

Next
meeting:
17 May in
Colchester

Suffolk Humanist NEWS

Suffolk Humanist Group Newsletter

May 2007

“If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible or the Koran — as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. We do not get our morality from religion. We decide what is good in our good books by recourse to moral intuitions that are (at some level) hard-wired in us and that have been refined by thousands of years of thinking about the causes and possibilities of human happiness.”

Sam Harris

*Thank you for the cards,
flowers, emails and visits
since I broke my ankle.
It's mending nicely, thank
you.* Margaret

A Humanist Thought for the Day on Today?



The debate about the lack of a Humanist Thought for the Day during Radio 4's Today programme has been hotting up. Joan Bakewell argued for the inclusion of Humanists on the Feedback programme, and recently BHA member Lord Harrison of Chester and T4TD contributor Jonathan Bartley of Ekklesia (the Christian think tank that the BHA has worked with on issues like creationism) made the case on the Today programme for including humanist contributors. To join in the debate, email today@bbc.co.uk, or write to Today Programme, BBC Radio 4, Room G630, Stage 6, Television Centre, Wood Lane, London W12 7RJ. You might point out (as I did) that there's been a Humanist Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk since 1995.

MN

Andrew Copson—June meeting in Ipswich

Andrew Copson, who's been BHA Education & Public Affairs Officer since 2005, will be our guest speaker on 13 June. Andrew's worked for the Citizenship Foundation and has wide experience, including sex education, education funding, and curriculum reform, as well as single issue campaigns. He's taught Latin, Greek and Ancient History, having graduated from Oxford with a first in Ancient and Modern History. He was in the winning team for the 2005 Young Educational Thinker of the Year Programme.



Suffolk Humanists' committee, 2007/2008

At the AGM on 11 April, the following people were elected to the committee:

Chair, David Mitchell; Secretary, Margaret Nelson; Treasurer, Louise Armstrong; committee members, Derek Mason and Joan Matthews. Since the meeting, Richard Stock has indicated that he's willing to be co-opted as Vice-Chair.

Copies of the annual report are available upon request.

www.suffolhumanists.org.uk

Suffolk Humanist News

Financial report, 2006/2007

The increased income from subscriptions reflects a good year for recruitment and although we have kept the individual rate low at £5 a year for many years, the corresponding increase in donations encourages me to recommend continuing the subscription rate for another year on the basis that many members supplement their subscriptions with a voluntary donation.

We have no brief to accumulate surpluses in our accounts and appear to be able to function well at present levels. Should members elect to embark on a course of action requiring additional funding in the future, we'd have to review the source of that funding at the same time.

On the expenditure side of the accounts, the continuing increase volume and cost of postal and telephone communications is reflected. The secretary has provided a full breakdown of costs, which is available for inspection. Increased room hire fees reflect events held at the Quaker Meeting House in Colchester, which offers a higher standard of venue at higher costs than Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich.

Website charges are lower this year, reflecting the set-up costs in the previous accounting period. Virtually all our committee meetings have been by conference telephone calls courtesy of the Community Network and this is reflected in the accounts.

David Mitchell, Treasurer

Income		
Opening balance		602.37
Subscriptions		265.00
Donations		258.00
Sale of publications		35.30
Refreshments & raffles		123.52
Celebrants' contributions		217.90
		1,502.09
Expenditure		
Postage & admin costs	220.00	
Room hire	95.18	
Stationery & printing	280.00	
BHA affiliation	70.00	
NSS affiliation	44.00	
SIFRE affiliation	20.00	
SAVO	5.00	
Freethinker subscription	15.00	
Website	6.93	
Honorarium for refreshments	24.95	
Telephone & conference calls	47.75	
Travel & speakers' expenses	107.87	
	936.68	
		565.41
Balance at Co-op Bank at 9/3/2005		488.98
Credits not yet shown		76.43
		565.41

SAVO - Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations

In Brief

Peter Tatchell sent his thanks for the donation we made towards his campaigning work, and for his "noodle dinner and tea with biscuits" at the March meeting. We raised £34 in donations and £19 in the draw, but have been asked not to have any more draws at the Quaker meeting house. Donations will still be welcome!

Chaplain Neil Bramble-Chapman of St Nicholas's Hospice at Bury St Edmunds has asked me for help in arranging a secular remembrance event at the hospice

in July. I've also had a very constructive meeting with **Chaplain David McCloud** of Suffolk College, who's interested in involving us in college activities in the future, including the Festival of Festivals in April 2008.

We've received **thanks from Elhassan Errezzaki** of Morocco, who emailed to ask for reading material about Humanism and was sent some books and magazines.

Contributions for next newsletter by the end of June, please.

MN

May 2007

Evidence-based ethics—Colchester meeting, 17 May

Michael Imison

It puzzles me that while there's no evidence for the existence of supernatural beings and the different religions' accounts of creation are at variance with the scientific account, so many people still regard themselves as religious. Perhaps they fear that without religion there'd be no basis for morality. I think Humanism would be much more attractive if it had more concern with morality and could lay down clear rules for human conduct, rather than expressing a general desire to promote happiness in others and ourselves.

However, there are two big problems; Humanists are generally suspicious of dogma and rules tend to breed exceptions. Even a simple statement like "Thou shalt not kill" demands qualification before application. A Humanist moral code is almost a contradiction in terms. What could Humanists offer that would assist with morality? One proposition most Humanists are likely to accept is that every case should be examined on its merits. I'd like to explore the idea that Humanists, who generally have a hard-nosed attitude to evidence, should deliver quite specific answers to individual moral questions by considering the evidence for the possible effect of any action.

ethics • plural noun **1** the moral principles governing or influencing conduct. **2** the branch of knowledge concerned with moral principles. (OUP)

The medical profession often has tricky moral dilemmas to consider and has set up ethics committees whose judgements are binding on their fellow practitioners. Similarly, disputed facts in criminal cases are submitted to juries as the fairest way of reaching an outcome. So I wonder if Humanists couldn't be of practical use by

setting up ethical juries to decide on the proper thing to do in particular cases. Parties in dispute and individuals unable to decide for themselves could come to such a jury and agree to be bound by its decision. The benefits for the Humanist movement would lie not so much in the individual outcomes but from the clear association of Humanism with solving moral questions and from the demonstration, in each case, of taking moral decisions without resorting to the supernatural.

This preamble explains why I want those at the meeting in Colchester on 17th May to bring one or more examples of actual situations where the moral course wasn't clear. The examples should, for the purpose of this exercise, be as specific as possible, maybe even derived from the member's own experience. The jury will need to know as much as possible about the facts surrounding the case. After we have heard what is on offer, we will vote to select two of them (more if there is time) and hopefully will be able in each case to find two people with opposing views who can then act as advocates setting out the case while the rest of us form the jury and finally reach a verdict.

Twelve Angry Humanists? Hopefully not, but it will be interesting to find out how much moral consensus there is. Please come, even if you're stuck for a question to consider.

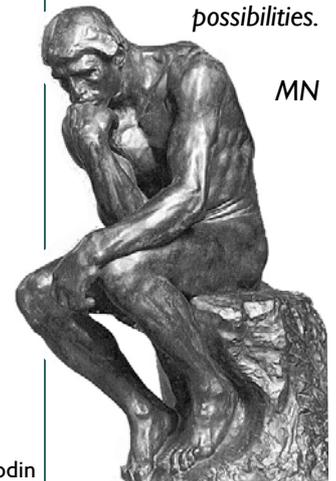
Alternatively...

we might promote philosophical inquiry as a core subject in schools (instead of RE) and PI communities for adults. If people learned to think clearly from an early age, wouldn't they be better equipped to deal with ethical dilemmas?

Rather than laying down "clear rules for human conduct", might it not be better to teach people (as Socrates did) to reason and to consider the consequences of their actions? It isn't always possible to have "clear rules" when dealing with dilemmas, apart from choosing the option that causes the least harm.

Through joint inquiry, communities large and small have a greater pool of experience than one person, offering more possibilities.

MN



The Thinker by Auguste Rodin



SUFFOLK HUMANISTS

5 Hadleigh Road
Elmsett, Ipswich
Suffolk, IP7 6ND
01473 658828
mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

The Suffolk Humanist group was founded in 1991. We promote Humanism and provide Humanist fellowship for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We meet in Ipswich and Colchester. Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions, including baby-namings, weddings, funerals and civic ceremonies. For more information, see the contact details above.

Humanism—for the good life based on human feelings and thought

Community Cohesion?

A message from the BHA: The Commission on Integration and Cohesion (COIC) was set up by the Government to make recommendations as to how 'local areas can make the most of diversity while being able to respond to the tensions it may cause'. They are close to making their final report and want members of the public to inform their last minute deliberations by contributing answers to the question, 'If you were in charge for a day, what would you do to help people from different backgrounds in your neighbourhood get on better?' via their website, following the instructions for submitting comments. We suggest mentioning faith schools.
www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk

Meanwhile, the BBC's Panorama programme on Monday 7 May reported on the situation in Blackburn, Lancashire, where increasing separation and segregation between Muslim Asians and whites is dividing communities. The BBC said, 'Blackburn presents a stark example of a difficult, national problem. For all the hopeful talk about "integration", "multiculturalism" and now "cohesion", the reality on the ground appears to be that Britain's Muslim Asian community and its white community have few points of contact, and that the white majority often feel they share little in common with the growing Muslim Asian minority.'

Programme — mark the dates in your diary now!

17 May— Evidence-based Ethics, a Humanist approach to morality in the Hexagonal Room at the Quaker Meeting House, **Colchester**. **Michael Imison** will lead a discussion about ethical dilemmas—see p3 for more information.

13 June—guest speaker Andrew Copson, Education and Public Affairs Officer at the BHA. We'll be at Castle Hill Community Centre, Ipswich, but not sure which room—see notice on the front door.

No meetings in Ipswich or Colchester in July or August, but there'll be a pub lunch and possible other social events—if you'd like to

organise one, please let us know.

12 September in Room 1 at Castle Hill Community Centre, **Ipswich**—Activity to be announced.

18 October in the Parnell Room at the Friends' Meeting House, **Colchester**—Activity to be announced.

14 November in Room 1 at Castle Hill Community Centre, **Ipswich**—Activity to be announced.

All meetings start at 7.30pm. We welcome sympathetic guests. We have raffles in Ipswich but respect the Quakers' request that we don't 'gamble' in Colchester.



www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk