide us towards what our lives mean and how we should live them.

Link: [TPM Online Article](#)

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Jul 2006
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I know a small boy called Tom. He sees the world through exciting rose-coloured spectacles. He must get grumpy, but I never see him then. He quite likes my dog, but what he likes better is fiddling with her harness, and the little light that we use when we go walking after dark. Tom likes to switch it on and off, on and off.

The other day, while out walking my dog with my mobility scooter, I saw Tom with his mum and dad, peddling towards me in his peddle-car. "Hello Margaret!" he called, cheerily. His mum and dad had to break into a trot to catch him up as he sped towards me, beaming. It's nice when someone's pleased to see you. Of course, what Tom really wanted was to inspect my scooter. "Turn on the lights," he instructed. I did. I made the warning lights flash, and he liked that. Then he got out of his car and walked round the back. "Do the back ones," he said. So I did. We'd have been there a lot longer, if his mum hadn't said it was time to go.



My encounter with Tom reminded me of something that the Belgian author Georges Simenon wrote in his autobiography. Simenon is most famous for his Maigret detective stories.

'My son Pierre, at thirteen months, amazes me by his capacity for wonder... A hundred times a day he points to a picture, a flower, a piece of furniture, the design on a carpet, a bedspread, and, as if in ecstasy, gives an "Oh - !" of delight. Everything is beautiful. Everything is a source of pleasure.'

Everything's exciting when you're very young. At least it is when you're fortunate enough to be a child in a happy home, with nothing to fear.

But can you imagine a child like this being harmed? Can you imagine a child like Tom being terrified by bombs and seeing people killed? Can you imagine children like this being starved, or deprived of medical treatment that could save their lives? The children who are experiencing these terrible things are no less loved than Tom, or than Pierre was.

Babies are just babies. Children are just children. None of them asked to be born. They're not on one side or the other in a conflict; they're in the middle.

This was a 'Thought for the Day' on BBC Radio Suffolk. On the way home from the radio station, I heard the news about [the bombing of Qana](#), killing at least forty people, half of them children.

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Jul 2006
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A week into one of the most severe crises the Middle East has seen in years, Israel is getting an influx of support from an unusual source. More than 3,400 evangelical Christians have arrived in Washington to lobby lawmakers as part of the first annual summit of Christians United for Israel.

Link: [BBC NEWS | World | Americas | Evangelical Christians plead for Israel](#)

The pastor of the 18,000-member Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, is John Hagee, "a long-time fervent supporter of Israel."

In common with many American evangelicals, he believes that God gave the land to the Jewish people and that Christians have a Biblical duty to support it and the Jews. His latest book, *Jerusalem Countdown: A Warning to the World*, interprets the Bible to predict that Russian and Arab armies will invade Israel and be destroyed by God. This will set up a confrontation over Israel between China and the West, led by the anti-Christ, who will be the head of the European Union, Pastor Hagee writes. That final battle between East and West - at Armageddon, an actual place in Israel - will precipitate the second coming of Christ, he concludes.

In a BBC TV interview, Pastor Hagee said that after a nuclear war, God will remake the earth like the Garden of Eden. Only for true believers in 'End Time' theology, of course. The rest of us will have gone to hell.

If you have broadband and Real Player or Windows Media Player, you can [watch a video](#) about this.

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Aug 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Peter will talk to us about his human rights work. We'll be in the hexagonal room at the Friends' Meeting House, Colchester. Friends and other guests welcome. We'll be going for a restaurant meal before the meeting. If you'd like to join us, please email us.

Peter Tatchell

Further info: www.petertatchell.net

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/2242bj>

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Aug 2006
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The doctrine of tolerance and, foremost, respecting cultural and religious diversity cannot easily cope with those who claim the right to intolerance, especially within the same society.

Link: [IHS :: HNN :: Entrapped by Tolerance: Humanism in the Netherlands](#)

Dr Floris van den Berg, a philosopher at Utrecht University, the Netherlands, is a member of the Dutch Freethought Association. He argues that Dutch Humanists have got into a muddle about multiculturalism. He says,

Dutch organised humanism has lost its orientation by taking the path of multiculturalism and thereby forgetting the essence of humanism: the freedom of the individual - not the group.

His article is relevant to our concerns about secular education, amongst other things.

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Aug 2006
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Frightened for your life in these days of madness? It's not about religion, stupid. It's about foreign policy, and silly us for thinking any different. So let's have a look at the unique feelings of those young Muslim men who are so deeply affected by international politics and certainly not religion - no, no, goodness me no - and examine those gaping differences between us. We can use the martyrdom tape of July 7, 2005, as a guide to why we're on such opposing sides and take it from there.

It seems that these suicide bombers are really, really different from us non-Muslims because they're against the war in Iraq and we aren't. But didn't one million people demonstrate against the war, hasn't the media pounded the government constantly ever since about the terrible error, and have you ever spoken to anyone recently who thinks it was a jolly good idea and it's all going terribly well? So no real difference of views there. So far the suicide bomber and the majority of British infidels are pretty much in agreement.

Link: [We all hate this murderous foreign policy, so what makes a suicide bomber? - \[Sunday Herald\]](#)

Muriel has a go at the excuses given for the behaviour of young Muslim men who become suicide bombers. It's not about foreign policy, it's about religion, she says.

Thanks to the [National Secular Society's Newslines](#) for drawing this to our attention.

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Aug 2006
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The other week I read [a newspaper article by Euan Ferguson](#) in which he wrote of his experience of a freak storm on a public holiday in Budapest, when flash floods overwhelmed a crowd that had taken shelter under the Elizabeth Bridge.

Ferguson wrote that most people reacted by helping each other, passing small children and the infirm to safety out of the rising floodwaters. Others, however, behaved differently; they "... pushed forward, pushed everyone out of the way; stamped and splashed and elbowed and forced their way to higher, drier ground." Why do some people behave like this, Ferguson wondered, while others don't? Is it down to their upbringing, he asked, or is it just the way they're made?

We can teach our children good manners and encourage them to be considerate, of course, but what about those whose parents haven't set a good example, yet turn out OK in spite of it? The former President of the British Humanist Association, Claire Rayner, wrote about her abusive, neglectful parents in her autobiography. She's devoted her life to helping other people, as a nurse, as an agony aunt, and as a campaigner. Where did her altruism come from? I think Claire has said that it's a natural human quality. I remember her talking about people who only do the right thing because they're told to, either by their parents or some authority figure, or their God. That's not altruism, of course. That's what some people do for fear of punishment for not doing it.

But if altruism is a natural human quality, why doesn't everyone have it? I wonder if it isn't simply that some people are deficient in some way – they're born that way. It's like those sad, self-destructive people who seem incapable of avoiding trouble in the form of drink and drugs. I've known some lovely people who've been at a loss to understand why someone they've loved has destroyed his or her life, despite all the support, love and care they've lavished on him or her. It's as though a self-preservation gene was missing. Similarly, many people seem incapable of understanding how their selfishness affects others.

Perhaps a psychologist could explain it. The important thing, however, is to remember that there are many, many people – a majority, I'd say – who do care, and who respond positively in a crisis. After all, it's in our own interests to do the right thing. One day, any of us might need help.

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Sep 2006
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Be afraid... be very afraid.

If you can't see the video above, see [the film website](#).

According to an interviewee in this trailer, there are two kinds of people in the world... people who love Jesus, and people who don't. The co-ordinators of the 'Kids on Fire' evangelical summer camp, who insist that "we have the truth", want to see Christian children as radicalised as the Muslim children with grenades strapped to their bodies - assuming that all children are, or should be, radicalised in the first place. There is no third way mentioned – presumably the atheists and Humanists of this world fit in to the category of people who don't love Jesus, and therefore are considered enemies, their children lost. The children in this film are described as born again, one boy saying he was 'saved' at the age of five. Apparently it's never too early to start saving souls.

You can anticipate the reaction to a film like this before it has even hit the cinemas – most reactions being formed without people even having seen the film (and, no, I haven't). Radical Christians may believe that their words have been misinterpreted, taken out of context or distorted, to suit the ends of the film makers (though the film has mostly been described as a balanced portrayal). Less 'extreme' Christians may claim that these loonies have nothing to do with them, and that the themes of the film don't apply to their own faith. Atheists and Humanists may describe this film as a worrying spectacle of young children being manipulated and indoctrinated by neo-

conservative zealots who are no less of a worry than radical Imams.

This all serves as a reminder that religion just isn't as simple as wearing a badge, any more than declaring yourself an atheist, Humanist or anything else provides a precise breakdown of your own personal credo. We really are all atheists – when it comes to other religions, or other interpretations of religion, faith, personal spirituality, whatever you want to call it. Mel Gibson and Tom Cruise have both fallen from favour with the movie-going public for being too assertive with their respective beliefs, the common reaction being along the lines of 'entertain me, just don't talk about your religion, it makes me uncomfortable'.

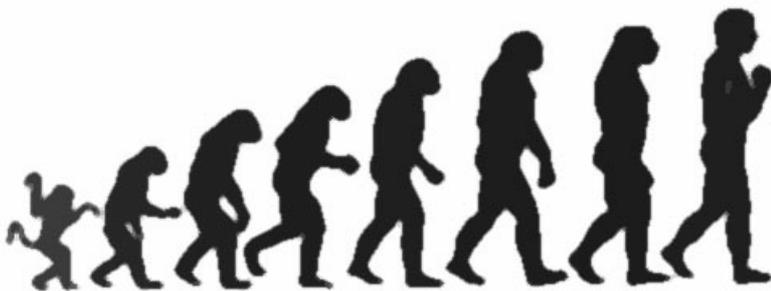
In many workplaces, even in social circles, conversations about religion are taboo – no-one can open their mouth without offending someone, and Muslims, Hindus, Christians and everyone else demand that their religion be treated respectfully, lest their human rights be violated. I don't think that my atheism earns me any special treatment, and I don't expect to have to extend any to anyone else, regardless of their religion. Being asked to lay off criticising religious people has always felt to me like being asked not to mock the afflicted. If you have a faith, you should be prepared to defend it.



Jesus Camp appears to demonstrate that the US has no less of a crisis of identity on its hands than Islam – well-organised radicalism against liberalism. Rational people don't have the luxury of being able to say that we're all stuck in the middle while this schizophrenic wrangling plays itself out around us.

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Sep 2006

Religious critics of evolution have trained their sights on one of the world's pre-eminent fossil exhibits -- Louis and Richard Leakey's extensive skeletal collections illuminating the origins of man. Evangelical Christians in Kenya are demanding that the exhibit at Nairobi's National Museum edit out references to human evolution in order to prevent young African Christians from being taught falsehoods.



Link: [Wired News: Evolution Attack Goes Global](#)

Falsehoods?

Like the evangelical Christians of America, Bishop Boniface Adoyo, chairman of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, says evolution is "still a theory".

Maybe [The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster](#) should do some missionary work in Africa. If evolution's still a theory, the good people of Kenya might be ready to hear the Good News about His Noodlyness, just as the people of Kansas haven't – but we're working on it.

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Sep 2006

By email:

'I am currently having my will updated (in Suffolk) and mention that I want a Humanist celebrant for my funeral. In the draft the solicitors have written that I want a "humorous celebrant". Can it be true!!!'

We aim to please, but can't guarantee any laughs. 😊

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Sep 2006

1930s school assembly

From Martin Henderson, North Yorkshire Humanists Campaign Group:

There have been some developments recently on enforced religious worship in schools, as required by the 1998 School Standards and Framework Act. This has been highlighted by the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee advice to the government in relation to ECHR Section 9. The government seem poised to largely ignore this advice in order to preserve the status quo. [See the BHA submission on their website.](#)

A concerted lobbying campaign may assist in raising the issues in the media, alerting our elected government representatives to discontent with the present situation, and raising the profile of the BHA and other secular groups. We would ask members sympathetic to this campaign to take one or more of the following actions:

- Write to their MPs, who can be found via [Secularists UK](#).
- Contact members of the Education Department, such as Education Secretary Alan Johnson, Lord Adonis and Schools Minister Jim Knight, and [the Department of Education and Skills](#).
- Write to local and national newspapers.
- Write or e-mail other media, such as [the BBC](#).

We ask members to compose their own letters, as this will deter the recipients from sending a standard response, but try and include some of the following points.

- Schools should be able to adopt their own policies regarding whether or not they hold acts of worship.
- All children of an age at which they can be deemed capable of making informed choice should be able to absent themselves (regardless of their parents' wishes) from acts of collective worship and/or religious education.
- Religion should be taught in a factual manner, which should include non religious life stances, and none should be given preference.

In addition, keep your eyes and ears open, and be prepared to respond to actions which would oppose the BHA proposals.

We appreciate that MPs can take some time to reply (if they do at all), but hope that if they are contacted in the next week or two it may concentrate their minds.

If any participants wish to send any feedback to us, we will collate it and circulate results in due course.

To respond to this message, [contact us](#) and we'll forward your message to Martin.

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Sep 2006

Both Joseph Ratzinger and the Islamists calling for his decapitation believe they have direct access to an invisible supernatural being called "God". Both believe this God wills them to make decisions that have led to the horrific deaths of tens of thousands of people. Both believe this God finds secular democratic Europe disgusting, an atheistic bog dominated by a "culture of death." Both hate feminism and gay rights and sexual freedom. Both believe they are infallible, and that the billions who refuse to follow them are incurring the wrath of the Creator of the Universe. The only real difference is the name they give to this creature, and a few added textual tweaks on either side.



Link: [Johann Hari article](#)

As Hari points out, the Pope and those Muslims who've been offended by his quotation from some 14th century text have a lot in common.

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Sep 2006

In *The God Delusion*, the scientist Richard Dawkins sets out to attack God "in all his forms". He argues that the rise of religious fundamentalism is dividing people around the world, while the dispute between "intelligent design" and Darwinism "is seriously undermining and restricting the teaching of science".

Link: [BBC NEWS | Programmes | Newsnight Home | The God Delusion](#)

See [a forum discussion](#) about the book on this site.

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Sep 2006
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A Suffolk Humanists member who's not on the Internet contacts me the old-fashioned way – by letter. His latest went as follows:

Identity Crisis

I chanced upon the word 'godless' in a dictionary, which gave three definitions:

1. 'Refusing to acknowledge God'. I recognise myself. No problem.
2. 'Lacking a God'. If I have already stated my belief that God does not exist (see above), how can I be lacking one?
3. 'Wicked or unprincipled'. Really? How? When? Where? Why?

Perhaps this is a revelation to see ourselves as others see us.

Derek

Derek's letter reminded me of a Thought for the Day I did on BBC Radio Suffolk in May 1998, called 'Offending the Godless':

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names may never hurt me.' Except they do. Scant regard is paid to the possibility of causing offence to people who have no religious beliefs, while the sensibilities of religious people are generally protected.

A few years ago, the TV, radio and press news had been full of reports about rioting and hooliganism in urban areas. Our parish magazine contained an article by one of the local ministers, blaming the lawlessness and violence on 'godlessness' in society. I was so annoyed that when I met him outside the Post Office I demanded to know why he imagined all godless people were hooligans, because, as a godless person, it had never occurred to me that I should be out there creating mayhem with the rest. He could see I was a bit cross and apologised, saying he hadn't realised the significance of what he'd written. Quite.

In the 4th century BCE the Greek philosopher Protagoras taught that 'man is the measure of all things.' In other words, that human values are formed by reason and experience. He, and many other thinkers who formed the humanist tradition, believed that we can be good without a God or gods, that we can be moral without religion. It's silly to suggest otherwise. It's silly to suggest that everyone who lives without religion is a bad person. Non-believers used to be subjected to sticks and stones, were sometimes killed, for their failure to conform to the religious orthodoxy of their time. In some parts of the world they still are. Many prejudiced people are ready to judge their fellows not by how they behave, but by what they say they do or don't believe.

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Sep 2006
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An organisation called Truth in Science has ... sent resource packs to all UK secondary school science departments. It promotes the idea of intelligent design - that there was an intelligence behind the creation of the universe. Humanists and a Christian think tank want the government to tell teachers to keep "a wholly scientific perspective".

Link: [BBC NEWS | Education | New challenge over school science](#)

They're persistent, these 'Intelligent Design' nuts, but wouldn't know the truth if they fell over it.

Related link - [We're all monkeys](#)

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Oct 2006
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Through [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#), I've been invited to lead a 20 minute school assembly, followed by a 40 minute class. I've done school assemblies before (though not often), but this one will be a first because it'll be in a primary school. It's not a church primary school – that would be unusual – but a county primary school. I'll be talking to children from years 1 to 5, that's from 5 to 11 years of age.



Until now, the youngest children I've been allowed to talk to were in a county middle school, aged 12. I shared a session with an evangelical Christian who told them, among other things, that death is a punishment for sin. If I'd been the parent of a child at that school and had learned about this, I'd have been as mad as hell. Some of the children seemed fascinated by death, asking what I thought happened to us when we died, and by the possibility of life on other planets.

I'll be preparing by looking at [Dr Mike Newby's guide to the use of story in spiritual and moral development](#), the [BHA's Humanist Perspectives](#) for primary school teachers, and other resources. I'll also be very interested to hear what our member Yvonne Peacock (experienced in parenting and play) says about [introducing children to Humanism](#) at our next meeting.

If you have any experience of primary school assemblies, god-free or religious, good or bad, feel free to sign up as a user (if you haven't already), and let us know.

Perhaps ought to add that I used to teach (at secondary school level), and have been visiting schools as a Humanist speaker for years.

Related link: [Inter-Faith & Us](#)

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Oct 2006
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E-mail:
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Suffolk Humanist and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource tutor Margaret Nelson will contribute to a SIFRE Forum of Faiths on Death & Dying. Lecture Theatre 2, Suffolk College, Rope Walk, Ipswich.

Map link:
tinyurl.com/gxolz

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Oct 2006
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How often do you challenge the rambling street preachers, the noisy ones who spend their days shouting threats of damnation at passers-by, or waving pamphlets around?

A gentleman at Brixton Tube station offers everyone eternal salvation as an alternative to the Victoria Line in the mornings. I haven't asked him if I can still change for the Circle Line. A few years ago, a particularly unpleasant bunch of street preachers in Leeds declared that all passing shoppers were going to burn in hell, the women also being whores and jezabels. Some people understandably took exception to this and tried to embed small change in their crania at close range.



Throwing money is obviously not the way to go for most people – unless you really like what someone is saying, in which case you do it gently, with an underarm throw.

Reproduced here with permission of the author, a good example of taking on a street preacher with one of the best weapons at our disposal, humour:

I like to be offensive to the religious. They love it really.

Today at lunchtime one particular part of the Nutter Brigades was out in London, leafleting under a huge banner in the name of 'Tradition, Family and Property' (Property? Surely Bigotry and/or Homophobia should come next?)

Actually a quick bit of googling just now reveals that to be close to the mark. Tradition, Family, Property are, in the words of the Vatican "A right-wing Catholic group close to the late schismatic Bishop Marcel Lefebvre known as Tradition, Family, and Property (TFP). The group, founded in Brazil by the late Plinio Correa de Oliveira, a wealthy developer, promotes a harshly anti-Communist message using Fatima's messages as a support to their views".

So if even the Vatican thinks that you are right wing headcases, you must be $\frac{1}{4}$ bernutters of the highest order.

Anyway their leaflet was about 'Our Lady of Fatima' and was offering copies of a DVD called 'Fatima, Past or Future'.

Sensing an opportunity here, I closed in for a cheap gag. That's the sort of guy I am:

"Hello!"

(Nutter looks worried, usual response is blank faces)

"Hello, thanks for the leaflet"

(Nutter looks relieved but still wary)

"Thank you"

(I start the setup)

"I really like what you are doing, I don't think we think enough about Fatima these days"

(Nutter beams and positively gushes the next bit)

"That's brilliant, it's important to keep this message alive!"

(That's far enough Nutter, I've still got to buy my lunch, time for the cheap payoff)

"Me too. Mind you, I always preferred Tessa Sanderson myself."

Thankyew, I'll be here all week etc, etc.

Of course that lazy gag presumes you have a working knowledge of British female field athletes of the 1980s.

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Oct 2006

[Muriel Gray wrote in the Sunday Herald](#) about Home Secretary John Reid's recent warning to Muslims to look out for signs that their children were being 'radicalised',

"... and should they come home with bags of fertiliser and detonators, they might have a bit of a word with them."

How 'fundamental' do your beliefs have to be to represent a danger to society? As Muriel points out, 'fundamentalism' is an accepted part of British life, as long as we encourage faith schools and avoid discouraging the isolation of minority communities who try to keep their children from being influenced by modern secular, liberal values. She wrote that in many Muslim homes, children,

"...have been brought up to genuinely believe that Allah intended women to have a single purpose in life as subservient wives and mothers; gay people are perverts; freedom of speech does not apply to any kind of criticism of their belief; democracy is a man-made sham; and the values of the West are inferior. If the family are devout then TV, cinema, theatre and art will be banned, and the children's lives will resemble the upbringing of 1950s Presbyterian children, with school, prayer and chores being their lot."

Instead of challenging these beliefs and values, we're expected to politely ignore them for fear of causing 'offence', because the muddled-heads who run the country imagine that multi-culturalism's a good thing. School RE lessons must include religions other than Christianity, but the subject is taught completely differently from any other subject. Children learn about what Sikhs, Hindus, Jews and Muslims believe (to name a few), but not *why* they believe what they do, and they're not encouraged to ask if they *should* believe what they do. They learn about religious traditions and festivals, but not about the history of religion. If children learned, for example, that the story of the Christian nativity is more or less the same as other nativity stories in other religions, and that there have been other [Jesuses](#) too, they might be less willing to listen to the old lies. If they learned that the development of the major monotheistic patriarchal world religions supplanted earlier matriarchal religions, for sexist and political reasons, they might be less willing to defer to religious leaders who claim moral authority on behalf of a God. It won't happen, of course, because there's not a lot that RE teachers can do in the short time they have available, even with the greater freedom of a revised syllabus since the new guidelines were introduced. The underlying principle of modern religious education is to encourage tolerance and respect, social cohesion and multiculturalism, no matter how absurd the religious beliefs that children are learning about. Whatever they do, RE teachers mustn't upset anyone by suggesting that all religion is nonsense.

This was first written for [my blog](#).

What do you think? Join in [a forum discussion on 'multiculturalism'](#).

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Oct 2006

The Pope may be about to abolish the notion of limbo, the halfway house between heaven and hell, inhabited by unbaptised infants. Is it really that simple?

Pope Benedict XVI's anticipated pronouncement on limbo will have been informed by the International Theological Commission - a group of leading Roman Catholic theologians who have been meeting to consider the issue.



Link: [BBC NEWS | Magazine | How can limbo just be abolished?](#)

I'm currently reading Richard Dawkins' book 'The God Delusion' and can imagine what he'd have to say about this ridiculous story. You have to wonder how anyone with a modicum of intelligence, Catholic or not, could take this sort of thing seriously. Abolishing limbo means scrapping a concept that's about seven centuries out of date. Before the 13th century every unbaptised person, including infants, went straight to hell, the Catholics said. So why are they raising the subject now? To compete for converts in the developing world with the Muslims, who say that all dead babies go to heaven.

Illustration (c) M Nelson 2006

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Oct 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

A UCL Public Lunch Hour Lecture - so get yourself down to UCL on your lunch break!

Presented by Steve Jones (UCL Biology):

"I wear glasses. My eye lens has become stiff and no longer focuses well. That's life, or a hint of impending death, for in the days of nuts, berries, and sabre-toothed tigers I would have starved or been eaten by now. Evolution cares only about the next generation; I am too old to pass on genes, and my eyesight is hence of no interest to Darwin's machine. I have nobody to blame - but what about advocates of Intelligent Design, the notion that the eye is so complicated that it needed a Designer to do the job? Some wear spectacles. Do they never have doubts about their astral engineer, who could give them a BMW of an organ rather than an Austin Allegro? I will show why theirs is the argument from ignorance, idleness and incuriosity - and why evolution is a far better theory."

Further info: www.ucl.ac.uk/news/events/

Map link: tinyurl.com/kdduj

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Oct 2006
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US-based Institute for Humanist Studies advances human rights, secular ethics and the separation of religion and government through advocacy, innovation and collaboration. IHS also produces the Humanist Network News podcast. US-based Institute for Humanist Studies advances human rights, secular ethics and the separation of religion and government through advocacy, innovation and collaboration. IHS also produces the Humanist Network News podcast.

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Oct 2006
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Click on the 'religious education' link to see more information on the 'Why Atheism' DVD for schools, including ceremonies conducted by SH's Margaret Nelson, and interviews with students from Kesgrave High School.

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Oct 2006
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The map to the right shows where some of our visitors have come from today (click the image to view full size). Hello!

We're also very pleased to have had recent visits from Cambodia, New Zealand, Palau, Israel, Sweden, China, United Arab Emirates, and France.

It's a small world on the Internet – wherever you're visiting from today, thank you, and we hope you found something interesting, and come back soon.

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Oct 2006
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Humanists think we can be good without God. We're atheists or agnostics. There are other words to describe a positive, non-religious approach to life; they include secularist, rationalist and freethinker. I particularly like the last one. Humanists are independent thinkers, so it's sometimes hard to agree. However, there are some things that we do agree about, and one is the notion of an afterlife; we don't think there is one. In fact, I'd be disappointed if I find there is one; I find the idea very unattractive.

We're here to talk about death, dying and disaster. I have some experience of the first two (though not first-hand, obviously) but not of the last.

Since 1991, I've conducted nearly a thousand funeral ceremonies, so I've listened to what other people have thought about death and dying. Sometimes people who've been diagnosed with a terminal illness have asked to see me and shared their thoughts about something that many prefer not to think about. I've been impressed by those whose thoughts were about the effect their death would have on their loved ones, rather than about themselves, and by the way that some retain a sense of humour even when they've been very ill.

I've had to consider my own death because I'm a cancer survivor. I've got so many things wrong with me that I'll be surprised if I make it past my mid-seventies, which is how old my parents were when they died.

So these are my credentials, when it comes to talking about death and dying. I'm talking from personal experience. Humanists don't have a rule book, the equivalent of a holy book for religious people. We don't usually presume to talk on behalf of anyone else, though I do when it comes to asserting our right to live freely in an open secular society, without having other people's beliefs imposed on us.

In a couple of days, I'll sign my new will. The reason so many people die intestate, or without a will, may be because they feel that if they don't acknowledge the prospect of dying, it'll never happen. [Michel de Montaigne](#), a 16th century French philosopher, wrote, "Make room for others, as others have done for you." Once you've accepted your mortality, he said, you're free to make the most of life.

In my will, I specify who'll receive all my worldly goods. [I'm leaving my body to the anatomists](#) at Cambridge University, who'll use it to educate medical students. Not all Humanists donate their whole bodies, but from what I've heard, most carry a donor card.

As I said, we don't expect an afterlife; when you're dead, you're dead, as far as we're concerned, though this doesn't mean that our bodies shouldn't be treated with respect. However, we don't expect any special rituals to be performed when we die. Our families are free to choose how to dispose of our bodies, though they're likely to try to do appropriately. I've heard some old atheists say, "just put me on the tip" or "stick me on the compost heap." Strangely, it is possible to end up in a compost heap; [the Swedes have recently devised a method of freeze-drying bodies](#), which can then be safely used to boost your garden's fertility.

The only people who've been denied a funeral or some other way of marking their deaths, have been criminals, soldiers who've died in battle, or those who've been caught up in some horrible disaster. When someone's body is destroyed, there's nothing to confirm what you might find hard to accept; that they're really dead. These days forensic scientists can do what their predecessors couldn't; they can identify someone from tiny fragments of DNA. There's a fashionable term about needing to find a body, such as that of a murder victim; it's "closure". I'm not convinced there is any such thing, though it is important to know what happened to someone you've lost.

Grief is the consequence of love, when a loved one dies. As I've pointed out many times, if we never loved, we'd never have to grieve for anyone, but what sort of a life would that be?

Death isn't all about doom and gloom. When someone has lived into old age and had a good, useful life, he or she will be missed but without regret or too much sadness. When someone has suffered a painful illness, people will say they're relieved it's all over. As the Roman philosopher poet [Lucretius](#) said of death, "From sense of grief and pain we shall be free; we shall not feel, because we shall not be."

For some, dying is all over in an instant, as it was for my mother. She'd have hated to die like my dad, who took over a year to go. We're fortunate to live in a society with a high standard of public health, healthy food, and amazing medical science, so we mostly expect to live into old age. When someone dies young, people ask why. Was it something he or she did or didn't do? Was it something you could have done? In most cases, there wasn't anything anyone could do. Considering how amazingly complex the human body is, it's not surprising that things sometimes go wrong, and all over the world, the death rates are higher for young men than young women because of their lifestyles and risk-taking; the majority of those killed on the roads are young drivers.

As for disasters; with all the stuff about terrorism in the news these days, you'd be forgiven for feeling apprehensive about finding yourself in the middle of one. The odds are strongly against it. You're far more likely to have an accident at home or on the road than to be killed by a suicide bomber. If you lived in Iraq, it would be different. However, if you were caught up in a disaster, I think most people would help you. That's what's happened on many occasions. My son questioned this when I wrote it; he wonders if people are as unselfish as I suggest. My feeling is that many are wary of getting involved if someone's in difficulties but in a crisis, most people will help. Natural human altruism kicks in, the old "do as you would be done by" response. There'll always be selfish people who climb over everyone else to escape or who won't do anything but whinge, but they're in a minority.

As you've probably guessed, I could talk about these things a lot longer, but I only have seven minutes. I could live a lot longer, but I may only have a few hours – you never know. Because none of us knows how long we've got, we shouldn't postpone doing anything that's really important. Show someone you love them; climb a mountain; write a book. Whatever matters to you, do it. If it doesn't matter, and you don't want to do it, don't do it. As the Roman poet [Horace](#) said, *Carpe Diem*, or seize the day.

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Oct 2006
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Secularisation is not on the retreat in western Europe. Yet it is true that new threats to individual liberties and to the religious neutrality of governments are coming from many (not all) organised religious denominations. National situations are somehow different from one another, but nowhere in Europe is the society going back to the time when a common set of religiously-based beliefs was the one and basic common ground for values and views shared by almost every member of the society itself.

Link: [Organised religion and its threats to a secular liberal state - Activities and Papers - Think Tanks - Members - Liberalism](#)

This paper, presented to [Liberal International](#) last year, warns of the threat to secularism posed by organised religion. The LI authors write,

In the new multireligious society more than ever, the strictest religious neutrality of public institutions, the highest possible degree of separation between government and religions is the only possible recipe to preserve individual rights and the fabric of liberal democracy.

This 'highest degree of separation' isn't possible as long as we have faith schools. Liberal Democrat [Dr Evan Harris MP](#), an Honorary Associate of the [National Secular Society](#), has consistently challenged the existence of faith schools, while the party as a whole has not. The British [Liberal Democrat Party](#) is a member of LI.

[The Labour Party](#) won't get rid of faith schools, so enthusiastically encouraged by T Blair, partly because they fear losing votes over the issue, especially Muslim votes. Maybe we haven't done enough to stir the British electorate out of [its usual apathy](#) and make secular education an issue that at least one of the major parties – the Lib Dems – will support? Personalities rather than politics – when Blair will go and if Brown will take over – have been the focus of attention over the next general election. Maybe it's time we tried to set at least *some* of the agenda?

I feel a letter to my local political parties coming on...

I've looked at [the Green Party's web site](#) for any references to faith schools, and couldn't find any. A lot of their info is annoyingly presented in downloadable PDF files, with very little substance. Could be one of the reasons they don't get many votes.

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Oct 2006
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Since the publication of my first book, *The End of Faith*, I have received thousands of letters and e-mails from religious believers insisting that I am wrong not to believe in God. Invariably, the most unpleasant of these communications have come from Christians. This is ironic, as Christians generally believe that no faith imparts the virtues of love and forgiveness more effectively than their own. Please accept this for what it is: the testimony of a man who is in a position to observe how people behave when their faith is challenged. Many who claim to have been transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism. While you may ascribe this to human nature, it is clear that the hatred these people feel comes directly from the Bible. How do I know this? Because the most deranged of my correspondents always cite chapter and verse.

Link: [Council for Secular Humanism](#)

['The End of Faith' is available from the NSS shop](#) for £7.99 plus P&P.

[In The Observer, Stephanie Merritt wrote,](#)

A radical attack on the most sacred of liberal precepts – the notion of tolerance ... An eminently sensible rallying cry for a more ruthless secularisation of society.

Look out for a review on this site.

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Oct 2006
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The cabinet is in open warfare over new gay rights legislation after Tony Blair and Ruth Kelly, the Communities Secretary, who is a devout Catholic, blocked the plans following protests from religious organisations. Alan Johnson, the Education Secretary, was so angry with the move that he wrote a letter to Kelly three weeks ago, telling her that the new rights should not be watered down.

Link: [The Observer | Politics | Cabinet split over new rights for gays](#)

The new anti-discrimination legislation for gays and lesbians is infuriating homophobic religionists, who want exemptions on religious grounds. If further exemptions *are* allowed, they'll be legitimising prejudice. Expect more rows before the issue is resolved.

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Oct 2006
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Horried by escalating religious violence and alarmed by the Bush administration's "faith-based initiatives," which make government money available to religious organizations, atheists are coming out of the closet -- and organizing.

Link: [Atheist groups are on the rise: South Florida Sun-Sentinel](#)

Now all we need to do is to stir British atheists out of their complacency. [Won't you join us?](#) And how about joining the [BHA](#) and/or the [NSS](#)?

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Oct 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Suffolk Humanists Chair Michael Imison will make a brief appearance on ITV1 in Anglia TV's 'Late Edition' regional politics programme, talking about faith schools.

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Oct 2006
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Book Reading, 'The God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins. Institute of Education, London, 9 October 2006 Last week my partner Marion and I attended this reading organised by Foyle's at the Institute of Education in Bloomsbury. The Logan Hall seats almost a thousand and the venue was sold out, with many disappointed non-ticket holders turned away. The event followed a format that Dawkins has used before. He and Lalla Ward, his wife, take turns to read out sections of the book, and after three quarters of an hour or so Lalla leaves the podium and Professor Dawkins invites questions. They are a good act and the rhythm and juxtaposition of the selected text strongly reinforces the Dawkinian message. We were both surprised when Mr Foyle, who introduced the evening, asked those sitting in the auditorium to declare their attitude to God. However, it was interesting to note that from this initial show of hands there were very few believers or agnostics in the audience. I'd guess 90% voted definitely no God so this really was a case of preaching to the converted. If you feel such an evangelical phrase inappropriate here, Dawkins has said he wants his book to persuade wavering creationists to abandon The Almighty! The readings were unsurprisingly full of the powerful scientific logic that Dawkins is so famous for, and the audience of atheists clearly enjoyed the compelling and persuasive dismissal of all things godly. It was indeed a pleasure to listen to the elegantly crafted text, especially as enunciated by Lalla, who has now fully graduated from Doctor's to Professor's assistant. (UK television buffs will know she played opposite Tom Baker, the fourth Dr Who). Talking about the event later, we agreed that it was disappointing that a large part of the evening centred on quoting from and ridiculing the Old Testament, this being largely taken from chapter seven of the book. As one questioner put it towards the end of the evening, surely this was an easy target. We know these ancient texts are full of ludicrous and hideous stories that tell of a repugnant and vengeful God. Of course some of the tales raised a few laughs but bashing the Bible to combat Bible-bashers is a fairly pointless exercise. We also wondered what the handful of Christians in the audience would make of hundreds of atheists laughing heartily at their God being exposed as a misogynist promoter of gang rape and infanticide. Its not that the criticism is misplaced, rather that there was something slightly undignified about the spectacle. The reduction of the argument to imply that belief in the Christian God and therefore by implication an acceptance of the nonsense of the Old Testament is a little shallow. Dawkins is surely above all that and at his brilliant best when using science and logic to explain evolution and promote a worldview based on scientific evidence. It is this, underpinned by a clear philosophical rejection of the need for supernatural belief in a post Darwinian world, which makes reading and listening to Dawkins so rewarding. For me the best part of the evening was an attack on the growth in faith schools and their attempts to dilute the theory of evolution. The Intelligent Design lobby need to be undermined, especially in the light of evidence given by Dawkins that multi-millionaire creationists have seed funded Academy Schools and exploited the opportunity given by Blair's misplaced desire to widen educational choice. I cannot believe that the Roman Catholic clique at the centre of Government fail to see that by promoting faith schools they increase division in society. Perhaps their real agenda is not about widening choice but resisting the rise of secularism, and they see the cost and damage to society arising from their policies as an acceptable price. So let's hope Dawkins's new bestseller's main achievement will be as a valuable counter to the dangerous entrenched views of cynical Christian political leaders. Promoting the idea that a fair and equitable society is best achieved without religion is a far more positive and valuable message than simply mocking Hebrew Scriptures. *See the forum button at the top of this page for a discussion about the book*

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Oct 2006

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If you are involved with RE teaching in Suffolk you'll know about the new RE syllabus that was launched at Endeavour House yesterday.

Now that Humanism is officially included in the syllabus, we must provide teachers with the resources to teach it. RE is often taught by non-specialists and teams that change from term to term. Teachers who are new to Humanism will find it especially difficult to work out how to approach the subject. One teacher has already told me that he has difficulty with including Humanism in the syllabus because "you don't have festivals and rituals, like the religions do."

The BHA provides resources for teachers but a lot of it is unsuitable for younger children, or relies on RE teachers having the time to extract what they need. Schools would welcome accessible audio-visual resources, perhaps on a new web site. One Suffolk primary school has already done something like this to enable the children to learn about Judaism.

As a co-opted member of Suffolk's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), I've been asked to help the county RE advisor and an academic who's interested in syllabus development with providing teachers with guidance. If there are any teachers in primary, middle or high schools who are Humanists, atheists or agnostics, and who would like to talk to me, [please get in touch](#). I'd appreciate even a brief chat, particularly if you're a parent too.

Margaret Nelson

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Oct 2006

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British people waste more energy than the inhabitants of any other major western European nation, hastening climate change and adding £2.5bn to annual fuel bills, according to research.

Link: [Independent Online Edition > Environment](#)

An ICM poll conducted in the UK, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, showed that the British seem less concerned about global warming than our European neighbours.

- 71% leave appliances on standby
- 67% boil more water than needed in kettles
- 65% leave chargers plugged in
- 63% don't turn off lights in empty rooms
- 48% use the car for short journeys
- 44% wash clothes at 60F
- 32% leave the engine running while the car is stationary
- 32% use the tumble dryer when the washing line could be used
- 28% have the central heating on in an empty house
- 22% turn up the thermostat instead of reaching for a jumper

If you're not one of the culprits, good for you – Humanists *should* care for the environment. But have you considered everything?

You might save money by changing your energy supplier, but cheap fuel is bad for the environment. The most environmentally-friendly electricity comes from [Good Energy](#) – it's all wind-generated. Replacing all your light bulbs with low energy ones needn't be expensive. [Energy Savers Direct](#) has bulbs from 99p each. Gas is more difficult but [RSPB Energy](#) plant trees to try to compensate for the damage caused by burning a fossil fuel. Environmentalists say that planting trees doesn't solve the problem, because some fail. Whenever they die, they'll release all that CO2 back into the atmosphere. You can check how to make the most of your energy through [the Energy Saving Trust](#).

When it comes to shopping, there are many ways to reduce the negative effects we have on the environment.

- Support [local producers](#)
- Avoid food with [high air miles](#), like out of season fruit and vegetables.
- Eat less meat and fish – [only eat fish from sustainable sources](#) or meat that's been reared organically. A lot of animals and poultry are fed on soya protein, and [soya plantations](#) are another reason that rain forests are being destroyed in South America.
- Avoid over-packaged items
- [Refuse plastic carrier bags](#) – take your own bags
- [Avoid products containing palm oil](#) unless you're sure it comes from sustainable plantations – the habitat of animals like the [orang utan](#) is being destroyed to plant palms for the oil that's used in a huge range of foodstuffs, cosmetics and cleaning products.
- Only buy as much as you need – [30% to 40% of the food bought in Britain is thrown away](#), uneaten.
- Be thrifty with left-overs, like they were during the war – make soup!

We can reduce waste in many ways. If anyone would like some brandling worms for their enclosed [compost bin](#), please email me – I've got thousands! Using disposable nappies is *not* environmentally-friendly. 3 billion nappies a year are thrown away in the UK and 90% end up in landfill, where they may stay for decades, even hundreds of years. If there's a baby in the family, use [real nappies](#). They're

cheaper in the long run. You can buy enough nappies for your baby's nappy-wearing life for under £50. If you don't like the idea of laundering them, there may even be a nappy laundering service in your area, but what's the world coming to when parents won't wash nappies?

Many won't do anything to save the planet because it takes effort. Laziness is no excuse!

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Oct 2006
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The alternative to secular multi-culturalism is not an enforced integration, such as we see in France. What is required is a proper and mutually respectful co-operation between religious faith and public authorities.



Link: [Telegraph | Comment | Labour's plans for faith schools will only make divisions deeper](#)

Dr Vincent Nichols says Catholic schools are doing a good job – well, he would, wouldn't he? – and that the idea of making a quarter of places in faith schools available to pupils of other faiths or none won't work.

I'd have to agree with the bishop that the 25% policy hasn't been clearly thought out. It's the Government's answer to those who say that faith schools are incompatible with their aim of social cohesion (as we do). What they mean is that Muslim schools (and possibly those of other minority faiths) aren't committed to social integration.

How many non-Muslim parents are likely to want to send their kids to a Muslim school, particularly if the girls' uniform is a hijab or even a burqa?

We differ with the bishop by saying the answer isn't just to scrap the 25% plan; it's to scrap all public funding for faith schools, and concentrate on providing a secular education for children of all faiths or none.

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Catholics](#), [Catholicism](#)

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Oct 2006
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A new educational project has begun in Bosnia-Herzegovina, aimed at ending ethnic divisions in the country.

Link: [BBC NEWS | World | Europe | Bosnia tries multi-ethnic education](#)

[Elsewhere on this website](#), I referred to the [Integrated Education Fund](#) in Northern Ireland, where parents have had to raise funds to enable their children to experience integrated education.

Now a new college in Mostar offers students a chance to learn side by side with young people from other ethnic groups.

Somehow, the British politicians who are so anxious to defend faith schools just don't seem to see the relevance of other countries' segregated education systems, and the effect they've had on "social cohesion".

Tags: [Bosnia-Herzegovina](#), [Multi-ethnic+education](#), [Integration](#)

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Nov 2006
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John Humphrys as you've never heard him before - talking with religious leaders about his unfulfilled desire to believe in God. How is faith possible in a world of suffering, much of it arguably caused by religion or religious extremism and to which God seems to turn a blind eye? Is there a place for religion in an age dominated by science?

[John Humphrys talking to rather than interviewing Archbishop Rowan Williams](#) is worth listening to. In the piece Williams accepts that, "Religion and geo-politics always mix in a rather explosive way". Following this understatement he presents the idea that the worst murderers in history were not believers should be seen as support for Christianity. Ah! The old Stalin defence!

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Nov 2006
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This talk was prepared for a Faith & Reflection Day at Farlingaye High School, Woodbridge, on 3 November 2006. The event ended the school's One World Fortnight. I had to skip a chunk of my talk because the previous speakers overran (don't you just hate it when that happens?), and we were running out of time.

The other speakers included a Jew, a Unitarian, a Buddhist, the Mayor of Woodbridge, John Gummer MP, a Hospice Chaplain, the Bishop of Dunwich, a Quaker, and the local Vicar, who said he agreed with everything I said.

Since I started this sentence, the Earth's travelled 100 miles around the Sun, the Sun's moved 1,000 miles in its circuit of the Galaxy, and the Orion Nebula's moved 100,000 miles relative to us. A few years ago, NASA took a photograph with the Hubble Space Telescope, leaving the shutter open for 10 days. The 10-inch square photograph is of an area of space that to the naked eye is about the same size as a grain of sand viewed from 6 feet away. To cross it at 10 times the speed of light would take 300,000 years. There are about 1,500 galaxies in the picture, each containing billions of stars. Here we are, whirling round a relatively small star, a tiny planet in all the vastness of space. It's a small world.

3½ billion years ago, Earth was uninhabitable. Half a billion years later simple organic compounds were formed – the basis of life. It was a long time before DNA evolved, to make more complex life forms possible. The trilobites and ammonites appeared about 570 million years ago, insects appeared about 300 million years ago, dinosaurs were much more recent, and if we represent the history of Earth with a diagram of an hour in time – a clock face – we human beings have only appeared within the last minute or so.

Since we evolved, between 100,000 and 300,000 years ago, we've made great progress and caused great damage. Of all the species that inhabit the Earth, we're the cleverest. We've created machines, the World Wide Web, medical cures and procedures, great art, great science, and great literature. Of all the species on the planet, we've had the greatest impact. At the end of the last Ice Age, there were only about 10,000 people on the Earth. The current population of Suffolk is about 690,000. If you were living in the Ice Age, you'd probably never meet anyone outside your community or imagine that there was anyone else. The world's population has recently reached 6 billion. It's taken less than 40 years to double in numbers. Scientists predict that, within 50 years, it may double again. Imagine what sort of pressure that will put on our resources.

Imagine that we're all on a spaceship, travelling across the vastness of space, like the Starship Enterprise in the TV series Star Trek. We'd rely on other people to ensure our safety; that we could breathe freely, that there'd be food and water, and that the temperature would be neither too hot nor too cold. If there was a fire, say, at the other end of the ship, would you ignore it and say it's someone else's problem? No, of course you wouldn't. It's unlikely there'd be an inter-galactic fire engine within a few light years, even travelling at warp speed, as they do in the science-fiction series. Would you think it fair that one set of passengers should eat more than their fair share of the food, faster than anyone could replace it? No, of course not. Behaving like that would put everyone at risk.

Well, we are on a space ship, of a sort. Earth is like a space ship, millions of miles from any other galaxies where there might be intelligent life. Our resources are finite. If we light too many fires, we breathe less easily. If we're greedy, people starve. If we make a mess, someone must clear it up or we all suffer.

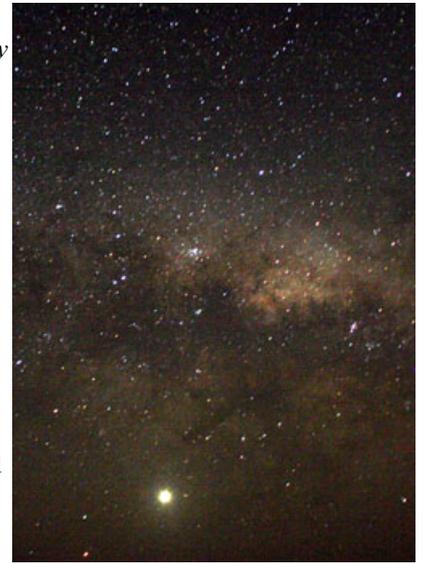
I referred to Star Trek for a good reason. Its creator, the American writer Gene Roddenberry, was a Humanist and an atheist, like me.

The original TV series was the most popular TV series ever. The first real space shuttle was named Enterprise after the fictional spaceship in the series. Before Star Trek, most science fiction was about monsters from space. If an alien stepped out of a flying saucer, they'd be regarded with suspicion, probably shot, and any stragglers would be sent packing with the message that the Earth was hostile to inter-galactic travellers. Roddenberry's science fiction was different. The crew of the Enterprise travelled across the universe, seeking new life, boldly going where none had gone before, to find out what was out there and to learn. In their encounters with alien races, the crew avoided confrontation or violence, except when defending themselves against aggression, resolved differences with negotiation, and treated people of all races with respect. Roddenberry didn't think of Star Trek as just science fiction. He thought it was about people and how they behave. His Humanist values informed all his story lines and many that have been written by others since his death in 1991.

Roddenberry believed it's possible to solve problems through reason and co-operation and that there's no need to turn to religion or superstition for help. These things were irrelevant to his life, as they are to mine. He felt that human reason and intelligence will help us to develop and progress, and that the world and the universe are natural wonders, waiting to be explored and understood.

When they started filming the first Star Trek series, 40 years ago, Roddenberry's ideas weren't appreciated by all the NBC studio bosses. He wanted everyone involved to be treated equally, for a start, and wanted the second-in-command to be a woman, which the bosses wouldn't accept. They made the women crew members wear skimpy costumes, which he opposed. Roddenberry didn't want any religion or dogma on his spaceship. He thought it illogical to imagine that everyone from Earth and the other planets would share the same beliefs in the 24th century. He fought to have black people in the cast, saying, "If we don't have blacks and whites working together when civilisation reaches that time frame, there won't be any people."

Roddenberry's Star Trek stories didn't cover the dangers of global warming, except in situations like planets being drawn too close to a star. This is a problem that we've really only become aware of recently. Climate change has been in the news a lot. Drought in Africa and flooding as sea levels rise will displace millions, so many more are likely to want to share our space. It's ridiculous that an intelligent, resourceful race — the human race — should continue to be divided into nations who behave as though other nations' problems are nothing to do with them, unless they choose to get involved. When powerful nations do get involved, it's often produced a negative



effect.

As the world's population increases, there'll be less room for us all and more refugees from war zones, such as Iraq, and from dangerous places like earthquake zones and flood plains. However sympathetic and generous we might be, it seems the British don't necessarily want foreigners to turn up on their doorsteps, judging from news reports about hostility towards immigrants and refugees. Yet we're all part of the same crew. We're all human, whatever the colour of our skins or the language we speak, or whatever we believe. If an inquisitive alien, like one of the intelligent beings that the crew of the Enterprise met, were to visit our small planet and ask why we fight and kill one another, and why some are greedy while others starve, what excuse could we make?

There are many who are trying to make the world a better, fairer, safer place. Humanists helped found the United Nations and UNESCO and other important international organisations that don't have a religious agenda. It's important to concentrate on what we have in common, than what divides us. We all have to work together. There's a lot to do. There's a lot you can do. Don't imagine that whatever you do won't make a difference. Besides, you'll probably be happier doing more, rather than having more.

Over the last 50 years, increasing affluence has allowed many more people to spend more on household appliances, TVs, DVDs, mobile phones, and cars for every member of the family, and clothes, and trainers, and foreign holidays. Those who've researched such things tell us that though many people have more possessions, fewer would say they were happy now than in the 1950s. Meanwhile, the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing wider.

The 17th October was International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. On the same day, 8 years ago, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan gave a message that included the following: "For the past 3 decades, we have witnessed the most rapid improvements in the lives of billions. A child born in a developing country today can expect to live 16 years longer than a child born 35 years ago. Infant mortality has been more than halved since 1960, and the share of rural families with access to safe water has risen from 10% of the total to 60%. But," he went on, "... the struggle for the eradication of poverty has reached a critical phase... So long as every fifth inhabitant of our planet lives in absolute poverty, there can be no real stability in the world."

Absolute poverty is defined as an income of roughly a dollar a day, which is currently worth about 52p. Poverty knows no boundaries, spreads over every continent and is present in industrialised and developing countries, crippling the lives of some 1.5 billion people, whose number is rising by at least 25 million a year – mainly women, children and the elderly. The cost of providing basic social services for everyone in the developing countries is estimated at about £27½ billion a year over the next few years, which is less than 0.2% of the world's income of £17.22 trillion. The sum needed to close the gap between the annual income of poor people and the minimum income at which they would no longer be poor is estimated at another £27½ billion a year, so the total cost would be roughly £55 billion, or less than the combined wealth of the seven richest people in the world.

Closing the gap between the haves and have-nots could be so easy, if we could only agree to do it and stop wasting money on wars, bombs and guns – in 1998, a B-2 Stealth Bomber could cost you \$1.157 billion.

Can money buy you happiness? It can make a huge difference to those with little, but seems to make little difference to those who have a lot. Once you've got the necessities of life, you don't actually need more. One problem is that millions of people earn a living producing and selling things that no one really needs. All that talent, all that effort, wasted on cluttering up our homes with more and more stuff, while a quarter of the world's population live in absolute poverty. Doesn't seem right, does it?

I've covered a lot in my slot. Evolution, time and space, human potential, a science fiction TV series, poverty, wealth, climate change. I haven't really covered philosophy, or we'd be here all day. I haven't covered religion because religion is for the religious, as far as I'm concerned.

You believe what you want to, but don't let it stop you from doing the right thing. If we're honest, most of us know what needs to be done, without needing to be told, though some hang back and wait for someone else to do it first. Remember that fire on the spaceship? If you wait for someone else to do something, it could be too late.

I know that many of you worry about the future and care passionately about doing the right thing. I know that many of you think for yourselves. I know that you won't accept that what other people may tell you is true without thinking about it. I hope that, like the Starship Enterprise, you'll boldly go where no one has gone before and that this small world may be safer in your hands than it's been in the hands of those who ought to know better.

Photo of Southern Hemisphere night sky (c) Nathan Nelson 2005

Tags: [Small+world](#), [Education](#), [School+conference](#), [Stars](#)

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Nov 2006

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The Church of England has challenged the Royal Mail's move to issue festive stamps without a Christian theme. Santa, a snowman and a reindeer are among the festive images on the Royal Mail's 40th set of Christmas stamps. The church "regretted" Royal Mail's decision not to launch "Christian themed designs reminding people of the true meaning of Christmas".



Link: [BBC NEWS | Business | Church challenges festive stamps](#)

So let's get this straight shall we? What *is* "the true meaning of Christmas"?

When Christians talk about the "true meaning of Christmas", they're talking about *their* meaning – the Joseph, Mary and Jesus in a manger story. It didn't used to be the church's "true meaning".

Christmas and New Year are celebrated at about the time of the midwinter solstice, the shortest day in the northern hemisphere – about 21st December. The mid-winter festival has been divided into two parts, Christmas and New Year, but used to be all-in-one, around the time of the shortest day, when people in cold climes depended on the vagaries of nature and their own resourcefulness more than at any other time. For thousands of years, in Europe, Scandinavia and around the Mediterranean, communities have celebrated life, and their survival in the depths of winter, with eating, drinking and other fundamental pleasures.

The early Christian Church disapproved of all this pagan jollity. They seem to have decided that, since people were determined to go on having a great time regardless, they'd hijack the festival to celebrate the birth of Christ – hence Christ-mass. Few theologians will claim that he was actually born on 25th December, or even that he was born 2006 years ago.

So let Christians celebrate the solstice their way, but leave us to celebrate it however we like. Some of us try to ignore it, some of us enjoy good food and drink with our families and friends, and most of us are fed up with seasonal commercialism.

You can go to [the Humanists' website](#) and [the NSS website](#) for more about Christmas from a secular point of view. I won't wish you a Merry Midwinter yet – it's too early!

Visual by [www.PDImages.com](#)

Tags: [Xmas](#), [Christmas](#), [Royal+Mail](#), [C+of+E](#), [Church](#)

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Nov 2006

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E-mail: mail@suffolhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Margaret Nelson from Suffolk Humanists will review the papers with Rachel Sloane on BBC local radio. Can't be sure of the exact time, but from about 7 am.

BBC Radio Suffolk is on 95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm. See [the link on the Radio Suffolk website](#) to listen online if you're not in the area.

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Nov 2006

A few years ago, the mayor of a Suffolk town, an atheist, planned to mark Armistice Day with an inclusive, secular ceremony. After the procession through the town and a wreath-laying on the war memorial, it would be up to those who were Christians whether or not they attended a church service. It never happened. The mayor had to deal with a family matter and handed the arrangements over to others who (influenced by conservatives in [the British Legion](#)) did things the usual way, with religious ceremonial.

I was reminded of this while watching BBC News this morning. They showed soldiers at a remembrance service in Basra, Iraq, who appeared to be singing a hymn. If that's what they were doing, would they have been given the option of non-attendance at a religious service? Probably not, which means that, since it's statistically unlikely that they're all Christians, some of those soldiers are singing hymns and saying prayers that are meaningless to them.



This sort of thing wouldn't have been questioned in the years immediately after WW1, but why are the same old assumptions made now, nearly 90 years later?

The futility of war and the pain of loss mean the same to most people, religious or not. It is simply wrong for Christian leaders and politicians to claim Armistice Day events as they do. To be truly inclusive, they should be secular ceremonies.

It's an insult to all those servicemen who've died asking whose side God was supposed to be on, to mark their deaths with religious ceremonial.

This is from [The Good Soldier Švejk](#) by Jaroslav Hašek, 1923:

The great shambles of the world war did not take place without the blessing of priests. Chaplains of all armies prayed and celebrated drumhead masses for victory for the side whose bread they ate.

Throughout all Europe people went to the slaughter like cattle, driven there not only by butcher emperors, kings and other potentates and generals, but also by priests of all confessions, who blessed them and made them perjure themselves that they would destroy the enemy on land, in the air, on the sea etc.

Drumhead masses were generally celebrated twice: once when a detachment left for the front and once more at the front on the eve of some bloody massacre and carnage. I remember that once when a drumhead mass was being celebrated an enemy aeroplane dropped a bomb on us and hit the field altar. There was nothing left of the chaplain except some bloodstained rags.

Afterwards they wrote about him as a martyr, while our aeroplanes prepared the same kind of glory for the chaplains on the other side.

We had a great deal of fun out of this, and on the provisional cross, at the stop where they buried the remains of the chaplain, there appeared overnight this epitaph:

What may hit us has now hit you.
You always said we'd join the saints.
Well, now you've caught it at Holy Mass.
And where you stood are only stains.

The [UK Armed Forces Humanist Association](#) welcomes new members.

The photo of a WW1 family group is from my private collection.

Tags: [WW1](#), [WW2](#), [Armistice+Day](#), [Thought+for+the+Day](#), [War](#)

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Nov 2006
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There is currently [an online petition calling for the abolishment of faith schools](#). It reads:

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Abolish all faith schools and prohibit the teaching of creationism and other religious mythology in all UK schools.

Online petitions are often a waste of time, but 10 Downing Street is actually encouraging them. They say:

Downing Street is working in partnership with the non-partisan charitable project mySociety to provide a service to allow citizens, charities and campaign groups to set up petitions that are hosted on the Downing Street website, enabling anyone to address and deliver a petition directly to the Prime Minister.

mySociety is a charitable project that runs many of the UK's best-known non-partisan political websites, like [HearFromYourMP.com](#) and [TheyWorkForYou.com](#). mySociety is strictly neutral on party political issues, and the e-petition service is within its remit to build websites which give people simple, tangible benefits in the civic and community aspects of their lives. For more information about mySociety and its work, visit [its website](#).

The e-petition system has been designed to be transparent and trustworthy. For legal and anti-spam reasons this site cannot host every petition submitted, but the rule is to accept everything that meets the terms and conditions of use.

No petition will be rejected unless it violates these terms. And even when petitions cannot be hosted No10 will still publish as much of rejected petitions as is consistent with legal and anti-spam requirements, including the reason why it could not be hosted.

If you have any questions about the service, you can email either the Downing Street web team at webmaster@pmo.gov.uk or mySociety at team@mysociety.org.

Please sign the petition, and email [the URL](#) to every sensible person you know who's opposed to faith schools.

Tags: [Petition](#), [Faith+schools](#)

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Nov 2006
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David Starkey argues that the Church must be disestablished to ensure that other religions can't claim a right to faith schools and the other privileges it has. We need "a level playing field".

I adore much about the Church of England, profound atheist though I am. I raise funds for its cathedrals and parish churches, which I regard as absolutely intrinsic to the fabric of England. But because of what is happening with Islam, the sweet, confused C of E has, alas, to be disestablished. Britain must become a secular state.



Link: [Henry was wrong. Put religion back in its box - Sunday Times - Times Online](#)

One of the consequences of the Church's privileged position, Starkey writes, is that...

...in the House of Lords we have the extraordinary situation where religious leaders sit ex officio in the legislature. Only one other country entertains the practice — the Islamic Republic of Iran. Now it is being suggested that because bishops are represented in the Lords, therefore rabbis, Catholic archbishops and imams should also sit there. This, in the early 21st century, is grotesque.

Over the last couple of years we've seen the Government getting into difficulties over "multiculturalism", as various religious lobbyists have demanded the same privileges as the C of E. Increasingly, unelected religionists are having an influence on the politics of this country, and the rot must stop. Disestablishment is essential, isn't it?

Tags: [Religion](#), [C+of+E](#), [David+Starkey](#), [Disestablishment](#)

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Nov 2006
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Some of the children were dancing, their bodies writhing and twisting, their arms flailing in the air, perspiration on their foreheads. Some had fallen to the ground, 'slain in the spirit', as the phrase has it, and were now crouching and kneeling in prayer, while the grown-ups moved among them laying on hands, some speaking in tongues.

Ruth, who is eight years old, was sobbing quietly. Earlier that day she had been one of those to come forward during the 'prophetic dance' session, when Pastor Becky Fischer asked if anybody had heard the word of God and had something to impart.

Link: [Telegraph | Health | Kindergarten of Christ](#)

This is in Missouri, USA. It's bad enough when adults behave like lunatics, but when children get involved, doesn't it make you angry? "Kids in Ministry" trains children, some as young as five, to use "to use the 'gifts' of healing, prophecy and speaking in tongues". Ruth was sobbing quietly? Sounds like a form of hysteria, brought on by intense emotional pressure.

Tags: [Kindergarten](#), [Child+abuse](#), [America](#), [USA](#)

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Nov 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson during Mark Murphy's programme on BBC Radio Suffolk (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or listen again via the [Radio Suffolk website](#).

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Nov 2006
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Nov 2006
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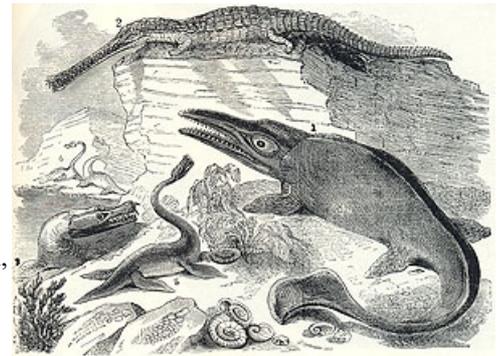
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Nov 2006
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Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, took part in BBC Radio 4's 'In Our Time' programme this morning (23 November) on Altruism. The programme is presented by Melvyn Bragg. You can [download the programme](#), or Listen Again via [the In Our Time website](#). The other participants were Miranda Fricker, Senior Lecturer in the School of Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London, and John Dupré, Professor of Philosophy of Science at Exeter University and director of Egenis, the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society.
Tags: [Radio](#), [Dawkins](#), [BBC](#), [Altruism](#)

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Nov 2006
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On this day (24th November), 147 years ago, Charles Darwin's revolutionary book, *On the Origin of Species*, was published. His theory of evolution by natural selection is still generally accepted as the best explanation of how life on Earth developed.

Darwin was reluctant to publish his book because he knew it would attract widespread condemnation from those who believed, or said they believed, the biblical creation story. He was a quiet, studious man who preferred to avoid controversy or offending religious people. He may not have published the book at all if he hadn't had a letter from the biologist Alfred Russell Wallace, whose research was leading him to a similar conclusion, and Darwin realised he must publish before Wallace did.



On the Origin of Species was the result of work that Darwin began in 1831, in his early twenties, when he joined the Royal Navy Survey ship, HMS Beagle, as a naturalist. He was hired to record the variety of flora and fauna he'd observe on the journey. His father was a doctor who expected him to study medicine but Darwin found his medical studies "intolerably dull" and he couldn't stand the sight of blood, so he quit. Since childhood, he'd been fascinated by natural history; the voyage of the Beagle presented him with an irresistible opportunity.

The ship sailed to South America where they landed on the Galapagos Islands. Each island had its own species, different from those on the mainland, and half the species of birds occurred nowhere else in the world. Darwin was fascinated by the variety of finches, for example, that had developed different shaped beaks to equip them to find different types of food. He clarified some of his ideas during discussions with the ship's Captain Fitzroy, a religious man. Darwin reasoned that what he'd observed couldn't be accounted for by the Genesis story of the creation of the Earth in six days but that the varied species had evolved from similar ancestors washed up from the mainland. He observed, "In the struggle for survival, the fittest win out at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment."

Darwin's theory of evolution caused great controversy, as he'd anticipated. Some ridiculed him in the cruelest terms. There are still people today, mainly in America, who reject the theory, believing that the earth was created about 10,000 years ago; a belief that's in conflict with the evidence; fossil records exist for bacteria from 3.5 billion years ago – three quarters of the age of the Earth.

The Origin of Species ends with the words, "... whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."

Further reading – [We're all monkeys](#)

Apologies if you tuned in to listen to this broadcast and heard someone else's Thought for the Day. Due to flooding on the road I had to make a detour and arrived late, so they used a recording. This thought (minus the first few words) has been recorded and will be used when another contributor fails to arrive in time.

Tags: [Science](#), [Darwin](#), [Evolution](#), [Dinosaurs](#)

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Nov 2006
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The Suffolk Humanist group, Suffolk Humanists, is affiliated to [the British Humanist Association](#), which recently commissioned an [Ipsos MORI poll](#) about British attitudes towards religion and humanism. The following is part of a press release that's been sent to all the Suffolk media. Feel free to draw the attention of anyone who may be interested, such as your MP and county councillor, to what it says. We get the feeling that since religion has been in the news so much lately, the publicity has backfired on the religious authorities because an increasing number of people are saying they're tired of the way they've been demanding attention. Despite all the publicity about faith schools, 64% of the poll's respondents opposed public funding for them.

PRESS RELEASE In the 2001 census 7 out of 10 people ticked the 'Christian' box but, with church attendance now below 7% and under 1 in 3 marriages taking place in church, this figure was clearly more about cultural identity than religious belief.

Today the Ipsos MORI poll has shown that 36% of people - equivalent to around 17 million adults - are in fact humanists in their basic outlook. They:

- feel scientific and other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe (rather than feeling that religious beliefs are needed for a "complete understanding"),
- believe that "right and wrong" can be explained by human nature alone, and does not necessarily require religious teachings, and ...
- base their judgments of right and wrong on "the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world"./font>

Humanism is a non-religious ethical outlook on life and these answers summarise its key beliefs (see [the BHA website](#) for more details on Humanism today) These are the key figures: - Overall, faced with the choice, 62% said 'scientific & other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe' against 22% who felt 'religious beliefs are needed for a complete understanding of the universe'. - Similarly, 62% chose 'Human nature by itself gives us an understanding of what is right and wrong', against 27% who said 'People need religious teachings in order to understand what is right and wrong'. - In the last question, faced with three choices, 65% said that what is right and wrong 'depends on the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world'. The rest split almost equally between two profoundly un-Humanist views: 15% said right and wrong were 'basically just a matter of personal preference' and 13% said what was right and wrong was 'unchanging and should never be challenged'. Thirty-six percent chose all three of the Humanist answers, and another 30% chose two out of three. Only 13% chose none of them. **42% say Government pays too much attention to 'religious groups and leaders'** A separate question found that, asked to select from a list of groups that people might think the government pays too much attention to, more people (42%) chose 'religious groups and leaders' than chose any other domestic group. Religious groups and leaders came second only to 'leaders of other countries' in a list that also included 'Newspaper headlines', 'Big business', 'the Royal family', 'Trade Unions' and lastly 'Ordinary people'. **41% believe this is our only life** Another question found that 41% endorsed the strong statement: 'This life is the only life we have and death is the end of our personal existence'. Fractionally more - 45% - preferred the broad view that 'when we die we go on and still exist in another way'. Of those choosing all three of the 'Humanist' answers, 54% said this was our only life, against 38% who believed in some sort of continued existence. And of those seeing this as our only life, 79% chose two or all three of the 'Humanist' answers to the other questions. (Interestingly, 22% of those who endorsed the need for religion in answers to other questions also said this was our only life.) **Comments** 'Britain is basically a Humanist country, and this poll shows it,' said Hanne Stinson, chief executive of the British Humanist Association, which commissioned the poll from Ipsos MORI. 'We have always been aware that many people who do not identify themselves as humanists, and this includes quite a few people who do not know what Humanism is, live their lives by what one might describe as humanist principles. People who join the Association often tell us that they have been humanists all their lives, or for the last 20 years or so, but didn't know it. But it is very encouraging to find that 36% of the British population are not simply non-religious, but actually humanist in their outlook and their morality, and that very many others don't feel they need religion to understand the universe, or to guide their moral decisions. These people may not belong to the Humanist Association, may not have even heard of Humanism, but they share our attitudes and we speak for them in our campaigns. 'Bishops and Archbishops every day make more extravagant claims about Britain's alleged Christian values, but here at last is the evidence to show they are wrong. The churches, despite their establishment and institutional privileges, have lost the right to speak for Britain. The Government still makes one concession after another to religion on the basis of that 70% census figure, but if the public resents Government kow-towing to religious leaders almost as much as they resent its subservience to foreign leaders, then ministers really need to think again. They should move towards a secular state in Britain, with the Government neutral on matters of religion and belief, no privileges for any belief system, and public debate conducted in shared language, not dominated by religious pronouncements based on theology.' Ms Stinson added that her only surprise was that only 42% felt religion got too much attention from Government, and wondered how much higher this figure would have been if respondents had been able to select more than three options from the seven listed. 'The other explanation might be a lingering deference to religion that has outlasted mass religious belief. Time and again religious groups get their way against overwhelmingly public opinion. They killed off the Assisted Dying Bill, which 4 out of 5 people supported; they have won wide exemptions from equality legislation so they can continue to discriminate against gay people and those who do not share their beliefs; and they will be doing their utmost to defend their 26 unelected members of Parliament when the Government tackles Lords reform this session!' Andrew Copson, Education Officer at the BHA, said that the result was particularly interesting coming so soon after Government caved in to religious pressure over faith schools: 'The government keeps making the mistake of seeing pressure from religious groups as widespread public opinion. Even though poll after poll has demonstrated wide public opposition to faith schools, religious groups have fought off all attempts to reduce the harm done by them, and instead have won more privileges and pay scarcely a penny of the costs of "their" schools.'

Tags: [Humanism](#), [Poll](#), [17+million](#), [BHA](#), [Ipsos+MORI](#)

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Nov 2006
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Dozens of schools are using creationist teaching materials condemned by the government as "not appropriate to support the science curriculum", the Guardian has learned.
The packs promote the creationist alternative to Darwinian evolution called intelligent design and the group behind them said 59 schools are using the information as "a useful classroom resource".

Link: [Revealed: rise of creationism in UK schools | News crumb | EducationGuardian.co.uk](#)

We're not aware of any Suffolk schools that are doing this, but if you know different, please [contact us](#).

See [We're all Monkeys](#) for an answer to Creationism and "Intelligent Design".

Tags: [Creationism](#), [Intelligent+design](#), [Education](#), [Schools](#)

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Nov 2006
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Ministers have been accused of overturning the nation's morality in a searing attack on new gay rights laws by a leading Roman Catholic churchman. Archbishop of Birmingham Vincent Nichols threatened to withdraw Catholic co-operation with the Government over schools, charity programmes and adoption agencies if the new sexual orientation regulations go ahead.

Link: [Don't impose your morality: Catholic Archbishop attacks gay rights bill | the Daily Mail](#)

Maybe Archbishop Nichols needs a reality check. "The nation" is generally more tolerant and enlightened than him, especially young people. [The National Centre for Social Research's](#) 2002 British Social Attitudes survey included questions on racial prejudice and prejudice towards homosexuals. NatCen published these results:

There has been a dramatic change in attitudes towards homosexuality. In 1985, 70% of people thought it was "always" or "mostly" wrong. Now under half (47%) think this, while a third (33%) says it is "not wrong at all".

A quarter of people (25%) in Britain describe themselves as "very" or "a little" prejudiced against people of other races, down from a third (34%) in 1985.

Britain is likely to become increasingly tolerant over time:

- Older, less tolerant, generations will die out and be replaced by more tolerant ones.
- One of the less obvious pay-offs from higher education seems to be more liberal views on these issues. So tolerance should increase as the numbers of people entering higher education grows.

Prejudice varies dramatically, particularly by age and education:

- Racial prejudice. Just over a fifth (22%) of the under 30s are prejudiced, compared with almost a third (32%) of the 60 plus group. And around a fifth (19%) of graduates are prejudiced, compared with more than a quarter (29%) of those with no qualifications at all.
- Homosexuality. Almost a quarter (23%) of the under 30s think homosexuality is "always wrong", compared with almost two-thirds (60%) of the 60 plus group. Fewer than one in five (17%) of graduates think homosexuality is "always wrong", compared with more than half (54%) of people with no qualifications.

On both matters, young people's tolerance is likely to stay with them as they get older so they won't become more prejudiced with age.

Gives you a reason to feel optimistic, doesn't it?

Visit the [Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association's](#) website for a Humanist perspective.

Tags: [Gay+rights](#), [Catholics](#), [Catholicism](#), [Morality](#)

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Nov 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

NOTE: this event has been cancelled due to urgent dental surgery, but please get in touch with [Action Aid](#) to find out more about Fair Trade.

Action Aid's 24 Hour Coffee Break. A 100g jar of instant coffee costs £1.94, yet a Ugandan coffee farmer only earns 7p. Buy fair trade products to make a difference. We drink fair trade tea and coffee at Suffolk Humanist meetings.

Further info: www.actionaid.org.uk/index.asp?page_id=1330

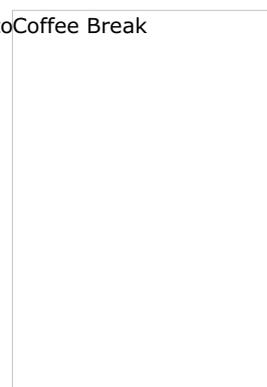
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Dec 2006
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In Sunday's Observer, [Mary Riddell](#) wrote about Blair's bias when it comes to the issues of diversity and integration. He has had plenty to say about what immigrants ought to do...

'Conform to [tolerant attitudes] or don't come here. We don't want the hate-makers, whatever their race, religion or creed.'

... but never a word of criticism for our home-grown hate-mongers, the Christian clerics. They assume they have every right to preach against anyone who fails to share their antediluvian attitudes while Blair ignores their intolerance and maintains a double standard. Mary Riddell wrote,

... the bishops are on the prowl. The Bishop of Rochester criticises diversity legislation, while lamenting the lack of Christmas celebrations in that hotbed of Saturnalia, the nation's SureStart schemes. The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, announces that 'illiberal atheists' and 'aggressive secularists' have stolen Christmas. On a point of semantics, secularists do not wish to harm religion or deny its great cultural influence. They simply want it to know its place.



How will these troublesome priests know their place, as long as they sit in the House of Lords, enjoy special privileges (many at public expense), and hang around like the proverbial millstone, carping on about 'moral values' as though they're the only ones who have any?

What we want is secularism, now, for everyone. Integration is impossible without it. Social cohesion is impossible without it. No more privileges for the church; let them do what they like (within reason), but not at public expense.

As for Christmas – quite apart from the oft-repeated point that [we did not 'steal' Christmas \(on the contrary, the church 'stole' it about 1600 years ago\)](#), we don't want to ban carol services, midnight masses, nativity scenes, or any of that stuff – we just want the Christians to keep them to themselves.

Tags: [Mary+Riddell](#), [Secularism](#), [Tony+Blair](#), [Integration](#), [Diversity](#)

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Dec 2006
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[BBC Radio Suffolk's Rachel Sloane](#) came to talk to Suffolk Humanists on 11 December. You can hear some of what was said on Rachel's programme on Sunday 24 December, between 6 and 9 am, on 95.5, 95.9, 103.9 or 104.6 fm.

If you're not an early bird, you can [read and hear about the encounter via the BBC Suffolk website](#). You'll need [Real Player](#) to hear the clips.

Tags: [Radio](#), [Radio+Suffolk](#), [BBC](#), [Meeting](#)



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Dec 2006
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E-mail: mail@suffolhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Suffolk Humanists met BBC Radio Suffolk's Rachel Sloane when she came to our meeting on 11 December. The encounter will be included in Rachel's programme on 95.5, 95.9, 103.9 and 104.6 fm. You can also listen again via [the BBC Suffolk website](#).

Further info: www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2006/06/15/bbc_radio_suffolk_sloane_profile_feature.shtml

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Dec 2006
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Professor Dave Muller is Principal of [Suffolk College](#), Ipswich.

For the past 2 or 3 years, the college has had a "Celebration of Community" in the summer term, with a procession through the town and a church service, involving the Mayor and other dignitaries.

We've been invited but haven't attended because we don't go to church – for obvious reasons. I've written to Prof. Muller a couple of times, explaining why we think it's not a good idea to celebrate the community with a Christian service, and why we won't join in, but so far he hasn't replied. So this is what he's getting with his Xmas card from Suffolk Humanists:

Professor Dave Muller
Principal
Suffolk College
Ipswich
IP4 1LT

18 December 2006

Dear Professor Muller,

We wish you a happy and successful 2007, and hope that you might review your approach to the Civic Celebration event you'll probably hold in the summer.

We haven't previously participated because they've included Christian services, which had no relevance to us, nor to a significant proportion of your students and the local population.

The British Humanist Association (to which we're affiliated) recently commissioned an Ipsos MORI poll about religious beliefs and attitudes, and found that 36% of the respondents were broadly Humanist in their outlook. They –

- feel that scientific & other evidence provides the best way to understand the universe (rather than feeling that religious beliefs are needed for a 'complete understanding');
- believe that 'right and wrong' can be explained by human nature alone, and does not necessarily require religious teachings.
- base their judgements of right and wrong on 'the effects on people and the consequences for society and the world'.

In addition, 46% of the respondents thought that the government pays too much attention to 'religious groups and

leaders’.

A secular society is one where everyone is free to practise their faith, change it or not have one, according to their conscience. No one can be forced to believe or to have religious convictions. Please can you explain why a secular college and a secular local authority choose to celebrate the community with a religious event? While many in the local community are Christians, many are not. It’s possible to have a secular civic event that includes everyone, such as the event that was held at Ipswich Corn Exchange in 2002 to commemorate 9/11.

Yours sincerely,

Margaret Nelson
Secretary

Tags: [Suffolk](#), [Suffolk+College](#), [Community](#)