

Sunday assemblies—church for atheists?



Comedians Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones, founders of The Sunday Assembly.

If you don't believe in God but you miss church, maybe a Sunday Assembly's for you? Or maybe you're quite happy to attend meetings where we talk about whatever interests us, without any singing or churchy stuff?

Pippa Evans and Sanderson Jones, founders of The Sunday Assembly, say that they wanted to do something that had all the best bits of church but without the religion, and with "awesome pop songs."

The first assembly was in January 2013 in London. They weren't expecting many people but the venue was full. It grew, and then it went viral. They say,

Now there are 28 Assemblies across the world, and it looks like there'll be 100 by the end of 2014. It is the most exciting thing in the world.

People across the world were drawn to our simple values, clear message and excellent mission.

We are a godless congregation that celebrates life.

We have an awesome motto: Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More.

A super mission: to try to help everyone find and fulfil their full potential.

An awesome vision: a godless congregation in every town city, or village that wants one.

We are dedicated to helping the people that attend, and the folk in the wider community, to make the most of this one life that we know we have. We harness fun and joy and wonder to build communities and to help others.

When interviewed at the first assembly, Jones said that they'd like to do weddings and funerals one day too.

Sunday Assemblies don't claim to be Humanist and have no connection with the BHA, though some Humanists have joined them. We've heard that plans are being made for an assembly in Norwich. If anyone was interested in starting one in Ipswich, it would have to be independently of our group.

Does the idea appeal to you? Or would you rather spend your Sundays doing something else? See the diary on page 6 for one suggestion. We'll be talking about assemblies at our meeting on Tuesday 9th September.

Evans and Jones aren't the only people who want to offer atheists an alternative to church. Self-styled philosopher Alain de Botton's idea was a "Temple to Atheism", costing £1 million. Haven't heard any more about that.

Are you persecuted?

You may have read that a succession of British public figures have claimed that British Christians are persecuted. Now the former Attorney-General, Dominic Grieve, has joined the chorus of complaint. The Telegraph reported,

Britain is at risk of being “sanitised” of faith because an “aggressive form of secularism” in workplaces and public bodies is forcing Christians to hide their beliefs, a former attorney general has warned.

Dominic Grieve said he found it “quite extraordinary” that people were being sacked or disciplined for expressing their beliefs at work.

He described Christianity as a “powerful force for good” in modern Britain and warned that Christians should not be “intimidated” and “excluded” for their beliefs.

While Christians and others in Iraq are in fear for their lives, British Christians clearly don't know what persecution is.

The sort of cases that Grieve and others have been referring to involved evangelical Christians who expected special treatment because of their faith, including discriminating against others on religious grounds, such as the B & B owners who refused to let a room to a gay couple.

To read more about the issue go to:
www.secularism.org.uk/blog/2014/08/grievous-nonsense.

Meanwhile, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has launched a major call for evidence from individuals and organisations about how their religion or belief (including non-belief), or that of other people, may have affected their experiences in the workplace and in using the services and facilities they need in everyday life.

The Commission wants to hear about the issues people face, including issues stemming from the provision of faith schools, religious selection of pupils and collective worship in schools. (We know, for example, that faith schools have discriminated against staff who are either atheist or of the wrong religion.)

The Commission will use the evidence as part of its work looking at assessing the effectiveness of current equality and human rights legislation on religion or belief.

The Commission also wants to hear from employers and employees about the religion or belief issues people face in the workplace and how solutions have been found. The Commission wants to know about both negative and positive experiences since 2010.

Despite a number of high profile legal cases involving the manifestation of religion or belief in the workplace, the EHRC say very little is known about how frequently these issues occur in practice.

The information will be used to assess how employers and service providers are taking religion or belief into account and the impact this has on individuals. The work covers all faiths and beliefs, including non-belief, and experiences in England, Scotland and Wales.

The consultation will remain open until 14th October. To take part, go to <http://goo.gl/xol01s>.

“Persecution is not an original feature in any religion; but it is always the strongly marked feature of all religions established by law.”

— Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*

British Muslims' fatwa

British Muslims have declared a fatwa condemning the jihadis who go to fight with the 'Islamic State' in Iraq and Syria as “heretics”. A fatwa is a ruling on a point of Islamic law by a religious authority. It cannot be revoked and lasts as long as the lives of the people it's directed against.

The Islamic State jihadis have proclaimed Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph and “leader for Muslims everywhere”, but scholars have said that they don't know what they're talking about, and are ignorant of the history of Islam. The first four caliphs were companions of Mohammed who assumed control of the emerging Muslim empire in Arabia after the prophet's death in 632. They were supreme political and religious leaders who were supposed to rule with the consent of the majority of Muslims, but three out of the four were assassinated. The caliphate was finally abolished by the Turkish leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924.

The concept of a modern caliphate is deeply divisive. While Sunni Muslims believe a caliph should be elected by his followers, followers of Shia Islam can only accept a ruler who is a direct descendant of Mohammed.

Secularism

Margaret Nelson

Am I alone in looking forward to a time when religion is allowed for “consenting adults in the privacy of their own home”?

– Lucy Craig, letter to the Observer, 22/10/06

I don't remember what Lucy was responding to, but she was evidently tired of hearing about religion. What she may not have realised was that, not long ago, it was less socially acceptable to talk about religion in public than it is now, unless you were with people who shared your faith, it was private.

In general, I'm less interested in what other people believe than in how they behave. Organised religion, particularly the established church, is a nuisance, forever making demands on the public purse while claiming the moral high ground. But an increasing number of British people are like my mum, who developed her own private beliefs and kept them to herself.

Anti-theists, the hardline wing of the atheist tendency, are as boring as the evangelical religionists, forever opining that religion ought to be banned, or dismissing religious people as stupid. Religion will always be with us, thanks to humanity's stubborn refusal to reject it. I had a Jewish friend, a widow who'd been a wartime refugee. I conducted her husband's funeral and eventually conducted hers too. She wasn't a religious Jew but she said that she thought that many people have a “yearning” for something above and beyond the material world, and it was hard to put this into words. She chose 'Beim Schlafengehen' (Upon going to sleep) from 'Four Last Songs' by Richard Strauss for her husband's funeral, and we played it at hers. It's so beautiful it makes me weep. Some might call this yearning a “spiritual” dimension to life, though I've always had trouble understanding what that means. Anyway, it's what many find in religion, though not all.

I'm not on the evangelical wing of the Humanist “movement”, as some will insist on calling it. Humanism, to me, is simply a way of viewing the

Elderly people at weddings always poke me and say “You're next.” So guess what?... I started doing the same thing to them at funerals.

Tweet by @tweetcomedy



He's done nothing wrong. He's just showing us Amnesty International UK's phone number.

A reminder to look beyond the stereotype, copied from Amnesty Portugal.

world, without reference to any intermediary. Since I first got involved with social Humanism – meeting others who share the same outlook, and conducting rite of passage ceremonies free from religion – I've come to feel that secularism is increasingly important. The term has been misused by the sort of people mentioned on page two who are ignorant of its potential. As Douglas Todd wrote in the Vancouver Sun, “Secularization is the best thing that's ever happened to religion.” It means equality for all, whatever you believe, and the freedom to be true to yourself, ignoring authority. It could be the best thing that ever happened for all of us. Hardline atheists might even come to agree.

“The very notion of a community leader is damaging. It promotes the idea that ethnic or religious identity defines an individual's views on all other matters”

Ellen-E Jones, the Independent

SIFRE seminar on “What wisdom can the faiths contribute to caring?”

Denis Johnston

Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE) held a one-day seminar on the above topic in July. Invited to chair a session, I was curious to discover how the subject would be approached and a little alarmed when I saw a flyer that read, “Holistic care and treatment encompasses mind, body and spirit”, fearing new age mumbo-jumbo. The flyer added that the day was primarily intended for “professional careers and others involved with or concerned about the various support networks on which our society depends”, which was a better description of the topic.

The keynote address by Dr Christine Whitney Cooper of University Campus Suffolk focussed on the need to provide patients with dignity and kindness. She began by inviting one of the audience to come and sit on what turned out to be a commode, illustrating what it felt like to be on a commode in a non-private place. She referred to the recent problems in Mid-Staffordshire and the lessons that had to be learned, concluding that “the need is to teach compassion”, explaining how that might be done.

Most of the other morning’s talks were short summaries of the rules or policies from religious texts, or descriptions of the roles of charities. A few personal stories reflected on negative experiences with care homes and the NHS. One that caused great distress was the shaving of an elderly Muslim’s beard when he was unable to communicate. It was striking that the traditional “care in the family” models (particularly in Asian families) were in disarray as children had left the familial home to seek work. Finally, St Nicholas Hospice chaplain Charles Amoah spoke of his experiences in Ghana, Ireland and Ipswich, commenting on how in Africa medicines would be blessed before use (“Africans are incurably religious”), and that he was shocked when, in Ireland, a cup of tea was offered to a bereaved family member; in Ghana tea was only offered at a time of celebration.

The afternoon began with a presentation by Joanna Spicer from the Suffolk Health and Well-being Board. She explained, de-mystified and de-jargonised the changes that were going on.

Several speakers mentioned that when people go into hospital they tick a box to indicate their religion (or not) and that is it. Julie Sadler (Head of Patient Experience and Adult Safeguarding at The Ipswich Hospital NHS Trust) said that only “C of E” or “RC” ever appeared and that she’d reorganised the chaplaincy team to be more involved with patients. She remarked that the big difference in today’s hospitals is that, with some exceptions, people are generally in and out quickly; consequently opportunities for patients get to know each other (e.g. doing the tea-round) are fewer.

A further aim of the day was “to highlight the value of spiritual support for cared-for and carer alike and to explore what insights and values the faiths have to offer our myriad support agencies.” In the afternoon we split into groups and mine focussed on this aim. After a bit of an unresolved struggle to agree what “spiritual support” meant, a rather telling statement came from one of the carers, who said, “Spiritual support: it always ends with rituals,” followed by an awkward silence. Since most of those present were from religious organisations, I found it odd that there was almost no attempt to challenge that assertion. There was almost a feeling of embarrassment, as if he had touched a nerve.

I can’t say that I identified any specific “wisdom” that the faiths brought to caring but perhaps this was because they seem to create problems and complications for cared-for and carers alike. A number of relatively easily fixed things were highlighted by the speakers from the various religious groups, e.g. teaching carers about the patients’ various cultural and religious sensitivities, and even that vegetarians will eat more than cauliflower cheese. A greater problem was due to conflicts of faith; the religious beliefs of some staff meant that they could be reluctant to provide help to those of different faiths. This was rather pithily summarised by one as, “Christians don’t do Yoga”.

There were some more intractable issues. With hindsight I suspect that these ethical dilemmas were the ones that the carers hoped the event would help to answer. It was then that the relatively few carers present began to speak more openly about problems with their patients’ families. I can best summarise these by simply listing some of the comments verbatim:

“Sometimes families are unable to cope but won’t let go.”

“Where does the power and decision making lie when both family and patient are incapacitated?”

“In families, who should carers listen to?”

“Who has the authority for deciding parents’ care amongst children and siblings?”

“Often the family can be the biggest problem that carers have.”

“Often meetings in hospital are with totally dysfunctional families.”

Just as the topic of living wills was raised, time was up.

Feedback suggested people found the day helpful and have enthusiastically signed up for a core support network. All in all an interesting day with perhaps not so surprising an outcome.

The fact that these things are being considered now is an improvement on the situation several years ago, when I was involved in a SIFRE training session for hospital staff and carers. A nurse said that she was in the habit of leaving a Bible on a patient’s locker and praying beside him or her, if he or she was terminally ill, regardless of whether she knew that he or she was a Christian, and seemed to be proud of her initiative. When told that this wasn’t appropriate, she was visibly taken aback. MN

Witch-finder sues the BHA

The British Humanist Association (BHA) and Witchcraft and Human Rights Information Network (WHRIN) are being sued for half a £billion by wealthy evangelical preacher and ‘witch hunter’ Helen Ukpabio, who calls herself a ‘Lady Apostle’. Mrs Ukpabio claims to have expertise in identifying children and adults possessed with witchcraft spirits and in how they can be ‘delivered’ from them. Her lawyers have told the BHA and WHRIN that she’s launching a legal case against them due to their criticism of her teachings and methods.

Ukpabio, Nigerian founder of the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries, has been accused of exploiting superstitious beliefs around demonic possession, which can and often does result in the endangering of vulnerable children. The BHA has called for Ukpabio and others like her to be banned from the UK on the grounds that they are a threat to child welfare and their practices are not conducive to the public good.

The eminent media lawyer Mark Stephens CBE, representing the defendants, said, ‘We thought witch-

finding had been left behind in all civilised societies since the death of the last Witch-finder general, Matthew Hopkins in 1647 ... Whilst the medieval methods of Matthew Hopkins are no longer used to “identify witches”, of course, we must remain ever vigilant of the danger of persecution of innocent children – babies, even – being branded as witches by latter-day self-styled witch-finders with perverse and pernicious views. These people must not be allowed to identify the vulnerable as witches. Freedom of speech is at its most precious when it permits voices to be raised against such evil. British libel laws must never be abused to censor matters of such public importance.’

Dr Brantly thanks God

Dr. Kent Brantly was serving as medical director for the Samaritan’s Purse Ebola Consolidated Case Management Center in Monrovia when he tested positive for Ebola. He was flown back to the US where he recovered in Emory University Hospital, Atlanta. He thanked God for his miraculous recovery, giving credit for his now rude health to his organisation’s new and advanced, most powerful yet, experimental prayer.

Satirical website NewsBiscuit.com reports, “The prayer, which had been in development for over five years, has never before been tested on humans, but prayers given for laboratory monkeys deliberately infected with Ebola had previously shown promising results. Bradley’s organisation Samaritan’s Purse claim the prayer still needs more research before being cleared for wider use, as at the moment it only appears to work for white people in possession of incredible new anti-Ebola drugs.”

Yes, we know that Ebola’s a serious subject, but...

I’d love to hear from you. It’s good to know that there’s somebody out there who reads this newsletter. Articles and letters would be very welcome, either by email or the old-fashioned way, by post.

Email margaret@suffolkhands.org.uk or write to me at:

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Next issue—November.

Margaret



Suffolk Humanists And Secularists

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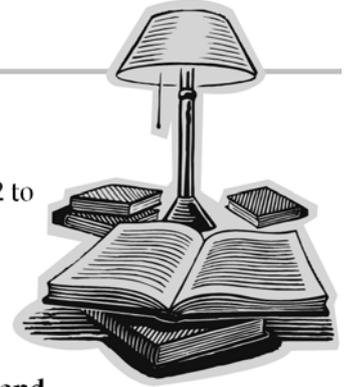
Dates for your diary

Unless stated otherwise, we meet in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall at the top of Hawthorne Drive, Ipswich, IP8 3SL. Meetings at Pinewood Hall start at 7.30pm and end at 10pm. The car park is at the rear, entered via Laburnum Close. If the door is locked, press the buzzer for entry. Guests are welcome. Get in touch if you need or can offer a lift and we'll try to help.

Tuesday 9th September – Sunday Assemblies – see page 1.

Saturday 27th September at noon – there would normally be a pub lunch on this day but our secretary, who usually organises them, will be away, so nothing's been decided yet. Let us know if you'd like to come by emailing mail@suffolkhands.org.uk or phoning 01473 658828, and if someone volunteers to organise it, we'll let you know. Pub lunches are at The Duke of York, Ipswich Road, Woodbridge, IP12 4BY.

Founded in 1991, we're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource. Sympathetic non-members are welcome but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.



Sunday 12th October from 2 to 5pm in the seminar room on the 1st floor at Hadleigh Library, on the corner of Duke Street and the High Street, Hadleigh – **Desert Island**

Books. Bring a book (or several) that means something special to you (prose, poetry or drama), be prepared to read some of it and to tell us why you chose it. And if you have any books that you've read and would like to swap for something you haven't, bring them too. There is a free public car park, accessed via Magdalen Road, opposite the library, which is almost empty on Sundays.

Tuesday 11th November – Prime Minister Cameron, talking about British jihadists, said, "Adhering to British values is not an option or a choice." **What are British values?** A discussion about values, British or otherwise.

Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies

Suffolk Humanist Celebrants have provided non-religious funerals, weddings and baby-namings for thousands around Suffolk and N E Essex since 1991. The current team is David Mitchell, Sue Hewlett and Sophie Lovejoy. Marie Haworth, Yvonne Peacock and Margaret Nelson have retired but still offer support and advice. For information, phone 01473 658828 or email ceremonies@suffolkhands.org.uk.

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

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

www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com

www.suffolkhands.org.uk