

Suffolk Humanists

Promoting Humanism and Secularism

Welcome to our Summer issue

Since the last issue, we have moved our monthly meetings to the Thomas Wolsey pub in Ipswich. As a result, the numbers attending have been higher with particularly large turn-outs for Mike Whybray's cosmology talk in April and the talk on the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust in May. Somewhat surprisingly, much of the success of the move appears to have been fuelled by large quantities of Adnams Ghost Ship Alcohol Free!

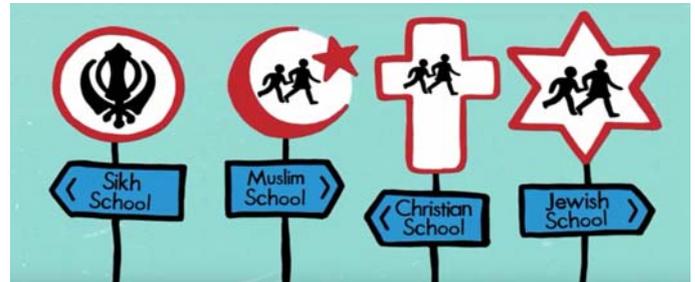
Ed.

[This issue's banner shows stars in Messier 11, a star cluster known as the Wild Duck Cluster because its brightest stars form a "V" resembling a flock of ducks in flight.]

March: RE in Suffolk Schools

Our March meeting was led by Denis Johnston who drew on his experience as the only non-religious member of the county's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) to give a fascinating overview of the history of RE in schools and the current complicated situation regarding RE and the law. He described how England now has a bewildering array of school types including community schools, foundation schools, academies and voluntary controlled schools - all of which may be faith-based or faith-supported or neither! Generally speaking, all schools are required to teach RE using 'an agreed syllabus'. In faith-based schools this will be in line with the school's trust deed or its specified denomination. In non-denominational schools in Suffolk, the agreed syllabus for RE is that developed by the SACRE. The syllabus can be downloaded from Suffolk County Council's 'Suffolk Learning' website (www.suffolklearning.co.uk) and makes for fascinating reading. The study programmes consistently talk about religion *and belief* allowing for the inclusion of non-religious belief systems alongside Christianity and other major religions. This is exemplified by a graphic at the front of the syllabus which includes Humanism's 'happy human' right in the middle of the symbols for Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. In the battle against religious indoctrination in schools, this can be considered a small but significant victory.

Following the presentation, Denis and other members who have been invited to talk about Humanism in primary and secondary schools shared their experiences - most of which were extremely positive due to the open mindedness we invariably see in the young people we meet. Is this the most important way that our group can make a difference?



The Secular Society's website www.nomorefaithschools.org sets out the arguments against faith schools in a nice video.

April: Evolution of the Cosmos

At our April meeting, member Mike Whybray condensed 13.8 billion years of cosmic evolution into an hour and a half. With the aid of some great images he metaphorically held our hands as he walked us expertly through quantum fluctuations, inflation, and expansion. We got to learn about the formation of fundamental particles and light elements, the birth of stars and heavy elements, and the formation of galaxies. Mike also shared current theories about the likely fate of our universe. Unfortunately, when it came to the whereabouts of the dark matter and dark energy which together are thought to make up 96% of the universe, Mike was unable to shed any light!

April meeting post script

On April 10th, the day after Mike's cosmological talk, we heard the news that the Event Horizon Telescope (in fact, a global network of radio telescopes) had produced the first picture of a black hole. The mind-boggling challenges faced by the team responsible were explained in the BBC 4 documentary 'How to See a Black Hole: The Universe's Greatest Mystery'. Sadly, this is not currently available on BBC i-player but look out for a repeat showing (or search YouTube for an unauthorised upload!)

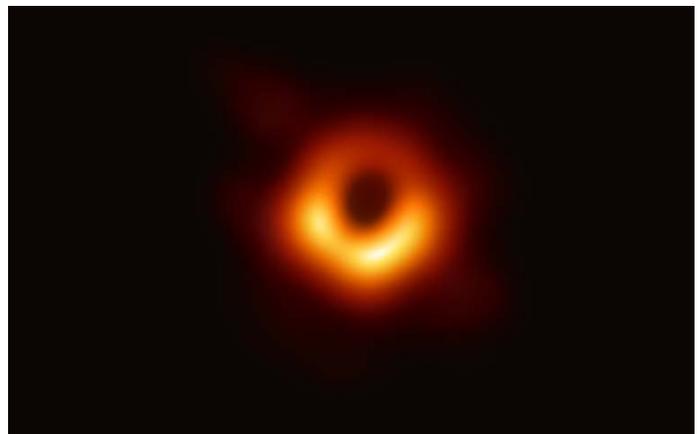


Image of the supermassive black hole in the centre of Messier 87, a galaxy 55 million light-years from Earth, composed from data gathered from eight radio telescopes around the Earth.

May: Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

The invited speaker at our May meeting was Steve Hurd, Chair of the trustees of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust (UHST). Steve spoke to a packed room about the history of the Trust's work in supporting three schools in rural Uganda. He described how this was a response to the initiative of two founder members of the Uganda Humanist Association, Peter Kisirinya and Moses Kanya, who wished to establish schools embracing humanist principles in their own highly religious communities. We heard of the extreme challenges facing schools in deprived areas in a country where AIDS has left a legacy of many orphans. We also heard of the ways in which the school Principals and teachers, with the support of UHST, are overcoming the challenges. The key indicators of their success are the ever growing demand for places in UHST-supported schools and the remarkable examination results gained by pupils - comparable to those achieved by their peers in more prestigious urban schools. Encouraged by these achievements, UHST is now considering supporting a primary school close to the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo - a location which will bring additional challenges!

Steve was very open about the difficulty of promoting humanism in schools where the vast majority of students, if not all, come from families and communities where religion is very important and largely unquestioned. He explained his own pragmatic approach which is not to openly confront religious beliefs, but to encourage the important but less contentious behaviours embodied in the schools' guiding principles. These include: freedom of thought and expression; rational enquiry and the scientific method; and, human rights and the right of individuals to choose their personal life stance.

The meeting closed with our Treasurer, John Mellis, presenting a cheque for £200 for the Trust's on-going work in Uganda.



On behalf of the Uganda Schools Humanist Trust, Steve Hurd (L) accepts a cheque from John Mellis.

Quick Quiz

These questions are loosely related to things mentioned elsewhere in this newsletter. Good luck!

- 1: What was the cause of the death of Thomas Wolsey?
A Beheading
B Natural causes
C Hanged, drawn and quartered
- 2: According to Department for Education figures for 2017, approximately what proportion of state funded primary schools are denominational or have a religious character?
A 17% B 37% C 57%
- 3: In the US sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, which character travelled into space?
A Howard B Leonard C Sheldon
- 4: Who is the President of Uganda?
A Paul Kagame
B Emmerson Mnangagwa
C Yoweri Museveni
- 5: Which of the following is the flag of the Democratic Republic of Congo?



- 6: Earlier this year, Luke Perry, US actor and star of *Beverly Hills 90210*, was buried in a suit made from which of the following?
A Mushrooms B Paper C Grass

(Answers at foot of back page.)

Humanists UK launches a new course

Humanists UK has just launched a new, free 'massive open online course' (MOOC) on humanism. Called *Humanist Lives*, the course will not only offer an introduction to humanist approaches to life, but also the opportunity to hear the views of humanists from around the globe. Registration is now open for the first cycle of the course (available from June 10th) but if you miss this window then the course will be repeated at various times throughout the year. For further details go to the Humanists UK website (<https://humanism.org.uk/>).

Earth to Earth...

George Bethell

In May, Washington became the first state in the USA to pass a law which, from 2020, will allow the composting of human bodies. The approved process of composting, or to give it its official name 'natural organic reduction', involves sealing the body in a container with a mixture of wood chips, alfalfa and straw. Thermophilic microbes then get to work breaking down everything - including bones and teeth - in just 30 days! The result is, we are told, about two wheelbarrows' worth of "dry, fluffy, nutrient-rich soil... suitable for vegetable gardens". Those left behind can then legally spread the soil on public land or use it to grow plants in a private garden. Recomposing, is said to be far more eco-friendly than either burial or cremation (think of all that CO₂).

The new law has its opponents, the most vociferous of which is, unsurprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church. The Director of the Washington State Catholic Conference said, "The Catholic Church believes that disposing human remains in such manner fails to show enough respect for the body of the deceased." Of course, the Catholic Church has a track record on this issue. For most of its 2000 year history, the Church banned cremation as a sacrilegious and blasphemous act. Then in 1963, long after the practice had been legalised throughout Britain, the Pope lifted the ban for Catholics. However, the Church still insists that ashes are buried or otherwise kept in an urn 'or other worthy container'. The scattering of ashes is explicitly prohibited - I presume this is because this would make it much more difficult for God to reconstitute the body before the Last Judgment.

George

Things you were dying to know...

- On March 26th 1885, Jeanette Caroline Pickersgill became the first person to be legally cremated in Britain when she was cremated at Woking (the country's first authorised crematorium).
- A YouGov poll of 2016 found that 58% of those surveyed want to be cremated when they die compared with 17% who want to be buried. (The means of disposal preferred by the remaining 25% is unclear!)
- According to figures compiled by the Cremation Society of Great Britain, 77% of those who died in 2017 were cremated - the highest proportion since records began.
- The average cost for a basic cremation service in 2017 was £3312. The average crematorium fee was £783, up by 776% since 1990.
- The top 10 most expensive places to get burnt included the crematoria of Beckenham, Chichester, Dundee and Oxford (all £1070) with Norwich coming in just behind at £1060 and Ipswich looking very reasonable at £695.
- The cheapest place in which to get turned to ashes was Belfast - a snip at £364.
- In the 1998 cult film *The Big Lebowski*, Walter Sobchak (played by John Goodman) baulks at the funeral parlour's asking price of \$180 for an urn for the ashes of his late bowling partner, Donny. He goes off to a local grocery store to get a can of Folgers Coffee which does the job until he and The Dude (Jeff Bridges) can scatter Donny's ashes. (Film available on Netflix and Amazon.)

Forthcoming Events

Tuesday, 11th June 2019: Teddy Prout (HUK)

Teddy Prout, Humanists UK's Directory of Community Services will be our speaker for the evening. Given our pending application to become a Humanists UK Partner Group, this will be an opportunity to learn more about the organisation.

7:30 pm at Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 St Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1XF. Buy a drink and meet us upstairs.

Saturday, 29th June: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Tuesday, 9th July 2019: Topic to be confirmed

Watch out for details of this meeting in Denis' monthly bulletins. Time and venue as below.

7:30 pm at Thomas Wolsey, 9-13 St Peter's Street, Ipswich, IP1 1XF

Saturday, 27th July: Suffolk Humanists Pub Lunch

Duke of York, Woodbridge at noon. If you plan to attend, please let Denis know in advance.

Recommended on YouTube

- Katrina Spade, the developer of the human composting process recently legalised in Washington talks about the environmental impact of the various methods of disposing of the dead. Highly recommended.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PRsopS7yTG8>

- *Origins of the Universe 101* by National Geographic. An excellent summary of the evolution of the universe from the Big Bang spoilt only by the strange pronunciation of the word 'epoch'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HdPzOWILrBfE>

- The scattering of Donny's ashes in *The Big Lebowski*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ezPvzKe5M>

Call for Contributions

If you wish to comment on anything you've read in this edition of the newsletter or if you would like to contribute a piece for the autumn edition, please contact the editor on shands.editor@gmail.com.

Want to join us?

If you would like to join Suffolk Humanists or if you simply want to know more about us, contact Denis Johnston on 01394 387462 or denisjohnston@btinternet.com

You can also contact us through our website:

<http://suffolkhands.org.uk/>

Quick Quiz Answers

6: A
5: C
4: C
3: A
2: B
1: B