

# Suffolk Humanists Monthly Bulletin

## January 2020

**Next event:** Get together for a natter.

Unfortunately I have just heard that our speaker for our first meeting of 2020 is unable to make it.

Rather than cancel, and as the room is booked, we can get together for a chat and sort out the problems of the world.

Venue: upstairs at the Thomas Wolsey pub, St Peter's Street, Ipswich. 7:30 pm onwards.

The talk about the Suffolk Refuges Support will now be held later in the year.

### **Review of December meeting - "Midwinter Traditions"**

After a rather delayed start due to problems with the new Greater Anglia trains our speaker Robin Herne took us through some of the many traditional winter festivals.

When it comes to festivals, parties, and downright debauchery, no one bettered ancient Rome and what we have today is essentially based upon the Roman celebration of the winter solstice when they celebrated the festival of Saturnalia.

As the name implies, this was a holiday to honour the god, Saturn. This week-long party typically began around December 17th and spanned the day of the solstice.

One of the highlights of Saturnalia was the switching of traditional roles, particularly between masters and slaves who were free to be as impertinent as they wished to their owners.

However, despite the appearance of a reversal of

social order, there were actually some fairly strict boundaries. A master might serve his slaves dinner, but the slaves were the ones who prepared it.

Feasts and banquets were held, and it wasn't unusual to exchange small gifts at these parties. A typical Saturnalia gift might be something like a writing tablet or tool, cups and spoons, clothing items, or food. Another popular present was the cerei, a tapered wax candle used in many temples and shrines.

Citizens decked their halls with greenery, and even hung small earthenware or metal ornaments on bushes and trees - baubles. Bands of naked revellers often roamed the streets, singing and carousing, as a sort of precursor to today's Christmas caroling tradition.

### **Humanists UK Education Day for school speakers and SACRE reps.**

The first session on learning and memory by Robin Launder was an entertaining introduction into how we associate new ideas with existing memories and how this can be harnessed in the learning process.

This was followed by a presentation by Laura Fitzsimons, a teacher from Belfast. Her session addressed age appropriate techniques for introducing humanist ideas to younger children using objects such as model animals, fossils, microscope etc.

She also provided some insight into the differences in teaching RE in N Ireland compared to the rest of the UK. (This will be a topic in a future Newsletter.)

Luke Donnellan of HUK gave a session entitled "Should I be talking about religions" where he emphasised that our strategy should be to talk about what we believe and not to mock or criticise other belief systems.

There was only a short (30 minute) session for SACRE reps which took the form of a Q&A with Ruth Wareham who is the Humanists UK Faith Schools and Education Campaigner.

Quite a lot of this session was about the potential ramifications of the recent success by Lee and Lizanne Harris who successfully challenged compulsory collective worship in a school assembly on human rights grounds. The bad news, she said, was that this was a one-off success and was not likely to change the law generally.

The final, and Keynote Speaker was Rudolph Eliot Lockhart, Chief Executive of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, who provided an update on the work of the Commission on RE whose report on the future of RE in schools had been published the previous year.

Unfortunately his report was mainly about a lack of progress as the government had decided to completely ignore all of the report's recommendations.

This was not just because the government had other things on its plate at the time but was due to lobbying from some of those representing 'schools with a religious character'. These didn't really want to have to teach about other religions let alone "other worldviews".

Apparently one of the arguments they put forward was that term 'worldviews' might be construed to include any 'ism' eg, communism and fascism.

He highlighted the dramatic fall in the number of students taking RE examinations (30% at A-level and 60% at GCSE). One third of secondary schools and 42% of Academies no longer offered examinations in the subject.

What was worse, he said, was that in many schools

RE was being taught "in a sanitised and uncritical way" often reducing the teaching of the subject to the level of an RE Pub Quiz.

The general message was that RE in schools would continue to weaken with few incentives for schools that do it well and few consequences for those that don't.

### **United Nation Association Annual Celebration of Humans Rights.**

This annual event was held at the Ipswich Buddhist Centre and this year was based on Article 18 - Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Rather disappointingly less than half of the billed speakers turned up. Our presentation (slightly shortened) is below:

Much of Article 18 is essentially a declaration of secularism and as such we endorse it

Many do not know what 'secularism' means. It is frequently used to describe a form of repressive atheism that's anti-religion which it most certainly is not. Secularism is a principle that involves two basic propositions. The first is the strict separation of the state from religious institutions. The second is that people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law.

Secularism is the best, possibly the only, means to create a society in which people of all religions and none can live together fairly and cohesively. It is an essential element in promoting equality and fairness for all citizens.

The opposite of secularism is where any group - religious and political, national and international has as an objective to ensure that certain belief systems are preferenced over others, privileging those people who happen to subscribe to such beliefs and penalising those who do not.

Such actions serve only to divide our society, stressing and institutionalising differences, rather than championing the equality of all. Sadly, and worryingly, the alignment of governments – perhaps more correctly political parties – with religious beliefs appears to be increasing. Here I am thinking of India, the Middle East or even countries such as China where the state is ideologically linked to irreligion.

Closer to home, not so long ago, we heard a Prime Minister of the UK saying that this was Christian country. All I can say is that it reminded me of my childhood in Belfast where the phrase “this is a protestant street” was common. We know where that kind of thinking led.

It is also ironic that so many in the United States of America now see the First Amendment’s separation of church and state as an attack on their religious freedoms when, in fact, it was included to defend the rights of those holding minority beliefs – specifically the Danbury Baptists of Connecticut.

The difficulty is that so much of history tells us that the exercising of one group's 'religious freedom' so often tramples upon the rights of others. The old jibe that “The Puritans loved religious freedom so much that they kept it all to themselves.” is the nub of the problem.

Freedom of belief is not the same as 'freedom of my belief'. The right to manifest one's belief – even as a so called holy ritual – cannot ever extend to justifying the physical or mental abuse of others. Similarly just as those who are of one religion or belief have a right to manifest their belief – by preaching, teaching or writing so they must accept that others have the same right to challenge and criticise that belief in exactly the same way.

Challenging and criticising is not intolerance and disagreeing with someone is not intolerance.

Refusing to allow someone to disagree with you IS.

The first part of Article 18 – the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is vital, but for me it is the second part – the freedom to change religion or belief – which is really crucial for it allows for a far greater test of the principle.

For there can be no freedom of thought, conscience or religion without the freedom to dissent and change.

### **Forthcoming events**

Our next monthly lunchtime meetup at the Duke of York will be on Saturday January 25th at 12.30.

February 11th Darwin Day Dinner. This will be a get together in the evening at a local restaurant. Please let us know if you would like to attend.

Wednesday, 12th February 2020: Humanists UK Darwin Day Lecture

Chris Packham CBE will be the speaker at this year’s Humanist UK Darwin Day Lecture. Doors open at 18:30 for a 19:30 start at Troxy, Commercial Road, London E1 0HX. Tickets available from Humanists UK.

February 29th - monthly lunchtime meeting.

Finally...

**HAPPY NEW YEAR**

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