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Jan 2009

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[The atheist buses](#) will be on the streets this month, challenging lazy assumptions and encouraging people to be open about their skepticism.

Obama takes over in the White House, thrown in the deep end with the economic crisis and the Israelis to deal with, but hopefully better at the job than Bush (no one could be worse, surely).

The economic downturn might prompt people to live more frugally, which will be good for the planet, and might encourage environmentally-friendly innovations.

[Humanist Roy Brown attended the 60th anniversary celebration of the Declaration of Human Rights](#), “expecting to be appalled in equal measure by the extravagance of the surroundings and the hypocrisy of the speeches, but I left both moved and inspired.” Could attempts by Islamic states to set the clock back be thwarted?

We can influence events in 2009 with positive action. You might be surprised by what we can achieve.

Happy New Year!

Tags: [2009](#), [Happy+New+Year](#), [Optimism](#), [Action](#)

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If you go to the [Think Humanism](#) site, there's [a quiz](#) to test your knowledge of Darwin and his work. We'll be celebrating the 200th anniversary of his birth on 12th February this year. Anyone who's interested in marking the event in Suffolk, [please get in touch](#).

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Quiz](#)

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The third of our stories since the new year to end with a question mark - over at [Edge](#), some of our leading thinkers and scientists were asked the question *what will change everything?*. Answers range from the discovery of intelligent life from somewhere else through our ability to conquer death to superintelligence, universal translation, climate change and human-chimpanzee hybrids. Someone has pointed out that a human-chimpanzee hybrid has already been achieved, his name is George, and an Iraqi journalist threw a shoe at him a short while ago. One thinker suggests that nothing will change everything, another says just 'a very very good battery'. Maybe he was having a bad day and his laptop died on him. What would currently change everything for me would be heated socks and losing the ability to procrastinate. Whatever would change everything for you, the answers at Edge are characteristically mind-boggling and well worth a look.

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Got family or friends who'd like to know more about Humanism? Know anywhere you could leave some leaflets about Humanism? This double-sided sheet gives a brief introduction to Humanism, encouraging the reader to find out more.

[File Attachment: WHAT IS HUMANISM.pdf \(290 KB\)](#)

Need to know how to open a pdf file? [Click here](#).

Tags: [Humanism](#), [Leaflet](#)

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Twitter is a free messaging and micro-blogging service - think of a combination of a blog, a messaging service, and a social network. See www.twitter.com for more info. More people all the time are joining Twitter to take advantage of quick, informal messages, the exchange of ideas and links, or maybe just daft comments about what's going on in the news. The idea is simple - you post a message, people can reply, and you can reply to other messages. If you like someone's style you can 'follow' them to see what they have to say, and they may even follow you back. If it all sounds a bit unfamiliar, or you think email and the like is quite enough, don't worry - it's easy to give it a go, and you might even enjoy it. Below are some notable Twitterers - to follow them or see what they have to say, just click the links:

- [Stephen Fry](#) (British National Treasure)
- [John Cleese](#) (Python and mustard fan)
- [Al Gore](#) (erstwhile President of the USA and environmental campaigner)
- [PZ Meyers](#) (author of the Pharyngula blog)
- [Penn Jillette](#) (presenter of the 'Bullshit' TV series and half of Penn and Teller)
- [Robert Llewellyn](#) ('Kryten' in Red Dwarf and presenter of Scrapheap Challenge)
- [Phil Plait](#) (astronomer and skeptic)
- [Mars Phoenix](#) (the Mars Phoenix Rover)
- [Darth Vader](#) (Sith Lord)
- [The Atheist Bus Campaign](#)
- [The Flying Spaghetti Monster](#)

And feel free to [follow me!](#)

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[The BHA](#) launched its new website yesterday (6 January). We're assured they haven't copied our colour scheme – we were just ahead of the trend.

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[Atheist ads can now be seen on buses](#) in London and across the UK, thanks to the hugely successful campaign launched by the [Guardian's Comment is Free](#) writer, [Ariane Sherine](#). They read, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life". Originally, Ariane appealed for £5,500 to place ads on London buses to counter nasty Christian messages, [Prof Richard Dawkins](#) pledged his support, the [BHA](#) took on the organisation through the [Just Giving](#) website, and the whole thing took off. Donations streamed in from across the UK and abroad, eventually totalling over £135,000 (and rising).

Yesterday, the first buses were waved off by Ariane with BHA President Polly Toynbee, Vice-President Prof Richard Dawkins, philosopher Prof A C Grayling, and 'Father Ted' TV writer Graham Linehan.

Why "probably"? Richard Dawkins says he'd have preferred "almost certainly". [The BHA Explains](#).

Photo of Ariane Sherine & Richard Dawkins © Jon Worth / British Humanist Association.

Tags: [Buses](#), [Atheism](#), [Ads](#), [Advertisements](#)

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Send your family and friends (especially the scientifically confused ones) this Darwin Day greetings card for the 12th February. Spread the word about how wonderful evolution is. It's designed to be printed on A4 and folded in four, as a notelet. It's free!

[File Attachment: Darwin Day card.pdf \(226 KB\)](#)

[How do you open pdf files?](#)

Tags: [Free+stuff](#), [Darwin](#), [Darwin+Day](#)

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You can read [Darwin's 'Origin of Species' online](#), if you can't be bothered to buy it.

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Charles+Darwin](#), [Origin+of+Species](#)

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There are some [atheist ads](#) on buses from the Eastern Counties garage in Norwich that cross the border into Suffolk. Haven't yet worked out where all these places are (apart from Bungay) but you might see one if you live near ... Arminghall, Attlebridge, Bawdeswell, Bintree, Bowthorpe, Bungay, Caistor St Edmund, Catfield, Costessey, Cringleford, Ditchingham, Drayton, Fakenham, Foulsham, Guist, Heartsease, Hedenham, Hellesdon, Hethersett, Horning, Horsford, Lakenham, Long Stratton, Ludham, Lyng, New Rackheath, Norwich,

Old Catton, Poringland, Salhouse, Silfield, Spixworth, Sprowston, Stalham, Sutton, Swainsthorpe, Tasburgh, Taverham, Thorpe Marriott, Trowse, University of East Anglia, Woodton, Wroxham, or Wymondham.

If you see one, take a pic and let us and [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#) have a copy.

Tags: [Buses](#), [Atheist+bus+campaign](#), [Ads](#), [Norwich](#), [Suffolk](#)

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On Saturday I conducted a Humanist wedding and a naming at a local [Unitarian](#) Meeting House, a wonderful venue at which we are always made most welcome. After the ceremony some people came up to me and said they'd enjoyed the whole thing so much they were going to start coming every Sunday!

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[Graham Nunn](#)'s video of the bus launch on 6th January, with Ariane Sherine, Hanne Stinson, A C Grayling, Richard Dawkins and Graham Lineham. Graham Nunn wrote, "The footage is a bit shaky at times, for which I apologise, but it was very cold and I couldn't stop shivering." How did Ariane manage to speak without her teeth chattering, in a skimpy T-shirt?

Considering how atheists have been maligned by religious critics, who use words like "aggressive" and "militant" to describe the people behind the [Atheist Bus Campaign](#), you can see that the bus launch was a good-humoured affair.

One critic, who describes himself as an atheist, is [Stephen Marche in the Canadian Weekend Post](#). Bah!

Tags: [Atheist+bus](#), [Atheism](#), [Buses](#)

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Encouragingly, US President Barack Obama's inaugural speech included the words, "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and non-believers." [The IHEU](#) reports, "This is believed to be a first for a United States President."

[The American Humanist Association is placing an ad](#) in The Washington Post with the heading, "President Obama: Living Proof that Family Values Without Religion Build Character." In his book, "The Audacity of Hope", Obama wrote that his mother was a "witness for secular humanism."

After the bigotry of the Bush years, Obama's attitude is a refreshing change. However, there have been criticisms of the religious tone of the inauguration and [the choice of the Rev. Rick Warren to give the invocation](#). One of my US contacts blogged, "I am still pissed off that Obama allowed that anti-gay bastard [Rick Warren](#) to pray/perform at the inauguration, and that the inauguration was laden with religion."

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[The Advertising Standards Authority decided today that the atheist bus ads didn't break its code.](#) [Stephen Green](#) of Christian Voice must be seething, tee hee! All aboard please, ding ding!

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Ms Palin is the winner of [the 2008 Bad Faith Award](#), nominated for “Being an election and a heart attack away from controlling the world’s largest thermonuclear arsenal while simultaneously believing that the End Times may arrive during her lifetime.”

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[A statue of Charles Darwin as a young man will be unveiled at Christ's College, Cambridge, on 12th February](#), the bi- centenary of his birth. Sculptor Anthony Smith says he wants to change Darwin’s image from that of a “wizened Victorian gentleman”.

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[Stonewall](#), the campaigning organisation for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals, has named [Suffolk County Council as being among the top one hundred employers](#) for these groups for the second year running. SCC has “diversity champions” at all levels in its organisation.

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If you [Twitter](#), you might add [New Humanist](#) to your list.

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The more publicity that’s given to the Darwin bi-centenary, the nastier some creationists become. [The Atheist Bus Campaign](#) began in reaction to some messages about non-believers burning in a lake of hellfire for eternity, and now that nice [David Attenborough is being told he'll burn in hell](#), for not giving God credit for his “creation”.

A couple of creationists from Clacton wrote a letter to the East Anglian Daily Times about the bus campaign and Darwin, published on 14 January. They wrote that the BBC would “very probably be showing a bias in favour of evolution ... in their contributions to the anniversary celebrations.”

[File Attachment: Letter, Wakeling, EADT.jpg \(194 KB\)](#)

Graham Nunn, who designed the Atheist Bus ads, wrote an excellent letter, published on 21 January, explaining the campaign.

[File Attachment: Graham Nunn's letter.jpg \(163 KB\)](#)

The EADT also published a letter from me on 23 January. I’ll probably get more hate mail.

[File Attachment: Letter to EADT.jpg \(68 KB\)](#)

Update, 27 January – in today’s paper, another stubborn creationist refuses to consider Darwinism. Bet that if he watched BBC4 last night ([What Darwin didn't know](#)), he didn’t understand it.

[File Attachment: Missing links, EADT, 27 Jan 09.jpg \(66 KB\)](#)

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Harold Blackham, ‘architect of the British and international humanist movements’ and ‘founder of the British Humanist Association’, died at the age of 105 on 23 January.

[Read his obituary on the BHA website.](#)

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An article by Kate Whiting in the East Anglian Daily Times yesterday refers to [the resignation of Prof. Michael Reiss from the Royal Society](#) last year, after he said that Creationism should be discussed in science lessons if students wanted to.

[File Attachment: EADT creationist story, 28 Jan 09.jpg \(527 KB\)](#)

The article mentions that Reiss was in the working party that drew up the [DCSF](#) advice to schools about creationism in 2007, including the need to “respect” religious students’ views.

Would a teacher of mathematics be expected to “respect” a child’s views if his or her religious family had taught him or her that $4+4=7$? Or would a Geography teacher be expected to “respect” the opinion of a child from a family of flat-earthists? So why should one respect the views of a creationist?

[Read why the Creationists are wrong.](#)

[Article by Jerry Coyne on “The never-ending attempt to reconcile science and religion, and why it is doomed to fail.”](#)

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There’s a new [Humanists for Science](#) group on Blogger, affiliated to the [BHA](#). Latest posts ponder whether we’re losing opportunities for science and wonder, and whether atheism fosters immorality? We know the answer to the latter, surely.

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[The James Hemming essay prize](#) will be awarded in July 2009. The competition is open to any student at a UK school or college studying for AS or A2 levels who will not have passed his or her 19th birthday by 31st March 2009. The subject is “In life, the meaning comes in living”. First prize £1000. Do you know someone who might enter?

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[Derby City Hospital is haunted](#), apparently. Maybe it’s looking for its appendix?

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The results of the Rescuing Darwin survey, published to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth by the [Theos](#) think tank, make depressing reading. A staggering proportion of the UK population are woefully ignorant about evolution. I’d like to say it surprised me, but it didn’t. [The story’s on the Guardian website](#), beginning as follows:

Half of British adults do not believe in evolution, with at least 22% preferring the theories of creationism or intelligent design to explain how the world came about, according to a survey.

The poll found that 25% of Britons believe Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is "definitely true", with another quarter saying it is "probably true". Half of the 2,060 people questioned were either strongly opposed to the theory or confused about it.

I wrote a couple of comments. The first one was,

This is horribly depressing, but not very surprising. I visit schools as an atheist/humanist to talk to kids as part of their RE courses. When I've asked Year 10 or 11 kids how much they know about evolution, the answer's usually been very little, or nothing at all. Their science lessons cover bits of the story, like human or plant biology, but don't seem to put things in context, so they don't get the bigger picture. They have no idea how old the Earth is, or what evolution means. Seems to me they're leaving school completely ignorant of some of the most exciting things they could be learning about in science lessons.

A scientifically trained friend who’s involved with education read [my previous post about an article in the East Anglian Daily Times](#), and emailed,

It is all extremely depressing ... In my optimistic youth I was convinced that superstitious nonsense would disappear under the influence of education and the obvious superiority of scientific methodology and logic. I thought that humankind was heading for the stars both literally and metaphorically. I was wrong. They are descending back into ignorance. Mit der Dummheit kämpfen die Götter selbst vergebens*.

*"Against Stupidity, the Gods Themselves Contend in Vain" – a quote from Friedrich Schiller's play *Jungfrau von Orléan*, which Isaac Asimov used for the title for his book "The Gods Themselves". Asimov said, "Creationists make it sound as though a 'theory' is something you dreamt up after being drunk all night."

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We've been invited to an event in Ipswich this weekend. Various local groups with an interest in the environment, including Suffolk Wildlife Trust and the Ipswich Society, will be there. No idea why religious faith matters even if you're an atheist. If you want to find out, let us know how it goes.

We are having an Energy Day this coming Saturday at St Margaret's Church Hall in Bolton Lane Ipswich and I have attached a poster about the event. Please will you display it in some appropriate place.

[File Attachment: Energy Day poster.pdf \(673 KB\)](#)

Mark Dowd of [Operation Noah](#) will give his talk 'Climate Change....why religious faith matters even if you're an atheist!' in the upstairs Meeting Room in the St Margaret's Church Centre at 11 am. Mark is an excellent speaker and if you have not heard him I suggest you look at [the film 'God is Green'](#).

Regards, Charles Croydon

[Click here to find out about pdf files](#)

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We've hired a display case at the entrance to Ipswich Central Library for the week including Darwin Day (12th February), the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Offers of help to set it up welcome.

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The [atheist bus ads campaign](#) has led to all sorts of reactions, from the thousands of atheists (and a few Christians) who contributed to the fund that paid for them (far in excess of expectations) to [the ultra-sensitive driver who wouldn't drive](#), and the sneers of those who accused us of agnosticism with that "probably".

Now there are [new ads from the Christian Party, the Trinitarian Bible Society and the Russian Orthodox Church](#), asserting that "There definitely is a God", though they offer no proof, as usual.

[The BHA's Hanne Stinson has made a statement in response to requests for comments about the new ads](#), that includes,

Our ads were funded entirely by thousands of individual donors who gave small amounts in an outpouring of popular support for the positive message. The ads now launched in response to our response are funded by organisations or wealthy individuals.

Our ads were positive and peaceful. They didn't say, for example, that religious people were 'fools', unlike one of the response ads being run, which says that "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God."

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In response to letters in today's East Anglian Daily Times ([File Attachment: EADT prayer letters.jpg \(185 KB\)](#) about [the nurse facing disciplinary action for praying for a patient](#), I've sent the following reply:

As an old age pensioner I've been around far too long to believe you can change the minds of the god deluded. The sheer implausibility of the supernatural can only be accepted by working it out for yourself, as recalled by the young David Attenborough, now in his eighties, who recently said, "I remember looking at my headmaster delivering a sermon, a classicist, extremely clever ... and thinking, he can't really believe all that, can he? How incredible."

Christine Hart (EADT Letters 6th February) is free to believe whatever she likes about anything, including the power of prayer, comfortable in the knowledge that she is never likely to be called upon to provide a scrap of real evidence to support her assertions.

However neither she nor Caroline Petrie, the nurse who was suspended for offering to pray for a hospital patient, have any right to assume that their genuflections are welcomed by everyone into whose lives they seek to poke their noses.

The fact remains that the only properly conducted study into the efficacy of [prayer for the sick, reported in the American Heart Journal of April 2006](#), showed conclusively that, overall, medical outcome was no different for those who were prayed for and those who weren't. Some patients, from a very large sample studied, were actually told they were being prayed for but sadly for the god botherers those people ended up suffering disproportionately more complications than those who had no idea they were supposed to be getting help from 'up there somewhere'.

Yours faithfully, David Mitchell

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Jerry A. Coyne, Ph.D, is a Professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolution at the University of Chicago and a member of both the Committee on Genetics and the Committee on Evolutionary Biology. He wrote "Why Evolution is True", a book that [many ignorant Britons](#) ought to read. Now [Jerry has a blog](#). Thanks to P Z Myers for flagging this up on [his blog](#).

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To celebrate Darwin's birth, [Ipswich Museum](#) is offering "funny, exciting and thoughtful tales inspired by animals and Darwin's discoveries" for children over half term – Tuesday 17th to Friday 20th February.

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[Dr Tim Jones has blogged about the annual Secularist of the Year Award](#), which has been jointly awarded to Dr Evan Harris MP and Lord Avebury for their success in getting the blasphemy laws abolished. The fact that Tim's used [my Darwin images](#) for his site banner is rather pleasing.

SH&S webmaster [Nathan Nelson](#) has begun a new blog, designed to be run in conjunction with his Open University course. It's called [Big Wide World](#), and is "trying to make sense of big words like sustainability, technology, environment and development."

Do you blog or twitter? Let us know.

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[The Open University has a neat toy](#) on its Darwin bi-centennial site. If you upload a photo of yourself, you can morph into someone who lived 37 million years ago. This is me. It's not flattering, but a 37 million-year-old man might think I'm gorgeous.

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If there are no atheist buses in your neighbourhood, [display an ad in your car instead](#). All profits to the campaign.

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The 12th February 2009 was the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin. Our member Dan Clery has written his story:

Charles Darwin, born on the 12th February 200 years ago, came up with what is probably the most important idea in the history of science. He reasoned that plants, animals and all living things are not static and unchanging, remaining as they were made by a divine creator; instead they change subtly from one generation to the next and those that are better suited to whatever environment they find themselves in prosper and reproduce more, while those that are less well suited don't. In this way, plants and animals gradually change, eventually developing into new species and producing the huge variety of nature that we see today. Darwin's theory, evolution by natural selection, is at the root of our understanding about life on Earth: it explains why there is such diversity in nature, why we are here, and why we are as we are.

When Darwin graduated from Cambridge University in 1831, there was little sign of the revolutionary that he would eventually become. He was an enthusiastic and good natured young man from a well-to-do family, destined to become a country clergyman. He had, however, developed a passion for natural history, both as a boy and in his student years when he would scour the countryside around Cambridge looking for beetles.

Out of the blue, soon after graduation, one of his professors recommended him for the position of unpaid naturalist on a Royal Navy survey ship. He travelled to London and met Robert Fitzroy, captain of HMS Beagle, who was preparing to survey the coast of South America. Fitzroy was a deeply religious man who hoped that any scientific discoveries made on the expedition would provide evidence for the literal truth of the bible. Darwin was soon signed up and on 27th December 1831 the Beagle set sail from Plymouth.

Darwin suffered terribly from seasickness but when they arrived in Brazil he was overwhelmed by the richness and diversity of life in the rainforest. He spent much time ashore, based in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, while the Beagle mapped the coast of Argentina. He travelled deep into the rainforest collecting specimens and crossed the Argentinean pampas with the local gauchos. He carefully preserved and packed up hundreds of specimens of plants and animals and shipped them back to England for later study. His discoveries set him thinking about the nature of species and whether they were really unchangeable and had all originated from one divine act of creation.

With Darwin back on board the Beagle, they passed through the Straits of Magellan into the Pacific. While Fitzroy surveyed the coast of Chile, Darwin journeyed high into the Andes by mule and made the startling discovery of layers of fossilised seashells. Geology too was thought to be unchanged since God created it, but Darwin surmised that the Andes must have been slowly pushed up over the aeons of geological time by enormous underground movements. While in Chile, the crew of the Beagle experienced an earthquake that killed nearly a hundred local people. When the shocks had subsided, Darwin noticed that coastal land had risen up by a few feet. If that was possible, numerous quakes over millennia could lift seashells up into the mountains.

The Beagle's next port of call was the Galapagos Islands, 500 miles off the coast of Ecuador. The crew found the Galapagos to be an inhospitable place, made of black volcanic rock, but Darwin was intrigued by the wildlife there. Each animal was a member of a unique species not seen anywhere else in the world, but all had some striking similarities to specimens he had recently encountered in South America. There were also marked differences between the same type of animal found on different islands of the Galapagos: finches on one island had thick beaks suited to cracking the nuts that grew there, while on another island the finches had long thin beaks suitable for winnowing out insects. Similarly, the giant tortoises that roamed the islands had a different shaped shell if their island had abundant ground vegetation compared to ones on islands dominated by trees.

This got Darwin thinking. What if the Galapagos had been created relatively recently – geologically speaking – by a volcanic eruption and a few plants and animals had managed to fly, swim or drift there from South America. Those unsuited to the conditions on the barren new islands would perish, but if they survived and had offspring they, simply through natural variation, might be better or worse suited to the islands and so have differing chances of survival. In this way, natural variations and the simple process of survival of the fittest gradually created the new species uniquely suited to life on each of the Galapagos Islands.

It was nearly a year later, in October 1836, that the Beagle arrived back in England and so Darwin had had plenty of time to ponder his discoveries and extend his idea. He concluded that all of nature's diversity, including human beings, must have branched out from a small number of primitive forms in the very distant past. That idea was so radical and contrary to the teachings of the church that Darwin was reluctant to reveal it to the world. He spent 10 years cataloguing his specimens from the voyage of the Beagle and writing a detailed account which was then published. He continued to investigate how species changed by studying the breeding of pigeons and plants that he grew in his garden. He wrote a summary of his theory of evolution and hid it away with instructions to his wife to publish it if he should suddenly die.

Then in 1858, 22 years after the Beagle's return, his hand was forced when another naturalist, Alfred Russell Wallace, sent him an essay he had written describing the very same ideas. Darwin arranged for both Wallace's essay and a summary of his own theory to be read out to a meeting of the Linnean Society in London the following month. The event didn't cause much of a stir at the time, but a year later, 150 years ago, Darwin published *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. All 1250 copies of the first edition were sold out on the day of publication.

Darwin's theory split the scientific world and popular opinion. It caused a schism between science and the church. Gradually, over the past century and a half, evolution has come to be accepted by virtually all scientists and it has transformed biology from a science that simply classified and catalogued species to one that understands and can study how species change and adapt to their surroundings. From that has come the science of genetics and modern medicine. It has also influenced geology, archaeology and palaeontology. There are still many people who believe that God created the natural world as it is today, but the amount of scientific evidence now amassed in favour of evolution is hard to dispute.

On the Origin of Species ends with these lines:

Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, 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.

To mark Darwin Day, we've filled a display case in the Northgate Street entrance to Ipswich County Library with information about Charles Darwin, including the above, and left some leaflets with an evolution reading list. [File Attachment: Darwin leaflets.pdf \(706 KB\)](#) The exhibit will be there until first thing on Monday morning (16th February).

My thanks to Dan Clery for the introduction to Darwin, to Sharon at Sharward Services for all the last minute printing, and to David Mitchell, Andrew Morrison and Jenness Proctor for helping me to set everything up.



The above poster was made using two copyright-free 19th century prints. For a full size version to download, [click here](#).

“Man is descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped, probably arboreal in its habits” – Charles Darwin

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There's [a quiz to test your knowledge of Charles Darwin on the Think Humanism site](#).

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After our dismal failure to excite any of the students at University Campus Suffolk about a secular students' society (we haven't given up though), and the reports of science students who won't accept evolution, it's heartening to hear that there's still some freethinking on British campuses. Hurrah for [the AHS](#)! Read about it in [The Independent](#).

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From today's [NSS](#) Newsline:



Murphy O'Connor must not be given a peerage

[The Times reports today](#) that the Government is considering offering a peerage to Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, who is soon to retire as leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. This will be the first time a Catholic cleric has sat in Parliament since the reformation.

The Times says that "The prospect of offering Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor a life peerage is understood to have been discussed during Gordon Brown's meeting with the Pope at the Holy See last week."

Murphy O'Connor will bring the Vatican's reactionary, homophobic, misogynistic and manipulative agenda right into the heart of our parliament.

But worse than that, Murphy O'Connor appears to be being rewarded when he should be on the grill being asked to explain his activities in relation to the foul child abusing priest 'Father' Michael Hill.

In the 1980s Murphy O'Connor was the bishop of Arundel and Brighton. Although he was aware that one of his priests — Michael Hill — was a dangerous paedophile he did nothing to prevent his access to children. When the abuse came to light, Murphy O'Connor helped Hill to move from one parish to another, where his activities continued. Murphy O'Connor ignored three warnings that Hill was likely to offend. Finally, Hill was moved to a place where he could do most harm, with the least chance of discovery – as a chaplain at Gatwick airport. It was there that he abused even more defenceless children. The police eventually brought his reign of terror to an end, but not before this monster had ruined the lives of countless children and young people, some of them suffering from disabilities.

Not only was there abuse on a massive scale, of which the Cardinal was aware, money was paid by the Roman Catholic Church to victims in his diocese to hush the matter up. I am not aware of any apology or explanation for this by the Cardinal.

All this could have been prevented if the Cardinal had not tried to sweep it under the carpet.

There were strong suspicions that other priests in the Arundel and Brighton area had also been involved in child abuse while under the

wing of Murphy O'Connor, but for some reason the investigation into the Cardinal's culpability came to an abrupt halt. The Times reports are very disturbing.

The BBC, [which was investigating the matter](#), inexplicably dropped the story and the police enquiry fizzled out when the Catholic Church accused the media of "persecuting" Murphy O'Connor.

The victims of the crimes committed under the leadership of this man, who is now about to be given privileged access to our lawmaking body, certainly don't think he was persecuted. They think that the real crime is that he got off scot-free.

Murphy O'Connor's defence is that "the decisions he made at that time were not irresponsible and that there was a genuine ignorance among bishops, priests, and society at large about the compulsive nature of child abuse". For a bishop of an organisation purporting to be a moral authority to claim to be ignorant of something everyone else knew can only be stupidity and / or dishonesty of a stunning degree. Neither commend him for a seat in the Lords.

The President [of the NSS] has written to the Prime Minister in terms similar to the above. Please write to your MP and complain about this proposal and suggest they ask a Parliamentary Question. Murphy O'Connor must not be rewarded for these unpardonable actions with a seat in the House of Lords.

[Write to your MP now.](#)

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This is a monthly update of news from **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU). You can find the full versions of these news stories [on their web site](#). Visit www.iheu.org/newsletter to subscribe.

One Law for All - anti-racist rally - London, 7 March 2009

The One Law for All Campaign against Sharia Law in Britain will hold an anti-racist rally in London on 7 March 2009. The rally, opposing Sharia and religious-based tribunals and laws in Britain and elsewhere and defending citizenship and universal rights, will be held in Trafalgar Square from 3.30 pm to 4.30 pm. [Read more](#)

Happy Birthday to the Vatican!

IHEU member organization the French Libre Pensée has sent Pope Benedict XVI ironic congratulations on the 80th anniversary of the foundation of the Vatican State by the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini and Pope Pius XI. [Read more](#)

February 2009 IHN published

The February 2009 issue of International Humanist News has been published. This edition includes features on *Celebrating Darwin*; and *Humanism Down Under*. [Read more](#)

Judge Tosti cleared!

In a ruling dated February 17, 2009, the Court of Cassation (Supreme Court) in Rome has acquitted Judge Tosti of all charges. Judge Tosti had been sentenced to seven months in prison for refusing to hold court under a crucifix. This ruling is a great victory for all secularists, in particular the Giordano Free Thought Federation. [Read more](#)

IHEU commemorates murder of Giordano Bruno

The President of IHEU, Sonja Eggerickx, has sent greetings to the Libero Pensiero "Giordano Bruno" on the occasion of their annual commemoration in the Campo de' Fiori, Rome on the occasion of the 409th anniversary of the murder of Giordano Bruno by the Catholic Church. The ceremony was attended this year by Hugo Estrella representing IHEU. [Read more](#)

Why is Secularism essential? Sweden, 8 March 2009

The Organisation for Women's Liberation is holding an international conference in Sweden on the occasion of International Women's Day, 8 March 2009, called: Why is Secularism essential? The conference will focus on the detrimental effect of religion on women's lives. [Read more](#)

Humanists take lead in Darwin Day celebration

In honor of the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birthday, the American Humanist Association held a luncheon at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., featuring a range of engaging speakers who discussed Darwin's role in shaping religion and science. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the country and around the world, Darwin Day was being widely celebrated by humanist and scientific groups. [Read more](#)

The West standing firm on Freedom of Expression

In the run-up to the UN conference on Racism (The Durban Review Conference) to be held in Geneva in April, IHEU representatives have been attending the informal preparatory meetings charged with agreeing the outcome document to be presented to the conference. [Read more](#)

IHEU replies to Benin on Slavery

IHEU has responded to the attack on IHEU by the Benin Mission to the UN in Geneva. The response is in the form of a letter to the Mission and a paper made available at the informal meeting to discuss the upcoming conference on Racism in Geneva. [Read more](#)

International Religious Freedom Caucus

The Jubilee Campaign in collaboration with other religious freedom advocacy organizations will be hosting the new International Religious Freedom Caucus for a reception on March 19th from 6-8pm. [Read more](#)

It is time our leaders learned that Islam is just another religion

It was a bad week for freedom. On Monday and Tuesday 9/10 February, an Islamic mob in Kolkata (Calcutta) called for the arrest of Ravindra Kumar and Anand Sinha, the editor and publisher of the Statesman, one of the oldest and most respected English-language newspapers in India. On cue, the Indian authorities arrested both men on Wednesday. [Read more](#)

Celebrating Darwin and Galileo - a conference in Hyderabad, India - 14-15 February 2009

The conference is arranged under the aegis of IHEU and co-organised by Manava Vikasa Vedika and Jana Vignana Vedika. Venue: Auditorium of the Indian Institute for Chemical Technology, Uppal Road, Tarnaka, Hyderabad, India. [Read more](#)

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This Saturday, the day before [International Women's Day](#), the [One Law for All Campaign](#) against Sharia Law is organising a demonstration and public meeting in Central London. Maryam Namazie emailed:

We are looking forward to seeing many of you at the anti-racist London rally against Sharia and religious-based laws in Britain and elsewhere and in defence of citizenship and universal rights in Trafalgar Square from 3:30-4:30pm. You can find posters that have been prepared for the rally by Dan Simon and Reza Moradi on [our website](#). Please feel free to download them and bring them along to the rally to ensure that there are enough placards for everyone. At 4:30pm we will begin our march to Red Lion Square and then join a public meeting at Conway Hall from 6:00-8:00pm. We will be registering people for the public meeting at Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square WC1R 4RL from 5:00pm. From 5:30pm onwards, there will be live music by *Raised Voices*, pastries and refreshments. The entry fee to the public meeting is £5, including refreshments, but we won't turn anyone away. If you plan on coming, try and send in your booking form before the event (by March 6) so that we can reserve a place for you.

We now have over 9,700 signatories to our petition. Please sign up to it if you haven't already and tell others about it too. For more background on One Law for All, the nature of Sharia councils and tribunals and on whether it is Islamophobic to oppose Sharia law, see the latest interview with Maryam Namazie and Bahram Soroush on Fariborz Pooya's Secular TV: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/mediaPages/SecularTV.html>. You can also see what a Sharia judge really means for people and women in particular by watching a recent BBC TV Big Questions programme in which I participated: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAKRvBe_-EA.

If you haven't seen it, the opinions expressed by a fundamentalist Muslim on the Big Questions programme are truly horrifying. He speaks about killing people in the name of his religion, and his arrogance is breathtaking.

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[Cath Elliott has written a piece for the Guardian's Comment is Free](#) website about [a Theos survey](#) on faith and Darwin, which indicates that East Anglia is "full of atheists".

So far from being the Sodom and Gomorrah that religious folk would no doubt have the godless east pegged as, according to the latest British Crime Survey (pdf), "The East of England region had the lowest rates of overall recorded crime and violence against the person and amongst the lowest rates of burglary and offences against vehicles. This region also had significantly lower rates of BCS burglary, vehicle-related theft and violent crime, and risk of household crime than England and Wales overall." London on the other hand, which has one of the highest percentages of religious believers, also has the highest crime rates in the country.

So, if you're one those god-free East Anglians, how about joining us? Help us to raise the profile of Humanism and secularism, and help us ensure that there are no more faith schools in our region, and that a small minority of religious people don't gain any more special privileges at public expense. Not only that, but you'll find that we're a lively, friendly bunch of law-abiding atheists. There's no collective noun for us yet; maybe you can think of one? (Without being rude).

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Please note that we're moving from Castle Hill Community Centre to Pinewood Community Hall, on the other side of Ipswich, and from the second Wednesday of the month to the second Tuesday. The usual stuff - reports about our finances, etc., and the election of officers and committee members, then a discussion about our plans for the coming year - we'd love your ideas and suggestions, so please come

and share them. We'll be in the lounge, next to the front door. [Get in touch](#) to request of offer a lift. The hall is in Laburnum Close, Ipswich, IP8 3SL, near the A12/A14 Copdock interchange and Copdock Tesco. From the interchange, on the A1214 London Road towards the town centre, turn right opposite Tesco into Scrivener Drive. At the 4th right-hand junction, a roundabout, turn right into Shepherd Drive. From Ipswich town centre, follow the A1214 almost to the end and turn left at the traffic lights (opposite the A1071 road to Hadleigh) into Sprites Lane, which leads into Scrivener Drive, then left at the roundabout into Shepherd Drive. In Shepherd Drive, it's first left into Laburnum Close (signed to Pinewood Surgery). The car park is at the end of the close on the right, after the surgery. Guests and raffle prizes always welcome. If the door at Pinewood Hall is locked, press the buzzer to be let in.

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Our March newsletter is online now for you to download. Feel free to give copies to all your family and friends, especially all the "godless" people we hear are in East Anglia.

[File Attachment: SH&S News March 2009 A4.pdf \(634 KB\)](#)

Not sure about pdf files? [No problem!](#)

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In response to the article in the latest Newsletter, 'Replicating the social functions of religious organisations'. Firstly, a quick nod to Margaret. Margaret, I see you often end forum posts and have signed-off the most recent Newsletter with an appeal for more activity. I haven't (as yet) attended any of the Suffolk Humanist meetings and (until now) haven't really posted on the forums with any conviction. This doesn't mean I'm shy or less than a committed Humanist. I (I'm sure like many others) occasionally browse the website and read the Newsletter with enthusiasm. Topic: Is a Humanist Movement a bad idea? Humanism is a rallying point for those with a substantial doubt about metaphysical matters; for those who can clearly see that a Society mixed with Religion can only result in social divisions and eventually conflict. Maybe Darwin wasn't right, and maybe Dawkins isn't right; but they've made or are making a way of thinking about the world and our collective existence that dares to challenge religiosity and absolute truths. These people and their contemporaries have helped to publicise or helped to advance human thinking. However, it is important to not deify Humanism or it's most public figures lest we fall into the trap of immutable truths. Humanism it seems to me, is as unique to each of us as individuals. And it evolves. For me, Humanism is about demonstrating clear, flexible and objective thinking rather than subscribing to any doctrine; this is what makes Humanism unique. Surely a Humanist movement would become a rallying point for those whose appeal of the apparent rebelliousness nihilism of Humanism deem as the 'new thing'. It would become a hook for those for whom religion is 'so yesterday'. Humanism, doesn't need logo's, badges, flags, colours, evangelists or champions. It is a quiet revolution in thinking, objectivity, freedom and compassion. Therefore, the notion that Humanism can represent itself via a Humanist Movement that sets itself against others seems entirely wrong. MA.

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Seed magazine's website has [a video of 4.6 billion years of the earth's history](#) condensed into a minute. The evolution of humankind is a barely discernible blip.

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Yesterday, our Celebrant David Mitchell conducted [a Humanist funeral for Kate Wasyluk](#), one of the victims of Scott Nicholls, whose car struck Kate and her friends Emma (who was also killed) and Rebecca Harold, who were walking home from an evening out on 21 February. [Nicholls has been charged with dangerous driving](#), driving while disqualified, and driving without a licence.

Nearly 300 mourners attended the funeral at Ipswich Crematorium, where David described the incident as "utterly pointless, utterly random, utterly wasteful".

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Good news! Thanks to the efforts of committee member John Palmer, who scouted the area, we've found a new venue for our meetings. From next month (our AGM) we'll be at the Pinewood Community Hall (owned by the parish council) on Hawthorn Drive, Ipswich, not far from the A12/14 Copdock interchange and Tesco. The car park is in Laburnum Close at the rear, next to Pinewood Surgery. See the events calendar for a map.

We'll be in the lounge from 7.30–10pm on the second Tuesday of every month from Tuesday 14 April, not Wednesday 8 April as

previously stated. More details to follow.

Thank you to everyone who made helpful suggestions.

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Any of our members and supporters who read the Daily Mail may have been alarmed by the article they published on Friday 20 March headed "[How cash meant for promoting faith is going to an organisation that campaigns AGAINST Christianity](#)". It referred to a grant given to the BHA by The Equality and Human Rights Commission. James Chapman, the Daily Mail journalist, could not have got his facts more wrong. The BHA is seeking a correction from the Mail, and has published [its own corrections on its website](#).

If you are a Daily Mail reader and a Humanist (the Mail possibly thinks the two are incompatible, but we know otherwise), perhaps you'll write to the editor or comment on their website?

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Group member and British Humanist Association trustee Michael Imison will offer his ideas about the BHA's role in society, followed by another point of view from Margaret Nelson, then there'll be a discussion. What do you think about the suggestion that there should be a "Humanist Movement"? Should Humanists and Secularists try to replicate religious services? Should you be able to have legally-recognised Humanist weddings in England and Wales? What might we do to increase our membership? These are just some of the questions we might try to answer. We're in the lounge (next to the front door) at Pinewood Community Hall, Laburnum Close, Ipswich, IP8 3SL. The hall is near the A12/A14 Copdock interchange and Copdock Tesco. From the interchange, on the A1214 London Road towards the town centre, turn right opposite Tesco into Scrivener Drive. At the 4th right-hand junction, a roundabout, turn right into Shepherd Drive. From Ipswich town centre, follow the A1214 almost to the end and turn left at the traffic lights (opposite the A1071 Hadleigh road) into Sprites Lane, which leads into Scrivener Drive, then left at the roundabout into Shepherd Drive. In Shepherd Drive, it's first left into Laburnum Close (signed to Pinewood Surgery). The car park is at the end of the close on the right, after the surgery. If the door is locked, press the buzzer for entry. If you need or can offer a lift, please get in touch. Guests and raffle prizes always welcome.

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The new RE syllabus for Suffolk schools was introduced in September 2007. It includes Humanism and secular world views. The idea is that children should learn about religion and its alternatives, not to be religious, though the many church schools in the county do things differently. We'll be visited by a teacher from a local county primary school, who'll tell us about her approach. I visited this school a couple of years ago to do an assembly and talk to the older children afterwards. They were very lively and open-minded. We'll be in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Ipswich. For directions, see the map, and the notice of the May meeting in the calendar.

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Our member Tom Boles will boggle our minds with a talk about astronomy, referring to photographs from the Hubble Space Telescope. Come prepared to be awed. We'll be in the lounge at the Pinewood Community Hall - see map. You'll find directions with the notice of the May meeting in the calendar.

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A popular format that allows you to spend ten minutes talking about something that interests, annoys, or pleases you. It might be something you've read about in a newspaper, or an injustice you care about - it's up to you. We'll be in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Ipswich.

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

We'll be in our usual venue - the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Ipswich.

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If you've heard a lot about Humanist ceremonies and would like to know more, come and hear about our religion-free baby-namings, weddings (for heterosexual and homosexual couples), and funerals. Plenty of time for questions.

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Our committee "meets" over the phone. The group is widely scattered over a rural area, so having committee meetings face to face, when committee members are all busy people with family commitments, is often inconvenient. The prospect of having to drive long distances, especially in the winter, can put prospective committee members off volunteering. It's not very environmentally-friendly to drive when you don't have to, and petrol isn't cheap.

For the past few years we've held most committee meetings by telephone conference call, arranged through Community Network, a charity based in London that provides tele-conferences for charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises. Attempts to arrange video conferences have failed because we're not all fluent in Internet-speak. A significant proportion of the group aren't on the Internet anyway. Tele-conferences are easy for even the most technophobic; all you have to do is pick up the phone at a pre-arranged time, and it's not expensive. As far as we know, we're the only local Humanist & Secularist group to use this facility. We wonder why.

Calls can cost from as little as £8.80. [Contact Community Network via their website](#), or phone 020 7923 5250.

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The BBC's online magazine asks "What do you get if you divide science by God?", which is possibly one of the daftest questions imaginable. In an article about "the meaning of physics", Mark Vernon reports:

The Templeton Prize, awarded for contributions to "affirming life's spiritual dimension", has been won by French physicist Bernard d'Espagnat, who has worked on quantum physics with some of the most famous names in modern science.

What the heck is a "spiritual dimension"? What does "spiritual" mean? Blowed if I know. [Why not add a comment on the BBC website?](#)

Yes, I know. I'm just a grumpy old sceptic.

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[A group of Saudi clerics want their government to ban women on TV](#), writing,

We have noticed how well-rooted perversity is in the Ministry of Information and Culture, in television, radio, press, culture clubs and the book fair.

Perversity?

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The [BHA](#) received grant funding from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) for a project which aims to increase understanding of the 'religion or belief' equality 'strand'. As part of this, [the third in a series of conferences was held in Birmingham on 22nd January this year](#). We've previously posted [a report from the Daily Mail](#), which misrepresented the purpose of this work.

With her permission, here is a report on the conference from Alison Rawlinson from [Coventry & Warwickshire Humanists](#), which was published in their newsletter. Alison attended the conference with her husband Mark.

On 22nd January, Mark and I attended the BHA's conference on 'Religion or Belief and Equality in Human Rights' in Birmingham.

The first section of the event took the form of a discussion on the matter of 'Religion or Belief in Education' between [Andrew Copson](#), the BHA's Director of Education and Public Affairs, and Tony Pearce, Regional Officer of the [NUT](#).

Andrew Copson opened by pointing out that schools are perceived as being at the forefront of teaching about toleration and equality, even though in reality schools probably carry out more institutionalised discrimination than any other public organisation. Aside from the obvious bugbear of daily compulsory religious worship, he cited examples of children being told that they will "believe when they get older", and one case where the teacher of a child whose parents were of the Baha'i faith flatly refused to believe that the child wasn't making it up. He pointed out that the acceptance of faith schools and daily acts of worship cause religion to become normalised in society. He made a very interesting point that schools can apply to their local authority for 'determination' which allows them to opt out of daily worship, and that some councils actively encourage this.

Tony Pearce expressed the NUT and NASUWT's concern about state funded faith schools, particularly through the academies programme, as most academies are in some sense religious. He also pointed out that there is a continuous erosion of staff employment rights due to exemptions on religious grounds. He then went on to demonstrate how faith schools' selective nature can lead to socio-economic discrimination. For example, C of E primary schools have only half the number of pupils eligible for free school meals compared to non-religious schools, and the number of children with special educational needs is also lower. In fact, church and foundation schools are 25 times more likely to select children in order to boost their league tables. He also expressed concern that most faith schools are quite unaccountable for the state funding they receive, as they are not obliged to have governors appointed by the local authority and therefore are de facto self-governing.

A third speaker in favour of faith schools was due to attend but had to cancel, so the chairman gave a brief synopsis of his points, i.e. that faith schools provide parental choice, that they give children a familiar environment (in terms of dress, food etc.), that they perform better in exams and that they involve themselves in wider society, including teaching about other faiths.

A fascinating lecture was then given by [Professor A C Grayling](#) on the nature of religious talibanisation. He began by talking about the persecution of early Christians in the Roman Empire and their refusal to publicly observe Roman deities. He then moved on to illustrate how quickly the roles became reversed once Constantine elevated Christianity to its position as official religion of Rome, the persecuted becoming the persecutors within a very short time. Christian coercion continued and escalated, reaching its height by the late mediaeval period with the Inquisition. He recounted the story of Michael Servetus, who was persecuted - and eventually executed for heresy - by Calvin (himself in exile from Catholic persecution) and defended by Sebastian Castellio who publicly denounced Calvin for his hypocrisy towards Servetus. Prof Grayling gave other examples of how the Christian church has talibanised (demanded observance), and commented on the fact that our human right to freedom of religion is not necessarily the same as having freedom from religion.

He then moved on to speak about the amplification of religion. As someone who is regularly invited to speak in debates about religious issues, he pointed out that although he may be one of a panel of five, the remaining four (comprising perhaps a Jew, a Christian, a Muslim and a Sikh) represent only around 8% of the population between them; the only reason so many voices are needed is that they can't agree between themselves! He argued that not every debate is representative of society's distribution of viewpoints, and yet the BBC's policy of giving equal airtime to minority views gives the illusion that each possesses equal weight and public support. Amplification occurs when one religion begins making proportionately more noise than the rest about a particular issue, then the others feel they must be heard too. The Professor pointed out that an increase in volume does not necessarily equate to an increase in number. He concluded by saying that people who have no religious persuasion should be protected from those who do.

In the afternoon, various discussion groups took place. Mark and I attended one run by Anna Fairclough, a lawyer for [Liberty](#), on the subject of freedom of expression. She outlined some recent case law on the topic, then we discussed what limits should be placed on religious belief itself, what limits (if any) should be placed on criticism of religion and whether we should have the right not to be offended. We discussed the notion of blasphemy, and noted that there is little point in having laws that guarantee freedom of expression if they apply only to ideas which are likely to be favourably received.

Being a BHA event, the pervading intention of the day seemed to us to be to remind those attending, some of whom were not Humanists, that when it comes to matters of belief, in the context of people's human rights, the non-belief perspective also has to be addressed.

Alison Rawlinson

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Thanks to Ariane Sherine, for posting the URL on [Twitter](#). If you're on Twitter, let us know – we might follow you.

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If you're one of those people who likes to save up stuff for the weekend, like washing the car, deafening the neighbourhood with a cacophony of power tool noises (note to my neighbours: SHUSH!), or tackling that annoying stain on your carpet, here's an excuse to procrastinate; some weblinks to amuse, annoy or inform you.

[Ariane Sherine](#) of [Atheist Bus](#) and [Comment is Free](#) fame has appealed for subjects to write about. Don't suggest writing about biscuits or insults, as she's already done them.

The Islamic states are destroying the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as applied to freedom of expression. [Yesterday the United Nations Human Rights Council passed a resolution aimed at restricting criticism of religion, or 'religious defamation'](#). They're aiming to silence any criticism of Islam, anywhere.

You may have read about [Google Street View](#), which allows you to take a virtual tour of British cities, and the fuss a few people have made about being caught on camera. [spEak You're bRanes](#), "a collection of ignorance, narcissism, stupidity, hypocrisy and bad grammar" found on the [BBC's Have Your Say](#) website, has found some [examples of street view paranoia](#), such as; "one my my colleagues is clearly visible on Street View, his face is blurred but it's obvious who he is." Who'd have the time to go looking for colleagues with blurry faces? If you're offended by bad language, skip this one.

The No.10 petitions website finally agreed to allow [a petition against Cardinal Murphy O'Connor getting a peerage](#), so why not sign it? Here's [why you should](#), in case you've forgotten.

Once upon a time, wealthy people used to pay clerics to say prayers for their recently deceased relatives, to save them the bother. The idea was to speed the dead through purgatory and on to heaven ASAP. Now you can [pay \\$4.95 a month to have virtual prayers said by computer](#); a snip for busy devout people. New Humanist, not to be outdone, is offering a new [Too Busy to Blaspheme service](#), or "computer-aided cursing."

We haven't any thoughts for the day on BBC Radio Suffolk for a while, since they were cut to weekends only, but you can listen to some [Thought for the World](#) podcasts, courtesy of the Humanist Society of Scotland. The thinkers include BHA President Polly Toynbee, philosopher Nigel Warburton, Ariane Sherine, and comedian Stewart Lee.

[Stewart Lee's](#) Comedy Vehicle on BBC2 (Mondays, 10pm) has been worth watching. He'll be ranting about religion in the next couple of weeks. If you're not familiar with Lee, he was responsible for [Jerry Springer: the Opera](#), which upset [Stephen Green of Christian Voice](#), amongst others.

Tomorrow, Saturday 28th March, you might want to switch off your lights for an hour at 8.30pm as a [vote for the Earth](#), against the effect of human activity on the planet.

During his first visit to Africa recently, Pope Benedict outraged many with his pronouncement that [HIV/Aids was "a tragedy that cannot be overcome by money alone, that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which can even increase the problem"](#). Now the medical profession has firmly contradicted the pope. [The Lancet, the prestigious medical journal, says that the Pope's recent comments that condoms exacerbated the problem of HIV/Aids were wildly inaccurate and could have devastating consequences](#). I'm inclined to wish that the pope's father had worn a condom.

Those atheist buses are still causing controversy and stimulating the little grey cells around the world, including [Seattle, where an atheist](#)

[group is placing ads with atheist quotes in the city's buses.](#)

BHA Vice-President Dr Evan Harris MP has been in the news today with his [private members' bill that aims to end discrimination in the British Royal Family](#). Although it's not part of Dr Harris's proposal, it's hard to see how this could work without disestablishment, or, as [Dr David Starkey](#) has pointed out, couldn't we have a Catholic as head of the C of E, a role held by the monarch?

I conducted a funeral the other day where a teenager asked me to say that her gran is an angel, looking down from a cloud. Since the highest clouds are about 45,000 feet above us (I write as [member No. 2812 of the Cloud Appreciation Society](#)), I guess she doesn't imagine heaven's very far away. [Go a bit further](#), and you won't find any angels.

That's enough for now. No more procrastination for me. Things to do, kitchen to tidy, washing to dry. Have a good weekend.

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The latest news update from [the BHA](#) – click on “read more” for the whole bulletin.

BHA meets Department of Communities and Local Government

Representatives from the BHA met with officials from the Department of Communities and Local Government on Friday to discuss Humanist involvement in their community cohesion work. This meeting was part of a follow up from the successful meeting the BHA had with Minister Sadiq Khan in February where Mr Khan agreed that humanist representatives should be involved in relevant discussions on public service delivery and cohesion initiatives. Pepper Harow, Local Campaigns Officer, explained, “All too often the department choose to work exclusively with religious groups. Initiatives such as ‘interfaith week’ as announced last week are planned and implemented without any non-religious voices being heard. This meeting is a big step in trying to change this.”

Discrimination in succession to the Crown must end

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has restated its support for a Bill that seeks to end discrimination in succession to the Crown. BHA Vice President Dr Evan Harris MP is seeking to end centuries of ingrained anti-Catholic and sexist prejudice in the UK Constitution with his Private Member's Bill: ‘Royal Marriages and Succession to the Crown (Prevention of Discrimination) Bill’. [Read more on our site.](#)

We need secular public spaces for community life to flourish

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has responded to a new government report “Church and Faith Buildings”. Hanne Stinson, BHA Chief Executive, said, ‘It appears from this report that the Church is using the influence of its “unique legal status as the Established Church” to exert pressure on the Government to include it as a key partner in the provision of welfare, community and other public services – and that the Government is acceding to those demands.’ [Read the full story on our website.](#)

British Humanist Association responds on Government's “interfaith week”

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has responded to the Government's announcement of its first “interfaith week”. We said, ‘It is of course important that people have some understanding of each other's beliefs and values and interfaith dialogue can contribute to this, but this “inter faith week” is unlikely to add much to the wider aims of social cohesion and intercultural interaction. The Government is prioritising – and funding – the religious aspect of good relations and social cohesion, with the majority of the UK's population relegated to a footnote.’ [Read the full story on our website](#)

Welcome for inclusion of Humanism in new GCSE

The BHA has welcomed a new GCSE from the OCR exam board that will enable students to study Humanism and humanist organisations as part of a study of religions and beliefs in the modern world. Andrew Copson, director of education at the BHA said, ‘The non-religious, non-religious beliefs such as Humanism, and non-religious organisations like the British Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union are significant features in the landscape of belief today. It is great that students will have the chance to study them alongside religions in the pilot GCSE.’

BHA EVENTS

23rd April, Annual Voltaire Lecture, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, 6pm for 6.30pm start, The Guilt of Science? Race, Science and Darwin: a lecture by Kenan Malik. Chaired by Polly Toynbee. Cost is £5 for members of the British Humanist Association or South Place Ethical Society; £7 for non-members. Tickets can be bought online through the shop [here](#) for those wishing to pay by debit or credit card. Alternatively you can send a cheque made payable to "British Humanist Association" and clearly marked "FOR VOLTAIRE LECTURE" with your name and a return address, to 1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD.

6th June, ‘Darwin, Humanism and Science’, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, 10am – 5.30pm. This day conference will open with a keynote speech from Richard Dawkins and close with a keynote from A C Grayling. In between we will be hearing from speakers on topics to do with increasing understanding of evolution and its implications, including James Williams from Sussex University and Johan de Smedt of Ghent University who will speak about the cognitive biases that can prevent acceptance of

evolution. Cost is £15 including coffee and tea but not lunch. [Tickets can be bought online through the shop](#) for those wishing to pay by debit or credit card. Alternatively you can send a cheque made payable to "British Humanist Association" and clearly marked "FOR DARWIN, HUMANISM AND SCIENCE" with your name and a return postal address, email address and telephone number, to 1 Gower Street, London, WC1E 6HD.

OTHER EVENTS

Camp Quest UK is now taking bookings for July 2009! Camp Quest UK is a week-long residential summer camp program for the children of atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and all those who subscribe to a naturalistic, rather than supernatural, worldview. The camp combines outdoor activities like climbing, zip wire, canoeing and archery with fun and educational activities which stimulate critical thinking, curiosity and humanist ethics. The theme for the camp this year is evolution and so several of the activities will reflect that, but the activities will also include crafts, Philosophy for Children (P4C), drama, talks on famous humanists and other freethinkers and on astronomy. Our counsellors come from a variety of backgrounds and we intend the camp to be a place where everyone can share their thoughts and ideas in a safe environment and where children are encouraged to explore their interests, whatever they might be. Camp runs from 27th - 31st July 2009 and is held in Bruton, Somerset. Cost: £275 all inclusive (Discounts available for more than one child). Please register soon to avoid disappointment! [Click here for more information](#)

25th April, 'Science and Religion', Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, Baroness Mary Warnock, best-selling science writer Simon Singh, Scientist Jack Cohen and Stephen Law will be looking at God, the Big Bang and a host of science-and-religion related topics. Tickets are just £5 for BHA members (£10 for non-members). [Find out more here.](#)

3rd May 2009, LSS: Manzoor Moghal - Religions and Misguided Government Policies, Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB, Starts at 6.30pm. 'I will be talking about how religions have begun to acquire an inappropriate role in our society, how this has been brought about and encouraged by government policies, and how the net effect of this is a fragmentation into faith groups. I will focus on the education system and various faith activities funded by the government and discuss a shift towards religious rather than national identity.' Manzoor Moghal chairs the Leicester-based Muslim Forum. Free. A collection will be taken.

TAKE ACTION! Campaigners in over 50 countries are gearing up to mark the **5th International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia** on May 17th. The IDAHO committee in conjunction with "Transgender Europe" and "Gender Dynamix" have launched an international appeal "to reject transphobia and respect gender identity" and there is an on-line petition to sign. Derek Lennard, IDAHO-UK Campaigner explained "In the UK, we will focus on human rights and violations against trans people around the world, and work with other campaigners to publicise and celebrate the services which do exist, and identify the many gaps in service provision". Professor Stephen Whittle commented "Press for Change welcomes the IDAHO campaign and we will be working closely with them". Details of the campaign can be seen on www.idahomophobia.org

Not already a BHA member? [Join now](#) and support our vital work!

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Mar 2009
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The latest issue of Gay & Lesbian Humanist magazine is now online at www.gayandlesbianhumanist.org.

With a nod to Christopher Isherwood, we say "Hello to Berlin" – the Berlin Film Festival, to be exact. Some of the mixed bag of fascinating movies that were seen there will no doubt be worth looking out for when they are shown at British film festivals, and we take a look at 21 offerings through the eyes of our man in Germany, Colin de la Motte-Sherman.

Comedians are always good for a laugh (well, so they should be). The US irreverent comedy legend George Carlin certainly is – or was. Carlin died last year, and the American Public Broadcasting Service showed a tribute to him. Thanks to videos that can be found on such sharing sites as YouTube, Carlin lives on. Our "Airings" column features one of his most hilarious performances "Religion is bullshit!".

George Broadhead profiles the Iranian human rights campaigner, Maryam Namazie, a staunch opponent of political Islam

In the UK, a five-year-old girl told a fellow primary school pupil that she would burn in hell if she didn't believe in God? Our Christian commentator Neil Richardson has been looking at the case, and at allegations of anti-Christian prejudice at that British school.

Should we believe politicians who tell people only what they want to hear? Andy Armitage thinks not. He also asks why the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who sat on evidence of child abuse by catholic priests, should be allowed into the House of Lords.

All this, plus our selection of a blog that takes our interest in "Blog Watch"; some titbits from our own blog, Pink Triangle, in "On the Blog"; a news roundup from a UK perspective; "World Watch", looking at news from other parts of the globe; and "Gossip from Across the Pond", in which our man in the US Warren Allen Smith ponders on some of the more interesting entries in his own online creation, Philosopedia.

All in all, another mixed bag to dip into at www.gayandlesbianhumanist.org. Feedback - complimentary or critical - is very welcome.

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Apr 2009
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A newsletter with the agenda and reports is attached. We'll be at Pinewood Community Hall from 7.30pm on 14th April – see the events calendar (right) for a map and directions.

[SH&S News April 2009 A4.pdf \(262 KB\)](#)

Not sure about PDF files? [Easy-peasy!](#)

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Apr 2009
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If you don't want [Murphy O'Connor](#) in the Lords, have you signed [this petition](#)?

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Apr 2009
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A few years ago, while visiting a local high school, one of the girls told me that her little sister had been told that their parents would go to hell because they were atheists. Who told her? Her primary school teacher. Did they complain? I believe they did, though I don't know what the outcome was.

In another local primary school, a class had been doing some science about colours. The head teacher visited the classroom and was admiring a picture of a rainbow. She asked the artist where the colours came from. As the child began to explain what she'd learned about the refraction of light, the head teacher interrupted her. "No, no, no," she said, "God did it!"

With examples like this of religious nuts imposing their beliefs on children, it's good to know that such behaviour is generally frowned upon in state schools. Teachers who aim to make the classroom a religiously-neutral zone should be supported. However, religious bullies can make life very difficult.

[In Surrey, Muslim parents who'd accused a primary school headteacher of "Islamophobia" were allowed to drive her out of her job](#) and wreck the school's religiously neutral ethos, while the county council "failed in its duty to protect her", according to the High Court, who awarded £400,000 damages.

In Devon, [a headteacher who reprimanded a child for suggesting that non- Christians would go to hell has been bombarded with threats against him and his family](#).

The Archbishop of York weighed in, telling the Daily Telegraph: "Asking someone to leave their belief in God at the door ... is akin to asking someone to remove their skin colour."

Oh yes, very helpful!

If you're a teacher who feels strongly about this, [the BHA](#) suggests you might get in touch with [the TES](#):

The Times Educational Supplement is including a feature about how teachers or head teachers respond to extremely religious pupils ([based on this story](#)). They or their parents may upset non-believers by espousing 'hell, fire and damnation' etc, or insist on wearing religious jewelry/clothing that runs counter to the school uniform. How do or should schools react?

All correspondence will be treated in the strictest of confidence if required. Please contact [Hannah Frankel](#) by **April 9**.

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Apr 2009
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By David Mitchell

What the proprietorship of these papers is aiming at is power, and power without responsibility — the prerogative of the harlot through the ages.

Those were the words of Stanley Baldwin, quoting his cousin Rudyard Kipling in the years leading up to the Second World War. Nothing much has changed in certain parts of the press and Humanists and other visitors to this website will have read about the furore caused by the scurrilous [article in the Daily Mail on 20th March by James Chapman making wild and inaccurate accusations against the](#)

[BHA](#). Whilst the article has now been removed from the Daily Mail website there has been no attempt to correct the contents or to apologise for the article. The biggest selling daily paper in Britain has got away with it once again. Hundreds of thousands of readers now probably equate Humanism with Al Qaeda. The damage is done. I can't hope to reach that sort of readership and undo the damage but it might be helpful for visitors to our site to learn a few things about the Daily Mail of which they might have been unaware. I'm pleased to say that the authors Steve Lowe and Alan McArthur of the 2006 best seller, "[Is it Just me, Or Is Everything Shit](#)", together with the book's publishers [Little Brown](#), have given us permission to reproduce the article about the Daily Mail from that book on this website. You might be surprised, but probably not too much!

The Mail is very keen on tradition, heritage and 'never forgetting' all sorts of heroic British endeavours. Unfortunately, the great publishing institution appears to have accidentally forgotten one particularly heroic aspect of its own heritage—viz. their wholehearted support for the fascism of Hitler, Mussolini and Oswald Mosley. How terribly absent minded of them. Acclaim for Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists kicked off on 8th January 1934 with the unequivocal headline; 'Hurrah for the Blackshirts!' Some Mail staff even wore black shirts to work. Lord Rothermere, the paper's owner, wrote of the BUF in the 15th January 1934 issue that they were 'a well-organised party of the Right ready to take over responsibility for social affairs with the same directness of purpose and energy of method as Hitler and Mussolini displayed'. Oh, good. Rothermere and the Mail broke with Mosley in June 1934, when the Blackshirts brutally suppressed (that is, kicked the shit out of) Communist Party supporters who disrupted a BUF meeting at the giant Olympia hall in Kensington, London—although not before investing (and now losing) £70,000 in New Epoch Products Ltd., a business arrangement with Mosley whereby the Blackshirts were to sell cigarettes made by Rothermere. Towards Mussolini, meanwhile, the Mail was 'always friendly' (SJ Taylor, *The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rothermere and the Daily Mail*). In November 1926, Italy's fascist supremo dropped a hand-written line to G. Ward Price, the paper's Chief Correspondent, congratulating him on his appointment as a director: 'my dear Price, I am glad you have become a director of the Daily Mail, and I am sure that your very popular and widely circulated newspaper will continue to be a sincere friend of fascist Italy. With best wishes and greetings, Mussolini. Through the 30s, the Mail was 'the only major British daily to take a consistently pro-Nazi line': it 'stuck out like a sore thumb' (Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39*). Rothermere penned a July 1933 leader, 'youth triumphant', praising the Nazi regime for its 'accomplishments, both spiritual and material'. True, he admitted, there had been 'minor misdeeds of individual Nazis' but these would certainly be 'submerged by the immense benefits that the new regime is already bestowing on Germany'. So complimentary was the article, the Nazis used it for propaganda. Rothermere eventually struck up a friendship with Hitler – or 'My dear Fuhrer' as he invariably began his regular correspondences – and visited him numerous times. Rothermere and Ward Price were among only three or four foreigners invited to Hitler's first ever dinner party at his official Berlin residence. Rothermere, ever the gent, presented the Fuhrer with some Ferrero Rocher. Probably. In 1937, Ward Price – who 'was believed to Rothermere's mouthpiece not only by the public but by Ward Price himself' (Taylor) – published a chatty memoir about his great mates Hitler and Mussolini entitled 'I Know These Dictators'. Last revised and reprinted in August 1938 – when fascism's dark intents were obvious to even the most ardent reactionary – the book called Mussolini 'a successful man of the world who is expert at his job and enjoys doing it' and spoke warmly of Hitler's 'human, pleasant personality.' The chapter 'The Human Side of Hitler' (not a phrase you hear very often) revealed that, alongside his affection for kiddies and doggies, the great dictator was also partial to the odd chocolate *Àclair*: Naughty but nice', as the Fuhrer used to say. Price urged readers of 'I Know These Dictators' to keep an 'open mind' on fascism. Of Hitler's initial wave of repression on gaining power, he wrote: 'The Germans were made to feel the firm hand of their new master. Being Germans, they liked it.' The concentration camps – about which 'gross and reckless accusations (have been) made' – were just full of dirty Reds. The Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler took on his party rivals – by killing them all – was a sensible bit of forward planning avoiding the need for lots of silly arguments later on. Overall, 'in every respect of the German nation's life the constructive influence of the Nazi regime (was) seen'. The only people who suffered were a few troublesome 'minorities'. Like, for instance, the Jews. In the chapter 'Germany's Jewish Problem' (the title's something of a giveaway), Price explains how the Jews only had themselves to blame as there had been too large a Jewish immigration to Germany following World War I: 'The cause of this migration was the collapse of the German currency, which gave the Jews of neighbouring countries a chance after their own heart to make big profits.' Lord Rothermere last visited Hitler in May 1938. While other papers condemned the regime's brutality and oppression, the Mail still claimed Germany was 'in the forefront of nations' and that Hitler was 'stronger than ever and more popular with his countrymen'. On 1 October 1938, after the signing of the Munich treaty in which Britain and France appeased Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia's disputed Sudetenland region, Rothermere sent a telegram to Hitler: 'MY DEAR FUHRER EVERYONE IN ENGLAND IS PROFOUNDLY MOVED BY THE BLOODLESS SOLUTION OF THE CZECHOSLOVAKIAN PROBLEM STOP PEOPLE NOT SO MUCH CONCERNED WITH TERRITORIAL READJUSTMENT AS WITH THE DREAD OF ANOTHER WAR WITH ITS ACCOMPANYING BLOODBATH STOP FREDERICK THE GREAT A GREAT POPULAR FIGURE IN ENGLAND MAY NOT ADOLF THE GREAT BECOME AN EQUALLY POPULAR FIGURE STOP I SALUTE YOUR EXCELLENCY'S STAR WHICH RISES HIGHER AND HIGHER. Oddly enough, 'Hitler the Great' never did become a popular figure in England or, indeed, any other part of the British Isles. When war was finally declared in September 1939, Rothermere reportedly uttered just two words: 'Ah' and then 'Bugger'. Ward Price finally broke with Hitler following the March 1939 invasion of Czechoslovakia. Only a 'foreign policy issue' (Griffiths) could provoke this shift in his opinions: 'Germany's internal policies, even at the extreme moment of the Kristallnacht Pogrom, could never have had such an effect.' Strangely, though, that's not how he remembered the whole thing afterwards. In his 1957 memoir, *Extra-Special Correspondent*, he 'recalls' how he always thought Hitler was weak and neurotic. Saw through it all from the start. Never even owned a black shirt. Some of his best friends, etc., etc. Price was clearly suffering from an affliction still rife at the paper today: a version of false memory syndrome that makes you forget you used to be a bit of an old fascist. It can only but make you wonder what would have happened if the Nazis had won the war. Presumably in the newly fascist Britain they would soon have found a collaborator in their old friend Rothermere. Then we might have ended up with the Daily Mail pouring forth reactionary bile against immigrants, gays, trade unionists, asylum seekers, women . . .

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Apr 2009
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The campaign was the idea of comedy writer Ariane Sherine, who'd seen some Christian bus ads with a link to a website with an unpleasant message. How unpleasant? [Judge for yourself](#). I especially dislike the bit about God's wrath if you reject him –

You will be condemned to everlasting separation from God and then you spend all eternity in torment in hell. Jesus spoke about this as a **lake of fire which was prepared for the devil and all his angels** (demonic spirits) (Matthew 25: 41).

It's staggering that people who can walk and talk and (presumably) tie their own shoelaces still believe in fire and brimstone in 2009.

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Apr 2009
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[The New Statesman asked various people what God means to them](#). What does it mean to you?

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Apr 2009
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I was going to write about Easter, for the benefit of those who'll ask things like, "And what do you poor atheists do at this time of the year if you don't believe in Easter?", but I'm too busy gardening. However, [Cath Elliott's saved me the bother](#). I will get around to writing an informative and educational page about the Spring Equinox Festival eventually.

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Apr 2009
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Franny Armstrong's film about climate change, starring Pete Postlewaite, will be shown at the [Hollywood Cinema, Ipswich](#), on Sunday 26th April at 4pm, 6pm and 8pm.

Go [the Age of Stupid website](#) to see a trailer, and more.

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Apr 2009
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The [Atheist Bus Campaign's](#) Just Giving page is now closed, after raising a phenomenal amount of money. There will be more ads later in the year – watch this space.

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Apr 2009
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[Twitter can make you immoral](#), says the Daily Mail. That would explain why I've become so wicked.

There are at least three "immoral" Suffolk Humanists on Twitter – [me](#), and [him](#), and [him](#). Oh, and [Charles Darwin's](#) on there too. If you don't understand Twitter, [read this](#).

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Apr 2009
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I never thought I'd live to see a TV documentary that made '[The Great Global Warming Swindle](#)' look balanced but the BBC managed it, and on the flagship channel, with [The Narnia Code](#) (BBC1 16th April) a blatant 'puff' for Dr Michael Ward's book '[Planet Narnia](#)'.

Whilst Ward's theory about an inner meaning behind [C.S Lewis's Narnia Chronicles](#) was an interesting one, the last 20 minutes of the 60 minute programme were pure Christian propaganda, with a series of scientist/Christians wheeled out to spout the most outrageous nonsense. There was not one dissenting voice and atheists were continually accused of being incapable of the sort of higher feelings and thoughts that those who believe in myths enjoy so much.

A lot was made of a visit by Ward to [the Wade Centre at Wheaton College](#) in Illinois where there is a Lewis archive, or perhaps shrine would better describe it. Few details were divulged during the programme about the nature of Wheaton College but its internet home page is headed 'For Christ and his Kingdom' and it also hosts other establishments such as 'The Billy Graham Centre', 'The Christian Ethics Centre' and 'The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals'. No agenda there then.

Of course Richard Dawkins was mentioned but he wasn't apparently asked to contribute. He and his opinions were portrayed as being strident but any reasonable person watching a Dawkins documentary would have to admit that he invariably comes over as quiet, polite and thoughtful. Dawkins, being confident of the intellectual rigour of his case, always features dissenting voices and they invariably end up bolstering his case and damaging theirs. Small wonder the makers of The Narnia Code didn't want to disturb the fairy tale world they inhabit.

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Apr 2009
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In today's Guardian – [new evidence that faith schools don't provide the benefits claimed for them, and that they increase social fragmentation](#). Government Minister Jim Knight provides the usual justification for keeping them.

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Apr 2009
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[From the Independent:](#)



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

[Read more about it on the BHA website](#). The humanist who'll sit on the Standing Conference on Religion and Belief will be Andrew Copson, the BHA's Director of Education & Public Affairs.

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Apr 2009
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We might like to imagine that all the funny Creationists are over the other side of the Pond, but we know that's not true. However, it's unlikely they'd be allowed to get away with this sort of daftness over here.

Bill Nye, the harmless children's edu-tainer known as "The Science Guy," managed to offend a select group of adults in Waco, Texas at a presentation, when [he suggested that the moon does not emit light](#), but instead reflects the light of the sun.

Some idiots refused to listen, because they think that God makes the moon shine by magic and it's made of cheese. No, sorry, I made that up about the cheese.

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Apr 2009
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[The BHA now has its own YouTube channel](#). The latest video is of Daniel Dennett at Conway Hall, providing "A Darwinian Perspective on Religions: Past, Present and Future".

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May 2009
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[I've been quoted in the Times Education Supplement](#) in an article about religious kids who proselytise in school. Read the comments for a copy of the email the quote came from.

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May 2009
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[Wordle.net](#) is a clever tool that turns words on websites into pictures - the bigger the word, the more times it has been written. Below is the word cloud for this site - so this is what we're saying, which worryingly seems to include quite a lot about cheese and the moon: □

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May 2009
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Sorry I've neglected posting anything for a while, but you could have written something yourself, you know. I've been in a codeine-induced stupor, due to severe back pain. No advice thanks; just send chocolate.

So, anyhow, here's some stuff for the bank holiday.

The hoo-ha over MPs' expenses has, it seems, led many to become so disillusioned with British politicians that they say they won't vote. Does that mean they're happy to delegate any decision-making to those of us who do? Were they among the 38.72% who didn't vote last time? Maybe, if you don't vote, you've no right to express an opinion about how we're governed. What do you think?

Of those who will vote, it's been forecast that many will vote for one of the smaller parties – maybe UKIP, the BNP or the Greens. Nigel Farage, the MEP who spends all his time telling us why we shouldn't be in the EU, has been vocal in his criticism of MPs' expenses, but [admits he's claimed £2 million as an MEP](#).

The BNP has upset the church with its poster campaign, asking "[What would Jesus do?](#)" This seems a little odd, as they wouldn't want Jesus in the UK if he had a second coming and decided to apply for British citizenship. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York are miffed about this, and have advised people [not to vote BNP](#); they don't think Jesus would vote BNP.

[The Christian Party & Christian People's Alliance](#) think he'd vote for them. Their manifesto is "based on biblical principles". [They're been in trouble too](#); their election broadcast was censored to remove a reference to a mosque that could offend Muslims. It's going to be hard to choose, isn't it?

Meanwhile, back in the real world (what am I saying?), it seems I'm sub-human. I knew there was something different about me, but now [the outgoing Archbishop of Westminster, Murphy-O'Connor, says that people like me are evil](#). Atheism is, apparently, worse than child abuse, since the shocking [Irish Child Abuse Commission report](#) "Should not overshadow all of the good that institutions such as the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy had done," according to this arch-hypocrite, [who's helped to cover a paedophile's tracks](#). When the commission report was discussed on [The Big Questions](#) this morning, Fr John Owen, press officer for the Cardiff archdiocese, admitted the paedophilia in the church was appalling, then said "Most of these offences are committed by homosexuals", implying that homosexuality was the problem! I don't know why I watch The Big Questions; I always end up yelling at the TV. However, I'm looking forward to seeing atheist comedian [Christina Martin](#) on the programme; her invitation has been postponed several times.

I remember seeing something on the Interweb about Noah's Ark, and the logistics of stocking said boat with sufficient feed and water for the creatures that went aboard, two by two, and for Noah and his family. I know that God can probably vacuum pack, but it'd still have to be a very big boat – too big to actually float. I was reminded of this by a video about the Genesis myth by Michael Shermer, editor of "Sceptic Magazine" and author of "Why Darwin Matters", which aims "to convey the logical absurdity of trying to squeeze the round peg of science into the square hole of religion." Thanks to the member who alerted me to it:

There are a couple of BBC programmes that might interest you. Firstly, 8pm tomorrow (25 May), 'Hearts & Minds' on Radio 4:

First of two programmes in which Nick Fraser considers the proper role of intellectuals in relation to world events and world conflict. The Cold War was fought on intellectual as well as strategic grounds, but did intellectuals abandon their own standards in the battle for 'hearts and minds'? Nick considers the matter in the run-up to the centenary of the birth of Isaiah Berlin, one of Britain's foremost political philosophers and opponents of Soviet communism, and takes the figures known as 'liberal anti-communists' during the Cold War as an historic peak of the Western intellectual's power and influence.

Secondly, 9pm on Tuesday on BBC ONE, 'Uncovering Our Earliest Ancestor: The Link':

BBC One brings you the story behind what could be one of the most important scientific discoveries of the 21st century.

The film, written and narrated by David Attenborough, is set to change our understanding of evolution.

Thanks to Roy Saich from the [Humanists](#) website for flagging those up.

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Jun 2009
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Here it is, for you to download, our latest newsletter, with details of our next meetings and reports on “community cohesion” consultations in our area.

[File Attachment: 2009 SH&S News June.pdf \(317 KB\)](#)

Not familiar with pdf files? [Click here](#).

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Jun 2009
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I've been trying to declutter. Amongst other things, I've been adding more and more tabs to my browser, thinking, “Oh, I'll include that in a news update on our site,” and it's got to the stage where I really, really have to clear up all the clutter. So here you are.

If you remember that we were concerned about the possibility of Holywells High School in Ipswich being taken over by the Church of England, then things went very quiet, there's been a development. [The secretary of state for children, schools and families has approved the county's plan to turn Holywells into an academy](#), with [Kunskapsskolan](#), the largest provider of secondary education in Sweden, to be a “preferred partner”. Sounds interesting...

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) continues to undermine free speech at the UN, resisting any possibility of Islam or its member states being subject to criticism or even discussion with resolutions about the “defamation of religion”. [The New Humanist blog reported earlier this month that Frank La Rue, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and Navi Pillay, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, were attacked by the OIC](#). The Islamic states are making a mockery of the UN's commitment to free speech and human rights.

Events in Iran have dominated the news over the last week or so. Blogs, Twitter, You Tube, Facebook, and other social networking sites have kept us informed about what's happening, despite the Iranian authorities' attempts to block the flow of news. Maryam Namazie, spokesperson for the One Law for All Campaign against Sharia Law in Britain, and a member of the Council of Ex-Muslims, has been following developments closely [on her blog](#).

Meanwhile, in cloud-cuckoo-land, an orthodox Jewish couple are suing their neighbours in a block of Bournemouth flats over motion sensors which automatically turn on the lights in the communal hallway. [Dena and Gordon Coleman say their human rights have been breached](#) because they can't leave their flat, because motion sensors turn on the lights as soon as they open their door at night, and are suing for £5,000 damages.

Giles Enders, chairman of the South Place Ethical Society which runs [Conway Hall Humanist Centre](#) in London, is a hero. [He stood up to a bunch of Islamist thugs and threw them out](#), after they'd hired the hall for a meeting and attempted to segregate men from women, which is against the hall's terms and conditions. Three cheers for Giles!

[The Daily Mail reports that two thirds of teenagers don't believe in God](#). I don't find that surprising, but there are probably many Mail readers who choked on their cornflakes when they read that. According the Mail, they “think reality TV is more important than religion”. Mmm. Maybe some of you will agree, though I rarely watch it.

If you want to get away from all this politics and religion, it's [Suffolk Open Studios](#) time again, when Suffolk artists open their doors to visitors. Why not pay some a visit?

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Jul 2009
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I missed this programme but will listen now, via [this clip](#). On [Mark Thomas's BBC Radio 4 Manifesto programme](#), audience member Laura proposed, to enthusiastic applause:

There should be a minimum age of consent before anyone joins a religion, because the vast majority of religions' members were put through ceremonies by their parents when they were far too young to know what was going on. And while many of them renounce their faith when they are older, indoctrinating children allows religions to claim more members and more influence than is actually justified.

There's [a bit more about the idea here, in the Freethinker](#).

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Jul 2009
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The Sunday Times recently wrote about the new summer camp for kids in the most misleading, prejudiced fashion. According to the paper, it's all a part of Richard Dawkins' evil plan to indoctrinate children. Couldn't be more wrong if they tried – and they are very trying. [For the truth, see the Camp Quest website.](#)

[Richard Dawkins has asked \(politely as ever\) for an apology from the newspaper.](#)

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Jul 2009
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[Brilliant news from the BHA](#) –

Every school in England and Wales is to receive a free DVD of 'Growing Up in the Universe', Professor Richard Dawkins' 1991 Royal Institution Christmas Lectures for children. The DVD is being distributed by the British Humanist Association with funding from the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of 'On the Origin of Species', which both fall in 2009.

In addition, we plan to send Suffolk schools copies of the BHA's 'Perspectives' teachers' resource books by the autumn term, together with the education newsletter, EdLines, thanks to a generous donation from one of our members.

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Jul 2009
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Fort Lauderdale Christian fundamentalists have been demanding the removal of a billboard message that affirms you can be good without God.

In Fort Lauderdale, the [Florida Atheist and Secular Humanist Society](#) has paid for a billboard stating: "Being a good person doesn't require God. Don't believe in God? You're not alone." Local "community activist" Big Mama said, "Nothing else matters, but that sign needs to come down. In the name of Jesus."

See the full report [here](#).

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Jul 2009
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[Ireland goes backwards.](#)

The DÃ¡il has just voted to make "blasphemous libel" a crime which carries a fine of up to €25,000, as part of the new Defamation Act.

Causing "outrage" will be a criminal offence.

It's not that long since [we scrapped the blasphemy law](#) this side of the Irish Sea.

Wonder what would happen if Ireland's freethinkers blasphemed en masse?

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Aug 2009
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This was first posted in November 2007, but has been updated several times.



I don't know how many American missionaries there are, or where they all are, but there are a lot of them. I've previously posted a story about [the Joshua Project](#):

Our Mission ... to highlight the people groups of the world that have the least Christian presence in their midst and to encourage pioneer church-planting among every ethnic people group.

I wrote "Mad missionaries" because they do seem to suffer from a collective psychosis. They're programmed to go and poke their interfering evangelical noses into communities that "have the least Christian presence", regardless of the existing religious beliefs, or lack of beliefs, of the people involved. Their unshakeable belief that they're doing God's will is not just misguided, it's very destructive. Suffolk Humanist Nathan Nelson was infuriated by the activities of missionaries in Cambodia, where most people are Buddhists. The young people at the centre where he did voluntary work must have been bewildered by the books they were given by an American organisation:

The dictionary in the back of the booklet was highly amusing, however. A is for Abraham. B is for Baptism. C is for Commandment. I particularly liked H for Herod, K for King David, and S for Sin. Useful, relevant English for the modern world.

Some evangelicals in Cambodia and elsewhere behave like the do-gooders (or should that be do-Godders?) who expected the poor and destitute to sing hymns for their supper in 19th century British soup kitchens. They ask the Khmers to pray in exchange for food and healthcare - not Christian charity, just bribery. One of the biggest of these organisations is [Samaritan's Purse](#). They encourage children in the affluent US and UK to fill shoe boxes with gifts for children overseas. "Oh, what a lovely idea," think thousands of generous people as they help their children to fill boxes with gifts for [Operation Christmas Child](#), "All those poor children will have such a lovely Christmas." How many donors actually read what it says on the Samaritan's Purse website? It makes it clear that the organisation's main aim is converting people to Christianity, regardless of their culture or belief. They do this through Operation Christmas Child by distributing evangelical literature with the boxes, and by encouraging the recipients to join Bible study and other classes.

The mission of Operation Christmas Child is to demonstrate God's love in a tangible way to needy children around the world, and together with the local church worldwide, to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

If the organisation was genuinely concerned about helping people they'd offer aid without strings, rather than trying to convert the recipients. The Rev Dr Giles Fraser, priest-in-charge at St Mary's Newington in south London and a former canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, [has written about their "warped version of Christianity" in the Guardian](#), advising would-be donors,

... why not support [Christian Aid](#), which works wherever the need and regardless of religion. Its current campaigns include working with HIV/Aids orphans in Kenya, recycling guns in Mozambique, and highlighting the impact of world trade rules on farmers in Ghana. Sure, we will need to have some rather grown-up conversations with our children if we are to explain some of these things. But that would be time better spent than wrapping up a shoebox. We must get over our fondness for charity and develop a thirst for justice.

If anyone reading this asks what atheists do to help other people, they do plenty; they just don't make a song and dance about it, or try to convert anyone as a price for their help. Altruism is a natural human quality, not a religious quality.

The BHA has some suggestions for alternatives to Samaritan's Purse - [click here to find out more](#).

[Read about head teachers' concerns about Operation Christmas Child here](#).

Update, 2015 - unwanted stuff:

Operation Christmas Child boxes cost money to transport and distribute, money that could be used for things that the recipients really need, like medical supplies and education materials. It's natural to want to help people when they've been struck by disasters like hurricanes and earthquakes by sending gifts of all sorts, including toys and clothes, but aid agencies discourage this. Having to sort through and distribute mountains of stuff, much of which is no use to anyone, wastes time and resources. Many of the items that are needed can be bought in the destination countries, which helps their economies. The best thing to do is to sell collections of stuff here, at source, and send the money instead. [Click here to read about unwanted stuff](#).

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Jul 2009
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On Tuesday 14th July I offered Suffolk Humanists & Secularists an "Introduction to the Cosmos". I'm from [Coddham Astronomical Observatory](#), and I used images from the [Hubble Space Telescope](#) and other space and ground based telescopes to describe the Universe in which we live. The talk began in our local neighbourhood and introduced the sizes and distances of the planets in our own solar system. As the Earth shrunk in relative size the journey took us out from the rocky inner planets to the cold gas giants most distant from the Sun. The planets were contrasted in size to the Sun, our nearest star. At this stage the Earth was quickly becoming smaller and less significant.

The situation was further emphasised as larger and larger stars were discussed. Some were so large that the Sun and its entire family of planets could orbit inside them. The distances here were even larger. If the sun were to be represented as a grain of sugar then the next nearest star would be another grain of sugar just over 4 miles away. From the room where we watched the show the grain of sugar would be typically, at Capel St Mary to the south or, towards the north, the bus station at M&S in Ipswich. Pictures of the Hubble "Deep Field" were shown. These showed the most distant galaxies ever photographed.

More Hubble photographs showed pictures of the birth and death of stars. These included the violent death of the largest stars and a supernova, which was observed by the early Chinese astronomers in the year 1054 to the more gentle deaths of the smaller stars like our Sun. Our Sun is a dwarf star and smaller stars live longer. It is because of this that life has had time to evolve on Earth. Pictures of nebulae (gas clouds) were shown similar to the one our Sun would eventually produce in 6 or 7 billion years time. The discussion of the life and death of stars was just an excuse to introduce some of the most wonderfully photographed objects in the heavens and to explain their beautiful colours. The reds, greens, blues and oranges were contrasted with the dark silhouettes of the dust and gas clouds from which new stars would eventually be born. Each colour represented an element. The heavier ones were made inside stars themselves. Indeed everything that we can see or touch around us, including the elements in our bodies, was made in stellar interiors. As Carl Sagan said, "We are all made of stardust" or, depending on your point of view, "from nuclear waste" as the stars shine using nuclear fusion reactions in their hot cores.

We moved on and discussed the discovery of planets around other stars and how astronomers managed to detect them. We realised that our Sun is not the only star with planets around it. There are over 100 billion stars on average in each galaxy and more galaxies in the Universe than there are grains of sand on every beach on Earth. The Earth is indeed an insignificant speck in the vast Universe. We looked at the shape of our galaxy and the Earth's unremarkable position inside one of its spiral arms. We felt humbled by the sizes and distances involved and realised that we hold no special place in the Universe.

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Jul 2009
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While [the BHA gets excited at the prospect of the BBC including Humanist thoughts in Radio 4 Today's god-bothering slot](#), I'm not keen on the idea. Yes, I know [I did T4TDs on local radio for years](#) (necessitating early risings that totally messed up my metabolic clock - I don't do mornings), but I've gone off them since then. How many people take them seriously? I get the impression that most people use them as an opportunity to go to the loo or put the kettle on, without missing anything worth listening to. Some of the ones I've done make me cringe, now I've re-read them. Maybe it's because I'm more cynical in my old age, but T4TD has been used as a platform for pontification and as an opportunity to spout a load of twaddle. By associating itself with the slot, the BHA could be seen to be condoning the provision of twaddle - it might even provide some twaddle of its own. [I agree with Ron Ferguson, who wrote in yesterday's Herald](#), "It's rather odd, within a news programme in which assumptions are regularly challenged, to suddenly have a space in which a representative of a particular faith tradition makes a commentary on a current issue for two or three minutes, without any hard questions being asked." However, the possibility of any hard questions being asked of the T4TD contributors is even less likely than the inclusion of atheist voices ever was. Let them all just shut up.

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Jul 2009
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I've responded belatedly to the new guidance on RE, as follows: Rt Hon Ed Balls MP Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Department for Children, Schools and Families Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street London SW1P 3BT Dear Mr Balls, I am writing to express my disappointment at the new draft guidance produced for RE in England, particularly its failure to make it clear that the subject should be the study of both religious and non-religious beliefs and to recognise and recommend the eligibility of Humanists for full membership of SACREs and ASCs. I am personally particularly affected by this. I am a Humanist and a full member of Suffolk SACRE. I am very concerned that the new guidance will lead to my position as a full member of the SACRE being seriously undermined and to a consequent lack of representation of non-religious people on the SACRE, even though my local area is at least 16% non-religious "which means there are more non-religious people than all the non-Christian religions combined. When my SACRE made me a full member, without dissent, they agreed that since our new RE syllabus (introduced in September 2007) included Humanism and secular world views, it would be inconsistent with this inclusion to exclude me from full membership of the SACRE. In my experience, as a frequent visitor to schools, both as a tutor with Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource and as a Humanist speaker, a majority of secondary school students identify themselves as non-believers. It is therefore especially important that the syllabus covers non-belief and its various expressions. I will also be unable to be a member of the ASC, even though government guidance includes Humanism as a subject to be studied. This will mean, for me as for many other Humanists involved in SACREs, that although we may have our beliefs explored in the syllabus, we will not be permitted to take part in deciding that content, while our religious colleagues will be fully involved in writing their parts of the syllabus. I do not see how your department can believe this is fair. I am involved with my local SACRE because I am committed to what good and inclusive RE can achieve "because I believe it can help to improve

understanding not just between people of different religions but between religious and non-religious people, and because I believe that children have the right to a balanced education when it comes to beliefs and values. However, I have strong reservations about the use of the term "Religious Education", as it is inconsistent with the way that other subjects in the syllabus are described, and is an anachronism. You do not say "Art Education" (the subject I used to teach), or "English Education". Using what is a misleading term to describe teaching children about religion, rather than teaching them to be religious, gives the wrong sort of message. It would be better to simply call it "Religions and Beliefs", allowing for the inclusion of both religious and philosophical world views, on an equal basis. The various forms of atheistic, non-theistic, or naturalistic traditions are a rich source of ideas and values, developed by very many people, that should not be treated as peripheral. I'm also unhappy about the use of the term "secular world views", as this is an inaccurate use of the word "secular". Many religious people are secularists, in that they want the separation of religion from the state and equal treatment for religious and non-religious people. Use of the word "secular" as though it were synonymous with "atheist" is widespread, but wrong. If those who are responsible for education can't use the correct terminology, I fail to see how we can have confidence that they know what they mean. I would like to see the word "Humanist" and "Humanism" spelt with a capital H throughout, as Harold Blackham, Levi Fragell, Corliss Lamont, Harry Stopes-Roe and Rob Tielman declared through the International Humanist & Ethical Union in January 2008. What's good enough for the religions is good enough for us. I had been looking forward to the clarity and improved practice the new guidance might bring: instead, I am left severely disappointed by a Government that claims to set such store by equality and non-discrimination and human rights. I would like to urge that the new guidance should make it clear that the subject should be the study of both religious and non-religious beliefs and should recognise and recommend the eligibility of Humanists for full membership of SACREs and ASCs, justifying this inclusive policy not just for its own sake but explicitly by reference to the Human Rights Act. Without such action at this time, it is difficult to see how the position of Humanists involved in their SACREs as I am is likely to improve or the discrimination that has existed against us since 1994 can be ended. Indeed, not only will the draft guidance, if unchanged, not improve the situation: by its blatant silence on the key point on which so many people have been looking to it for confirmation of an inclusive policy it is liable to create a setback and do serious damage.

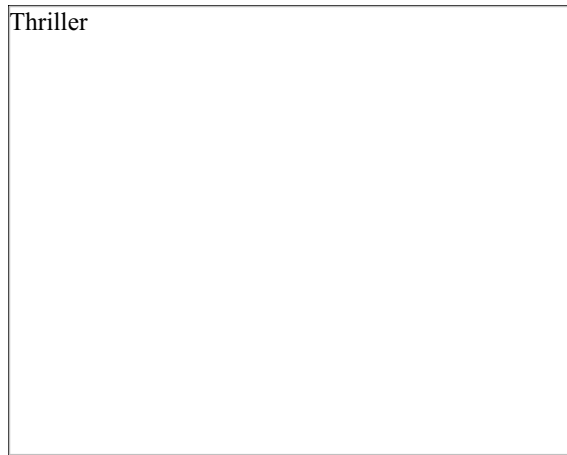
Yours sincerely, Margaret Nelson, Dip AD _____ You can read more about RE [here](#) (pdf).

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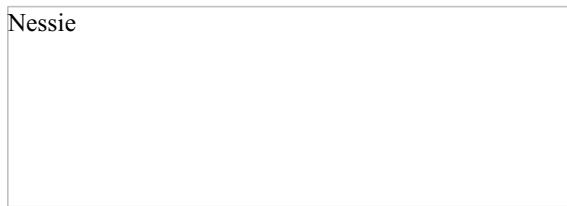
At 4pm on Sunday 2nd August, BHA member and "Happy Humanist" Andrew West, aka [Krypto](#), used his hour Andrew on [the 4th plinth](#) in Trafalger Square to teach a group of atheists, and anyone else who wanted to join in, how to dance Michael Jackson's Thriller dance routine.

[You can watch his dance lesson here.](#)

Our member Simon Bishop was there to take photos.



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A creationist exam syllabus for evangelical Christians that originated in Texas in the 1970s has been ruled equivalent to international A-levels by a UK government agency, despite teaching that the Loch Ness monster disproves evolution and racial segregation is beneficial.

[The Times Educational Supplement reports](#) that -

Hundreds of teenagers at around 50 private Christian schools in Britain study for the certificates, as well as several home-educated students.

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Aug 2009
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I try to resist watching The Big Questions on BBC TV (Sunday mornings), as it only makes me cross. They never give anyone time to develop an argument and it often ends up as a shouting match. Last Sunday ([you have until the weekend to watch on i-player](#)), the last question was "Is atheism an intolerant belief?", so you knew it was going to be silly. Belief? Atheism is a lack of belief. Intolerant? Compared with tolerant religion, presumably. Intolerant of what? Yes, I admit to being intolerant of bullshit, hypocrisy, false reasoning, etc.

Currently, atheists are being blamed for just about everything. We're nasty meanies, who have the temerity to question religionists and suggest they get things their own way too often, and at public expense. And [it's our fault that people murder one another, apparently](#). Yet, as one of my Twitter friends says, "Every day I don't commit murder, theft, rape or adultery, I surprise even myself."

The reaction to an increasingly questioning attitude towards religion has been either hurt petulance (like the guy from [Theos](#) on The Big Questions, who looked like he wanted his mummy), or vitriolic sarcasm, or lies. Terry Sanderson wrote about [The atheist bogeyman: a useful tool for reviving religion](#) in last week's Newsline.

One example of a home-grown scare story, the Daily Mail trying to make something out of nothing, was a report on [Camp Quest](#), the religion-free summer camp for kids. The headline, ['Camp faithless: Is Britain's first atheist summer camp harmless fun or should we be worried?'](#), said it all. Read the comments; few people seem to be worried - most welcomed the idea.

If there's one thing that's worse than an atheist, it's an atheist woman. Women have been blamed for just about everything, since the establishment of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We will insist on leading men on, with our seductive powers, and we defile anything we touch, [especially if we're menstruating or pregnant](#). They may not say that's why [some worshippers are refusing to accept communion from women clergy](#), but medieval prejudices persist, so they won't have 'tainted' bread. Former US President Jimmy Carter is one of a group of 'Elders' who are challenging this sort of discrimination. In [The Age on 15 July](#) he wrote, 'The Elders are an independent group of eminent global leaders, brought together by former South African president Nelson Mandela, who offer their influence and experience to support peace building, help address major causes of human suffering and promote the shared interests of humanity. We have decided to draw particular attention to the responsibility of religious and traditional leaders in ensuring equality and human rights and have recently published a statement that declares: "The justification of discrimination against women and girls on grounds of religion or tradition, as if it were prescribed by a Higher Authority, is unacceptable."'

Another organisation that's challenging old prejudices is The Quakers. [The BBC reported last week](#), 'One of the UK's oldest Christian denominations - the Quakers - looks set to extend marriage services to same-sex couples at their yearly meeting later. The society has already held religious blessings for same-sex couples who have had a civil partnership ceremony.' Their decision could bring them into conflict with the government, but it wouldn't be the first time that Quakers have taken a principled stand.

American Humanist D T Strain asks, ['Does Humanism exclude non-humans?'](#) in his latest online article. The answer's no, and you might care to explain this the next time someone suggests that Humanism means [anthropocentrism](#).

Having more than one child is bad for the planet: ['A study by statisticians at Oregon State University](#) concluded that in the United States, the carbon legacy and greenhouse gas impact of an extra child is almost 20 times more important than some of the other environmentally sensitive practices people might employ their entire lives â€“ things like driving a high mileage car, recycling, or using energy-efficient appliances and light bulbs.' I'd have thought that the same conclusions might be drawn about our densely-populated island, and elsewhere.

Nigerian Humanist Leo Igwe, who'd recently returned from Humanist events in London, was [attacked by a Christian mob at a conference he'd organised about children's rights and witchcraft](#) last week. Evangelist Helen Ukpabio is behind a lot of [the child witch horrors](#). You can [sign an online petition](#) calling for her and others like her to be prosecuted.

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Aug 2009
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Via a Facebook friend, a message from a doctor serving in Afghanistan: A request for support from a doctor serving in Kandahar Hospital, Afghanistan, who tells of some of the awful injuries suffered by many children as a result of the fighting. He has asked if people could parcel together a few toys, colouring books, toy cars, soft toys (but not dogs), and post to him: 5766271 Captain A J Stubbs, UK-JF Med Gp, Op Herrick 10b, BFPO772. NB: [a parcel up to 2kg is free to post to a BFPO address](#).

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Aug 2009
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If you missed Tom Boles' talk about the Hubble space telescope and what it's revealed about the universe at our July meeting, this might give you an idea of what you missed.

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Aug 2009
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Via [the NSS](#), 'A new survey by the Center for Inquiry entitled "[Profiles of the Godless](#)" (pdf), examines both the preferred labels that non-believers attach to themselves and the personality types that tend to be connected with those labels.'

It notes that 'non-religious people tend to be highly educated, unmarried males who are intellectually adventurous but personally "less agreeable".' Surely not!

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Aug 2009
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Today is World Humanitarian Day. This explanation is from the [World Humanitarian Day website](#):

The General Assembly of the United Nations adopted in its Plenary Session on 11th December 2008, the Swedish sponsored Omnibus Resolution on "Strengthening of the Coordination of Emergency Humanitarian Assistance of the United Nations", that carried the historic decision by the world body, to designate the 19th August as World Humanitarian Day to honor all humanitarian and the United Nations and associated personnel who have lost their lives in the cause of duty and those who have worked in the promotion of the humanitarian cause.

Visit the website to find out more.

Note: Although "humanist" and "humanitarian" sound similar, the meaning is different. However, there are [Humanist humanitarians](#), just as there are humanitarians who have a religious faith.

Humanitarian Day poster

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Aug 2009
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The gay Humanist charity the [Pink Triangle Trust](#) (PTT) has warmly welcomed the decision of Richard Dawkins to back the campaign to win an official apology for [Alan Turing](#), the code-breaking genius and father of the modern computer who committed suicide in 1954 after being prosecuted for being homosexual.

More than 2,500 people have now added their name to the on-line petition calling for the Government to recognise the "consequences of prejudice" that ended the life of the scientist aged just 41.

Professor Dawkins said that an apology would "send a signal to the world which needs to be sent", and that Turing would still be alive today if it were not for the repressive, religion-influenced laws which drove him to despair.

The author of The God Delusion, who is due to present a forthcoming television programme for Channel 4 on Turing, said the impact of the mathematician's war work could not be overstated.

Turing arguably made a greater contribution to defeating the Nazis than Eisenhower or Churchill. Thanks to Turing and his 'Ultra' colleagues at Bletchley Park, Allied generals in the field were consistently, over long periods of the war, privy to detailed German plans before the German generals had time to implement them.

After the war, when Turing's role was no longer top-secret, he should have been knighted and fãted as a saviour of his nation. Instead, this gentle, stammering, eccentric genius was destroyed, for a 'crime', committed in private, which harmed nobody.

Professor Dawkins also called for a permanent financial endowment to support Bletchley Park, where Turing helped break the Nazi Enigma code.

The PTT secretary George Broadhead commented:

It is great to have such a prominent atheist and humanist as Richard Dawkins add his weight to the campaign. As a gay atheist himself, Alan Turing is a humanist hero and an apology for the appalling way he was treated for being gay is long overdue.

Please [sign the petition here](#).

Note:

The Pink Triangle Trust is the only gay humanist charity and the only organisation worldwide publishing an online magazine for lesbian and gay atheists, freethinkers and Humanists. The trust is named after the pink triangle that lesbians and gay men had to wear in the Nazi concentration camps. This registered charity (number 1015629) was set up in 1992 to advance the education of the public and particularly of lesbians and gay men, in the principles and practice of Humanism and to advance the education of the public, and particularly of Humanists, about all aspects of homosexuality.

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Aug 2009
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[I've blogged about the release of Al Megrahi](#) and have exchanged comments with freethinking friends on Twitter, who agreed with MacAskill's decision. The issue has been confused by misunderstanding and bad journalism. What do you think?

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Aug 2009
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I was amused to get the latest [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#) (SIFRE) programme in today's post, with a picture of the atheist bus to illustrate Humanism.

We're affiliated to SIFRE - it means that we're included in all sorts of consultations and educational programmes that we'd otherwise miss.

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Aug 2009
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[Martin Bell](#) will be at the Unitarian Meeting House in Churchgate Street, Bury St Edmunds. This event is being sponsored by the Unitarian Trustees in association with Amnesty International, United Nations Association and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. Admission by ticket only. Contact Martin Gienke, martin@gienke.net, 01223 882426 or 0845 456 0091.

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Sep 2009
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A quick trawl through the Internet for the weekend, to keep the little grey cells going. Firstly, Dr Stephen Law, a member of the [BHA's Humanist Philosophers](#), has [a blog](#) that's worth reading. Among other things, he asks, "Does the concept of an intelligent designer make sense? We know the answer, but for anyone who doesn't, here's something to consider:

... when we suppose that the spatio-temporal universe was created by some sort of agent, we are presumably supposing it was designed by a non-temporal agent – an agent that does not (or at least did not then) exist in time. For there was not yet any time for the agent to exist in. But if desires are psychological states with temporal duration, how, then, could this agent possess the desire to create the universe? And how did it perform the act of creation if there was not yet any time in which actions might be performed? It is hard to see how talk of a non-temporal agent makes any more sense than talk of a non-spatial mountain.

The NSS's Keith Porteous Wood comments about [the Church of England's determination to keep their bishops in the House of Lords](#) on the NSS website:

Their presence in the House of Lords is unsupportable in a country where less than half of the people do not belong to Christianity, far less, the Church of England. The UK is the only Western democracy that has clerics in its parliament as of right. These clerics are all men, they are unrepresentative and, despite their claims, they have no special insight or universally accepted morality to bring to the debate.

Over the last couple of weeks there's been some heated debate about the Islamic 'threat' to Europe and the UK from the immigration of fundamentalists and their influence in our secular (or semi-secular) society in NSS Newline's letters section. [I blogged about it recently](#), questioning the assertions being made about the subject. One of the comments was from BHA trustee Josh Kutchinsky, who wrote,

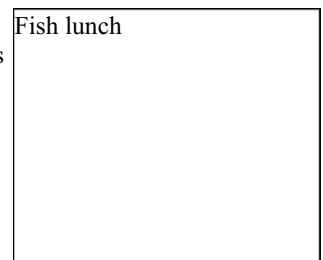
Those who propose acts of discrimination against Muslims are in fact anti-Muslim in exactly the same way as others are anti-Semites. Of course there are those in both religious groupings who have irrational hatred for each other too. There are some, often from the far right of the political spectrum who are anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and generally racist to boot. Prejudice feeds off rumour, scare stories and exaggeration but it is never founded on them.

What do you think?

The [New Scientist](#) website has some fascinating photographs and videos. Among them is one about men and their attractiveness to a potential mate, based on whether or not they can dance.

They don't say whether a woman's moves on the dance floor make her more or less attractive, but perhaps men are less discriminating than women?

Most Humanists try to shop ethically and exercise their purse power. One of the items on our shopping lists for non-vegetarians might be fish, but do you know what to look for? Many of the most popular types of fish are under threat from over-fishing, while some, like the 'rock eel' sold in fish 'n chip shops, are close to extinction - rock eel is a type of shark. The Marine Stewardship Council is promoting responsible fish-eating with its [Sustainable Seafood Lunch](#) on September 30th, when you're encouraged to enjoy sustainably-caught fish.



Another thing we need to be aware of when we're shopping is palm oil, but this is more difficult, as it's contained in a wide variety of foods and other products, including cleaning products, that aren't clearly labelled. Often it's described as 'vegetable oil'. Why should you avoid it? Because the unscrupulous palm oil industry is destroying huge swathes of rainforest in Borneo and Sumatra, denying many species their natural habitat, including our cousins the red apes - orang-utans. Orang-utan mothers are killed, leaving the babies to die. They will be extinct before long if this practice doesn't stop. Our webmaster Nathan Nelson explains about this on his website, [Big Wide World](#).

In the last ten years, an estimated 20,000 orangutans have been killed or poached, and not a single prosecution has been brought against any of those responsible. Killing, harming or even moving orangutans is illegal in Indonesia, and orangutans are theoretically protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Orphan orangutan

Another topic covered on Big Wide World is [climate change and carbon offsetting](#), which was the subject of a discussion some of us had over a pub lunch in Woodbridge last month. This is of particular interest in anticipation of the approaching Copenhagen climate change conference. Is it possible to make a difference fast enough to prevent catastrophe?

Last week, I attended a meeting between faith officers and others from [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#) and some faith representatives from [Local Strategic Partnerships](#). I'm a SIFRE tutor and a member of the Faiths Officer's team, representing Humanism. It would take too long to explain here why we have very strong reservations about the way the LSP reps were chosen (shared with some SIFRE people). I'm just going to mention one of the people I met there - a 'street pastor', who patrols the streets of a North Suffolk town, 'caring and listening' when young people leave the pubs and clubs. I didn't realise at first who he was, until, during a discussion over the board game 'Diversity', I mentioned that Humanists strongly disapproved of proselytising and missionary work, referring to [Operation Christmas Child](#) and others. A Buddhist colleague commented that she was glad I'd raised the issue, and that she agreed with me. The street pastor, and a chap from the [Church Army](#) who's a faith rep on an LSP in the north of the county, both said that they're obliged to spread the word of God because it says so in the Bible. It appears that other Christians might not agree with them, I said, as the Quakers and the Unitarians don't proselytise. They didn't have an answer to that, and as we didn't have any Quakers or Unitarians at the table, neither did they. This was all very civilised. I was prevented from expressing myself more forcefully by observing the SIFRE code; that we tend to skirt around serious differences. However, anyone who lives in the Waveney area of Suffolk might like to take up the issue of street pastors with the council there, as a correspondent to NSS Newline from Bath has done:

As a concerned taxpayer, I wrote to both the Chief Inspector of Police, and the Community Partnerships Manager of the local authority politely enquiring whether any evaluations of such schemes had been undertaken regarding their impact on community safety, and whether funding a project that only allows Christians to volunteer, was compliant with obligations under equalities and anti-discrimination legislation. No such evaluations had been carried out.

After some persistence on my part, however, the Council undertook something called an Equalities Impact Assessment, which had to acknowledge the fact that, under the aims of the scheme Street Pastors could only be recruited from "individuals with a Christian Faith" and was also only open to those "whose relationship lifestyle is in keeping with mainstream Christian teaching" - i.e. no gays or lesbians, thank you.

I have just received confirmation from a slightly embarrassed Council official that the scheme will receive no further public funding, and wanted to share with your readership a small, but satisfying, victory against the encroachment of religion into public life.

If you've spotted anything on the Internet that you'd like to share, please get in touch.

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Sep 2009

Today I received through my letterbox a card from a church in Woodbridge offering to pray for me. That might seem a reasonable offer but as an atheist, I find the whole concept of prayer and worship distasteful and, frankly, ludicrous.

I am very happy for others to believe in what they want to believe in but I am not at all happy for them to force their views or irrational practices and rituals on others without invitation. I consider their card an unwarranted and certainly unwanted intrusion.

However, the extreme irritation it caused pales when compared with the announcement on the card that church members were going to visit my house and interrupt either my working day or our private time at home in the evening on some unspecified date next week.

The card added insult to irritation by asking that if I did not wish anybody to call, I should telephone the church to stop the visit.

In the words of the Catherine Tate character Derek Fay, "How *very* dare you?" They ask *me* to telephone *them* to stop them doing something that they will otherwise do, without my invitation or permission.

No I would not. That is absolutely unacceptable. I do not, ever, want believers to attempt to force their beliefs on me and then ask me to spend money to stop them doing it!

I might consider turning up at their church, uninvited, and explain to the gathered followers why I consider them to be brainwashed, weak-willed, pathetic people. Maybe they would be outraged. Perhaps they would "pray" for my "soul." Either way, I think it would be an unreasonable way for me to act. And I see a very strong parallel with the way the church acted in sending these cards.

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Sep 2009
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Getting here is really easy, we are only 1 hour from the centre of London. There are trains every hour to and from London.

Our address is: Mercury Theatre, Balkerne Gate, Colchester, CO1 1PT.

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Sep 2009
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150 years after Charles Darwin first presented his theory to fellow scientists and amidst year-long Darwin celebrations in 2009, *Re:Design* is a fascinating and timely dramatisation of 30 years correspondence between Charles Darwin, Kent, England and Asa Gray in Boston, USA. Intellectual debate around science and religion is interwoven with gossip, opinion and anecdotes about everything from war and slavery, to family incidents and unfortunate gardening accidents.

If you're interested in joining a party to see the play, please [get in touch ASAP](#).

(Darwin is played by Terry Molloy, my brother-in-law, who also plays Mike Tucker in *The Archers*, and was Davros in the original *Doctor Who* - *Margaret*)



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Sep 2009
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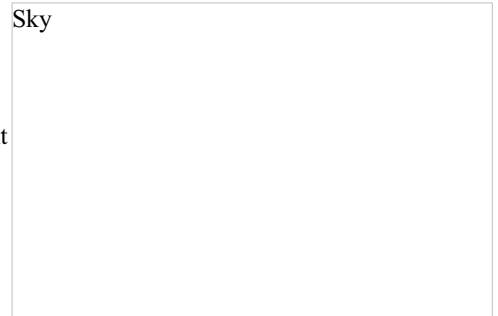
Regular group meeting in Ipswich. Bring your brains! We'll be planning what to do over the next few months, including choosing a slogan for our car stickers and any other ways we can promote ourselves and Humanism in general. Even if you haven't got any bright ideas yourself, come and see what you think of other people's. We'll be in the lounge in Pinewood Community Hall, as usual. If the door is locked, buzz the buzzer.

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Sep 2009
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How often do you look up at the sky and think, "It looks like rain"? Apart from that, and noticing when the sky is a boring blue with no clouds in sight, do you pay it much attention?

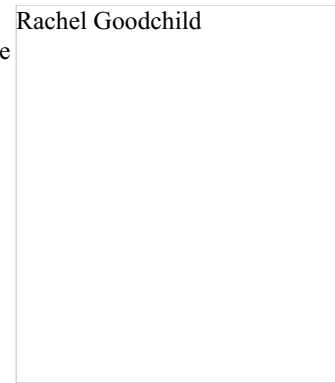
Margaret Nelson is member No. 2812 of the [Cloud Appreciation Society](#), pledged to fight "blue-sky thinking"™ wherever we find it. Life would be dull if we had to look up at cloudless monotony day after day. She hopes to encourage you to look up and see some beautiful clouds and optical effects, and maybe even learn to predict the weather.

We'll be in our usual place at the usual time. Friendly guests always welcome. Get in touch if you need directions or can offer a lift, or need to find one.



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Sep 2009
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Come and hear Soprano Singer Rachel Goodchild perform. Enjoy an evening's entertainment, including raffle, light refreshments, a programme of singing with commentary, and a FREE glass of wine or hot drink! The Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group would greatly appreciate your company. Please feel free to tell a friend! Tickets are £2 per person on the door to cover costs. Entry tickets can be exchanged for your free drink.



[Email Andrew Goodchild](#), or phone 07862 713342.

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Sep 2009
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The Islamic states and their allies at the UN, including China, want to censor and condemn free expression, usually on religious grounds. [Read more on the IHEU website:](#)

In a brave attempt at the Human Rights Council to re-establish their credentials as a team player on the world stage, the United States is co-sponsoring a resolution with Egypt on Freedom of Expression. The intent of the resolution is, in the words of the Egyptian delegate, to bring the Human Rights Council "to a point of convergence" on what has become the most divisive and contentious issue in the short history of the Council.

Meanwhile, [gay Humanists have issued a press release](#) about the "homophobic public pronouncements of Mr Ali Abdussalam Trekki, the new Libyan President of the UN General Assembly". Ali Abdussalam Treki opened the Assembly session stating that homosexuality "was not acceptable for most of the world". During the course of the assembly some journalists asked him about his position regarding the "Declaration for the Universal Decriminalisation of Homosexuality" which was made official on December 19, 2008. He stated, "It is a very thorny argument. As a Muslim, I do not agree with it. I believe it is not acceptable for most of the world, and it is totally unacceptable for our tradition and religion".

The Pink Triangle Trust's George Broadhead says:

The President's pronouncements are despicable, but are hardly surprising given the intrinsic homophobia of the religion he adheres to. However, like other members of the General Assembly, he is surely duty-bound to represent the principles and the aims of the United Nations, according to the Charter adopted on June 26, 1945, with its respect for human rights and fundamental freedom for all human beings. Instead he has implicitly endorsed the barbaric treatment of thousands of gay people throughout the world, particularly in Islamic theocracies like Iran and Saudi Arabia. He should be asked to resign immediately or be removed from office.

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Sep 2009
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The Guardian's Andrew Brown has written a piece about atheism, alleging that atheists are all middle-class, Aga-owning snobs. [I've written a comment](#), [Ariane Sherine](#) has responded to Brown, and [New Humanist](#) has provided some history of the connection between class and atheism.

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Sep 2009
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An Atheist's Guide to Christmas is in the shops now (and if it isn't, it jolly well should be). Edited by the lovely [Ariane Sherine](#), of [Atheist Bus](#) fame, a whole bunch of atheists, including some very funny ones, have contributed their thoughts about the festive season, including how to avoid it.

Atheists Guide

The royalties will go to the UK charity, the [Terrence Higgins Trust](#), which seems particularly appropriate now that [Pope Benedict](#), that homophobic old goat*, is about to visit the UK with his message that condoms shouldn't be used in countries where AIDS is rife.

You can [buy the book now at Amazon](#), or take a trip down to your local bookshop and demand that they put it in a window display.

**Actually, I take the goat insult back - I like goats.*

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Sep 2009
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In case you didn't hear it, I was on BBC Radio 4's 'Soul Music' yesterday, talking about a piece of music by Richard Strauss from Four Last Songs. I was introduced to it by a funeral client.

Strauss

You can [listen again on the BBC's i-player](#) for the next week or so, or it's repeated on Saturday at 3.30pm. Be warned; several people have said it made them cry, so have a tissue handy.

I was on the programme because the producer googled the title of the piece of music while researching it, and found [my blog](#).

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Sep 2009
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Today is Blasphemy Day, a day to promote free speech and to stand up in a show of solidarity for the freedom to challenge, criticise, and satirise religion without fear of murder, litigation, or reprisal. Find out more on [the New Humanist Blog](#), then blaspheme away!

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Oct 2009
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Apparently, we've won an award from the [British Humanist Association](#) for The Best Group Website, with a certificate and everything! Hooray! Denis Johnston, our secretary, collected it at yesterday's Groups Annual Meeting (GRAM) in London. Thank you Denis.

No acceptance speech from me, but a big thank you to our webmaster, my son Nathan Nelson, who keeps the technical show on the web, as it were.

You might be interested in his website - [Big Wide World](#).

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Oct 2009
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[BHA President Polly Toynbee](#) has been cited in the official Iranian media as "One of the great conspirators who wants to overthrow the Islamic regime," according to a contributor to the BBC's Dateline London yesterday.

Polly Toynbee

Polly said this is probably because of her presidency of the BHA, "... and we tend to attack all religions."

[You have 6 days to see the programme using BBC i-Player](#).

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Oct 2009

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Hollywood stars who've supported film director Roman Polanski, arrested for a rape he committed in 1977, may be regretting rushing to his defence, as [public opinion, led by some outspoken women, has condemned him](#).

[According to The Telegraph,](#)

Movie mogul Harvey Weinstein said Polanski was a "humanist" who had been the victim of a "miscarriage of justice".

Oh no he isn't.

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Oct 2009
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Andrew Brown of the Guardian made a lot of readers cross when [he wrote that atheists are all middle-class, Aga-owning snobs](#). Now [Theos, the public theology think tank, says that](#) -

Although atheists have historically been drawn from upper social grades and higher education levels, the research shows that converts to atheism are disproportionately drawn from groups with no educational qualifications whereas converts to theism are disproportionately drawn from higher socio-economic grades and from people with a masters degree or higher.

Maybe they should tell Andrew?

Theos researchers asked interviewees to choose from a selection of statements about God. 10% agreed with,

I do not believe in God but I do believe in a higher power.

Maybe they were [Pastafarians](#)?

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Oct 2009
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[An urgent message from the IHEU:](#)

Behnoud Shojaee and Akram Mahdavi are scheduled to be executed in Evin prison this Sunday October 11, 2009, which falls one day after the International Day Against Execution.

They were under 18 when they committed the crimes they've been sentenced for. Please read the IHEU report and act now.

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Oct 2009
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[In today's Guardian, Kitty Empire writes,](#)

If secular humanism had a house band it would be Oklahoma's [Flaming Lips](#). Having begun life in the mid-80s as lysergic slackers, the Lips have evolved into a kaleidoscopic outfit in which the forces of good and evil thrash it out nightly. Warm fuzziness and faith in human decency triumph most of the time. Their best-known epiphany, "Do You Realize?", watches the planet hurtling through space before skewering fans with the knowledge that everyone they know, someday, will die.

Do you realise?

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Oct 2009
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[Tonight on Radio 4, the first part of 'And Another Thing'](#), Eoin Colfer's sequel to Douglas Adams' Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series. Read by Stephen Mangan, with Peter Serafinowicz. If you miss it, you'll be able to listen via i-Player.

[We've written about Douglas Adams elsewhere on this site.](#) Apparently, Colfer's sequel has been approved by Adams' widow, and it sounds as though Douglas might have approved. Review tomorrow, probably.

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Oct 2009
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Not quite the outcome that [Mr Blair](#) had in mind when he agreed to invade Iraq, [Iraqis disillusioned with a God that allows the chaos and carnage they've endured since 2003 are losing their faith](#). He must be so disappointed.

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Oct 2009
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[The NSS reports:](#)

“Café Church” is the brainchild of Baptist Minister Cid Latty of Christchurch Baptist Church, Welwyn Garden City. The concept is simple - people won't go to church, so why not bring the church to the people via high street coffee chains? "The idea is to encourage those who might feel uncomfortable in a church building to worship in a more neutral environment," say the organisers.

Costa Coffee and the Gloria Jean coffee shop chain have co-operated with this scheme. I usually go to Costa's, so it'll be Starbucks for me.

I've emailed Whitbread, Costa's parent company, as follows:

Dear Sir,

I was very disappointed to learn that Christians are being allowed to proselytise at Costa Coffee shops, as part of the Cafe Church scheme.

If the church has trouble filling its pews, it's for a good reason; fewer people are interested in religion. They don't want it to intrude any further into public life.

As an atheist and Humanist, religion is irrelevant to my life. I have no problem with it, as long as religious people keep it to themselves, in their own homes or places of worship, where I can ignore it. Now that it's in my favourite coffee shop, I'll have to change my habits. It'll be Starbucks in future.

Please let me know when you change your minds and it's safe to go back to Costa Coffee.

Yours faithfully, etc.

You can email Whitbread at customer.relations@whitbread.com.

Email to Café Church (info@cafechurch.net):

Thank you for letting everyone know where to avoid evangelism. I shan't be going to Costa coffee (my usual place), or anywhere else where Christianity intrudes in a public place.

The reason that church attendances are falling is that no one's interested. I doubt that the commercial interests involved with your scheme will be interested when they realise that it alienates their customers.

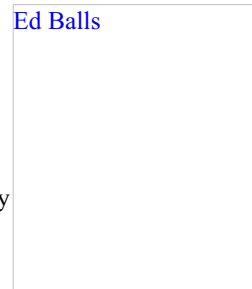
Email to Starbucks (infouk@starbucks.com):

Just to let you know that I'll be drinking your coffee, as long as you promise to keep Café Church off the premises.

I don't want evangelism with my latte, thank you.

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Oct 2009
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[Education Minister Ed Balls made a speech at the Institute of Directors yesterday](#). This is some of it:



It is now just over two years since we launched our Faith in the System document at the British Library.

It was a hugely important event.

And it came just a few months after I began this job – in fact, the speech I made then was one of the very first speeches I gave as Secretary of State.

I was very much a novice then.

I'm now a veteran – in fact, in the next few weeks, I'll become the second longest serving Secretary of State since Kenneth Baker.

But I do believe – and I hope you all agree – that Faith in the System was a landmark document.

Because it was the first time that all of you and we in government came together to set out our shared understanding of the important contribution that faith schools make to our country.

And it's only right that representatives of all of the different faiths are here with us again today to reaffirm our commitment to it and look at what more we can do to build on the progress that we've made together.

So, no change there then.

To find out why faith schools are a bad idea, [click here](#).

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Oct 2009
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And if he smite him with an instrument of iron ... the murderer shall surely be put to death (Numbers 35:16).



Amnesty International has issued an urgent appeal for a man facing execution in three weeks' time despite the fact that jurors at his trial consulted passages from the Bible in deciding his fate. Thirty-two-year-old Khristian Oliver is set to be executed in Texas, USA on 5 November. He was sentenced to death in 1999 for a murder committed during a burglary. While deciding whether he should live or die, jurors at his trial consulted copies of the Bible, including text supporting the death penalty, calling into serious question their impartiality.

[Read more on the Amnesty UK website](#).

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Oct 2009
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Last weekend, South Central Liberal Democrats Regional Conference passed a resolution calling for the state to be completely independent of any religion and none, as follows:

Conference notes:

1. That Britain is becoming more multicultural every day and virtually every religious faith in the world is now actively practised in the UK;
2. The steady decline in attendance at traditional Christian Churches
3. and That the Church of England is still tied to the Monarchy and the State;
4. That much discord in the world arises from strong religious belief or none.

Conference believes the time is right to separate all religious belief from its ties with Government and the Monarch at all levels so that all such belief and none is seen to be treated equally across the whole Electorate, reflecting today's modern British society where humanity and equality are seen as paramount and religious belief is simply personal. We ask Government to set up a Commission to implement this proposal.

The motion was proposed by Chris Marriage and the summation was by NSS honorary associate Dr Evan Harris, MP.

(Report from the [NSS](#))

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Oct 2009
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Some of the things that Terry says may upset Humanists who regard themselves as part of a "movement" that shares beliefs - a sort of quasi-religion. I sympathise with Terry's view of Humanism, but maybe you have a different point of view?

There's [more from the NSS on You Tube](#).

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Oct 2009
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eBay/Paypal and MillerCoors are donating a cent per hashtag (via [tweet](#), Facebook update, or blog post). The campaign is aiming for a Guinness World Record "for the distribution of the largest mass message through social media" in one day.

[Click here for my blog post](#).

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Oct 2009
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The Prime Minister's Office has responded to an e-petition that read:

We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to include the teaching of evolution by natural selection in the new national primary curriculum.

Details of Petition:

Scientists are agreed that all today's living organisms have evolved over millions of years from simpler organisms. This evolution is best explained by Darwin's theory of natural selection and its subsequent refinement. Natural selection is the most powerful tool for understanding living things. The current draft curriculum includes living things but omits evolution and natural selection. These ideas are needed to lay a foundation for later studies and to help children see their place in the living world and the universe.

The response from No.10 reads:

The future economic success of the UK is dependent upon a good supply of skilled scientists and engineers. The Government is therefore committed to increasing the number of young people that fully engage in science education whilst at school, particularly, for instance, encouraging the study of three separate science GCSEs. This is crucial if we want to increase numbers taking science at A level and beyond. Carving out a place for science within the primary curriculum that is engaging and relevant, and one which provides a smooth transition to secondary education, will provide the foundation needed to help achieve these aims.

The proposed new primary curriculum has been developed in consultation with a wide range of key stakeholders including primary head teachers, teachers, subject specialists and learned societies. The development of the scientific and technological understanding area of learning was directly informed by the outcomes of the consultation exercise to ensure that it contained the scientific knowledge, skills and understanding considered essential learning for children aged 5 -11.

The National Curriculum science programmes of study cover evolution explicitly in Key Stage 4 (age 14 -16). The understanding of evolution is underpinned by extensive knowledge about the living world. This underpinning knowledge and understanding for evolution is carefully developed in the primary curriculum and at Key Stage 3 (age 11 -14). In both the current primary programme of study for science and in the proposed programme of learning for scientific and technological understanding, variation between individuals and groups, classification and interdependence are all introduced. At secondary level these areas are developed further and genetics, selection and evolution are all included. In this way the fundamental concepts underpinning evolution are developed, leading to a fuller understanding at Key Stage 4.

It's the "explicitly" bit that's disappointing. Evolution should be explicitly included in the primary curriculum, so that children learn what it means much earlier than Key Stage 3.

[Read the letter sent to Ed Balls by a group of leading scientists in July this year.](#)

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Oct 2009

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Women with insecure immigration status fleeing violence cannot access the benefits they need to get protection and support. Due to their extreme vulnerability, immediate action is needed; the UK is in breach of its international human rights obligations while this situation persists.

[Amnesty lobby](#)

Amnesty UK is organising a mass lobby of parliament on Wednesday November 4th to urge the UK government to ensure equal protection for all women facing violence in the UK. It's hoped that hundreds of people will go to the House of Commons to raise the same concern with their MPs at the same time.

[To find out more, go to the Amnesty website.](#)

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Oct 2009

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[Author, broadcaster and campaigner Sir Ludovic Kennedy has died aged 89.](#)

[Sir Ludovic was a distinguished supporter of the BHA](#) and an honorary associate of the [NSS](#).

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Oct 2009

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Virginia, US.

The question was asked by a student from [Liberty University](#) in

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Oct 2009
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You'll find it hard to believe (I know I did), but [Iowan Christians have been offended](#). By Iowa Bus ad

My thanks to [Ariane Sherine](#) for this snippet of shocking news.

Incidentally, today is the first anniversary of the launch of [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#), which one of our members says was "The most positive defining moment of my life." Ah!

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Oct 2009
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A Humanist will be among a group of Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource people on the 1st floor at Hadleigh Library to play the board game Diversity. Come and learn about some of the faiths practiced in Suffolk.

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists is affiliated to SIFRE.

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Oct 2009
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[Richard Dawkins has struck a book deal with Transworld](#), part of the Random House group, with a title aimed at teenagers, due out in autumn 2011:

Aimed at the adult and young adult market, the book addresses big questions about the natural world, including What is a Rainbow? Why are there Seasons? and Who Was the First Man and the First Woman? Each question is answered first by myth and legend, and then by lucid scientific explanation.

I remember his slightly pained expression in one of his TV programmes (I think it was 'The Root of all Evil'), when he took a group of teenagers to a south coast cliff face and tried to interest them in the fossils they found there. At least one of the kids seemed to think that someone had come along and pushed the fossils into the cliff to try to discredit the creationists.

If you're a member of Suffolk Humanists & Secularists, you can borrow The Richard Dawkins Collection (The Genius of Charles Darwin, The Enemies of Reason and The Root of All Evil?) on DVD, donated by one of our members.

Rainbow

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Oct 2009
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When [Pope Benedict XVI visits the UK next year](#), he might have expected protests from [gay and lesbian organisations](#), [child protection campaigners](#), and [HIV and AIDS activists](#). Now it's looking like his reception by our Head of State, [HM Queen Elizabeth II](#), might be somewhat frosty, and [Archbishop Rowan Williams](#) may find it hard to be welcoming.

On the 19th October, Ann Widdecombe MP and Archbishop Onaiyekan lost a debate with Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry that "[The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world](#)." Before the debate, 678 were for the motion, 1102 against, with 346 don't knows. After the debate, 268 were for, 1,876 were against, and 34 were don't knows. We'll have a report in our next newsletter.

Apart from the most devout Catholics and a bunch of bigoted misogynist Anglican clergy, Pope Ben will be about as welcome as a fart in an elevator. It's not too late to remember a previous engagement, and cancel.

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Oct 2009
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[54% of Britons think creationism and intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution in school science lessons](#), according to a MORI poll commissioned by the British Council, which suggests that those 54% didn't pay much attention to their own science lessons, or weren't taught well.

If the school curriculum was determined by parental choice, ignorance would be perpetuated ad infinitum.

[Read why the creationists and intelligent design enthusiasts are wrong.](#)

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Oct 2009
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I was on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) today, talking about [the MORI poll that shows 54% of Britons think creationism & ID should be taught in school science lessons](#).

You can listen again via the website. It's on the James Hazell programme, from about 10.10am. The other contributor was [Prof. Michael Reiss](#), who resigned from his role as the Royal Society's director of Education over the issue.

Listen to the phone-in after the interviews.

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Oct 2009
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[The Bishop of Lichfield has criticised councils that "rebrand" Christmas](#) to avoid offending other religions. This is ironic, considering that the Christian church rebranded the earlier pagan midwinter festival in about the 4th century. The bishop needs [a history lesson](#).

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Oct 2009
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[The discussion about creationism in school science lessons on BBC Radio Suffolk](#) is now online.

[It's on James Hazell's programme, 26th October](#), about 35 minutes in. You have 7 days to listen.

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Oct 2009
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Oct 2009
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A message from Maryam Namazie of the One Law for All campaign about the rally on November 21:

Maryam Namazie

I am now responding to Sharia-related comments and questions every day of the week until the One Law for All rally on November 21. You can see my responses for the past two weeks by visiting [the One Law for All website](#). If you have any questions or comments, please email them to me or post them on the website and I'll be sure to respond.

Also, don't forget to tell everyone you know about November 21. It is an important day to raise our voices against Sharia and religious laws and defend humanity, secularism and universal rights, including the right to asylum for those fleeing political Islam. If you can't get to London and want to organise something in your city, contact us so we can help you do so. [Click here for more information on the London rally](#).

And please donate if you can. If everyone who supported us gave just Â£1, we would have more than enough to do all we need to do including conducting a survey on Sharia councils and Muslim Arbitration Tribunals, organising a seminar and report on the legal and legislative avenues available to restricting religious laws in Britain, and a conference on Apostasy in the upcoming year. [Click here to donate](#).

We look forward to seeing you out on the streets on November 21 " wherever you are.

Best wishes
Maryam

Maryam Namazie
Spokesperson
One Law for All
onelawforall@gmail.com
www.onelawforall.org.uk

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Oct 2009
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The latest [Gay & Lesbian Humanist online magazine](#) is available now - free. It includes a look at what life is really like for gay people in Russia and the former Eastern bloc countries of central and Eastern Europe.

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Oct 2009
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Emitos Girls Humanist Football Club is a really special project running in Uganda. Supported by Women and the Free World Organisation (WOFEWO), the aim of the club is to empower and educate girls aged 12-20 years through football. [The Central London Humanist Group](#) is aiming to raise Â£3,700 for football kits, the costs of playing away and for 3 Workshops on reproductive health and HIV/AIDS through the International Humanist Trust, the charitable arm of the [IHEU](#). [Click here to donate now](#).

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Nov 2009
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In today's Guardian, Phil Hall writes about humanist funerals, and why he finds them much more satisfying than ...

... religious funerals, where a stranger usually officiates and witters on about heaven, often fail to commemorate a life well lived properly. Religious funerals can be a whimpering anti-climax.

He goes on,

In contrast, [the humanist funerals in our family](#) were completely satisfying and eclectic. They looked backwards and allowed us to see the lives of our loved ones clearly. We did not need to look forwards towards some sort of puzzling postscript. Perhaps the last thing people want after a death, during the messy form of group therapy that is a funeral, is for some sanctimonious stranger to stand up and start talking about a the afterlife.

If you live in Suffolk, you might like to come and [learn more about humanist funerals at our December meeting](#).

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Nov 2009
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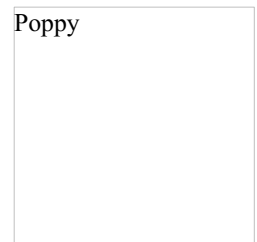
While the BBC Trust deliberates today on whether to allow more Humanist broadcasting, including Thoughts for the Day, [Humanist peers debated the issue last night](#). One of the speakers, Baroness Massey of Darwen, said,

Humanism is growing in strength. It has growing public recognition in non-religious ceremonies such as marriages, funerals and baptisms. This has made significant contributions to public policy. The moral values held by humanists are weighed and considered. Humanism is a philosophy in its own right and is not a negative response to religion. The BBC needs in its programmes to give a perspective from the non-religious viewpoint.

There've been [Humanist Thoughts for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk](#) since 1995, though the slot has been cut to Sundays only for a while now, presumably because it wasn't popular.

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Nov 2009
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Although there were representatives of other faiths [at the Cenotaph this morning](#), the religious part of the remembrance ceremony was Christian, as usual. Today and on Tuesday (Armistice Day, 11th November), Christian ceremonial will predominate, regardless of the fact that services personnel are of all faiths and none, and that those who join them on Remembrance Day are also a diverse cross-section of society. To be wholly inclusive, such ceremonial should be completely secular, allowing those who are religious to have separate ceremonies afterwards.



Not many people will know that there is now a [UK Armed Forces Humanist Association](#), which welcomes new members. Those who serve in the armed forces should not be expected to participate in religious ceremonial that has no relevance to them.

[Read our previous posts on 11/11 here](#).

The Soldiers At Lauro
Italy, January 1943
Spike Milligan

Young are our dead
Like babies they lie

The wombs they blest once
Not healed dry
And yet " too soon
Into each space
A cold earth falls
On colder face.
Quite still they lie
These fresh-cut reeds
Clutched in earth
Like winter seeds
But they will not bloom
When called by spring
To burst with leaf
And blossoming
They sleep on
In silent dust
As crosses rot
And helmets rust.

Spike was a bombardier in the Royal Artillery in North Africa and Italy in WW2.

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Nov 2009
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The recent Intelligence Squared debate - ['The Catholic Church is a Force for Good in the World'](#) - when Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry soundly thrashed Anne Widdicombe and Archbishop Onaiyekan, is now online. [Watch and enjoy](#).

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Nov 2009
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A few of the stories that have caught my eye on the Interweb this week:

* As an antidote to the depressing news that [a significant proportion of British people think that creationism ought to be included in school science lessons](#), we can celebrate a development in education. [Evolution will be in the national curriculum for primary schools when the new version is published soon](#). Andrew Copson from the BHA wrote in the Guardian:

The new primary curriculum, together with the 2007 government guidance that prohibits the teaching of creationism and intelligent design in science lessons, should put English schools in the forefront of education about evolution. Coming in the month which marks the 150th anniversary of On the Origin of Species, and at a point when good science education is a matter of urgency, it could not be more timely.

* We will have to remain vigilant, however, when loonies of all sorts seek access to our classrooms. [The Times Educational Supplement](#) reported a couple of days ago that ...

A school initiative that trains children in "energy therapy" has been criticised as unscientific by two senior academics.

The "EmoTrance" project is taking place at the Haydon School in Pinner, Middlesex. Nineteen pupils are being trained in "emotional transformation", which is described in a press release from [EmoTrance.com](#) as a "practical system for energy healing and energy working".

* Terry Sanderson, [NSS](#) President, has been urging disrespect for religion in [Forth magazine](#):

Religion has had it too easy for too long. It has erected around itself a completely unjustified wall of respectability. Many people still feel guilty or even "bad" if they speak ill of religion. I have even heard victims of the most horrendous clerical abuse holding back from condemning the institution that made that abuse possible because they had absorbed so deeply the Church's own propaganda about its "goodness".

* One of the ways that "fundies" like to threaten those who reject religion is to tell us that we'll all go to hell. A young woman on YouTube is amused by this.

* And lastly, some of you may remember that our webmaster spent some time in Cambodia the other year, helping young adults at the [Sangkheum Center for Children](#) to learn skills for when they left the centre. Now some of those young adults are raising funds to benefit the next generation at the centre with a sponsored 30km bike around Angkor Wat. [Please donate at their Just Giving site.](#)

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Nov 2009
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It's tedious, hearing those in Parliament wittering on about "secularism", when they clearly haven't a clue [what it means](#). But then, neither do a majority of religious leaders (including Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury) who complain about "aggressive secularism".

Personally, I'm feeling quite aggressive about the latest threat to secularism; [John Denham, the Communities Secretary, has announced that a new panel of religious experts has been set up to advise the Government on making public policy decisions](#). I'd hoped that that sort of nonsense would have been dropped when Hazel Blears departed, but no.

Exactly what are "religious experts"? Does that mean people who know a lot about religion? I doubt it, or they'd be academics who could tell Mr Denham all about how religions started, how they've inspired people to kill one another, and so on. Does it mean very religious people, who have their own interests to consider, such as maintaining their privileges. Does it mean non-elected, self-appointed religious leaders who don't represent anyone?

The last thing we need is religious bias in public policy decisions. It's very depressing.

Read [what Prof A C Grayling thinks](#) about this, and [what Ophelia Benson thinks](#). I think I'd like to lock John Denham in a room with Prof Grayling, and not let him out until he sees the error of his ways.

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Nov 2009
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[The BBC Trust today announced its findings on a number of appeals about the broadcast of Radio 4's Thought for the Day and BBC editorial policy on non-religious content.](#)

The Trust found that the editorial policy of only allowing religious contributors to participate on Thought for the Day does not breach either the BBC Editorial Guideline on impartiality or the BBC's duty to reflect religious and other beliefs in its programming.

[The National Secular Society](#) has issued the following press release:

The BBC Trust has rejected complaints by the National Secular Society that the Thought for the Day slot is discriminatory because it fails to include non-religious voices.

The Trust says the three-minute slot, which features on the Today programme each morning, does not breach impartiality guidelines and is entitled to continue to exclude non-believers.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society which launched the appeal to the Trust, said: "Naturally we are very disappointed. This is a campaign we have been waging for fifty years, ever since Thought for the Day and its predecessors were first broadcast on the BBC. Every edition of Thought for the Day is a rebuke to those many people in our

society who do not have religious beliefs. It says to them that their "thoughts" are not worth hearing and that somehow religious opinions are more worthy of a special, unchallengeable platform.

Mr Sanderson said that contributors on Thought for the Day often made political points at times when controversial issues are being debated in Parliament. He said: "Whether it's euthanasia or gay rights, abortion or foreign aid, the religious speakers have a platform on the flagship news programme to put a biased point of view that no-one can question them about. Nobody else on the Today programme can get away with that."

Mr Sanderson said that the campaign to open up Thought for the Day would continue. "This is so blatant an abuse of religious privilege that we cannot simply let it pass. We have evidence that public opinion is heavily on our side and we will be looking at other ways of challenging this unjustifiable slot."

"The BBC Trust has ruled that previous complaints about this religious bias have been mishandled and that the BBC should apologise. But it has done little better itself and has failed its first major test as the champion of the viewer and the upholder of the BBC's claims of impartiality and fairness."

Andrew Copson of [the BHA](#) issued the following statement:

What a shame that the BBC Trust has not found the exclusively religious slot of Thought for the Day to be in breach of editorial guidelines. This is a real missed opportunity to correct the ongoing injustice of the exclusion of non-religious speakers on the programme. We can see no good reason whatever why humanists are barred from making their contribution.

It is difficult to see how a policy of allowing only religious speakers to contribute, with unquestioned statements and positions, some of which stray very closely to the line of political opinions, does not contravene the BBC's guidelines for impartiality. It is unlikely that there is elsewhere in BBC output a strand that is devoted to a particular point of view, expressed without interruption and with no right of reply.

That Thought for the Day is, at present, reserved solely for religion clearly goes against both the spirit of the BBC Charter and also contemporary legislation. However, we look forward to continue to work with the BBC Executive and Mark Thompson on this important issue, and on the matter of humanist broadcasting more widely.

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Don't label me

After [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#), people have been asking, "What next?" Now you have an answer; [the Billboard Campaign](#).

Richard Dawkins famously said that there are no Catholic babies, or Protestant babies, or Muslim babies, or Hindu babies "they are all just babies. In [the Observer in December 2001](#) he wrote,

Where we might have said, "Knowing his father, I expect young Cowdrey will take up cricket," we emphatically do not say, "With her devout Catholic parents, I expect young Bernadette will take up Catholicism." Instead we say, without a moment's hesitation or qualm of misgiving, "Bernadette is a Catholic." We state it as a simple fact even when she is far too young to have developed a theological opinion of her own.

It never occurs to religious parents that by labelling their children with their faith, they are imposing beliefs on children who are too young to understand, but who may grow up feeling very confused about just what they ought to believe. Most religious leaders think that they have a right to do this, ignoring the rights of children. We think that children should be allowed to grow up before they're expected to decide how they want to label themselves, if they want labels at all.

The Atheist Billboard Campaign is just one way to try to change attitudes. Please spread the word.

There is an [Atheist Billboard Facebook](#) page, and it's on [Twitter](#).

[Read about Faith Schools](#), and why they're a bad idea.

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In 1925, one of the most unusual trials ever seen in a United States courtroom took place. Earlier that year, the state of Tennessee had passed the Butler Act, which made the teaching of evolution illegal. In the stifling July heat, and in a courtroom hung with banners proclaiming 'Read Your Bible Daily', 24-year-old teacher John Scopes stood trial.

With all the controversy about [the recent British Council poll](#) that suggested that 54% of British people want creationism covered in school science lessons, this is a lesson from history.

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Our latest newsletter is here. [Click here to download it.](#) To open a pdf file, [see our help page.](#)

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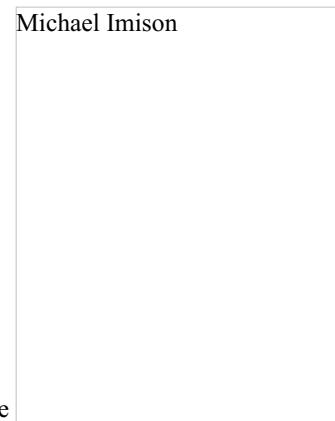
Postponed from January meeting, due to bad weather -

Come prepared to tell us about one or two books that you'd recommend, whether because they've inspired you, amused you, informed you, or all of these things. Don't worry about the usual Humanist stuff, like Dawkins' 'The God Delusion' - what about something you just couldn't put down, or you've read several times, or that makes you laugh?

We'll be in the usual place at the usual time.

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Member Michael Imison first tried out his ethical jury idea [at a 2007 meeting in Colchester](#). Now we're going to do the same in Ipswich.



Michael explains:

It has long puzzled me that religions such as Christianity and Islam which were invented for the use of unsophisticated societies centuries ago have survived as strongly as they have into the post-Darwinian age. One possible explanation for their continued existence is that they are generally regarded as repositories of morality. Abolishing them would leave people in general with no firm means of distinguishing right from wrong. Religions are seen as setting standards of behaviour, without which communities would decline into anarchy.

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

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

I wanted to see what would happen if a similar size group were asked to bring examples of real moral dilemmas they had faced in their

own lives so that the group could discuss one of them and reach a conclusion if necessary by voting.

The objective would be to look critically at the possible or actual consequences of the action contemplated to establish which would cause least harm. The participants would have to examine what moral principles they were using in making a decision, without assuming these would be applicable in every case. Humanist morality would therefore lie in examining each case on its merits, without attempting broad generalizations. It would be interesting to see how far these random groups would reach a consensus. I decided to call them ethical juries because of the parallels with the ethics committees operating in medical practice, who have to find practical answers to difficult issues, and with the juries in criminal cases who have to reach conclusions in the face of conflicting evidence.

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

I hope therefore that you'll come prepared to offer your personal moral dilemmas though of course no-one should feel they have to offer an example or even to take part in the discussion if they simply prefer to watch. Depending on the examples offered it may be possible to discuss more than one in the evening. The final part of the meeting will be a brief discussion of the process to see how effective people thought it was.

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We'll be in the usual place for our AGM in April, with an unusual guest. [The Mayor of Ipswich](#), Cllr David Goldsmith, has been visiting the various faith groups in the town at their "places of worship", and it's our turn. No worshipping for his worship (sorry, couldn't resist), but we will be able to give him a warm welcome, explain who we are and what we do, and talk about humanist and secularist interests.

The last mayoral visit we had was when we celebrated our 10th anniversary in 2001 and Cllr Philip Smart was mayor. He brought his family to meet us and we had a bit of a party.

At the time of typing, we're not expecting the mayor to stay long, so we'll postpone the usual AGM business (election of officers, etc.) until after he's left. If there's any time left after that, we'll have ten-minute topics - you're welcome to submit a topic on a piece of paper, then the topics are drawn at random.

We will need to elect a new chairperson and a new treasurer - anyone interested?

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30th January - a day discussing alternative medicine. The speakers are -

SIMON SINGH, author of *Trick or Treatment*, currently being sued by British Chiropractic Association

ANDY LEWIS, runs [Quackometer](#) on the web

PROFESSOR JOHN GARROW, founder member of the charity "HealthWatch" which promotes proper testing of the health claims of all therapies, alternative or orthodox.

In conjunction with SPES. Venue: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, Holborn, London WC1R 4RL "Main Hall. £10 on the door. Free to Friends of CFI UK, PLUS GLHA, SPES, BHA, NEW HUMANIST SUBSCRIBERS.

To book, see link below, hit button "support cfiuk" and follow instructions. Credit and debit cards welcome. Alternatively send a cheque payable to "Center for Inquiry London" to: Executive Director Suresh Lalvani, Center for Inquiry London, PO Box 49097 Centre for Inquiry London N11 9AX, and include names of those coming, phone number, return address, etc.

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As [world leaders meet in Copenhagen](#) to try to make a deal to prevent further global warming, why should East Anglians be concerned? Because what happened in 1953 could happen again.

[1953 flood](#)

In 1953 I lived on the North West coast of England, and I didn't hear about [the floods in East Anglia](#). I didn't hear of them for several years after I moved here, until I became a funeral celebrant. Then I heard stories from people who were affected by the North Sea surge. 307 people were drowned, some as they slept. Hundreds of animals were lost.

In 1953, communications weren't as good as today. The first story I heard about the flood was about a man whose parents had a small general store on the Tendring peninsula coast. He heard that there was a danger of flooding and phoned them to tell them to move onto higher ground. Thinking that they had plenty of time, they started moving their stock onto the highest shelves, and were caught by the rising water before they could escape. When their son arrived, a day or so later, he found them both lying face down in the water, drowned. He never recovered from the shock, his wife said, and was terrified of water for the rest of his life. At his funeral, some of his colleagues said they'd never understood, until then, why he wouldn't go swimming. On my way home I stopped at the public library and asked if there were any books about the flood. There was one, which I borrowed.

After that, there were more stories. A man who lived in a boat moored on Mersea Island made a living selling firewood and anything else he could find. He delivered it with an old bicycle. He was caught by the flood before he could get home, and spent the night up a telegraph pole. A family who were living in an old hut near Harwich, waiting to be rehomed by the council, were cut off by the water. Fortunately, they had a dingy, so the father was able to get to work and buy groceries. It was several days before they all managed to escape.

The reason I'm telling these stories is that it will happen again. The likelihood of another sea surge like the one in 1953 has increased as we get more extreme weather, due to climate change, and as sea levels rise, large areas of the East Anglian coast will be flooded. Areas of special scientific interest will be lost, as well as hundreds of people's homes. Compared with the few houses that are currently falling into the sea, due to coastal erosion, it will be far worse.

Disappearing coastline

This map is from [Marinet](#), the marine network of Friends of the Earth. FOE provides a briefing of the [coastal areas under threat](#).

Of course, if you're one of [those who don't believe that climate change has anything to do with them](#), you'll think this is all exaggeration, and you're probably quite happy to buy a cottage by the sea. You might have read about [those emails](#), and believed they provided the proof that it's all a conspiracy by scientists to spread alarm and make themselves feel important. But how much do you know about the science? Could you prove they were wrong? Or do you just hope they are, because you really don't want to make any changes in your lifestyle to help reverse global warming? Here's one explanation why the people who say those emails prove it's not happening are wrong...

But now [the Daily Express](#), which is, of course, an authority in these matters, says that climate change is "natural", so we've no need to worry. Not so, says [the New Scientist](#), pointing out all the errors in the Express's piece, while [Anton Vowl](#) supplies 100 reasons why the Daily Express isn't the world's greatest newspaper.

Anyhow, quite apart from any concerns you might have about coastal property prices, if you do accept the science, here are a few more reasons why humanists - that is, people who don't believe there's any superhuman being to come and clear up any mess we make of the small planet we all share - should care about climate change:

- Because more extreme weather will cause the loss of hundreds of thousands of people and millions of other creatures;
- Because floods and drought will make some parts of the world uninhabitable, leading to huge numbers of climate change refugees who'll want to move to areas, like Europe, where it's likely that this will lead to conflict;
- Because water shortages will cause loss of life, and possibly water wars;
- Because we could lose thousands of species;
- Because low-lying areas, like the Pacific Islands and Bangladesh, will become totally submerged;
- Because it will be impossible to grow food in previously productive areas;
- Because the Earth will be a very unpleasant place to live for many of us;
- And so on.

Humanism is about an ethical approach to life, without religion. Like many things, such as the X-Factor, other people's sex lives, and the BNP, religion is a distraction that is of little importance compared with making a concerted effort to change ourselves before the planet changes any more for the worst. That means a simpler life, with fewer unsustainable luxuries, fewer children, less meat, less energy. We can do it, can't we?

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Tim Minchin sings a rather lovely alternative song for Christmas.

[You can buy the song on iTunes here.](#)

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[The church has been complaining again](#), this time about the BBC's religious programming. There's not enough of it, they say, or it's not the right sort. The Bishop of Manchester, the Rt Rev Nigel McCulloch, says,

There is also a danger of the "David Attenborough" effect: religion always reported from the point of view of an observer of a fascinating and increasingly rare species, rather than explored as something of fundamental importance to the vast majority of the country.

Rev Nigel can't have read the latest British Social Attitudes Survey, which will be published next month. [The NSS reports:](#)

Britons do not want religion to run their personal lives or to interfere in politics. The research also finds Church "teachings" on a range of social issues are completely out of step with the opinions and desires of the population at large.

So do most people want more religious broadcasting? Probably not.

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Peter Tatchell, the human rights campaigner who came to talk to us at a Colchester meeting in March 2007, has been forced to cut down on his activities by the consequences of the beatings he's had, [the Observer reports today](#). He was going to stand as the Green Party's candidate in Oxford East, but has had to quit because "horrific beatings have left him experiencing permanent symptoms of severe concussion." Peter's lifestyle and workload are punishing, but as he's driven to continue campaigning, he's unlikely to give them up.

Peter Tatchell

The photo was taken at our meeting, when he spoke about democracy after a meal with a group of us at a local noodle restaurant. From the look of him, he could do with a lot more noodles.

[Visit Peter's website here.](#)

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[Suffolk Coastal MP John Gummer won't stand for re-election](#), he says, as he wants to concentrate on the campaign against climate change. That's commendable. We need more people to campaign against climate change, but...

[Remember how he got cross about humanists at the Conservative Party conference?](#) In a subsequent exchange of letters over his outburst, Mr Gummer was unapologetic, claiming that he didn't hate anybody and that the story wasn't true. However, as several reliable people had witnessed it, one can only assume he'd had a convenient memory lapse.

Is it too much to hope that at least *some* of the Suffolk candidates in next year's general election are clued up about climate change *and* about humanism and secularism? We'll be encouraging our members and supporters to contact their candidates and report on what they learn.

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A 1959 BBC interview with Earl Russell on You Tube. [Bertrand Russell](#) (1871-1970) has been a strong influence on humanist thinking. His autobiography began, "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the sufferings of mankind."

[For more on Bertrand Russell, click here.](#)