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Sep 2007
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We'll add more book titles as we go along and reviews to go with them.

These were discussed at our meeting on 12 September 2007:

- Humanism by Barbara Smoker.
- Humanist Anthology, ed. Margaret Knight & Jim Herrick.
- Modern Humanism; Living without Religion – Hobson & Jenkins
- The Thinkers' Guide to Life – Marilyn Mason
- Encountering Naturalism: A Worldview and Its Uses by Thomas W. Clark
- God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion by Christopher Hitchens
- Against All Gods – Six polemics on religion and an essay on kindness by A C Grayling
- The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins (paperback)
- The End of Faith by Sam Harris (paperback)
- How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World, A Short History of Modern Delusions by Francis Wheen
- Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster by Bobby Henderson
- Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast: The Evolutionary Origins of Belief by Lewis Wolpert
- Humanism: an introduction by Jim Herrick

Come back to see more soon.

Tags: [Reading](#), [Books](#)

If you buy any of these books through the Amazon link on the right, we get some commission.

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[University Campus Suffolk](#) opened in September 2007. We have been at the Freshers' Fairs at various times hoping to encourage students who might describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or humanists to form a new student society. To date only a few have been sufficiently interested to register their interest, but many more took a handful of information about humanist organisations away with them - maybe you were one of them? If you are currently a student at UCS and would like to set up a student group please [email us](#) with "students" in the subject line. If you're new to Humanism, explore [our links page](#). You can also look at the websites of student groups elsewhere: [Oxford Secular Society](#) [Cambridge University Atheist & Agnostic Society](#) [Edinburgh University Humanist Society](#) [Leeds Atheist Society](#) [Nottingham University Humanist Society](#) [We're on Facebook](#), but forgive the lack of content. Feel free to join our group and add some. You might want to start a new Suffolk Student group? There's [a Facebook National Secular Society group](#), and [a Facebook British Humanist Association group](#). In June 2008, [The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies](#) was formed - another source of support, ideas, and encouragement. We hope you enjoy your studies at UCS and that you might enjoy meeting like-minded people through a student society that could be a great place to share your ideas and opinions.

Tags: [Students](#), [UCS](#)

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Oct 2007
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Every society that's ever existed has felt it necessary to have creation myths. Why should I believe one? People write to me and say: "You show us birds and orchids and wonderful, beautiful things - why don't you feel you should give credit to He who created those things?" My reply is: what about a parasitic worm that's boring through the eye of a four-year-old child on the bank of an African river? It confuses me that I should believe in a god who cares individually for each and every one of us and could allow that to happen.

- Sir David Attenborough, The Observer Magazine, 20 January 2008

You can [read a clear explanation of why Intelligent Design \(and Creationism\) is wrong elsewhere on this site](#), and [The British Humanist Association also provides an explanation](#).

The subject was raised at a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education meeting, where it was stated that Creationism and Intelligent Design are likely to be discussed in RE lessons because children will ask about them. Suffolk's SACRE will be providing guidance on this.

We're aware that some teachers and others in education circles are sympathetic towards Creationism and Intelligent Design because their religious beliefs lead them to ignore or misunderstand the evidence for the theory of Evolution. We are strongly opposed to any suggestion that Suffolk schoolchildren may be given a false impression in RE lessons that Intelligent Design is a "theory" of equal value to the theory of Evolution.

We're aware that [a worryingly high proportion of British people think that Intelligent Design, or Creationism, is an explanation for life](#)

[on earth](#). We're aware that [an increasing number of teachers report that they're challenged by students who won't accept Evolution theory](#), making science lessons very difficult. We're aware that [university science departments are finding that science students are arguing that Darwin was wrong](#). This trend simply demonstrates a general scientific ignorance.

There is a strong case for training RE teachers in basic science. One of the arguments that's been used to justify credence in Intelligent Design is that "Evolution is just a theory", which demonstrates a lack of understanding about what is meant by scientific theory.

[Stephen J. Gould](#) explained theory and fact:

In the American vernacular, "theory" often means "imperfect fact"--part of a hierarchy of confidence running downhill from fact to theory to hypothesis to guess. Thus the power of the creationist argument: evolution is "only" a theory and intense debate now rages about many aspects of the theory. If evolution is worse than a fact, and scientists can't even make up their minds about the theory, then what confidence can we have in it? Indeed, President Reagan echoed this argument before an evangelical group in Dallas when he said (in what I devoutly hope was campaign rhetoric): "Well, it is a theory. It is a scientific theory only, and it has in recent years been challenged in the world of science--that is, not believed in the scientific community to be as infallible as it once was."

Well evolution is a theory. It is also a fact. And facts and theories are different things, not rungs in a hierarchy of increasing certainty. Facts are the world's data. Theories are structures of ideas that explain and interpret facts. Facts don't go away when scientists debate rival theories to explain them. Einstein's theory of gravitation replaced Newton's in this century, but apples didn't suspend themselves in midair, pending the outcome. And humans evolved from ape-like ancestors whether they did so by Darwin's proposed mechanism or by some other yet to be discovered.

Moreover, "fact" doesn't mean "absolute certainty"; there ain't no such animal in an exciting and complex world. The final proofs of logic and mathematics flow deductively from stated premises and achieve certainty only because they are not about the empirical world. Evolutionists make no claim for perpetual truth, though creationists often do (and then attack us falsely for a style of argument that they themselves favor). In science "fact" can only mean "confirmed to such a degree that it would be perverse to withhold provisional consent." I suppose that apples might start to rise tomorrow, but the possibility does not merit equal time in physics classrooms.

Evolutionists have been very clear about this distinction of fact and theory from the very beginning, if only because we have always acknowledged how far we are from completely understanding the mechanisms (theory) by which evolution (fact) occurred. Darwin continually emphasized the difference between his two great and separate accomplishments: establishing the fact of evolution, and proposing a theory--natural selection--to explain the mechanism of evolution.

[Stephen J. Gould, " Evolution as Fact and Theory"; Discover, May 1981](#)

[Prof. Jose Wudka](#) explains what's meant by a scientific theory:

In popular usage, a theory is just a vague and fuzzy sort of fact and a hypothesis is often used as a fancy synonym to "guess". But to a scientist a theory is a conceptual framework that explains existing observations and predicts new ones. For instance, suppose you see the Sun rise. This is an existing observation which is explained by the theory of gravity proposed by Newton. This theory, in addition to explaining why we see the Sun move across the sky, also explains many other phenomena such as the path followed by the Sun as it moves (as seen from Earth) across the sky, the phases of the Moon, the phases of Venus, the tides, just to mention a few. You can today make a calculation and predict the position of the Sun, the phases of the Moon and Venus, the hour of maximal tide, all 200 years from now. The same theory is used to guide spacecraft all over the Solar System.

A hypothesis is a working assumption. Typically, a scientist devises a hypothesis and then sees if it "holds water" by testing it against available data (obtained from previous experiments and observations). If the hypothesis does hold water, the scientist declares it to be a theory.

The British Government has issued clear guidelines about the teaching of Intelligent Design in science lessons; it's not science, so it won't be taught. We need equally clear guidelines about how Creationism and Intelligent Design are discussed in RE lessons.

If you teach RE in Suffolk, or you're likely to, and have any questions or comments, [please email us](#). All communications are treated with strict confidence.

[The Royal Society statement on Creationism & Intelligent Design](#)

Tags: [education](#), [science](#), [Intelligent+Design](#), [Creationism](#), [Schools](#)

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Oct 2007
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A Merry Whatever-you-call-it

We're often asked what Humanists do at Christmas. It's generally assumed that the festival based on [the winter solstice](#) (the shortest day) is Jesus's birthday. That's what a lot of people refer to as "the real meaning of Christmas". What they may not realise is that:

- It's highly unlikely that Jesus was born on 25 December;
- The Christian nativity story is very similar to [other stories of baby deities born to virgin mothers](#); it's not unique.
- The Christian Church didn't celebrate Christmas until the 4th century, as it took a dim view of all hedonistic hoo-ha enjoyed by the pagans at that time of year;
- There's been a midwinter festival of one sort or another in Europe, Scandinavia and the Middle East for thousands of years, since long before the Christians claimed it;
- "Traditions" like Christmas trees, cards, gifts and turkeys are all fairly recent. The Victorians, particularly Prince Albert, had a lot to do with their introduction.

Some Humanists regard the festival as a time to enjoy good food and drink with family and friends, but without going OTT because they regard the commercialisation of the season as irritating and wasteful. Others prefer to ignore the whole thing, which is difficult. There used to be special get-away-from-Christmas holidays for Humanists, who'd go and stay somewhere Christmas-free – I don't know if they still happen.

This is from my Thought for the Day on local radio around Christmas in 1996:

The artificiality of the 1990s festive season has little relevance to the original mid-winter solstice festival. For me, as a non-believer, it has no religious significance. Peel away all the layers of "tradition", which means different things to different people, and what are we left with?

The mid-winter festival has been divided into two parts, Christmas and New Year, but used to be all-in-one, around the time of the shortest day, when humankind's precarious survival depended on the vagaries of nature and their own resourcefulness more than at any other time.

For thousands of years, in Europe, Scandinavia and around the Mediterranean, communities have celebrated life, and their survival, in the depths of winter, with eating, drinking and other fundamental pleasures. There was nothing contrived, nothing artificial about it, just sheer enjoyment.

I wouldn't want to go back to living without the comforts of the 1990s. Being a member of one of the simple communities that celebrated the winter solstice thousands of years ago mattered; if you weren't part of a community, your chances of survival were limited.

The same can be true today, yet we have the means to create a sense of inclusive community and with it freedom from want and hunger, so that everyone has something to celebrate. I sense an increasing disillusionment with Christmas as an over-extended, expensive event that fails to meet unrealistic expectations. Is anyone interested in devising a new version?

I don't envy parents of young children, who have to deal with non-stop pre-Christmas exhortations to spend lots of money. On BBC24 business news this morning (24 October), a businessman from one of the big retail chains spoke about his hopes that the British public

would go out and and spend lots of money over the next couple of months. It appears that the main purpose of Christmas is to keep people like him in business. I refuse to spend money in stores that start displaying Christmas decorations or piping Jingle Bells on the shop floor more than four weeks before the holiday. I asked a shop assistant if it didn't drive her crazy to hear the same music over and over again. She said it did.

If there are young children in your family, you can't be an old misery, but there are better ways of doing things than joining in the stress-inducing orgy of consumption. A few years ago, Suffolk Humanist Yvonne Peacock wrote about how she gives pleasure to her grandchildren at this time of year.

As I've never embraced Christianity, I've always found this time of year a bit difficult. As a just pre-war-baby, I grew up through fairly hard times and Christmas was an oh-so-needed landmark. There was excitement and surprise, with parents doing unexpected things like hanging up paper chains, putting silver three-penny pieces in puddings, digging up little trees and cursing over fairy lights that would never work, but which looked nice to me anyhow. There were little presents and new jumpers from aunts. There were even grown-ups drinking a teensy bit of alcohol! So I look back on the time with nostalgia and I think my own children loved it similarly.



However, now I think it is time to get my head round it. For me the nativity has a historical significance and that is all. But also it seems to have built up into such a monster of greed and commercial opportunism with people begging themselves to provide what is 'expected' of them. I've finally decided to turn my back on the whole shemozzle, but being grandma to ten (to date) has its responsibilities and being a miserable old git is not an option, so I have reverted to good old astronomical and biological ideas and have a winter solstice party for family, neighbours and friends. The cause for celebration is simple; the passing of the shortest day and longest night with the hope of a new year of growth, rebirth and all that. The wheel turns for a seasonal change and I can rejoice in the gentle movement from the dark, cold winter to the sweet spring. As well as making a thank you opportunity to all those around who love and care for me.

On this occasion the children are allowed to hold matches and light fires. We have a firework display (absolutely no bangs), sparklers, night-lights in jars, a bonfire, wood gathering and chopping. Then they light and keep fed my two open fires indoors. The house is mostly candle-lit. Then I sort out some activities. They make sun, moon and star cakes – fairy cakes with icing and silver and orange decorations. They make solstice cards with gold and silver stick-and-cut and can make large willow weavings with thin branches from my tree. Each child has a gold and silver bag with little gifts all of which are hung up (weather permitting) on the tree outside. These include a small torch each, a little piece of jewellery or a toy, a gold or silver decoration and a sweet of some kind. With the torches they then do a treasure hunt in the dark, finding a list of things tucked up in odd places. Indoors we have another treasure hunt right through the house. They have done this last for many years now and are very sharp-eyed about it, finding things like the tiny salt spoon stuck to the lamp-shade in no time at all. I do a pheasant soup and a veggie one, cold meat, cheese and bean salads and a bit of everything else with a sun and moon cake – with, of course, plenty of alcohol.

So far I have found this is a good mix of fireworks, Christmas and New Year. It comes a week before most people start celebrating and has enough darkness, difference, scariness and danger attached to it to rejoice the children and the grown-ups.

I would be very interested to hear of other folk's alternatives to the mighty spend.

Whatever you do, midwinter needn't be stressful or complicated. Bear in mind –

Christmas isn't compulsory; if you don't join in the festivities you needn't apologise for it, but try not to spoil other people's enjoyment.

If children learn to have reasonable expectations from an early age, you're far less likely to have problems as they grow older.

It's more important to spend time with your children than to spend money on them, at Christmas or at any other time.

Story-telling, whether they're your own stories or read from books, is a great way to spend winter evenings. Telling ghost stories that send a shiver up your spine is one Christmas tradition that most can enjoy. Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is only one of many.

There's nothing wrong with giving young children second-hand gifts, as long as they're in good condition.

You can treat people by doing things for them, as well as giving them presents. It's nice to feel spoiled.

The divorce and suicide rates go up over the Christmas holiday, when expectations clash with reality. Be realistic and sensible, and accept that people are just as likely to be ill, irritable and tired as at any other time of year; more so, if they've been working hard in the build-up to Christmas. Make allowances for this.

Rather than spending huge amounts of money on presents for people who already have lots of stuff, come to an agreement with family members about the maximum you'll spend on each other.

For ethical gifts, most leading charities have gift catalogues.

[Oxfam Unwrapped](#) and [Good Gifts](#) are just two websites where you can buy gifts for someone who really needs something, in the name of someone who doesn't.

Have a happy whatever-you-call-it, whatever you do with it.

Tags: [Christmas](#), [Christmas+presents](#), [Children](#), [Gifts](#), [Traditions](#)

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Nov 2007
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In 1952, at the first World Humanist Congress, the founding fathers of [IHEU](#) agreed a statement of the fundamental principles of modern Humanism. They called it "The Amsterdam Declaration". That declaration was a child of its time: set in the world of great power politics and the Cold War.

The 50th anniversary World Humanist Congress in 2002, again meeting in the Netherlands, unanimously passed a resolution updating that declaration: "The Amsterdam Declaration 2002". Following the Congress, this updated declaration was adopted unanimously by the IHEU General Assembly, and thus became the official defining statement of World Humanism.

[Read more about the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 | International Humanist and Ethical Union.](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [Humanism](#), [Amsterdam+Declaration](#)

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Dec 2007
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Not many people realise that you don't have to have a celebrant (sometimes called an officiant) to conduct a funeral. There isn't a law that says you have to have a funeral at all, but if you do have one, anyone can conduct it.

As Humanist weddings aren't legally recognised in England and Wales (though they are in Scotland, if conducted by an officially recognised celebrant), anyone can conduct them. The same applies to baby-namings.

In our experience, some of the most satisfying ceremonies have been the ones that have had the most input from friends and family. There are a lot of people who are willing to offer their "professional" services (often after only a few hours or days training), but an impressive website doesn't necessarily mean that they can offer you something you might do better yourself. You can hire an accredited "funeral adviser" to guide you through the whole process of planning a funeral, but maybe all you need is someone to give you some reassurance about what is or isn't possible and appropriate (such as, what's the time limit at a crematorium? How much music should we have?).

Perhaps you prefer to delegate everything to someone else, but if you feel you'd like to do things yourself and you're not sure how to go about it, we can help. We've helped families plan funerals, baby-namings and weddings, and no one has reported a disaster. They were all pleased with what they'd accomplished.

It might be very difficult for those who were closest to someone who's died to lead or speak at his or her funeral – it's hard to mourn *and* perform – but maybe there's someone in your circle who's used to public speaking, and who isn't as emotionally involved as you?

If a group of you do things together, you need to ensure that everyone knows what everyone else is doing, but the experience may be helpful.

So, if you're considering a DIY ceremony, please get in touch. You don't have to live in Suffolk – we can communicate by phone or email. All we ask is a donation to our funds.

Tags: [Funerals](#), [Weddings](#), [Baby-namings](#), [DIY+ceremonies](#)

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Jan 2007
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SEVERAL POLLS indicate that the term "atheism" has acquired such an extraordinary stigma in the United States that being an atheist is now a perfect impediment to a career in politics (in a way that being black, Muslim or homosexual is not). According to a recent Newsweek poll, only 37% of Americans would vote for an otherwise qualified atheist for president.

Link: [10 myths -- and 10 truths -- about atheism - Los Angeles Times](#)

The author [Sam Harris](#) debunks some of the commonest myths about atheism in America, where 'a remarkable 87% of the population claims "never to doubt" the existence of God'.

Although the situation is not quite as bad in the UK, the influence of religionists is increasing. Can you imagine an openly atheist UK Prime Minister?

We might add Sam Harris's truths about atheism to our arsenal when fighting irrationality.

With thanks to [NSS Newline](#) for this story. To subscribe to Newline, send a blank email with 'Subscribe to Newline' in the subject line to enquiries@secularism.org.uk

Tags: [Sam+Harris](#), [Los+Angeles+Times](#), [Myths](#), [Atheism](#)

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Jan 2007
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John Lennon said that life is what happens when you're busy making other plans. Those plans might include New Year's resolutions. I never make any, knowing from experience that things will happen regardless. Not that I don't intend to make an effort to sort out the more disorganised parts of my life – that's work in progress – but there's no reason why I should be any more successful if I start a list of things to do on 1st January than at any other time of the year. If I were to make a resolution, it might be to spend more time ticking off the things on my 'to do' list. The thing about the list is that if I leave things on it long enough, they eventually become so overdue that it's not worth bothering. Anyway, to get back to what happens. Apart from the internet (portal to a world of rubbish as well as some very interesting stuff), I'm easily distracted. I'm a news addict who checks BBC News 24 at frequent intervals, to see if anything interesting happened while I was doing something else. The sun might shine, and it would be a pity to waste it by staying indoors, so I pick up my camera and take the dog for a walk. A friend calls round and I put the kettle on, so we spend the next half hour putting the world to rights. And so on. If I had a proper job, nine to five, it might be different. As it is, I can suit myself how, when and where I spend my time. I'm fortunate in that respect, but even nine to fivers have free time. As a child, like all children, I was oblivious to time passing. Absorbed in some game, a whole morning could drift by and the only thing that brought me out of my reverie was hunger. Come to think of it, that happens now. No, I'm not going to resolve to be sensible and stick to a timetable. Instead, I shall avoid doing anything I don't want to do, if I don't have to do it. Why feel that you'd much rather have been doing something else when you were doing something unnecessary that hardly anyone appreciated? Just one thing though; this philosophy doesn't apply to sharing the chores or anything else that might help someone else feel appreciated. The things we have to do include being considerate towards other people. Otherwise, it's amazing what you don't have to do, if you think about it. Enjoy life while you can. It's later than you think. If you're wondering what I've been going on about for the last couple of minutes, I'm sorry I don't have time to explain – things to do...

Tags: [Radio](#), [Thought+for+the+Day](#), [Life](#)

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Jan 2007
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One of the greatest mysteries of the universe is about to be unravelled with the first detailed, three-dimensional map of dark matter - the invisible material that makes up most of the cosmos.

Astronomers announced yesterday that they have achieved the apparently impossible task of creating a picture of something that has defied every attempt to detect it since its existence was first postulated in 1933.

[The Universe gives up its deepest secret: The Independent](#)

We know very little about this material. The breakthrough is the result of international co-operation in the scientific community.

A team of 70 astronomers from Europe, America and Japan used the Hubble space telescope to build up a picture of dark matter in a vast region of space where some of the galaxies date back to half the age of the universe - nearly 7 billion years.

When there are such mind-bogglingly amazing things still to be learnt about the universe, why must some people ignore science and invent supernatural stories about one tiny planet that are nowhere near as interesting as this?

Tags: [Universal+dark+matter](#), [Universe](#), [Mystery](#), [Science](#)

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Jan 2007
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[There's an online poll on the Channel 4 website, asking "Is atheism a meaningful alternative to religion?"](#)

So far, the religionists are winning. Go and vote now!

Tags: [Poll](#), [Channel+4](#), [TV](#), [Atheism](#)

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Jan 2007
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For a long time, Christians have been dominating American politics and public life even more than they do here. It's been hard to find any American atheists willing to come out of the closet, but things are changing. [Richard Dawkins'](#) book 'The God Delusion' has had record sales and his promotional lecture tour has drawn large audiences, many of them sympathetic.

In [The State News](#), John Bice writes about the ‘growing popularity of atheism’ ...

...the most important accomplishment of this wave of atheistic sentiment is the disruption of the long-standing and unjustified cultural taboo against publicly criticizing religious belief. As the writer Douglas Adams pointed out, "If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like. ... But on the other hand, if somebody says, 'I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday,' you say, 'Fine, I respect that.'"

Cultural critic H.L. Mencken similarly noted, "The most curious social convention of the great age in which we live is the one to the effect that religious opinions should be respected." Regrettably, theocratic Christians and insufferable self-anointed moral elitists have taken advantage of this excessive deference, and have become increasingly preoccupied with imposing their faith-based views on everyone.

A similar resurgence is overdue on this side of the Atlantic. Never mind all those excessively sensitive religious types who scream that they've been ‘offended’, or worse, whenever anyone dares to question their beliefs or their influence in public policy and education. It's time they were challenged, and forced back into a strictly secular framework that won't allow them any special privileges at public expense.

If you're just reading this out of curiosity but you agree, [why not join us](#) or one of our allied organisations – see [our links page](#)? There's strength in numbers...

With thanks to the [National Secular Society](#) for The State News article.

Tags: [Secularism](#), [Atheism](#)

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Jan 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

T4TD by Margaret Nelson during Mark Murphy's programme on BBC Radio Suffolk (95.5, 95.9, 103.9 & 104.6 fm). Listen online or listen again via the [Radio Suffolk website](#).

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Jan 2007
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[Cabinet rejects exemption on gay adoptions | Special reports | Guardian Unlimited](#)

The Catholic church is almost certain to lose its battle for special treatment over gay adoption rules under a deal agreed by the cabinet to heal damaging divisions between senior ministers. Cabinet sources said the new proposals would require Catholic adoption agencies to consider gay couples - or close down - after a reasonable delay that would allow them to ensure that the children in their care are properly dealt with.

[The Catholics, supported by Anglican Archbishop Williams of Canterbury and Archbishop Sentamu of York, want exemption from the anti-discrimination legislation for homosexuals](#), saying their “rights of conscience cannot be made subject to legislation, however well-meaning”. They are putting the childrens’ interests first, they claim, but considering the Catholic Church’s record on child abuse, this seems like gross hypocrisy to me.

In [today's New Statesman](#), Constitutional Affairs Minister Harriet Harman says,

You can either be against discrimination or you can allow for it. You can't be a little bit against discrimination.

If Tony Blair were left to make the decision about giving in to the Catholics’ demands, he almost certainly would. Communities Secretary Ruth Kelly, a Catholic, is reported as considering resignation. However, other cabinet members and many back-benchers have signalled that there can be no exemptions from the legislation. If the Catholics had their way, it would be legitimising homophobia.

Tags: [Gay+adoptions](#), [Politics](#), [Catholics](#), [Catholicism](#)

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Jan 2007
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Please help to prevent Islamic [Sharia](#) law being implemented in the Kurdistan region. [Please sign the petition to remove Article No 7 from the proposed Kurdish constitution](#). Article 7 clearly states that Islam is the main official religion, and that laws should be based on it. If this happens, it will lead to the violation of the most fundamental and basic liberties of the people of Kurdistan, and most of all undermine the rights and freedoms of women.

Meanwhile, [a British Muslim lawyer thinks we should have Sharia law here in Britain](#), and that it's already applied in the Muslim community. One law for them...

With thanks to [NSS](#) Newline.

Tags: [Sharia+law](#), [Kurdistan](#), [Petition](#)

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Jan 2007
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Since [the story about the alleged kidnap plot by "terrorists"](#) broke today, BBC news has been dominated by it. Reporters have been interviewing people in the Alum Rock and Sparkbrook areas of Birmingham where the arrests were made. The "Muslim community" is in the news again, with indignant young men protesting that the "community" ought to have been consulted before any arrests were made. Of course! That's what the police ought to do - 'consult' people about whether or not to arrest anyone.

The form of words that BBC (and other) journalists use to explain stories like this is infuriating. I've complained to the BBC about the way they refer to people as "Muslims", or talk about the "Muslim community", on the basis of assumptions made about them because of their appearance or the area they live in. Laziness like this reinforces stereotypical thinking. When did journalists start defining people by religion, rather than their ethnicity?

For example:

A BBC reporter questions a Caucasian man in the street:

"How about the relationship between the English community and the Muslim community?"

He might as well have asked about the relationship between white people and brown ones.

A BBC reporter stands in front of a small crowd of men and boys at the end of a cordoned off street, and talks to camera:

"Quite a lot of local Muslims have gathered."

Not, a lot of local people, or a lot of local men; maybe he thought they must all be Muslims because there's a mosque in the vicinity?

BBC [NEWSWATCH](#) is on BBC News 24 at 20.45 on Fridays and on BBC1's Breakfast on Saturdays at 7.45.

Tags: [Islam](#), [Muslims](#), [Labels](#), [BBC](#), [Terrorists](#), [Terrorism](#), [Community](#)

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Feb 2007
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The actor Warren Mitchell, most well-known for his role as the bigoted Alf Garnett in "Till Death us do Part", is a distinguished supporter of the British Humanist Association. He's of Russian Jewish descent, and has been quoted as saying, "I enjoy being Jewish, but I'm an atheist". There are many atheist Jews like him. Warren tells a story about visiting Northern Ireland, where he was asked if he's a Catholic or a Protestant. "I'm Jewish," he replied. "Yes, but are you a Catholic Jew or a Protestant Jew?" was the response.

In August 2005, an Egyptian Arab set up a website called "[Arab Atheists](#)". He wrote that it's for "every person who wants to think freely in the Arab world," but acknowledges that it can be dangerous to be open about your atheism in Arab countries. I imagine that it might be difficult to be openly atheist in some sections of British society too. Many people assume that all Arabs are Muslim.

Last week, I was watching a TV report about some children's definitions of "Britishness". One boy said that he thought we're all "British", whatever our religion, whether we're Christian, Muslim or Jewish. He left out all the other religions (maybe they hadn't got that far in his RE lessons), and it didn't seem to occur to him that many of us are atheists too. According to a MORI poll recently commissioned by the BHA, [about 17 million British people are broadly Humanist](#) or atheist in their outlook.

There's been a lot of talk about "community cohesion", which is mostly about achieving harmony between different religious groups, but few have been clear about what they mean by the term. Every time I hear some lazy journalist or commentator refer to a "Muslim Community", or a "Muslim country", when he or she is talking about a geographical area, I'm irritated. When I'm told I live in a Christian country, I'm irritated. Rather than describing us in terms of our ethnicity, it's become common to describe us in terms of our supposed religion; to assume that we all share the same beliefs because of where we live or our appearance. It's also a mistake to assume that one religious person believes the same as the next. If we dispense with these labels, we're forced to see people as just people, to communicate with them directly, and not through some confusing set of assumptions about their attitudes or beliefs. We live in a secular society where everyone has the freedom to believe whatever he or she likes, and no one should assume anything about us. Let's be judged by how we behave, rather than notions of what we might believe.

Tags: [Thought+for+the+Day](#), [Assumptions](#), [Labels](#)

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Feb 2007
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Children as young as four are being taught philosophy in the nursery, BBC Scotland has learned.

The Clackmannanshire Council initiative is believed to be the first run by a local authority in Britain.

New research from Dundee University suggests learning philosophy raises children's IQ by up to 6.5 points and improves their emotional intelligence.

[BBC NEWS | Scotland | Nursery pupils taught philosophy.](#)

It's not the first time that very young children have been taught philosophy. In 2005, it was reported that [children were learning philosophy in Leicester](#), and there've been similar reports from schools in other parts of the country.

Dr Catherine McCall founded the [European Philosophical Enquiry Centre](#) in 1990, where she began innovative schemes with children, adults, businesses and communities (including some in the most deprived areas of Glasgow). Dr McCall is involved with the European Foundation for the Advancement of Doing Philosophy with Children – [SOPHIA](#).

Ever since I heard about her work, I've believe that philosophy ought to be a core subject in the curriculum for all ages, replacing RE. Religion should be included in other courses, but not a separate subject. If children learn to think in philosophy lessons, they'll be better able to distinguish between sense and nonsense in other areas of the curriculum, including religion.

Tags: [Philosophy](#), [Education](#), [Children](#), [BBC](#)

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Feb 2007
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Monday 12th February is [Darwin Day](#), the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin in 1809. Scientists, Humanists and Rationalists around the world will be celebrating Charles Darwin's birthday in a variety of ways.

Charles Darwin's book [The Origin of Species](#) set out his theory of evolution by natural selection.

Whenever I get the chance, I tell children in Suffolk schools about evolution. It's surprising, and worrying, how few seem to know much about it. Unless they know the truth, they are susceptible to the lies being promoted by Creationists who are distributing ["Intelligent Design" teaching materials](#) wherever they can.



This is how I've introduced evolution in schools:

Since I started this sentence, the Earth has travelled 100 miles around the Sun, the Sun has moved 1,000 miles in its circuit of the Galaxy, and the Orion Nebula has moved 100,000 miles relative to us.

A few years ago, NASA took a photograph with the Hubble Space Telescope, leaving the shutter open for 10 days. The 10 inch square photograph is of an area of space which to the naked eye is about the same size as a grain of sand viewed from 6 feet away. To cross it at 10 times the speed of light would take 300,000 years. There are about 1,500 galaxies in the picture, each containing billions of stars. Here we are, whirling round a relatively small star, a tiny planet in all the vastness of space.

3½ billion years ago Earth was uninhabitable. Half a billion years later simple organic compounds were formed - the basis of life. It was a long time before DNA evolved, which made more complex life forms possible. The trilobites and ammonites appeared about 570 million years ago. Insects appeared about 300 million years ago. The dinosaurs were much more recent, and if we represent the history of earth with a diagram of an hour in time - a clock face - human beings have only appeared within the last minute or so.

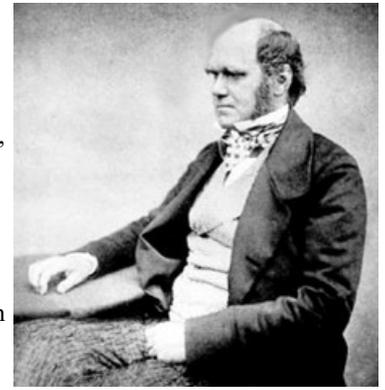
There's no evidence for the theory of creation, but plenty of evidence for evolution. The odds against us being here at all are amazing. The variety of species is amazing. We are amazing. Why invent supernatural explanations for life, when the natural world is so amazing and there is still so much more to learn? Humanists apply science and reason to the understanding of the universe and our origins.

Further reading – [We're all monkeys](#).

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Evolution](#), [Science](#), [Darwin+Day](#)

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Feb 2007
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Today is Darwin Day, the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin in 1809. In celebrating Darwin Day, those of us who value the great man's achievements hope to raise awareness of his work. If he were still alive, Darwin would be surprised that it's still the subject of so much debate.



Like many great scientists and thinkers, Darwin was driven by an intense curiosity from an early age, when he was happiest wandering around the countryside near his home in Shrewsbury, collecting rocks, bugs, beetles and plants. His habit of taking natural history specimens home to study them persisted for the rest of his life.

Darwin came from a wealthy family, so when an opportunity arose to spend five years as a companion to Captain Fitzroy of the survey ship HMS Beagle around South America, he seized upon it. He was in his early twenties and Fitzroy was only twenty-six. The captain's responsibilities were onerous and naval etiquette dictated that he shouldn't socialise with his crew, so it could be very lonely on a long voyage. Darwin enjoyed the freedom to explore wherever the ship berthed in return for keeping the captain company. Instead of a gap year, he had five gap years, and we're all the richer for them.

The voyage opened Darwin's eyes to the possibility that the scientific orthodoxy of the time was wrong. It was believed that everything in the natural world had been created in the form we now see and that nothing had changed. When Darwin published his research, he called it, "On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life". He didn't use the term "evolution" to describe the process he described, but Darwinian evolution theory is now the best explanation we have for the development of life on Earth.

Darwin wasn't always right, but he didn't have the scientific tools at his disposal that they do today. He'd have been fascinated to know what's been discovered since his death, such as DNA and carbon dating, and to examine the theory about how life began in a primordial soup between 3½ and 4 billion years ago, when simple organic compounds were formed.

There is one lesson from Darwin that, so far, humankind has been slow to grasp. It's that species, including our own, evolve over time in response to changes in their environment and when that environment changes drastically, whether through man-made or natural events, they cannot evolve and become extinct. So, while we celebrate Darwin's life in science, maybe we should heed the words of one of his admirers, Sir David Attenborough, who wrote, "In our hands lies not only our own future, but that of all other living creatures with whom we share the earth."*

* From 'Life on Earth', 1979

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Science](#), [Evolution](#)

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Feb 2007
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[Trilobites](#) were arthropods that existed during the Cambrian period, until about 250 million years ago.

Andrew Scott of Vancouver, aka '[Bugmaker](#)', creates trilobites and other creatures out of PVC gel, copper, and acrylic paint.

Creationists, including those who promote the theory of '[Intelligent Design](#)', believe the earth was created at about the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC, so I'm not sure how they explain the trilobites.



Trilobite image courtesy Andrew Scott – (c) all rights reserved

Tags: [Trilobite](#), [Science](#), [Art](#), [Creationism](#), [Intelligent+design](#)

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Feb 2007
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Friday news and web links...

An Alexandrian court has sentenced Abdel Kareem Nabil Suleiman to four years imprisonment for "inciting hatred of Islam" and insulting President Hosni Mubarak in his blog, using the pseudonym "Kareem Amer." [Visit the Free Kareem! website](#) to call for his freedom. As [Amnesty International](#) reports, the sentence means that bloggers are under threat from the Egyptian authorities.

All [copies of Egyptian feminist writer, activist and medical doctor Nawal Al Saadawi's latest book, God Resigns in the Summit Meeting, were removed from circulation and destroyed](#) last week by her publisher Mahmoud Madbouli, according to German news service Deutsche Press Agenter. Madbouli said he withdrew the book once he learned it "offended readers' religious sensitivities."



Perhaps because of the [The British Humanist Association](#)'s attempts to appeal to 'cultural Christians' as prospective

members, some have demonstrated rather woolly thinking about atheism or Humanism in its members' forum. This is part of a topic posted recently:

Most reasonable people accept evolution and much that RD [Richard Dawkins] says in [The God Delusion](#). On the basis of God defined in RD's theistic terms, many people such as myself are atheists, but that does lump together a wide spectrum of belief some of which may prefer not to be called atheist.

Know what he means? Answers on a postcard please. Meanwhile, please would intelligent, sensible Humanists [join the BHA](#)? If you're a bit woolly about what it all means, read 'Humanism: an Introduction' by Jim Herrick, normally available from the [Rationalist Press Association](#) but their website's having a make over and doesn't appear to be fully functional today, so try later. Also recommended: a subscription to [New Humanist](#) magazine.

I spent Thursday morning at a local High School talking to 14-year-olds (Year 10) during a Marriage Conference. Other contributors included religious representatives, someone from the police domestic violence unit, and a superintendent registrar. Towards the end of the last session we veered off topic, steered by a very religious young man. After defining atheism, agnosticism, and secularism, and talking about religion in public life, specifically the House of Lords, one boy said, "Why should we believe in anything? Why can't we just believe in nothing?" Several others agreed that most high school students aren't religious, but they're not anything else either – that most believe in nothing. Whether or not this is true, several students from this school contributed to the '[Why Atheism?](#)' DVD, at my suggestion. Thursday's group were feeling 'got at' by a bunch of religious people who'd spend most of the morning promoting their different approaches to marriage, which appeared to have been received with scepticism - I'm pleased to say!

In view of the new equality legislation, Suffolk County Council has organised a [Stonewall](#) Masterclass on faiths and sexuality for faith representatives on March 1st, which will be followed by a seminar organised by [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#). There have been other seminars around the county attended by a variety of faith representatives. I was invited to attend as a 'critical friend' but can't make it. SIFRE's summary of the work so far includes:

- it is important to have a historical perspective on the subject and to understand the social and cultural contexts in which traditions have developed.
- if we get behind the various translations and official or idiosyncratic interpretations of sacred texts, they may open up to alternative readings and have quite a different impact when not taken at face value.
- the authority of texts may be need to challenged by the authority of conscience and experience.
- the issues around sexuality and sexual orientation need to be tackled sensitively using everybody's insights.
- some faiths have very strong teachings against same-sex relationships, but internal pressure groups as well as external forces are now challenging them.

We felt that the next stage might be to have a regional conference so that others could be drawn into the discussion as we seek more ways of supporting people, particularly the young, who are experiencing difficulties in the current situation and work out how best to move forward together in the light of the new equality legislation.

Sex and religion, eh? Gay sex *really* gets 'em going.

"If Michelangelo had been straight, the Sistine Chapel would have been wallpapered." *Robin Tyler, US comedienne, speech to gay rights rally, 1988.*

While promoting his 'God Delusion' book in the US, Richard Dawkins was asked how the people of [Liberty University](#) (an 'an independent, fundamentalist Baptist university') could convince him that dinosaur fossils are only 3000 years old and that life began only 6000 years ago. See [YouTube](#) for his reply – broadband needed.

The weekly Humanist Network News email from the [Institute for Humanist Studies](#) features the '[Agnostic Mom](#)' blog, written by Noell Hyman, who was raised a Mormon. This week she writes about a Humanist wedding:

My favorite part of this story is that my sister-in-law asked one of her brothers to marry them. That brother (one of the nonbelievers) spent fifteen minutes on a humanist website, filled out a form, paid a small fee, and is now an "authorized clergy member."

It seems to be much easier to become a Humanist Celebrant (if that's how you choose to describe yourself) in some US states than it is here, simply by paying to become an 'authorised clergy member'. So far, you can have legally recognised [Humanist weddings in Scotland](#) but not in England or Wales.

Mike Lake from Derby has started a [UK Secularists website](#) through the National Secular Society (we're affiliated). We're listed under 'humanist groups' on his site but if you click 'Suffolk' under the heading 'local secular groups' we're not there! Mike doesn't seem to think that we can be secularists and humanists at the same time. He tried to explain why we're not listed under 'secular groups', but I dozed off while reading his explanation. If you have an opinion, please [email him](#).

Molly Beanland, daughter of Suffolk Humanists Stan Beanland and Marion Edwards, is a talented singer/songwriter whose first single is due for release this spring. [You can hear Molly's beautiful voice on her My Space website](#).



Saturday TV - 2.05 pm on BB2, [Inherit the Wind](#) -

This courtroom drama was inspired by the real-life trial in 1925 of a young Tennessee teacher who was

charged with giving lessons on the Darwinian theory of evolution in a state school. (Radio Times)

And finally, a 19-year-old 'man' (I use the term loosely) had a full English breakfast tattooed on his head. [Dayne Gilbey was inked with bacon, eggs, sausages, beans and cutlery during a six-hour session](#). Don't tell [Britney](#).

Tags: [News](#), [Group](#), [Roundup](#)

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Feb 2007
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Headteachers should be stripped of the power to pick pupils amid fears the best schools are colonised by middle-class children, according to one of Tony Blair's favourite think-tanks.

The IPPR says faith schools are 10 times more likely to be over-run with middle-class children compared to other schools

Faith schools, which can select according to religious belief, are 10 times more likely to be "highly unrepresentative" of the children in their local communities, said the report published today by the [Institute for Public Policy Research](#).

[Stop faith schools being ghettos for the middle class, think-tank warns | Uk News | News | Telegraph](#).

When a New Labour think tank criticises Government policy, will it make a difference? That would mean admitting they're wrong.

Lord Adonis, the schools minister, last night rejected the IPPR's recommendations.

"We agree that ability banding can be an effective way of widening access, but schools should have the power and freedom to set their own admissions policies according to local needs.

"The report is wrong to suggest that schools operate in a vacuum - by law they must consult widely on their proposed admission arrangements, with any objections being ruled on by the independent schools adjudicator."

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Education](#), [IPPR](#), [Politics](#)

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Feb 2007
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The [Ipswich Crematorium](#) management has erected signs in the driveway to reserve parking spaces for funeral officiants. The significance of the wording is important. Where other crematoria still have parking spaces signed as reserved for 'clergy', these use the word 'officiant' – a neutral term that includes religious ministers, civil celebrants and humanist celebrants. Thank you, Ipswich Borough Council.



Crematoria are owned and run by local authorities, such as Ipswich and Colchester, or private companies such as the [Westerleigh Group](#), which owns West Suffolk Crematorium. The church has no claim to them and the clergy is one user group among several.

Tags: [Crematorium](#), [Parking+sign](#)

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Mar 2007
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This week's [Moral Maze on Radio 4](#) debated fundamentalism. One of the contributors was Hanne Stinson, British Humanist Association Chief Executive. You can [listen again via the BBC](#) but will need Real Player on your PC, which you can [download free](#) from the BBC help page.

Tags: [BBC](#), [Moral+Maze](#), [Religion](#), [BHA](#)

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Mar 2007
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[Peter Tatchell](#) will be the guest speaker at our meeting in Colchester on Thursday March 15th. [For details, see our events calendar.](#)

Peter is, amongst other things, a Guardian 'Comment is Free' columnist. [His profile on the Guardian web site](#) begins:

Peter Tatchell is a human rights campaigner, and a member of the queer rights group OutRage! and the left wing of the Green party.

His key political inspirations are Mahatma Gandhi, Sylvia Pankhurst, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.



For more information, [get in touch.](#)

Tags: [Peter+Tatchell](#), [Group](#), [Meeting](#)

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Mar 2007
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Conservapedia has over 3,800 educational, clean and concise entries on historical, scientific, legal, and economic topics, as well as more than 350 lectures and term lists. There have been over 2,500,000 page views and over 19,000 page edits. Already Conservapedia has become one of the largest user-controlled free encyclopedias on the internet. This site is growing rapidly.

Oh dear! Should you laugh or cry? [Conservapedia](#) is being touted as a reliable alternative to [Wikipedia](#), "the free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit". Instead,

Conservapedia is an online resource and meeting place where we favor Christianity and America. Conservapedia has easy-to-use indexes to facilitate review of topics. You will much prefer using Conservapedia compared to Wikipedia if you want concise answers free of "political correctness".

Conservapedia's got a thing about spelling; they favour (or favor) American spelling. They say,

Wikipedia often uses foreign spelling of words, even though most English-speaking users are American.

Don't know where they get that idea. "Most" may be a slim majority, as [Wikipedia](#) is an international resource, with "over six million articles in 250 languages including 1.6 million in the English edition". English (the original version) [is an international language.](#)

Conservapedia accuses Wikipedia of bias. For example:

Wikipedia allows the use of B.C.E. instead of B.C. and C.E. instead of A.D. The dates are based on the birth of Jesus, so why pretend otherwise? Conservapedia is Christian-friendly and exposes the CE deception.

Wikipedia's entry for the Renaissance denies any credit to Christianity, its primary inspiration.

Wikipedia's entry on abortion reads like a brochure for the abortion industry. Wikipedia denies and omits the results of 16 out of 17 statistically significant studies showing increased risk of breast cancer from abortion. Wikipedia's entry also omits the evidence of abortion causing increased premature birth of subsequent children.

Edits to include facts against the theory of evolution are almost immediately censored. On Conservapedia, contributions that meet simple rules are respected to the maximum extent possible.

There's no bias in Conservapedia, of course. Well, only Christian and American bias.

However, Conservapedia is far from being "one of the largest user-controlled free encyclopedias on the internet". Most entries selected at random are single sentences and the subjects are limited. The authors have a long way to go to catch up with Wikipedia.

Tags: [encyclopedia](#), [Wikipedia](#), [Conservapedia](#)

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Mar 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

The AGM part shouldn't take long - new officers needed please! Most of the meeting will be about how the group can raise the profile of Humanism and Secularism in Suffolk and N E Essex during the coming year.

If you're one of the many who think that religious organisations have too much influence in public life, come and help us plan our

strategy.

We'll be in Room 1 (next to the front door) at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.

Map link: tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Mar 2007
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We'll be at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester.

Michael Imison is organising an experimental "ethical jury". He writes, "I'd like members to bring one or more examples of actual situations where the moral course was not 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. Do come even if you are stuck for a question to consider."

There'll be more info in our next newsletter, due soon.

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/2242bj>

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Mar 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Andrew is the [Education Officer for the British Humanist Association](#). He'll be talking about [the BHA's education policy and campaigns](#), and sharing ideas and information relevant to our work in Suffolk.

We *won't* be in Room 6 (first floor), as previously stated, but in the hall on the ground floor at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.

Map link: tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Apr 2007
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Regret this site admin and author-in-chief had an accident resulting in hospitalisation and severe restrictions to my mobility, which is why things have gone a bit quiet. However, my ankle may be broken but my typing fingers aren't, so aim to start writing again ASAP. Meanwhile, if there's anything you'd like to read about here, please email us.

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Apr 2007
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Here's the latest Suffolk Humanist News, with apologies for lateness – our editor may have got herself hospitalised, but she's back on the mend now.

This edition includes information on our upcoming AGM, our meeting with Peter Tatchell in Colchester last month, and upcoming events.

[Download SH News April 2007 \(93 KB PDF\)](#)

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Apr 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Opinions on the Sea of Faith vary widely in Humanist and Secularist circles. For an explanation of what they're about, see their website. They're concerned with what will replace institutional religion as interest in it declines. The SoF Roadshow will be at the Quaker Meeting House, 39 Fonnereau Road, Ipswich, IP1 3JH. The cost is £8, including a vegetarian lunch, tea and coffee. Speakers are

[Don Cupitt](#), fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and Stephen Mitchell, a Suffolk Parish Priest and founder member of SoF. To book, contact David Barklem, 01473 780041, dbarklem@bramblyhedge.co.uk. Places are limited, so make haste.

Further info: <http://www.sofn.org.uk/>

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/278gns>

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Apr 2007
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Every MP in the country is to receive a copy of Richard Dawkins' latest book [The God Delusion](#) following a grassroots effort by humanists who want to challenge state privileges given to religious groups.

The campaign, organised through the community action website, Pledgebank, is an attempt to demonstrate how widespread secular and atheist views are in this country. It comes in response to Prof Dawkins's rallying cry in the book for atheists to be more vocal.

['Darwin's rottweiler' looks to round up Britain's atheists from Guardian Unlimited: News blog.](#)

Have to confess that Suffolk Humanists didn't respond to the appeal from James Christie of Fife:

"I will arrange for my MP to receive a copy of Richard Dawkins' book, The God Delusion, but only if 645 other people (one per UK constituency) will do the same for other MPs."

However, it seems that others will send Suffolk MPs copies of Dawkins' excellent book. We wondered if it would be as effective as sending something more concise, such as Jim Herrick's "Humanism: an Introduction". Perhaps we'll send that instead. It's normally available from the [Rationalist Press Association](#), but their website doesn't appear to be working properly at the moment. Try again later.

We couldn't meet Mr Christie's deadline but the reasons that some committee members agreed we'd be unlikely to recommend making the pledge were the same as those given by BHA supporter and philosopher Julian Baggini in [the Philosophers' Magazine blog](#):

1. Mature adults rarely change their fundamental commitments about religion. Even if all 650 MPs read the book, the odds of any of them thinking "Oh my God – religion is evil!" is almost zero.
2. The God Delusion has had plenty of coverage. Any MP who knows about it and wants to read it will have done so already. They're not going to think, "I'd like to read that. £14.99 is a bit pricey though. But maybe someone will get it for me as a present! I'll wait and see".
3. MPs get tons of email. It will be opened by civil servants and they will probably be sent a standard reply. The book may not even get into the MPs' hands.
4. Dawkins is notoriously hard-line and the person least likely to get people to think more kindly of atheism. Indeed, for many he has the effect of making people think atheists are a belligerent bunch of zealots.

So if reading the God Delusion *does* make a difference to parliamentary attitudes, I'll humbly apologise, but I doubt very much it will.

Tags: [MPs](#), [The+God+Delusion](#), [Book](#)

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Apr 2007
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At this year's Cambridge Science Festival, Re:Design was a dramatisation of the correspondence between Charles Darwin and [the Harvard Professor of Botany, Asa Gray](#).

[You will need broadband and Flash, Windows Media or Quicktime player to see the video extract.](#)

[Terry Molloy](#), who plays Darwin, is my brother-in-law!

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Theatre](#), [Cambridge](#)

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Apr 2007
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If you're a Radio 4 listener, you'll know that the debate about including atheist/humanist thoughts for the day in the Today programme has been hotting up. We've had an email from Naomi Phillips, Public Affairs Officer at [The British Humanist Association](#), as follows:

We seem to be getting somewhere with our campaign to have humanist voices included on Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day'. Last week both BHA member Lord Harrison of Chester and Jonathan Bartley of Ekklesia (the Christian think tank with which the BHA has worked on issues like creationism), himself a contributor to Thought for The Day, made the case on the Today programme for including humanist contributors.

John Humphries last week asked people to email in if they wanted humanist thinkers included in Thought for the Day so please take the time to contact the Today programme on today@bbc.co.uk and make the case for non-religious thinkers to be included! We know that many of you sent emails in support of Joan Bakewell when she too appeared (on Radio 4's Feedback) to argue for the inclusion of humanists – if you didn't then, please email now! If you did, please email again!

I've emailed to ask why they're being so stubbornly resistant to the idea of having non-religious 'thoughts' on the programme, and pointed out that there have been [humanist thoughts for the day on BBC Radio Suffolk](#) since 1995, and the world hasn't come to an end.

Please email [Today](#) now.

Tags: [Radio](#), [Thought+for+the+Day](#), [BBC](#), [Humanism](#)

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Apr 2007

Hundreds of thousands of people have rallied in Istanbul in support of secularism in Turkey, amid a row over a vote for the country's next president.

[BBC NEWS | World | Europe | Huge rally for Turkish secularism.](#)

Many see the nomination of foreign minister [Abdullah Gul](#) as a threat to the strict separation of religion and politics since Turkey became a republic in 1923, suspecting that he has an Islamist agenda and would be in a position to veto all laws and appoint key establishment figures. If he became president, his wife would be the first First Lady of the Republic of Turkey to wear a headscarf, or hijab, which some say would have [Mustafa Kemal Ataturk](#), founder and first president of the Republic of Turkey "turning in his grave".

Although the demonstration in Turkey (reported as attracting a million people) was peaceful, some are nervous because the military have threatened to intervene to prevent an Islamist from becoming president. A demonstrator is reported as saying, "We want neither Sharia, nor a coup, but a fully democratic Turkey."

Turkey wants to join the EU and has introduced substantial human rights and economic reforms to meet European standards, improving the status of women (though not enough, women's organisations say), abolishing the death penalty, bringing in tougher measures against torture and overhauling the penal code. Abdullah Gul has been involved with the EU negotiations.

Many European politicians have opposed Turkey's application to join the EU because of the unresolved issue of Cyprus and because they regard its predominately Muslim culture as "not European". If Turkey became part of the EU, the union's borders would be uncomfortably adjacent to Syria, Iraq and Iran. If the country's secularism is abandoned or compromised, it will be even less likely to gain membership of the EU.

Tags: [Secularism](#), [Election](#), [Turkey](#)

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May 2007

We've received the following email 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 now very close to making their final report and have asked members of the public to inform their last minute deliberations by contributing their own 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?'

It is very important that as many people as possible respond to this request by going to www.integrationandcohesion.org.uk and following the instructions for submitting comments.

There are a number of points that the BHA has made which it would be valuable to have echoed by individuals, for example:

- There should be no more faith schools created and existing ones should be phased out. Likewise, publicly funded social and medical care should be provided in an inclusive secular way, not divide people up by religion.
- The law should be changed to replace the requirement on state-funded schools to hold daily acts of worship with a requirement to hold inclusive assemblies and guidance under a new law should emphasise the promotion of shared values.
- The current curriculum subject of 'Religious Education' should be reformed into a more inclusive subject of 'Beliefs and Values Education' as part of the national curriculum.
- In strategies designed to promote greater social cohesion and integration, care should be taken that 'communities' defined by

religion or other attribute are not always the units of choice for policy-makers. Communities defined by location may be more useful as units of choice.

- Where local projects are organised to encourage dialogue between people of different beliefs, those whose beliefs are not religious should be included – ‘inter-faith’, lazily assumed to include everyone, in fact does not.

Of course, all contributions made to the COIC should be in your own words and tailored to the specific question which the COIC are asking people to answer, but we hope that these suggested points are useful. You can see the BHA’s first and second submissions to the COIC at <http://tinyurl.com/2hholy> and <http://tinyurl.com/2bhyk9> and we hope these too will be useful to you.

Tags: [Community+cohesion](#), [Inter-faith](#), [Integration](#), [Religion](#)

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May 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Veronica Broomes is the guest speaker at the UN Association's AGM at The Friends' Meeting House, 39 Fonnereau Road, Ipswich.

Veronica Broomes works as a freelance consultant on sustainability and environmental issues. With a background in agricultural biotechnology research and as an environmental impact assessment practitioner, Veronica has been a sound grasp of the importance of sustainable development and implications of climate change on lives and livelihoods. This enables her to explain issues simply whether it’s conducting environmental audits for businesses, promoting awareness of recycling and sustainability among community groups or discussing research findings and their implications for twenty-first century businesses.

At present, her main assignment is conducting integrated environmental audits of small and medium size enterprises (SME) in London on behalf of the environmental charity Global Action Plan. Through advising on ways to reduce energy and water consumption and management of waste, Veronica promotes sustainability and helps businesses to reduce operating costs through more efficient use of resources.

In her presentation ‘Choices for climate change – pain or pleasure’, Veronica explores some current concerns about climate change and their implications for society. In addition to discussing likely causes and consequences of climate change, Veronica advocates informed decision to enable everyone to take action in our own homes, through the organisations we serve and in our communities.

All are welcome.

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/25coqn>

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May 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

ICR has short term licences that enable it to provide opportunities for local groups and individuals to learn about broadcasting. They showcase local talent at a variety of events. We've been on ICR in previous years!

Further info: <http://www.icrfm.co.uk/homepage.htm>

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May 2007
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Our latest newsletter is now available, with info on the appeal for a Humanist Thought for the Day on Radio 4, Andrew Copson’s upcoming visit to our June meeting, evidence-based ethics, community cohesion and our financial report.

[Download SH News May 2007 \(295 KB\)](#)

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May 2007
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[The O Project](#) champions the contributions that humanists and other atheists make to wider society and encourages good relations between atheists and religious people.

[Hamish McPherson](#) says The O Project is an 'idea'.

The 'O' in the O Project is what you are left with when you take 'god' 'out' of 'good'.

In other words, it's about how you can live a good life without following a religion. It has two goals:

1. To champion the contributions that humanists and other non believers make to wider society in the fields of social justice, equality and human rights.
2. To promote good relations and cooperation between believers and non believers

However it does not assert that people should become atheists - it demands equal respect for religion and atheism as potential vehicles for good.

It's only possible to have a truly constructive dialogue and co-operation between religious and atheist people in a secular society, where religious organisations do not expect special privileges. [IHEU's president Roy Brown spoke at the UN Commission on Human Rights on 5 April 2005](#), when he said,

Secularism should not be confused with militant atheism. We urge the Commission to recognise that a truly secular society - one that is neutral in respect of all religions - is a necessary safeguard against religious intolerance - discriminating against none and favouring none. The United Nations is itself a shining example of secularism.

[Read about Suffolk Humanists and the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource.](#)

Tags: [The+O+Project](#), [Co-operation](#), [Multi-Faith](#)

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May 2007
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"I'm not deterred one iota from coming back to protest in Moscow," Peter Tatchell told PinkNews.co.uk from Moscow, just hours after he was attacked by suspected neo-Nazis and then arrested by the Russian riot police the OMON. "Gay Russians need overseas support to protect them against state and neo-Nazi violence."



[Peter Tatchell speaks out after his violent Moscow assault- from Pink News- all the latest gay news from the gay community - Pink News.](#)

Peter was a guest speaker at our March meeting in Colchester. [He was just one of many who were assaulted while attempting a Gay Pride march through Moscow to assert gay rights on Sunday 27 May.](#) The marchers included MEPs and Richard Fairbrass of the pop group 'Right Said Fred'. They were aiming to deliver a petition to Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, demanding the right to stage public marches. [The mayor has said he'll never allow a gay rights parade in the city, describing gays as "satanic".](#) The attackers were mainly neo-Nazis and members of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Peter has appealed for complaints to be made to Russian ambassadors concerning the brutal attacks on peaceful demonstrators and the deplorable lack of police protection in Moscow yesterday. He also suggests that local MPs be asked to complain. Complaints should be sent to:

His Excellency Yury Fedotov
Russian Embassy
13 Kensington Palace Gardens
London
W8 4QX

Photo courtesy of Pink News

Tags: [Peter+Tatchell](#), [Homophobia](#), [Human+Rights](#), [Moscow](#), [Assault](#)

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Jun 2007
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While Humanists in other parts of the country struggle to be co-opted onto their county's Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education ([SACRE](#)), I was promoted from being a co-opted member of Suffolk County Council's SACRE to full membership at its

meeting on 5 June, with the agreement of all those present.

The reasons given were:

There is varied practice with other SACRE membership for Humanists across the country, some of whom have full membership.

With the NSFRE (National Framework for Religious Education) requesting religions and beliefs being included in new agreed syllabuses it is hard to justify humanists not having full membership of SACRE.

I've been a member of Suffolk's SACRE for years – I forget how long – and feel this is a vote of confidence in me and my contribution to the development of RE in Suffolk. It's also significant because Suffolk, which has a particularly harmonious SACRE, is showing the way to other local authorities who appear to be less enlightened, and who are resisting the involvement of Humanists and secularists in RE.

I'm grateful to my fellow SACRE members.

Tags: [RE](#), [SACRE](#), [Suffolk+County+Council](#), [Humanism](#)

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Jun 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

If you're interested in meeting a group of fellow Humanists for lunch, please email by 30th July.

We'll be at The Seal in Woodbridge. Look for the newsletter on a table. As we can't book, we need to get there early.

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/248duy>

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Jun 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Group meeting at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. A selection of books about Humanism or of interest to Humanists, with extracts of some of the good bits, recommended by Margaret Nelson. Friends and raffle prizes welcome. We've been asked to provide a books page on this website - maybe this will get it started. Anyone interested in becoming a reviewer? Copies of 'A Short Guide to Humanism', published by the BHA, will be on sale at a discounted price of £4.

Map link: tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Jun 2007
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When funerals were all (or almost all) conducted by clergy, at least you knew what you'd be getting: a load of old cobblers about being with Jesus and anyone who'd pre-deceased the deceased; the Lord's Prayer; two or three dreary hymns; and so on. Many clergy did the same funeral for everyone. Some even forgot whose funeral they were doing and got the name wrong. It was all very predictable and irrelevant. An Anglican vicar, quoted in Dr Tony Walters' book 'Funerals and how to improve them', said, "It's striking how little you have to do for people to thank you profusely - standards are so low they expect the funeral to be done badly."

Then some of us started providing a service for atheists and agnostics who didn't want God at the funeral. There weren't many of us to begin with but the numbers have grown. However, more doesn't necessarily mean better.

There are some 'humanist' officiants (mentioning no names) who seem to have an inflated opinion of their abilities and some peculiar ideas about their role. More or less anyone can set him or herself up as an officiant or celebrant, whether he or she is 'accredited' or not. It's not surprising that the prospect of filling this very important role in other people's lives, however briefly, should attract people who quite like the idea of being very important. Such people, however well-intentioned, ought to have a Government Health Warning stamped across their foreheads. One give-away is their use of a "Sunday voice" and an accompanying "caring" expression.

The client, who may never have had to arrange a funeral before, assumes that the officiant knows what he or she is doing. Some do, some don't, and some have a very clear idea of what he or she wants to do, which may not be what he or she ought to do. Dig a little deeper, and you'll probably find that he or she gets a perverse pleasure out of being with bereaved people. They enjoy being close to "real" emotions. Consequently, when the clients stubbornly refuse to share such emotions, they're rather disappointed. They're grief junkies. I knew someone who took this to such extremes that she only did a funeral every few weeks because it took her that long to

"recover" from the last one. What's even more ridiculous is that she was appointed to train other officiants!

What an officiant ought not to do is to try and "help people to grieve". I've heard more than one officiant say that this is what they're aiming for, and groaned inwardly. Think about it; a crematorium funeral lasts about 20 to 25 minutes. Are you seriously expected to believe that the officiant should or could fulfil some wonderfully therapeutic healing role, so that everyone goes home having passed a significant stage in "the grieving process"? Give me strength! My advice to would-be officiants? Don't even try.

Walters quotes Roger Grainger, "The main purpose of a funeral is to signify the event of a death," and goes on to write, "It marks that something valuable, a human life, has passed. Whatever else a funeral does or does not so, it must do this."

To mark the end of someone's life, anyone's life, the occasion should be relevant and dignified. To have integrity, it should reflect the life and personality of the deceased, though there's no need to go into details about his or her less attractive qualities. It's important to get things right because there won't be another opportunity. This is why I always offer to check the details with the next of kin or someone he or she has delegated to check them with me. I've heard officiants say they never offer to do this. This is a form of arrogance. It's not their funeral; it's the family's funeral.

So what's the officiant's role? It's not "to help the grieving process". It's to get things right. The grieving will take care of itself.

The above is from my death blog – [Dead Interesting](#). If anyone has any horror stories about funerals, I'd be very pleased to hear them - though very sorry you had to experience them. I'd also like to hear stories about really good funerals, and really interesting ones. I'm writing a book. I won't use real names and may alter stories so those involved can't be identified. Please [email me](#).

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Jun 2007
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RE teachers must provide children with a more sophisticated understanding of the subject in a post-11 September world, Ofsted says.

After a five-year inspection of RE classes which began in the year of the attacks on the US, Ofsted says rote learning of RE is no longer adequate.

It says teachers should include ways in which religion is not always a force for good.

[BBC NEWS | Education | Call for 'post-9/11' RE teaching.](#)

The guest speaker at our meeting in Ipswich on 13 June, the [BHA](#)'s Education & Public Affairs Officer Andrew Copson, was interviewed on BBC News 24 today, 17 June, about this Ofsted report, together with Kate Ivens from the Campaign for Real Education (I think we might differ about what "real education" means). She claimed that young children were "confused" by learning about a variety of faiths and secular world views.



Ofsted has also suggested it's time to consider a new national RE curriculum:

It says that lessons often fail to build on prior learning. There is no national curriculum in RE.

Instead, all 151 local authorities are responsible for developing their own locally agreed syllabus. Ofsted says that hinders attempts to raise standards in RE, and consistency, across the country.

Suffolk county council's new RE syllabus will be taught from September this year.

Tags: [RE](#), [Education](#), [Religion](#), [Ofsted](#)

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Jun 2007
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Joshua Project Our Purpose ... to spread a passion for the supremacy of GOD in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. 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.

[Joshua Project - Unreached Peoples of the World.](#)

This is truly scary. These people want to convert everyone to Christianity, and we mean EVERYONE, but especially those who live in far flung places, minding their own business, without the same old gender bias as most of the 'Christian' world – that is, religious patriarchy. They might have a little competition, as there are equally determined Muslims who want everyone to see things their way, but they're busy elsewhere so their paths don't appear to have crossed – yet.

The Joshua Project's targeting (amongst others) [the Chiang people of Sichuan](#), China. The missionaries say that "Ties between Chiang men and women are weak. Romantic love is considered important, and sexual freedom is prevalent. The Chiang men need to move into

their God-ordained roles as heads of the families.” American missionaries aren't just trying to convert people to Christianity, they're trying to change their whole way of life.

Tags: [Joshua+Project](#), [Christians](#), [Missionaries](#)

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Jun 2007
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Policies that treat faith-based organisations as separate may be divisive according to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), the main umbrella body for charities in England.

The claim comes as NCVO publishes a new report, 'Faith and Voluntary Action'. NCVO states that whilst faith-based organisations (such as religious congregations, local community groups and charities) are distinctive, by treating them as separate from secular charities or community groups, there is a danger that policy makers will alienate civil society. In particular, NCVO is concerned that both secular and faith-based organisations feel, at times, discriminated against when applying for Government funding and excluded from policy discussions.

With ongoing tensions regarding the role of faith-based organisations in delivering public services, such as the high profile debate over adoption services, NCVO is worried that the current approach has affected the potential for collaboration between faith and secular organisations.

Instead, NCVO is arguing that the relationship between government and faith-based organisations should be based on the same principles as the relationship between government and other civil society organisations, including respect for independence.

Karl Wilding, Head of Research at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO), said:

The similarities between faith-based and secular organisations are striking. All are distinctive to some extent. However, both traditions and those working with them appear to be stressing separate approaches. At a time when civil society organisations are facing pressures in terms of identity and role, greater levels of collaboration should be a source of strength. Faith-based and secular organisations should build on their shared distinctiveness and should not lapse into practices and identities of separateness and, ultimately, isolation.

The report makes a series of other recommendations for policy makers, faith-based organisations and the voluntary and community sector:

- Both faith-based and secular organisations remain well placed to deliver public services. However, their work with clearly defined communities may not always be in the interests of the broader community. **If faith-based organisations are to play a greater role in public service delivery then a statutory framework that emphasises the universality of service delivery needs to be upheld.**
- There are numerous examples of collaboration between faith-based and secular organisations, however this collaboration needs further impetus.
- Many faith-based and secular organisations provide community buildings and spaces. A more joined-up approach to multi-purpose buildings that is adequately supported is required.
- Policy makers need to be more consistent when referring to faith communities. It is unhelpful at best, and damaging at worst, to use faith communities as a synonym for 'Muslim' or 'BME' communities.
- Policy makers should recognise that the use of the term "faith-based organisations" disguises significant variation in resources, roles, attitudes and practices both within and between faith communities.
- A clear case, based on evidence, should be developed regarding the nature of distinctiveness.

The report aims to address some of the questions and misunderstandings surrounding faith-based organisations, addresses some of the more commonly used concepts associated with their work and reviews current evidence regarding their scope, coverage and activities. It aims to enable wider civil society to more effectively engage with faith communities.

It also includes an overview of the Labour Government's policies and initiatives concerning faith-based organisations as well as highlighting the diversity of views regarding the involvement of faith-based organisations across the public realm. It includes five essays from external contributors on "Faith-based organisations within civil society", "Faith as a motivation for voluntary action", "Faith, social capital and social cohesion", "Local governance, representation and faith-based organisations" and "Faith-based organisations as service providers".

The report is being published in parallel with "Faith in the community: the contribution of faith-based organisations to rural voluntary action" which looks at the challenges and opportunities for faith-based and secular organisations in rural areas.

The report is being launched on Wednesday 13 June at 9am for 9.30am at One Birdcage Walk, Westminster, SW1H 9JJ. Speakers include John Battle MP, the Prime Minister's envoy on inter-faith matters.

[The National Council for Voluntary Organisations](#) (NCVO) is the umbrella body for the voluntary sector in England, with sister councils in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. NCVO has a growing membership of over 5,000 voluntary organisations, ranging from large national bodies to community groups, volunteer bureaux, and development agencies working at a local level.

Tags: [Faith](#), [Faith-based+organisations](#), [Government+policies](#), [Politics](#), [Voluntary+sector](#), [NCVO](#)

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Jun 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

[Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#) has been asked by Suffolk County Council to organise a Forum of Faiths Meeting on 'Shaping the Future of Suffolk', a Community Strategy Consultation Document 2008-2028. The Forum will take place on Thursday 5th July at 7:30pm in Lecture Theatre 4 of Suffolk College. (Lecture Theatre 4 is a temporary building located behind the new SIFRE premises next to the Nursery). Members of the 'Creating a Cohesive County' working party will be present to hear your views.

This is about 'Community Cohesion', the new buzz words.

As these sort of consultations tend to be dominated by religious organisations, it would be good if a few Suffolk Humanists were to turn up and redress the balance. [Get in touch](#) for more info.

Further info: www.onesuffolk.co.uk/spp/CommunityStrategy/

Map link: tinyurl.com/ysy4sc

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Jul 2007
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It is widely believed that Muslim 'martyrs' enjoy rich sensual rewards on reaching paradise. A new study suggests they may be disappointed.

[Virgins? What virgins? | The Guardian | Guardian Unlimited.](#)

Actually, it's not a new study – the report is from 2002 – but maybe the Islamist terrorists who are currently active haven't heard of it, or don't understand German. According to a scholar called Christoph Luxenberg, whose book 'Die Syro-Aramaische Lesart des Koran' was published in German in 2001, there are no virgins waiting to reward Muslim martyrs in Paradise. The confusion is due to an error in translation, he says. The word is 'raisins'. So all they can expect is some dried fruit.

Tags: [Muslim+martyrs](#), [Islam](#), [Virgins](#)

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Jul 2007
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Up to 40,000 Sherpas who live at the base of the Himalayas face devastation if vast new lakes formed by the melted ice burst and send a torrent of millions of tons of water down the slopes.

Mr Hillary, who has himself twice reached Everest's summit, said: "Climate change is happening. This is a fact. Base camp used to sit at 5,320 metres. This year it was at 5,280 metres because the ice is melting from the top and side. Base camp is sinking each year. For Sherpas living on Mount Everest this is something they can see every day but they can't do anything about it on their own."

The warning came as a survey revealed that most Britons remain unconvinced about the extent of climate change and that terrorism, crime, graffiti and even dog mess are more pressing issues for the UK. The Ipsos-Mori poll found that 56 per cent of people believe scientists are still debating whether human activity is contributing to climate change. In reality, there is virtual consensus that it is.

[A message from the melting slopes of Everest - Independent Online Edition > Climate Change.](#)

With 'Saving Planet Earth' on BBC TV tonight (6 July 2007) and the 'Live Earth' concert tomorrow, maybe a few more people might ratchet climate change up their list of concerns, above dog mess and graffiti?

[What are you doing to save our planet?](#)

Tags: [Climate+change](#), [Everest](#), [Global+warming](#)

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Jul 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

The mill is open to visitors today but we're not going. We may go in September instead.

Further info: <http://www.windmillworld.com/millid/2383.htm>

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Jul 2007
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I attended the [Forum of Faiths meeting on 5 July](#) at Suffolk College. The purpose of the meeting was to offer local faith groups an opportunity to feed into the "creating a cohesive county" element of [Suffolk Strategic Partnership's "Shaping the Future of Suffolk" community strategy](#). Our aim was to ensure the humanist perspective was reflected in the dialogue. The discussion centred on Suffolk in 20 years time. What are the issues that will face the county? What evidence is there that these issues (will) exist? What can we do to solve them?

The most striking element of the session was how irrelevant religion was to the whole discussion. This meant that a general consensus was reached on a variety of non-religious issues, particularly Suffolk's ageing population, housing and the built environment, and the role technology will play in changing how society organises and communicates. Religion was barely mentioned.

While it is noteworthy that religion should be playing such a small part in these discussions, the failure to look at the impact of religion on community cohesion was concerning. My suggestion that problems associated with religious division or segregation would become more serious with the growth of religious extremism was ignored. Although there was general agreement that promoting inter-faith understanding was a good thing, nobody seemed willing to discuss the possibility that the fruits of the current severe and very frightening divisions between religious groups across the world will impact on all parts of our society, regardless of faith or lack of it. The world grows ever smaller and Britain's involvement in political and military ventures overseas is already affecting us as creeping surveillance of the individual to monitor growing terrorist activity and the ever present security threat demonstrate. Suffolk will not be immune to what I fear is currently perceived as an "international" problem.

Humanists can play an important role in promoting cohesion within our county. We must celebrate Britain's secular outlook and ensure that our message goes out to the local community that secularism benefits everyone because it does not allow one belief system to dominate another. This message must be a guiding principle in the development of a cohesive county over the coming decades.

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Jul 2007
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Marcus Brigstocke has a go at not one, not two, but all three Abrahamic religions in the latest edition of [BBC Radio 4's The Now Show](#). Highly amusing, and really quite reasonably put.

Reposted from [RichardDawkins.net](#). [Download the MP3 here](#).

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Jul 2007
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In just over a week I'm flying out to Cambodia, the land of the ancient Khmer empire, scrawny cows, and orange-robed monks on the back of motorbikes.

Cambodia has one of the poorest health positions in the world, with HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis amongst other diseases. The education and health systems are in poor shape. There are serious problems with drug addiction, children living and begging on the streets, domestic violence and child sex abuse. The infrastructure of the country, including family structures, was shattered by the Khmer Rouge regime, and even now, Cambodia is struggling to recover and catch up with its wealthier neighbours, Thailand and Vietnam.



I'll be working initially for six months on a voluntary basis with [Earthwalkers Fund](#), on a variety of projects including sustainable rural development, education, and training and development of young people. There's a lot to do. I'm taking a vet with me, who'll be working on cattle health amongst other things.

I'll update the SH site with my progress once in a while, but see my [personal blog](#) for regular updates, photos and videos.

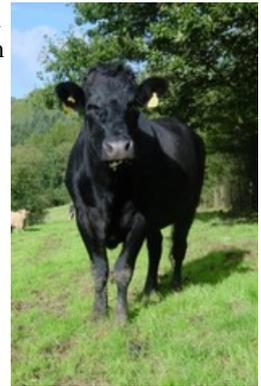
Finally, I must apologise sincerely for the problems that we have had with the [Suffolk Humanists website](#) for a while now, and which are now fixed. The site was not compatible with Microsoft's updated Internet Explorer browser, meaning that it appeared rather strange and higgledy-piggledy. This is sadly down to the fact that Microsoft are incapable of making a standards-compliant web browser, i.e one that respects the same rules others do. We're back to business now with an updated site that uses a simpler, brighter design - I hope you like it.

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Jul 2007
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Sacred cows? Bring them on. Demolishing ridiculous ideas is a columnist's job, even if the beasts in question are usually metaphorical. As a rule, the only culling I advocate is of sloppy thinking, which is why I'm taking this opportunity to warn readers of a nervous disposition about my views on Shambo, the black Friesian bull that has become the subject of a ferocious row between the Welsh Assembly and a Hindu temple.

[*Joan Smith: I'm sorry, but Shambo gets my bullet - Independent Online Edition > Joan Smith.*](#)

[The latest news is that Shambo's been removed from his pen at the Hindu temple in Wales and will be, or has been, slaughtered.](#)



This seems to have been an example of hysterical Hinduism. Judging from the TV pictures, most of the 'monks' at the Welsh temple are white British people – converts. They seem like so many others I've come across, who adopt Eastern religions for a variety of reasons, often trying several in search of an elusive 'something' they can't quite explain. [A Mr Jay Lakhani, who writes books about Hinduism for schools, says they're wrong](#) to defend Shambo from the officials of the Welsh Assembly. He said,

If the life of one animal may endanger other lives or human lives as well, then we must take into account the greater good and sacrifice the individual good.

Religious people who adopt this 'harm nothing' stance tend to tie themselves in knots trying to justify it. I heard an Englishman who converted to [Jainism](#) explaining that they avoid killing any living creature. So, I asked, if your cat had fleas, does that mean you wouldn't do anything to treat it? Yes, he said, if I had a cat, which I don't. But, I said, what about the cat? It would suffer from flea bites that can cause infection and even death. Someone changed the subject before he had a chance to answer, if he had an answer. Maybe not having a cat excused him from having to find one.

Anyhow, quite apart from all these inconsistencies in Hindu (and Jain) teaching, I agree with Joan Smith. The Welsh Hindus should not have expected special dispensation to keep Shambo – one rule for them, another for everyone else – especially as the poor creature was being cruelly confined in a small space, unable to live a natural life, and condemned to suffer from the progressive symptoms of TB – not to mention all that chanting.

Tags: [religion](#), [Shambo](#), [Hinduism](#), [TB](#)

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Jul 2007
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Six out of ten senior Church of England bishops could boycott next year's Lambeth Conference of more than 800 Anglican bishops and archbishops from around the world because of the row over gays.

Such a boycott would be unprecedented in the history of the Anglican Church and would be an indication of how deep the divisions go, in England as well as in the rest of the communion.

The fifth most senior bishop in the mother church of the Anglican Communion warns today that a majority of English diocesan bishops could consider a boycott if the US does not row back on its pro-gay agenda.

[Bishops threaten to boycott Lambeth Conference -Times Online.](#)

It seems the C of E is unraveling.

Tags: [C+of+E](#), [Lambeth+conference](#), [Homophobia](#), [Gay+bishops](#)

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Jul 2007
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From the [National Secular Society](#) – the nominations for the Secularist of the Year are in and the preliminary round of discussion has whittled down the shortlist to nine possibles. The final decision on who is the winner of this year's Irwin Prize will be taken by the end of this month.

[Johann Hari](#)

Columnist on the Independent for his consistent and vigorous approach to secular issues.

[Oliver Kamm](#)

Journalist and commentator. He is an example of the new alignment of the old "left-right" categories in politics, and an ardent secularist.

[Mina Ahadi](#)

Founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Germany, which prompted the formation of similar groups around Europe, including [one in the UK](#).

[Sam Harris](#)

For Letter to a Christian Nation – Sam Harris is regarded as one of the leaders of the New Atheist movement and his thinking has profoundly influenced the debate on the place of religion in America.

[Michel Onfray](#)

French philosopher who has had as much success in Europe with his book, In Defence of Atheism, as Richard Dawkins had with his book in the UK and USA. (To translate his website go to [Babel Fish translation](#)).

[Matthew Parris](#)

Times columnist and commentator. For consistent secularist journalism.

[Peter Tatchell](#)

For work on human rights from a secularist perspective.

[Kenan Malik](#)

For consistent defence of free speech.

[The National Secular Society](#)

Tags: [NSS](#), [National+Secular+Society](#), [Irwin+Prize](#), [Secularist+of+the+Year](#)

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Jul 2007
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An email received 21/7/07 from:

London School of Islamics

An Educational Trust

63 Margery Park Road London E7 9LD

Email: info@londonschoolofislamics.org.uk

www.londonschoolofislamics.org.uk

Tel/Fax: 0208 555 2733 / 07817 112 667

Building Bridges

The unrest among British Muslims both young and old is not only due the British policies abroad but also due the policies at home for the last fifty years. Anti-immigration was the norm during 60s & 70s and the British society and the Establishment just closed its eyes and even state schools tried to hide all physical and verbal abuse of Muslim children and teachers under the carpet. Muslims do not feel equal; that leads to a victim identity and extremism can take place. On top of that the young generation was deprived of their cultures and languages making them cut off from their cultural and linguistic roots. The second and the third generation were educated in State schools and they all speak English in local accents but not well versed in Standard English. Schools do not encourage and teach Arabic, Urdu and other community languages. They are even discouraged to speak their own languages at home.

Now young generation of English speaking Muslims have an opportunity to build many more bridges between the British society and the Muslim community. Instead of building bridges both the societies are splitting apart at a point of no return. The words ISLAM & MUSLIMS have become the pre-occupation, biggest headache of and anathema to western politicians, media and public. These two words irritate them beyond imagination. Majority of Muslim pupils leave schools with low grades and now the few British Muslims who are in the institutions of higher education are under suspicion and the universities authorities have been urged to keep an eye on Muslims so that they do not involve in any subversive activities. This means a Muslim in an institution is not going to concentrate on his/her education and I am afraid to say that now majority of Muslim students are not going to complete their studies or research. The proposal is an act of racism. In my opinion, 7/7 bombers were the product of the British education system. They were mis-educated and de-educated by the native teachers who are not interested to understand their needs and demands. British society is reluctant to open up its sense of citizenship to all those that have come to live here. It has failed to help Muslims feel part of society. Institutional racism, drugs, crime incivility, binge drinking, anti-social behaviour, rise in the rate of abortion and teen age pregnancies are common part of life in modern Britain. Muslim parent do not want their children to become integrated into such barbarity.

The DFES document clearly states that children should be encouraged to maintain and develop their home languages. The research of Jim Cummins (2000) high lights, how bilingualism is a positive benefit to cognitive development and bilingual teacher is a must. A Muslim is a citizen of this tiny village. He/She does not want to become notoriously monolingual Brits. Muslim children need state funded Muslim schools to be well versed in English, Arabic, Urdu and other community languages. They need Standard English to follow the National Curriculum and go for higher studies and research to serve humanity. They need to be proud of their cultural heritage.

[The editor of the Freethinker, Barry Duke, sees it differently.](#) Maybe, he posits, Muslim youth are angry for other reasons?

Could it be that they are lumbered with a no-brainer religion that denies them (to name but a few, and in no particular order):

- Bacon butties
- Premarital sex
- Mobile phones with musical ring-tones
- Masturbation
- Piercings and tattoos
- Nightclubs
- Alcohol
- Gay relationships
- Jobs where alcohol and bacon butties are served to (and by) inked and perforated people who have premarital sex and gay relationships – ie jobs within all of our service and entertainment industries?

So, do you agree with Iftikhar or Barry?

My response to Iftikhar:

Dear Iftikhar,

Thank you for your email of 21 July.

You wrote, "The unrest among British Muslims both young and old is not only due the British policies abroad but also due the policies at home for the last fifty years," and, "7/7 bombers were the product of the British education system". This is nonsense.

You wrote about racists attitudes during the '60s and '70s. Racism was common during this time (it still is, but the situation's improving, particularly among young people), but was directed towards all obviously non-white immigrants, mainly black immigrants. The prejudice was mainly about ethnicity, not religion. I don't believe that Muslims were singled out for special treatment by the ignoramuses. The recent TV series 'Life on Mars' showed the prevalence of prejudice – mainly sexism and racism – in the early '70s. I experienced sexism, as did many independently-minded women, and campaigned for anti-discrimination legislation. As has been said by the former President of the British Humanist Association, Claire Rayner, it is impossible to be a sexist, racist, ageist, or any of the other negative 'ists' if you're a Humanist. However, we do not accept that anyone living in our secular society should expect special treatment for religious reasons, including Christians.

You wrote, "Muslims do not feel equal; that leads to a victim identity and extremism can take place." This is a sweeping generalisation. Where's your evidence? You also wrote, "On top of that, the young generation was deprived of their cultures and languages making them cut off from their cultural and linguistic roots. The second and the third generation were educated in State schools and they all speak English in local accents but not well versed in Standard English. Schools do not encourage and teach Arabic, Urdu and other community languages. They are even discouraged to speak their own languages at home." I think that if you're an immigrant to the UK, a secular society, you must accept that your young people should become integrated faster than their elders, as they will grow up knowing British society, British education, and British culture. The efforts of older Muslims, especially the high proportion of immigrant imams who don't preach in English and hardly speak it, to prevent integration by teaching 'traditional' values, simply creates confusion and division. The cultural and linguistic roots you refer to seem like an excuse for resisting integration and withdrawing behind a barrier called 'community'. The United States of America, like the UK, is a mongrel nation. There are Italian-Americans, Latino-Americans, Chinese-Americans, Jewish-Americans, and so on, who all have their own community interests and activities, but the differences are mainly about ethnicity, not religion, and they regard themselves as Americans. I'm not saying there is no prejudice, only that the reasons aren't as you describe them.

There are plans to introduce a wider range of languages in British schools, other than the traditional French and German. However, English is still understood internationally and fluency is essential. [Interestingly, research has shown that "bilingual children are often culturally and linguistically influenced by English, regardless of fluency in their mother tongue" \(University of East London\).](#) There's a worrying tendency for immigrant women – mothers to the youth you write about – to lack fluency in English, which puts them at a huge disadvantage. Personally, as someone who experienced poor language teaching at school in the '50s, it's been my experience, and the experience of some friends and relatives, that you learn another language best while living and working in another country. I learned Dutch while working in the Netherlands, a niece is fluent in Spanish because she lives in Spain, a friend has lived in China for several years and is fluent in Mandarin, while my son has travelled widely and picked up a variety of languages. The important thing is being able to communicate, wherever you are.

Perhaps the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim' wouldn't attract so much negative attention if they weren't used to define people who come from countries like Pakistan, Iran and so on. There are atheist Arabs, for example, but it's generally assumed that all Arabs are Muslim. It comes down to this question of ethnicity versus religion, and how you prefer to be identified. As a secularist Humanist, I'd like religion to be a private matter. I don't care what people believe. I do care how they behave.

There are several reasons why Muslim students have attracted scrutiny, at school and in higher education. One is the worrying number who've been radicalised by fundamentalist imams, who preach anti-British, anti-everything propaganda. Another is the high proportion of Muslim university students, including science students, who reject the scientific evidence for evolution and regard it as a badge of honour to assert their ignorance. Another is the failure of schools with a high proportion of children from Muslim families to

do well in Ofsted reports. Muslim schools, overall, haven't served their pupils well.

As a member of a Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, I'm concerned about the attitude of some religious organisations that advise parents to withdraw their children from RE lessons, for fear of learning about beliefs that differ from their own. We can only achieve a cohesive, secular society when children learn about all the religions that are practised in this country, though I'd prefer that to be through the wider curriculum than through one locally-determined syllabus.

Your assertion that the 7/7 bombers were the product of our education system is absurd and deeply offensive. What about the attraction of Pakistani madrassas where radicalism is encouraged? What about the influence of fundamentalist imams? In my opinion, they were deeply unhappy and confused young men who were exploited by those whose main purpose is to make mischief, and who encouraged their martyrdom with a promise of rewards in Paradise, which I regard as a cruel con trick.

What needs and demands are you referring to? And who's encouraging these disaffected young men to make unreasonable demands?

It's only within the last decade or so that these issues have been generally identified as 'Muslim'. As the latest census and other research have shown, British people tend to be confused about religion. Some identify themselves as Christian but are only nominally so. There are minorities who practice a variety of other beliefs. A significant proportion, like me, doesn't have any religious faith. It's unhelpful and divisive to pay undue attention to the demands of any faith group for special treatment, as such demands generate conflict and confusion. I don't regard the demands of faith organisations as carrying any more weight than those of any other special interest group, such as the Freemasons or the Women's Institute, especially when their leaders are unelected and unrepresentative.

As for the social problems you refer to, it's deeply insulting to the majority of decent British parents to suggest that they condone such behaviour. However, I can think of many examples of unacceptable behaviour in predominately Muslim countries that I'd regard as barbarous, including their treatment of women and homosexuals. I don't think you're in a position to criticise us.

[Like most Humanists and majority of the British electorate, I'm opposed to segregated faith schools, Muslim or otherwise](#) . The record of segregated education in countries like Northern Ireland has been dismally destructive. We will never achieve a cohesive, harmonious society while children are taught apart from their peers. There is no reason why the languages you refer to shouldn't be taught in schools, but not just to Muslim students – to all of them.

Efforts to encourage integration through housing policies in the North of England have proved futile, as [a recent BBC Panorama programme](#) showed. What was evident was that the blame could not be attributed to either the so-called 'Muslim' community or the white British community – both had their own sets of prejudices and created their own barriers. Things are not as simple as you suggest.

If people like yourself, who claim to speak on behalf of those who identify themselves as Muslim, adopt a more positive approach to the problems you refer to, accept some of the responsibility for them and cease blaming everyone else for them, it would be helpful. The effect of a chorus of indignation from Muslim and Christian agitators alike has been a general weariness with their unreasonable whingeing. Fewer demands, and more willingness to adopt a secular, British identity, would be appreciated. Britain isn't perfect, but living here allows everyone the freedom to practice his or her own religion, or not to have a religion at all, without fear of persecution or death, as happens in many other parts of the world. Make the most of it, but please don't exploit it.

I don't expect you to agree with me, but hope you might accept my point of view in the spirit in which it was intended.

Margaret Nelson

Iftikhar's reply:

Salaam

Thanks for your thought provoking response.

The demand for Muslim schools is in accordance with the law of the land. We are not asking for any favour. I have been campaigning for state funded Muslim schools with bilingual Muslim teachers as role models for the last 35 years.

Muslim community is well integrated, working for the prosperity of the British society, paying all sorts of taxes, less burden on the social services by not indulging in binge drinking, drugs, incivility, teenage pregnancies and abortions.

Kind regards.

Iftikhar

Further reading: [On Faith Schools – a talk given to Suffolk Fabians](#)

An email about Iftikhar's assertions from Manwar of [JIMAS](#), a Muslim organisation in Suffolk, and a fellow [SIFRE](#) tutor:

Dear Margaret Nelson,

I have been dealing with Muslims for a long while, teaching, talking, discussing and differing with them across the country. No doubt I have mistakes and regrets to my account, but as a Muslim I say thank God I have learnt some lessons and still do so.

Even before reading through your email, which I must say I found very fair, I found the first quote from Iftikhar remarkably shallow and intellectually impoverished. The second quote is indeed unjust and hurt my feelings as a British Muslim. It is a wrong conclusion made out of gross ignorance and yet again seeks to mask the reality by drawing the readers' attention away with untenable assertions.

Some Muslims do not feel equal because they do not want to change to their new circumstances. This is a sensitive subject and can produce some exciting discussion. Why don't they want to change? I am sure, both you and Iftikhar can come up with some common sense answers that are simply known from experience, before anyone has to delve into research and social analysis. Some of the common-sense answers are awkward to spell out and sometimes we struggle to be decent in the way to word them. I understand this has a great deal to do with the pressure of political correctness than our civil duty to be polite and considerate. The difference is, someone like yourself can mention some of these answers directly while someone like Iftikhar perhaps cannot, due to his relationships with other Muslims in the UK, or he wants to position himself among them. If this is not the case then it will be distressing to assume that any set-up to promote bridge building will have people lacking adequate understanding of both Islam and the affairs relating to it in our country.

My heart resonated with what you wrote because you represented me better, because what you wrote is fair and true, does better justice to the way of our beloved prophet Muhammad, and addressed the disappointment and maybe anger I felt. What you wrote is Islamically better and closer to our values. Not that religion matters to you in such a personal manner, but it does to me because I am a Muslim and I know I can back you up with Islamic religious texts and their explanations. Islamic teachings of justice, truth, gratitude and fair play does not and should not make a Muslim blind to these things when found elsewhere, whether they come from secular sources or from other faith traditions.

I am offended by Iftikhar's write-up and I thank you for your balanced reply to him. I hope he will consider your words carefully and sincerely, and that of someone called David whose reply is on the London School of Islamics' web site, in light of what we accept as God's final revelation, and think very hard about the opinions he has expressed.

Warm regards, Manwar
Chief Executive of JIMAS

Tags: [Email](#), [Muslims](#), [Islam](#), [British+education+system](#), [7/7+bombers](#), [Education](#), [Faith+schools](#)

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Jul 2007
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France has proposed practical measures to ensure the country's Muslim prayer leaders speak French and understand France's way of life.

In a newspaper interview, Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin said that from September, future imams must study law, civics and history.

[BBC NEWS | World | Europe | Study planned for France's imams.](#)

Since [there are similar concerns about the language skills and competence of British imams](#), of whom 9 out of 10 are from overseas, with poor English, is there a case for following France's example?

Tags: [Imams](#), [Islam](#), [Education](#), [Language](#), [France](#)

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Jul 2007
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The Conservative party has commissioned a report about national security. One of the findings is that the Government is wrong to communicate with people from ethnic minorities as though they were members of groups rather than individual citizens.

[\(Read related BBC Story here\)](#)

The NSS has been saying this for years. The Blair Government created these group categories – mostly based on religion – to define whole swathes of the population. But the huge numbers who didn't want to define themselves in this way were left without a voice.

[Editorial by Terry Sanderson, National Secular Society](#)

Imagine if the Government only communicated with you via your local vicar? Or accepted what he or she told them about your opinions? It might seem ridiculous, but this is what's been happening with people from ethnic minorities, especially Muslims. It's about time that the Government realised that this is denying British citizens their democratic rights.

Read more:

[The Muslim Council, The Government and Taxpayers' Money](#)

[The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain](#)

Tags: [Communities](#), [Government](#), [Muslim+Council+of+Britain](#), [Ex-Muslims](#), [Democracy](#)

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Jul 2007
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In its submission on Combating Defamation of Religions to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva IHEU has damned the current process at the UN as "unnecessary, flawed and morally wrong". In the submission, IHEU affirms that each individual should be absolutely free to form, hold or change his or her beliefs and condemns any attempts at stereotyping of religions, racial profiling of individuals, and any and all calls for violence in the name of religion or God. IHEU also expresses deep concern that the exercise to combat 'defamation of religions' could compromise established freedoms including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

[International Humanist and Ethical Union | The world union of Humanist organisations](#)

The IHEU says,

Within the context of human rights, the very concept of 'defamation of religion' is flawed, since it is individuals, both believers and non-believers alike, who have rights, not religions. Furthermore the lack of a definition of the term "defamation" leaves these resolutions open to abuse.

Further reading:

[How the Islamic States dominate the UN Human Rights Council](#)

[How the left can criticise human rights hypocrisy – Ali Eteraz, The Huffington Post](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [UN](#), [Islamic+states](#), [Defamation](#)

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Jul 2007
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A friend recently asked,

If you absolutely believe that there is no god, does that make you a fundamentalist? I would say that some non-believers are more fundamentalist in their views than many so-called believers. Similarly, perhaps people like Dawkins could be considered to be 'non-religious extremists'. Is there a term for a fervent non-believer? (fundamentalist atheist?)

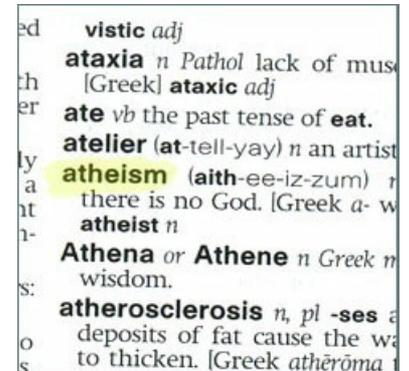
It's true that some [agnostic](#) Humanists (including the late Sir Hermann Bondi, past president of the BHA) assert that it's arrogant to say there is no god. Bondi called it 'the arrogance of certainty'. However, I'm with the late [Douglas Adams](#) (author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*), who was asked about his atheism and answered,

I really do not believe that there is a god - in fact I am convinced that there is not a god (a subtle difference) ... In England we seem to have drifted from vague, wishy-washy Anglicanism to vague, wishy-washy Agnosticism - both of which I think betoken a desire not to have to think about things too much.' He also said, 'God used to be the best explanation we've got, and now we've got vastly better ones. God is no longer an explanation of anything, but has instead become something that would itself need an insurmountable amount of explaining. So I don't think that being convinced that there is no god is as irrational or arrogant a point of view as belief that there is. I don't think the matter calls for even-handedness at all.

Religion is a belief in and worship of a supernatural power, or a system of faith or worship. Faith means believing something you can't prove. However, because there are so many religions and so many forms of religious belief, there are multiple fundamentals too. Atheism means without god, or the belief that god doesn't exist. That's all. It's not necessary to qualify it. There's no such thing as being a little bit atheist, or vaguely atheist.

[Professor Richard Dawkins](#) has been called a 'fundamentalist atheist' and an 'extremist'. He is one of the best at articulating the arguments against religion. Others are [Sir Jonathan Miller](#), [Sam Harris](#), and [Professor A C Grayling](#). They upset people who've been used to religion being off-limits for critics. When sceptics like us expose the inconsistencies and nastiness in the texts of major religions, and criticise the behaviour of their followers, we're subjects to cries of 'extremism' and told that we've caused offence. I say, either you believe or you don't. I don't, and I don't think we should be prevented from saying why not. It's almost impossible to avoid offending someone when talking about religion. The onus is on the religionists to come up with the evidence to support their claims. I recommend [a little book by Prof. Grayling called 'Against All Gods'](#), to save myself the bother of repeating what he's already explained.

It is also time to put to rest the mistakes and assumptions that lie behind a phrase used by some religious people when talking of those who are plain-spoken about their disbelief in any religious claims: the phrase 'fundamentalist atheist'. What



would a non-fundamentalist atheist be? Would he be someone who believed only somewhat that there are no supernatural deities in the universe - perhaps that there is only part of a god (a divine foot, say, or buttock?) Or that gods only exist some of the time - say, Wednesdays and Saturdays? (That would not be so strange: for many unthinking quasi-theists, a god exists only on Sundays.) Or might it be that a non-fundamentalist atheist is one who does not mind that other people hold profoundly false and primitive beliefs about the universe, on the basis of which they have spent centuries mass-murdering other people who do not hold exactly the same false and primitive beliefs as themselves - and still do?

However, I've stopped describing myself as an 'atheist' because the definition is a negative, and how can you say you're 'without' something that doesn't exist? As Jonathan Miller said in his [TV series about disbelief](#) not long ago, he gets annoyed at being expected to defend his lack of belief, or to use of the word 'atheist'. Dawkins also points out that there are many things we don't believe, such as fairies, but no one calls him or herself a-fairyist. The prefix 'a' simply means 'without', from the Greek.

Instead, we who reject all notions of supernatural powers (gods, fairies, Superman, Father Christmas, or whatever) might call ourselves '[Naturalists](#)', as opposed to 'Supernaturalists', though we might be confused with naturists (people who enjoy physical exercise in the nude) or the sort of naturalists who stalk bugs with magnifying glasses. Then there are [the Brights](#), which sounds like boasting to some detractors. Some prefer to be called Freethinkers or Rationalists. It can all get rather confusing. Maybe I'll just stick to being a Humanist.
Tags: [Humanism](#), [Atheism](#), [Fundamentalism](#), [Extremism](#), [Naturalism](#)

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Aug 2007
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Tibet's 'living Buddhas' have been told that they may not reincarnate without permission from China's atheist leadership. Whatever your belief, this goes dramatically against Article 36 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, which stipulates that 'all citizens enjoy freedom in religious belief; no State organ, social organisation or individual is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in any religion...no State organ, social organisation or individual is allowed to force any citizen to believe or not to believe in any religion; nor discriminate against any citizen with or with no religious belief; the State protects normal religious activities'

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Permission to reincarnate? From an atheist?](#)

Just supposing they could reincarnate, how would anyone stop them? It's not April 1st, is it?

Tags: [Reincarnation](#), [China](#), [Times+Online](#), [Silliness](#)

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Due to a misunderstanding, this hasn't been confirmed yet. Details to follow.

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

We don't assume that children will be Humanists like us, but how do we raise them the Humanist way? For example - what about Christmas? The midwinter solstice festival is one of the occasions when we can create lots of happy memories for children. Member Yvonne Peacock, grandmother to ten, has given things like this a lot of thought. Come and hear her talk about children and Humanism. Guests welcome. We'll be at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester.

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/2242bj>

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Member David Mitchell will talk about the longest strike in British history, when children in a Norfolk village took to the streets to protest over the dismissal of their teachers, Tom and Kitty Higdon. David plans to go to this year's Strike School rally in Burston on the first Sunday in September. Guests and raffle prizes welcome.

Further info: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A6017456>
Map link: tinyurl.com/fj2ck

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Aug 2007
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[Slaves to Superstition is on Channel 4 on Monday 13 August at 8pm. Part 2 will be on Monday 20 August at 8pm.](#)

In his last Channel 4 series, *Root of All Evil?*, the evolutionary biologist [Professor Richard Dawkins](#) explored how organised faith and primitive religious values blight our lives.

[Read more about the issues >](#)

But the fault line runs deeper even than religion. There are two ways of looking at the world – through faith and superstition or through the rigours of logic, observation and evidence – in other words, through reason. Reason and a respect for evidence are precious commodities, the source of human progress and our safeguard against fundamentalists and those who profit from obscuring the truth.

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Channel+4](#), [Superstition](#), [TV](#)

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Aug 2007
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[Dr Evan Harris](#) (MP and NSS Honorary Associate) asks a reasonable question about people who are not at all reasonable.

When is a liberal like me an extremist? When, in the words of Asghar Bukhari, chairman of the Muslim Public Affairs Committee, I defend the right of Salman Rushdie to offend the likes of Mr Bukhari - and defend the Government for knighting the novelist. At least that was what Mr Bukhari screeched at me in a televised rant recently.

True, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* was insulting and offensive to Muslims. But that is no basis to deny him an honour. In fact the reaction of Islamic extremists to his work - with al Qaeda's Ayman al-Zawahiri now threatening retaliation against Britain for the knighthood - underlines precisely why he should be honoured. To recognise our society's values and freedoms as well as the talent it contains.

And in one sense, Mr Bukhari was right about my own "extremist" views. For I will stop at nothing to protect the rights of people like him to be offensive and wrong.

[National Secular Society - National Secular Society - Is it extreme to defend free speech?](#)

Tags: [Dr+Evan+Harris](#), [Free+speech](#), [NSS](#), [Extremism](#), [Muslim+Public+Affairs+Committee](#), [Salman+Rushdie](#), [Liberal+Democrat](#)

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Aug 2007
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A few words from comedian Pat Condell ([NSS](#) member) about Muslims who are "almost permanently offended about something or other". You'll need broadband and a media player to view the video.

Tags: [video](#), [Pat+Condell](#), [Muslims](#), [Media](#)

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Aug 2007
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Struggling authors should keep the faith - literally. Sales of books that explore religion or spirituality have grown by more than 50 per cent in the past three years, according to online retailer Amazon.

The boom surpasses the rise in sales of books in categories such as history, which have grown by 38 per cent, and politics, up by 30 per cent, confirming that religion has become a pivotal topic in the early 21st century.

But the statistics may not make uplifting reading for believers. The most popular 'religious' book, says Amazon, is *The God Delusion*, an anti-faith polemic by Richard Dawkins, the academic who has been dubbed 'Darwin's rottweiler'. Second is *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, another broadside at holy citadels, by the journalist Christopher Hitchens.

[*Believe it or not: the sceptics beat God in bestseller battle | UK News | The Observer.*](#)

For more about the sort of books that have been making the best seller lists, come to [our next meeting in Ipswich on 12 September](#).

Tags: [Books](#), [Book+sales](#), [Religion](#), [The+God+Delusion](#), [God+is+not+Great](#)

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Aug 2007
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I went through the Sunday papers with Luke Deal on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) this morning. On the way home, I heard him report that a listener had phoned in to say our discussion was “the most intelligent and enjoyable bit of radio she’d heard for a while”. At least, that’s what I think she said. I was driving, not taking notes. So nice to know that someone was listening, after getting up at 5.30am. I’m not a morning person.

Tags: [BBC+Radio+Suffolk](#), [Sunday+papers](#), [Listener](#)

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Aug 2007
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The August 2007 issue of International Humanist News has been published. It includes features on Violence against Women; Creationism and Science; Humanism in Action; and The Continuing Fight for a Secular Europe. [Through the IHEU website](#), you can have:

- * the full text (available now),
- * a PDF version with pictures (available for download now) and
- * back numbers from the last 14 years

Tags: [IHEU](#), [International+Humanist+News](#)



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Aug 2007
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Amnesty International is set to defy the Vatican and risk the wrath of Catholics around the world over its decision to back abortion for rape victims.

Leaders of the international human rights group meeting in Mexico are expected to reaffirm the policy adopted by its executive board in April after two years of soul-searching within the organisation.

The decision, which will also cover women whose health is at risk from giving birth, follows the use of mass rape as a political weapon in the conflict in Darfur. But Amnesty has infuriated the Vatican by expanding its definition of human rights to include access to abortion, prompting leading Catholics to accuse the organisation of having "betrayed its mission". Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, has threatened that unless Amnesty's policy is reversed, the Vatican will call upon Catholics worldwide to boycott the organisation.

[Amnesty to defy Catholic church over rape victims' abortion rights - Independent Online Edition > Health.](#)

Tags: [Amnesty](#), [Amnesty+International](#), [Rape](#), [Catholic+Church](#), [Vatican](#)

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Aug 2007
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Journalist and political and social commentator [Polly Toynbee is the new President of the British Humanist Association](#), taking over the post from the comedian Linda Smith, who died last year.

Accepting the honour, Polly said,

I am honoured to be appointed President of the BHA at a time when not for many years has there been such a need to promote a Humanist view of the world. Religious fanaticism is the clear and present danger all round the world. We need to oppose religious zealotry by promoting the positive and liberating case for believing life on earth is precious because the here and now is all there is and our destiny is in our own hands. Mankind itself has all the innate moral strength it needs, without inventing divine reward and wrath.

Humanism is tolerant of all beliefs, so long as they oppress no-one else, including weak members of their own communities, and so long as they seek no special privileges from the state. The Humanist view of life is progressive and optimistic, in awe of human potential, living without fear of judgement and death, finding enough purpose and meaning in life, love and leaving a good legacy.

You can read more about and from [Polly on the Guardian's Comment is Free website](#)

Tags: [Polly+Toynbee](#), [Guardian](#), [BHA](#), [British+Humanist+Association](#)

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Aug 2007
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[I've been ordained](#). It's free, it's easy, it's quick. Just go to The Universal Life Church Monastery and with a few clicks of the mouse, you can be ordained too. Once ordained, there's [a range of impressive-looking products to help you perform your ministerial duties](#), including certificates from \$10.50, to a ministry-in-a-box for \$139.99. They don't seem to sell dog collars, but maybe I can just make one from some white plastic. Bless you all.

Tags: [Ordination](#), [Reverend](#), [Ministry](#), [Internet](#)

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Margaret Nelson provides a Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk for 2 minutes sometime between 7.20 and 7.30 am.

BBC Radio Suffolk's FM frequencies are 103.9 (Ipswich), 104.6 (west Suffolk), 95.5 (Lowestoft), 95.9 (Aldeburgh). It's not available on medium wave or DAB, but you can listen live online - see link below.

Further info: www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/

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Event description:

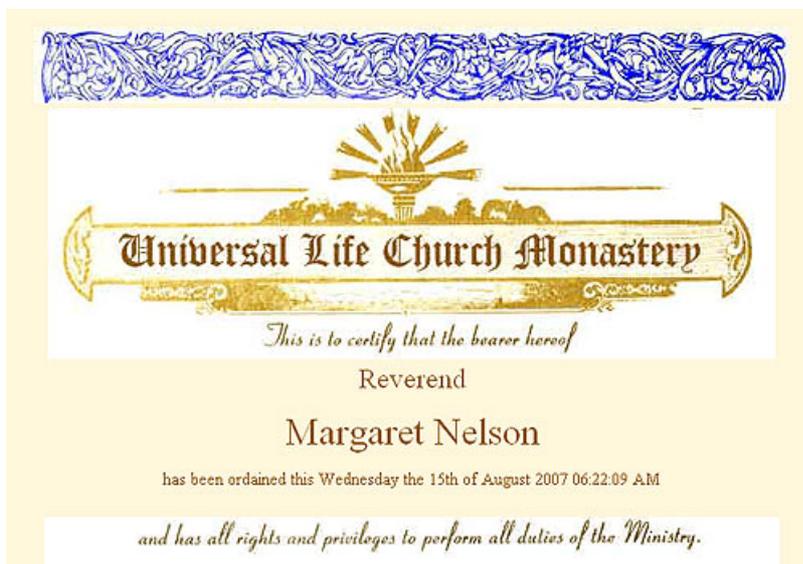
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Further info: www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/

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Aug 2007
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The Blair Government was very keen to delegate 'social and community projects' to faith groups, a policy that has created all sorts of problems. While religious organisations like to claim public funds for such projects, there's the tricky issue of discrimination, with some



seeking exemption from anti-discrimination legislation on faith grounds. The Church Urban Fund has advice for Christian organisations about this sort of thing:

The Church Urban Fund has launched a free online resource to promote excellence in employment by faith-based charities involved in social and community projects.

The guide, called Just Employment, contains advice and case studies about the specific issues faced by these groups, **such as whether discrimination laws prevent them from excluding people who are not Christian and what to do about employees whose values clash with an organisation's ethos.**

[Online help for religious charities - Communications - Third Sector.](#)

Tags: [Religious+charities](#), [Discrimination](#), [Church+Urban+Fund](#)

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

This will be in Lecture Theatre 4 at University Campus Suffolk. Email for directions.

At [a Forum of Faiths on 15 July](#), one or two contributors made comments that suggested that they didn't understand what secularism means, and how it benefits religious organisations. Margaret Nelson suggested that we might have a forum on secularism, and has been invited to lead a discussion.

The other speakers will be Manwar Ali (Muslim), Robin Herne (Pagan) and Shpetim Alimeta (thinker of Albanian origin).

[Read about our involvement with Inter-Faith work.](#)

Further info: www.sifre.org.uk

Map link: tinyurl.com/ysy4sc

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Aug 2007
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Bangladeshi writer-in-exile Taslima Nasreen was attacked at the Hyderabad Press Club today (Babu Gogineni reported, 9 August), where she was launching the Telegu translation of her book Dwikhandita. The attackers were members of the radical political group Majlis Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (MIM), led by three elected members of the Legislative Assembly. She responded, "Come what may, I will never be silenced."

Both missiles and obscene threats were launched against Taslima, but fortunately she was not injured as the attackers were unable to get very close to her. The Humanist activist Dr Innaiah was injured on the face by objects thrown by the protesters: they were throwing whatever they could lay their hands on, including flower bouquets, handbags and other items. They were even picking up chairs to threaten Taslima. Mr M Nagaeswara Rao of the Eenadu Journalism School and and Dr Innaiah were seen on television dissuading them.

[Taslima Nasreen attacked in Hyderabad, India | International Humanist and Ethical Union.](#)

[For more about Taslima Nasreen, see her website.](#)

Tags: [Taslima+Nasreen](#), [Assault](#), [Humanism](#), [Human+Rights+activist](#), [Bangladesh](#), [Hyderabad](#), [India](#)

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Aug 2007
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I do [YouGov polls](#). You get paid to answer a lot of questions. I find myself answering 'Don't know' to many of them because there isn't a 'Don't care' option. Pollsters are fond of asking how many hours a day I spend on the Internet. I generally lie about that because I know it's too many and I should be reading more books instead. These are a few of this week's distractions.

The Humanist philosopher [Julian Baggini was in the OUP blog, talking about a Very Short Introduction to Atheism](#). I think that other philosophers, including [A C Grayling](#), might differ about the introduction. The shortest introduction would be from [the OED: 'Atheism: noun the belief that god does not exist'](#). Padding that out into a rather long short introduction can mislead people. There was some discussion on the subject in [the BHA](#) forum (members only), where I wrote about atheism,

It's not a complicated definition, with multiple facets. It simply means 'without god'. Similarly, there's no such thing as a

fundamentalist atheist, as Anthony Grayling has written, because you can't be a little bit atheist. There are no degrees of atheism. I avoid calling myself an atheist. I'm a humanist.

There'll be more about definitions at [our next meeting](#).

In [the Philosophers' Magazine blog](#), Julian Baggini provides a copy of the Thought for the Day he did on BBC Bristol last week. Apparently, the train company First Great Western has a platform poet to entertain the travellers, which some may say is a waste of money. Julian said,

... is efficiency really all that matters? Imagine a country where everything works but no effort is made to make things fun, interesting or beautiful. Has such a nation ever existed? And, no, "Canada" is not a fair reply.'

Sometimes you can take fun too far:

[A couple in New Zealand is planning to call their newborn son Superman after officials rejected their original choice of 4Real](#). Pat and Sheena Wheaton have been frustrated by rules in New Zealand banning names that begin with a number.

Mum and Dad decided to call their son 4Real after seeing an ultrasound image of him. It was then they realised that their baby was "for real".

On Monday 20 August at about 11.10 am I'll be on [BBC Radio Suffolk](#) talking about [the Humanist equivalent of godparents](#). We don't seem to have a satisfactory name for them. Most call them 'supporting adults', but [Sophie](#) wrote,

My kids call Debbie their "spare mummy!" I've tended to use supporting adults in ceremonies I've performed. We refer to ours as ungod parents!

After a young woman's body was found near Manningtree Station last week, I looked at [the Bebo website set up by one of her friends](#), to find that most of those who'd written messages there seemed incapable of writing intelligible English. One message read,

.x.[R.I.P Natasha].x. didnt know her! but bless wot her famo mus b goin frew x

Another wrote,

R.I.P Tasha. I'm so sorry to hear wot has been said on the news. Your family, friends and bf are gunno miss yew so much and there love is always gonna be with u in there heart. God bless.

Someone else wrote that Natasha's family was in their 'thorts'. OK, so maybe I'm a stickler (as [Lynne Truss](#) would say), but these examples are typical.

It appears that a worrying proportion of university students can't spell either. [A tutor at Imperial College, Dr Bernard Lamb, was so shocked by his students appalling errors that he's published them](#). I mentioned this during my review of the Sunday papers on BBC Suffolk last week and said it didn't surprise me. Why? Because I'm sent contributions from friends and relations for ceremonies that include spelling and punctuation errors, even from educated, professional people. That'll make me unpopular!

[Libby Purves reports in The Times Online that there's been another religious scarf row:](#)

... a Muslim woman teacher in Germany has failed to persuade a German court that it was allowable to wear a headscarf - the hijab being banned for teachers in class in North Rhine - Westphalia - as long as she wore it in the style of Grace Kelly.

The court in Dusseldorf said Grace only wore her scarf in convertibles.

Now, I've got work to do, dishes to wash, etc. If you come across anything interesting on the web that you'd like to share, [get in touch](#), or sign up as a user and add a comment below. Have a good weekend.

Tags: [Weekend](#), [Internet](#), [Web](#)

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Aug 2007
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The Roman Catholic bishop of East Anglia (Cambridgeshire, Norfolk & Suffolk) has resigned from Amnesty International over [its decision to back abortion for rape victims](#).

A bishop who has been a member of Amnesty International for 31 years has resigned from the organisation over its changed attitude to abortion.

The organisation wants women to have access to abortion where pregnancy is a grave risk to their life or health.

As part of a campaign on women's rights the group is highlighting the issue of rape in society and war zones.

The Rt Rev Michael Evans, Bishop of East Anglia, said he could not agree to their stance and therefore resigned.

[BBC NEWS | England | Bishop resigns over Amnesty move.](#)

Tags: [Amnesty](#), [Catholic+bishop](#), [Abortion](#), [Rape](#)

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If you have Sky TV, you should be able to see a CNN 3-part TV documentary called God's Warriors starting at 8pm on Wednesday 22 August, narrated by CNN's chief international correspondent, Christiane Amanpour.

The preview by Sloan Freer in The Observer says:

'When piety meets politics it can be a volatile mix.' So says CNN's chief international correspondent Christiane Amanpour in one of the understatement of the year. Because, as she goes on to explore in this thought-provoking new documentary, the religious fervour now creeping into politics, culture and public life across the globe is fuelling a disturbing thirst for bloodshed and extremism, from assassinations to suicide martyrdom. During six hours of in-depth reporting - split over three consecutive nights - Amanpour uses interviews with the likes of former US president Jimmy Carter and Israeli president Shimon Perez to reveal how radical followers of Christianity, Islam and Judaism are prepared to go to any lengths to use religion to transform contemporary society. Beginning tonight (22 August) with *Jewish Warriors*, it's a quality piece of investigative journalism that sheds valuable light on the unsettling reality of the modern world.

If, like me, you don't have Sky, you can still see videos and reports on the [CNN website](#), but you'll need broadband and a media player.

Tags: [CNN](#), [Religion](#)

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Aug 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

An opportunity for members, associates, affiliate groups and friends of Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource to hear about its work during the previous year. Lecture Theatre 4, University Campus Suffolk.

Further info: www.sifre.org.uk

Map link: tinyurl.com/ysy4sc

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Aug 2007
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A Jehovah's Witness has escaped a jail term after admitting a series of sexual assaults on children and adults in Clevedon.

Michael Porter, of Okehampton Close, north London, admitted 24 counts of indecent assault and gross indecency on 13 victims aged 18 months and older.

Among the individuals were others involved in the faith.

Judge Tom Crowther at Bristol Crown Court sentenced Porter to three years of community rehabilitation.

The judge opted not to jail Porter after hearing he had undergone therapy and was a changed man.

[BBC NEWS | England | Bristol | Man escapes jail for sex attacks.](#)

What does 'community rehabilitation' mean? The 'treatments' for paedophilia are rarely successful, and paedophiles are notoriously manipulative and evasive. Judge Crowther needs a reality test. The Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to comment.

According to [a BBC Panorama programme](#), the Jehovah's Witnesses have a secret sex offenders register. They don't report paedophiles to the police because they're afraid the publicity will reflect badly on their organisation.

[Mr Porter's sister, Tina Hughes, has criticised the judgement](#), saying,

He (Mr Porter) blamed his childhood for the attacks, which was a lie, but the judge ate it all up. I just broke down in tears when the judge said he wasn't going to jail. The whole courtroom went quiet. No-one could believe it.

[The Jehovah's Witnesses website](#)

Tags: [Crime](#), [Sexual+assault](#)

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Aug 2007
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The government recently shifted its position on animal-human hybrid embryos: having been initially against the concept, it is now proposing to allow partial hybrids, where a complete set of human genes is inserted into an animal's egg cell, for research purposes only, through a new Human Tissue and Embryo Bill aimed at overhauling the laws surrounding fertility treatment.

The move has prompted strong protests from some religious and anti-abortion groups that oppose any such research. Anti-embryo campaigners had said earlier this year it was appalling that the government had, in their view, bowed to pressure from 'a random collection of self-interested scientists'.

The Catholic Church has made clear its opposition. Bishops told the parliamentary committee scrutinising a draft bill to allow the research to go ahead, that they opposed the creation of any embryo solely for research - they believe that all life begins at conception. They said they were also anxious to limit the destruction of such life once it had been brought into existence.

In a submission to the committee, they said: 'At the very least, embryos with a preponderance of human genes should be assumed to be embryonic human beings, and be treated accordingly.'

[Scientists' plea to use new hybrid embryos | Science | The Observer.](#)

Should religious organisations with a limited grasp of science have a say in the development of this sort of research? Such things are already scrutinised by ethics committees that make judgements based on the value of the research and any potential suffering that might be caused. In this case, there is the potential to relieve a lot of suffering caused by genetic diseases, or, at the very least, to understand them much better.

Hybrid embryos with human DNA are not the same as 'embryonic human beings'. They will never become sentient creatures. They are no more than a cluster of cells, such as the ones that women frequently lose soon after conception without even realising it.

[Stem cell research has been vetoed in the US by George Bush, influenced by his primitive religious beliefs, who said, "I also believe human life is a sacred gift from our creator".](#)

[Read more about hybrid embryos on the BBC site.](#)

Tags: [Hybrid+embryos](#), [Stem+cell+research](#), [Anti-abortion+lobby](#), [Science](#)

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Aug 2007
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The increasing interest in Humanism we've experienced locally and nationally seems to be largely due to concern over religious organisations' influence in public life. Maybe we can do something about that. The next census could provide us with more leverage when it comes to reducing that influence by showing that such organisations don't represent as many people as they'd like us to think.

Andrew Trimby has written in [the British Humanist Association website](#) forum (members only),

Census results have been used to influence government legislation. The 7 out of 10 who claimed to be Christian is now in serious doubt, also confirmed by subsequent polls including the Mori poll from November last year. I wonder if divisive faith schools would have been given so much governmental support, if Christian bishops would still be sitting in the House of Lords, or if there would still be the requirement by law for 'broadly Christian' school assemblies in all non faith schools, if the percentage that ticked 'no religion' were much higher? Close on 23% either ticked 'no religion' or didn't tick a box at all in the last census. The real percentage of people with no religion is likely to double this figure, potentially reducing the Christian percentage to less than 50%! The next census is still over three years away but I think the need to raise the profile of Humanism and to try to get people to tick the no religion or maybe tick a Humanist box if available, has never been so important.

The BHA is already campaigning to change the questions in the next census to reflect UK citizens' beliefs more accurately. This is from the BHA website.

Consultation on the questions for the 2011 census

The Government somehow omitted to include the BHA in its preliminary consultation covering the 'religion' question for

the 2011 census, but once we heard about the consultation, we very rapidly put together a response and managed to submit it just before the closing date.

[Click here to read the BHA response](#). (PDF)

Our objective is to ensure that the question or questions about religion in the 2011 census give an accurate picture of religious affiliation in the UK. The single question in the 2001 census used in England and Wales gave a far higher figure for 'Christian' than all other surveys: 71.74% in England and 71.90% in Wales, while the Scottish figures, where respondents were asked about the religion they were brought up in, as well as their current religion, showed significantly lower religious affiliation: 65.08%, in spite of far higher figures for Church attendance for example in Scotland. The corresponding figures for 'no religion' were: England 14.60%, Wales 18.63% and Scotland 27.55%. The figures were probably also distorted by the fact that the question appeared immediately after a series of questions on ethnicity, which may well have encouraged people to respond more on the basis of culture than actual beliefs or religious affiliation.

Other surveys tend to give around 30 - 40% non-religious, rising to 60 - 65% for young people.

[Click here for a selection of statistics on religion and belief in the UK](#).

The census figures are, of course, used throughout Government as the basis for planning, resource allocation, etc, so it really is very important to make sure that the figures they produce next time are a true reflection of the situation in the UK.

The BHA is demanding two questions on religion or non-religious beliefs in the 2011 census, similar to those used in Scotland in 2001, and will be lobbying hard to achieve this.

We also need to think about how to encourage people who do not have religious beliefs to answer the question more carefully: too many people who have not been near a Church for many years and have no religious beliefs still have a 'Church of England reflex' when faced with an official form.

[British Humanist Association](#).

[The National Secular Society refers to the census in this week's Newslines](#), as follows:

Who's where – according to the 2001 Census, by Keith Porteous Wood

Following the letter in last week's Newslines about local Census figures, readers may be interested in the areas where the highest incidence was recorded respectively of Christians, the non-religious, and Muslims – the three highest categories.

The highest incidence of declared Christians was St. Helens (comprising 87% of population). Next in the ranking were Wigan, Copeland, Eilean Siar (Western Isles/Outer Hebrides), Knowsley, Ribble Valley, Easington, Allerdale, South Ribble and Wear Valley (with 85%). Despite these declarations, only about a tenth of those ticking the Christian box in the Census are in church on an average Sunday.

Non-believers comprised around a quarter of the population. The highest area for non-believers was Norwich (comprising 37% of the population). Next in the ranking were Aberdeen, Cambridge, Brighton and Hove, Blaenau Gwent, Nottingham, Rhondda/Taf, Islington, Bristol, Caerphilly/Caerffili, Fife, City of London, Oxford and Lambeth (33%). These figures are based on the sum of two categories: respondents answering "none" and those declining to answer the question at all. It is generally accepted that the vast majority of the latter category also have no religion.

The national average figures for Muslims are less than three per cent. Much higher proportions however live in certain conurbations, while in other, especially rural, areas there are practically no Muslims at all. The area with the highest proportion of Muslims was Tower Hamlets (comprising 36% of the population). Next in the ranking were Newham, Blackburn with Darwen, Bradford, Waltham Forest, Luton, Birmingham, Hackney, Pendle and Slough (with 13%).

The NSS objected to the way the Census collected the Christian figures, leading as it did to a grossly exaggerated number, which has been ruthlessly exploited by the churches to justify more privilege for themselves. [We also made constructive suggestions as to an alternative](#) (PDF), which we are confident the Government will ignore, anxious as it always is to play up religion to the maximum.

Whether or not the Government ignores the BHA and NSS suggestions, we might try, individually or as a group, to persuade people to think about how they answer the questions in the census. As Andrew says, it could make a big difference to government policy.

Tags: [Census](#), [Statistics](#), [Religion](#), [BHA](#), [NSS](#)

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Sep 2007
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Have you noticed how often the word "closure" is used these days? A policeman or woman might say, when being interviewed on TV about a case, that they want to find the perpetrator so that the victims can have "closure". A verdict, a funeral, a divorce, or any event

that marks a significant setback in someone's life, and he or she may be expected to find "closure". It's one of those words that seems to mean something, but doesn't.

Where once it meant an act or process of closing, a device that closes or seals, or a procedure for ending a debate and taking a vote, the popular new definition of closure isn't in my dictionary. The Daily Telegraph's book of irritating phrases (a gift from my son, who knows how irritated I can get) says the word once described the fate of Midlands car factories and is now a state of mind.

The trouble is that people rarely achieve "closure" in that sense, and may feel cheated if they don't. There's no time limit on a sense of loss, it just changes, and nothing can fully compensate you for it. When it comes to losing people, the Humanist philosopher A C Grayling says, "We do not get over losses; we merely learn to live with them." The experience of loss is something we share with almost everyone else who ever loved anyone; it's part of being human, and accepting this is part of growing up, however old you are.

However, there are consolations, though not necessarily the sort that those who call for "closure" might appreciate. The fact that you enjoyed the love of someone you've lost can't be taken away. The possibility that you are a better, wiser person than someone who hurt you in some way, might give you strength that in turn you can use to support others. The anger you felt at some act of violence might spur you to act for political or social change. The realisation that life is short and messy might encourage you to make better use of your time, by finding fulfilment through a new challenge. None of these things will blot out a loss, but they might help you to learn to live with it.

Tags: [Life](#), [Closure](#), [Thought+for+the+Day](#), [Radio](#)

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Sep 2007
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[Hazel Blears is the Labour MP for Salford and Secretary of State in the Department for Communities and Local Government](#) (since 28 June 2007).

I've only just learned about a speech she made to the National Imams and Rabbis Conference in March this year. Ms Blears clearly sees religion as a good thing, while a lack of faith is (she seems to think) hardly worth bothering about. In the speech, she said,

It seems to me that for all the talk about British society becoming more secular, more consumerist, more avaricious, actually we have seen a growth in the importance of faith in many of our communities.

[Alif Aleph UK - Imams and Rabbis Conference in Manchester: Hazel Blears Speaks.](#)

By lumping together secularism, consumerism, and being avaricious, three distinct and totally different things, in the same sentence, Ms Blears demonstrates that she has no idea what she's talking about. She's a Government Minister in a secular state, and she clearly doesn't know what that means.

The emphasis in her speech was on 'multi-culturalism'. Towards the end she said,

Those discussions should be widened out into a debate about how we make the democratic process more accessible, about how our political system can adapt to the changing ethnic and faith make-up of Britain, and how we ensure that mainstream democratic politics is seen as the answer to everyone's problems and issues, not just an elite.

Does 'more accessible' mean continuing the trend, begun during her mentor Tony Blair's term of office, of providing religious organisations with a hotline to the government?

Dear Ms Blears, secularism is the promotion of the separation of the church (or any religion) and the state, so that no religion is allowed to dictate or influence public policy. One of the greatest threats to democracy is political Islam, which is behind the sort of extremism you spoke about. A secular state is the only sort where religious people are entirely free to worship as they please, provided they don't seek to impose their beliefs on anyone else or do any harm.

Consumerism and avariciousness have nothing to do with secularism. Think of Saudi Arabia, a Muslim country, where oil wealth has provided its devout citizens with the means to consume as avariciously as they please, and the US, where the majority of Christians spend their weekends in the malls. Get your facts right, please.

[Email Ms Blears and let her know what you think.](#)

Tags: [Hazel+Blears](#), [Speech](#), [Ignorance](#)

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Sep 2007
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Plans to allow British scientists to create human-animal embryos are expected to be approved tomorrow by the government's fertility regulator. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority published its long-awaited public consultation on the controversial research yesterday, revealing that a majority of people were "at ease" with scientists creating the hybrid

embryos.

[Human-animal embryo study wins approval | Science | The Guardian.](#)

[Despite religionists' objections](#), the research should go ahead.

Tags: [Research](#), [Human-animal+hybrids](#), [Science](#), [Embryos](#)

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Sep 2007
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In 2001 a new category of identity was introduced in the census: "mixed". Thousands of Britons were no longer required to tick "other" or align themselves exclusively with the more established groups recognised by the state. The census results made it apparent that labelling people simply as "black", "white" or "Asian" hid far more about the nature of Britain's population than it revealed.

[Comment is free: Thinking outside the ticked boxes.](#)

The author of this article, Kay Hampton, writes,

My own identity spans three continents and five cultural and ethnic identities from which I take something that is of value to me. The result is that I have interchangeable and interlocking identities that I adjust and develop to suit how comfortable I feel in time and context. I am African in South Africa, Indian in India and in the UK sometimes British and, more often than not, Scottish. Ultimately I appear "Asian" and am often mistaken for "black", but am made to feel an outsider when asked where I come from. Surely, it is more important to focus on where I am going.

This always was a mongrel nation, though many are apparently unaware of it. In the US, [DNA ancestry testing](#) has revealed that "black" people have "white" genes, and vice versa. White racists have been shocked to discover that they weren't as "pure" as they'd thought, and black people have learned that white slave owners contributed their DNA to the family's gene pool.

This seems relevant to the "communities" issue in the UK. While many British people are mixed-race, they don't fall into any distinct ethnic category. The "communities" that politicians so often refer to are more likely to be based on religion than on ethnicity; in other words, they are freely chosen. If you choose to associate with a group of people who all play golf, or don't eat meat, or simply avoid mixing with those who don't share your interests, why should you expect any special privileges, such as "consultations" with government officials?

And even if the so-called "communities" were based on ethnicity, do they merit special attention? No. That would be racist segregation. I look forward to the day when the word "community" is only used to describe people who live in a geographical area, such as my village. There are community activities, such as the community woodland scheme on land donated by a local landowner. We have community concerns, such as the provision of affordable housing for local young people. Otherwise, we're a diverse mix, in terms of attitudes and interests. We don't expect or want special privileges. Neither should self-selecting groups based on religion that are referred to as "communities".

Tags: [Communities](#), [Mixed-race](#), [DNA](#), [Ethnicity](#)

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Sep 2007
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So folks, if any of you get spam emails from dead people, this explains why. You just wouldn't listen, would you?

The rapture: When all the believers in Jesus Christ, who have been born again, are taken up to heaven.

After the rapture, there will be a lot of speculation as to why millions of people have just disappeared. Unfortunately, after the rapture, only non believers will be left to come up with answers. You probably have family and friends that you have witnessed to and they just won't listen. After the rapture they probably will, but who will tell them?

We have written a computer program to do just that. It will send an Electronic Message (e-mail) to whomever you want after the rapture has taken place, and you and I have been taken to heaven.

[Read more about it here.](#)

No, they didn't supply the picture – I did. Thought it needed a visual aid for those who have to read aloud.



Tags: [Rapture](#), [Emails](#), [Dead+people](#), [Bye-bye](#)

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Sep 2007
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Think about a moral principle or two. You know what I mean. Stealing is wrong. Lying is bad. You should not cause unnecessary suffering. You should try to help those in need. That sort of thing.

blog.talkingphilosophy.com » [Morality on Mountaintops](#).

James Garvey asks if it's excusable to do things that are usually considered morally dubious if you're in some sort of life or death situation.

Tags: [Morality](#), [Excuses](#), [right+or+wrong](#)

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Sep 2007
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The British Humanist Association has condemned the Governments 'joint statement' with religious groups released today, joining teacher representatives and some religious groups such as the Hindu Council UK in objecting to increased support for 'faith' schools.

Andrew Copson, BHA Education Officer, said, 'To expand state-funded faith schools is to increase discrimination in school admissions against pupils and their parents and to increase employment discrimination against teachers. It means more pupils will be segregated by religion and ethnicity and denied the right to a fully balanced education or to school with children from different backgrounds and learn with and from them.'

'Again and again opinion polls have shown clear majorities opposed to faith schools and their expansion but the Government is dismissing these serious and widespread concerns as mere 'misunderstandings'. The Government has behaved disgracefully, both in its general policies and in the way it has conducted itself in this present announcement, stitching up a statement with religious vested interests behind closed doors.'

[British Humanist Association](#).

If you agree, write or [email your MP](#).

For more on faith schools, see [Faith Schools or Secular Education](#).

Tags: [BHA](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Government](#)

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Sep 2007
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A new report examining the views of young Muslims in Ipswich and Suffolk has been published. Entitled "Exploring Young Muslims' Views" – it was compiled by Mojlum Khan, a Suffolk-based Muslim and launched before an invited audience of local Muslims, senior representatives of local statutory bodies and others, at Suffolk College on Tuesday 27th March.

Mojlum is closely connected to the Ipswich Mosques. He is the Development Manager at the Bangladeshi Support Centre and he also serves as a visiting Imam at a Young Offenders' Institution. He spent a year interviewing young Muslims for the report, which was commissioned by the Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) and funded by the Suffolk Development Agency and the Learning and Skills Council.

[Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#)

Tags: [Muslims](#), [Suffolk](#), [Research](#)

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Sep 2007
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To appeal to younger Humanists, we've signed up on [Facebook](#).

If you've got a Facebook account, make us your friend!

If you don't know what Facebook is, come and find out.

Tags: [Facebook](#), [Internet](#), [Contacts](#), [Group](#)

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Sep 2007
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[Camp Quest](#) is the first residential summer camp in the history of the United States for the children of Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists, Brights, or whatever other terms might be applied to those who hold to a naturalistic, not supernatural world view.

The purpose of Camp Quest is to provide children of freethinking parents a residential summer camp dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy and free speech.

Now there's talk of starting a similar organisation in the UK. If you have children, or you know any unbelievers who do, let them know about this. If you're on Facebook, there's a [Camp Quest UK group](#) where you can find out about developments.



Photo from [The Institute for Humanist Studies](#)

[IHS Camp Quest podcast](#)

Tags: [Camp+Quest](#), [Camp+Quest+UK](#), [Facebook](#)

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Sep 2007
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So the schools secretary, Ed Balls, and faith group leaders have formed a partnership endorsing faith schools as a force to improve social cohesion in England. This gasp-inducing statement is on a par with "let us build and run more nuclear power stations Chernobyl fashion - oh, and let's put them in city centres". In the face of the failure of multiculturalism, with the awful example of faith-divided schooling in Northern Ireland over decades, with news of Deobandi control of half of British mosques where hostility to the host community is preached, the government is choosing to continue to fly in the face of all reason and experience, and to design and pay for - with our tax money - greater future divisiveness and trouble. It is staggering.

[Comment is free: Ghettoes of superstition.](#)

Tags: [Comment+is+Free](#), [A+C+Grayling](#), [Faith+schools](#)

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Sep 2007
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When Nicholas Pandolfi of local radio [SGR fm](#) wrote a piece about his 'proxy atheism' recently in the Ipswich Advertiser, he provoked letters of protest from local Christians. Some people agreed with his sentiments, including Suffolk Humanists' members who supplied me with cuttings (we don't get the Advertiser in our neck of the woods). Nicholas wrote,

I SHOULD like to 'out' myself. My name is Nicholas Pandolfi and I am a 'proxy atheist'; a clumsy title at best and one that leaves me perched painfully on the fence between Faith and No Faith..

[Ipswich Advertiser - He of nearly little faith.](#)

Just a suggestion folks; the next time someone writes something like this in the local press (which isn't known for its humanist sympathies), a few letters of endorsement wouldn't go amiss. It wouldn't be difficult to challenge this sort of logic from an Advertiser letter-writer:

An atheist believes that life is purposeless with the consequence that it is meaningless. In such a world one cannot have meaning, therefore the statement "I am an atheist" is meaningless.

... Rationality based on irrationality (that everything occurred accidentally) is meaningless...

No, I didn't understand it either.

Tags: [Nicholas+Pandolfi](#), [Ipswich+Advertiser](#), [Atheism](#), [Letters+to+the+press](#)

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Sep 2007
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A headteacher who tried to reduce the influence of religion inside the classroom by creating the country's first secular state school had his plans blocked by senior government officials who called it a 'political impossibility'.

[Secular school barred by Whitehall | UK News | The Observer.](#)

[Ed Balls MP](#) is minister for schools. You can [email him about this lunacy](#).

Tags: [Ed+Balls+MP](#), [Secular+education](#), [Schools](#)

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Sep 2007
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One of the world's most respected [Deobandi](#) scholars believes that aggressive military jihad should be waged by Muslims "to establish the supremacy of Islam" worldwide.

Justice Muhammad Taqi Usmani argues that Muslims should live peacefully in countries such as Britain, where they have the freedom to practise Islam, only until they gain enough power to engage in battle.

His views explode the myth that the creed of offensive, expansionist jihad represents a distortion of traditional Islamic thinking.

[Our followers "must live in peace until strong enough to wage jihad" -Times Online.](#)

The UK is reputed to be a tolerant country where its citizens enjoy freedom of religion, but some Muslims are exploiting that tolerance. Human rights before religious claims is a principle that should limit that tolerance, but with all the confusion created by the Government's "multi-faith" approach and the proliferation of faith schools, there's a danger that fundamentalist Muslims will seize any opportunity to make mischief.

Update:

There was more on [the Deobandi threat in the Times Online \(7/9/07\)](#):

Almost half of Britain's mosques are under the control of a hardline Islamic sect whose leading preacher loathes Western values and has called on Muslims to "shed blood" for Allah, an investigation by The Times has found.

Riyadh ul Haq, who supports armed jihad and preaches contempt for Jews, Christians and Hindus, is in line to become the spiritual leader of the Deobandi sect in Britain. The ultra-conservative movement, which gave birth to the Taleban in Afghanistan, now runs more than 600 of Britain's 1,350 mosques, according to a police report seen by The Times.

Tags: [Jihad](#), [Muslims](#), [Fundamentalism](#), [Islam](#), [Deobandi+Islam](#), [Tolerance](#)

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Sep 2007
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While the military are shooting and gassing monks and civilians in Rangoon, here in Cambodia the picture is somewhat different. All appears to be well, the monks are cheerful, and no-one is protesting or getting shot. Cambodia has a motto – Nation, Religion, King – and yet no-one seems to get that worked up about it. The King's face adorns every shop wall, and most places also have a small shrine, but get talking to the average Khmer and Religion or King will be the last thing they mention, certainly to an outsider. This place is no model democracy, but people here seem to be happy enough, and sometimes give the impression that they would do anything for a quiet life.

The brand of Theravada Buddhism practised here is socially aware, not proselytising, just getting on with it and doing its bit. I live next to Wat Bo, a pagoda and monastery, and nearly every day I hear chanting and worship. The chanting sometimes sounds like a cattle auction, and the other day I even imagined I heard someone chanting "The line broke, the monkey got choked, and they all went to heaven in a little row boat", but I enjoy it.



Walking home through the pagoda you find elderly ladies curled over behind various obelisks, mumbling into the smoke from incense sticks on the ground, while the teenagers here all appear to be speeding around town three to a moto. I spoke to one young Khmer who told me he had briefly served in a monastery, but it was to keep his parents happy. Monks seem to be religious enough for everybody, allowing them to do their thing day by day without prostrating themselves at regular intervals. It might be over-romantic to call them the nation's conscience, but not a million miles away.

Becoming a monk may be because of a desire for cheaper education, enlightenment, or moderation, but the monks in Rangoon have formed a focussed political movement when most people in Burma are too terrified to do anything to oppose the junta. The fate of the monks in Rangoon reminds us that all of the monks in Cambodia were wiped out during the Khmer Rouge period, Pol Pot (despite having formerly served in a Buddhist monastery) seeing them as part of a dangerous intellectual class. In enough numbers, whatever colour the robes, monks seem to be rather good at getting attention.

Tags: [burma](#), [rangoon](#), [buddhism](#), [monks](#)

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Sep 2007
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The head of the Catholic Church in Mozambique has told the BBC he believes some European-made condoms are infected with HIV deliberately.

Maputo Archbishop Francisco Chimoio claimed some anti-retroviral drugs were also infected "in order to finish quickly the African people".

[BBC NEWS | World | Africa | Shock at archbishop condom claim.](#)

Makes you wonder if you need to fail an intelligence test to become a Catholic archbishop.

Tags: [BBC+News](#), [Catholic+archbishop](#), [Condoms](#)

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Sep 2007
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Leading a class in prayer can be tricky if you are an atheist. Tim*, 24, has found it one of the many challenges of being a non-believer working at a Roman Catholic school in west London.

He does not think his colleagues know that he is an atheist it did not come up at the interview and he is only in his first year of working as a science teacher.

"As a new member of staff, I have kept my feelings on religion to myself and I don't discuss it with anyone in the school," he says. "Teaching in a faith school has only strengthened my atheism."

[TES - Teaching jobs, resources & ideas from the Times Educational Supplement.](#)

Though there's been concern in Humanist/Secularist circles about discrimination against atheist teachers in faith schools, this article (published in July 2007) suggests that the Catholics can't afford to discriminate, as there aren't enough Catholic teachers to fill all their posts.

Tags: [Schools](#), [Teachers](#), [Discrimination](#), [Catholics](#)

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Sep 2007
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After a number of requests from teaching unions and civic bodies, including the Christian think-tank Ekklesia and the British Humanist Association, the UK Department of Children, Schools, and Families has issued guidance for teachers uncertain whether and how to discuss creationism – which is rejected by both scientists and theologians as lacking factual and theoretical value.

A statement on Teachernet, a government website, states that "Creationism and intelligent design are not part of the National Curriculum for science" and describes "intelligent design" as "a creationist belief" that "is sometimes erroneously advanced as scientific theory but has no underpinning scientific principles or explanations supporting it and it is not accepted by the international scientific community."

[Government issues guidelines to teachers on creationism and ID | Ekklesia](#).

The article goes on to mention that...

Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams has described creationism as "**a category mistake**" in religious thought.

What does that mean? You can [read Archbishop Rowan Williams' March 2006 interview with the Guardian's Alan Rusbridger here](#).

["We're all monkeys" – an explanation of Creationism, Intelligent Design and Darwinian Evolution](#)

Tags: [Ekklesia](#), [Teaching](#), [Creationism](#), [Intelligent+Design](#)

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Sep 2007
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One of the most discordant debates in Russian society is playing out in public schools like those in this city not far from Moscow, where the other day a teacher named Irina Donshina set aside her textbooks, strode before her second graders and, as if speaking from a pulpit, posed a simple question:

"Whom should we learn to do good from?"

"From God!" the children said.

[Welcome or Not, Orthodoxy Is Back in Russia's Public Schools - New York Times](#).

Religious instruction (or indoctrination), specifically Russian Orthodox Christian instruction, has been reintroduced in the Russian school curriculum, despite the protests of Jewish and Muslim leaders and those who say it weakens the separation of church and state. Religion was brutally suppressed during the communist era. Now Church leaders are reasserting themselves.

Tags: [Russia](#), [Russian+Orthodox+Church](#), [Schools](#), [New+York+Times](#)

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Sep 2007
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The religious activist Stephen Timms, who also happens to be the Labour Party's vice-chair and Minister for Competitiveness ("with special responsibility for faith communities"), this week made the insulting claim that "people of faith" bring special qualities to social work that "are rare elsewhere".

Speaking at a conference of Traidcraft, the Christian-based fair trade organisation, Mr Timms said: "There is positive impact when people of faith are involved in the lives of their community, because these people bring valuable qualities in their service which are rare elsewhere and they are qualities modern Britain urgently needs."

[National Secular Society - Government minister says social work done by Christians is superior](#).

Tags: [Government](#), [Stephen+Timms](#), [Social+work](#), [Insult](#)

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Sep 2007
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It *can* be done. There were so many problems associated with sectarian education in Newfoundland that all schools were taken under secular state control in the 1990s. Before then, animosity between different faith schools even resulted in savage ice hockey matches which weren't about playing the game, but an all-out battle.

It was a grim fact of life in that province under its historically sectarian education system in which the churches ran the schools with money from the public purse. Besides the rivalries, students and neighbours were divided along religious lines, often driven on half-empty buses across town to schools that were homogenous but under serviced.

By the 1990s, the tensions had eased, but the economic burden of too many groups operating too many schools remained. That is, until a dramatic and complex political move uncoupled schools from the churches, turning the education of Newfoundland youngsters on its head, from one that was entirely denominational, to one that entirely was not.

Now there's an election, and the issue has been raised again by Ontario Progressive Conservative leader John Tory, who wants to extend public funding to all faith schools. [However, the polls indicate that the tory Mr Tory is on to a loser as voters fear the province could be split on religious lines.](#)

[Thanks to the NSS for the story.](#)

Tags: [Canada](#), [Secularism](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Election](#)

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Oct 2007
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In mid-August, a few hundred people took to the streets in Burma's capital, Rangoon. Since then, the world has watched an unfolding drama on its TV screens. At least, those that have TV are watching. Others are listening to their radios, or reading newspapers, leaflets, emails and blogs (or web logs).

Over fifty years ago, when they wrote the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they didn't anticipate the World Wide Web and its effect on international communications. Article 19 says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." It's become harder to conceal human rights abuses since then, as there are an increasing number of ways to spread information.



There are still obstacles, of course. You need electrical power to power the Internet, though it can be generated with green technology, and access to a telecommunications network, but allowing for these hurdles, there's still a lot of information zooming about that some people would prefer you didn't know. That's the idea behind an Amnesty International campaign called "irrepressible.info". They say, "The Internet is a new frontier in the struggle for human rights. Governments – with the help of some of the biggest IT companies in the world – are cracking down on freedom of expression," and encourage people to undermine censorship by publishing fragments of censored material on their sites

Of course, if you're not connected to the Internet, you won't be able to read this sort of material, but some of it will have been used in the news reports you see, hear and read in the media. Even technophobes might acknowledge that the Internet serves a very useful purpose by disseminating information that tyrants and corrupt politicians don't want you to know. They dislike modern communications because they're hard to control. It's like sticking a finger in a dam; you might block up one hole, but the water will still trickle through somewhere else when you weren't looking.

To find out more about irrepressible.info, click the Amnesty banner on the top right hand side of our home page.

Tags: [Internet](#), [Irrepressible+information](#), [Amnesty+International](#), [Burma](#), [Censorship](#)

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Oct 2007
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It is like Daniel going into the lions' den, though Professor Richard Dawkins might not appreciate the biblical comparison. Britain's leading atheist is spearheading a campaign in America to challenge the dominance of religion in every day life and in politics, insisting that the millions of US godless deserve to be heard too.

Atheists in the US "have been downtrodden for a very long time. So I think some sort of political organisation is what they need", he said.

[Atheists arise: Dawkins spreads the A-word among America's unbelievers](#) | [News](#) | [Guardian Unlimited Books](#).

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [America](#), [Atheism](#), [Atheists](#)

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Oct 2007
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TV to see, tonight (Monday 1 October), 9pm on BBC2.

This World gains exclusive access to a Sharia court and its characteristic judge, Judge Isah, in the state of Zamfara in northern Nigeria.

Some British Muslims want Sharia law implemented in the UK. Sharia law is already practised informally in parts of Britain to resolve Islamic divorce, inheritance and family disputes. Now some Muslims want their laws to work alongside the

existing legal system.

[BBC NEWS | Programmes | This World | Inside a Sharia Court.](#)

Tags: [Sharia+law](#), [Muslims](#), [Islam](#), [Nigeria](#), [BBC2](#)

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Oct 2007
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I recently emailed my [MP, Tim Yeo](#), about the Government's plans to increase the number of faith schools. This was his reply:

Thank you for your e-mail of 11th September about the expansion of state sector faith schools.

I appreciate the concerns that you outline in your letter over the impact of faith schools on community cohesion. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck between the rights of parents to educate their children in a religious manner and the need to promote community cohesion.

Contrary to common belief, faith schools can achieve high levels of ethnic and social mix; the Roman Catholic Church, for instance, has made the point that in many areas, its schools achieve a higher level of diversity than secular schools.

Faith schools do extend choice for parents within the state education system, and choice and diversity in education can bring benefits for children of all backgrounds.

I do appreciate your strength of feeling about this issue and I am grateful to you for writing.

I disagree that parents have the right to educate their children "in a religious manner", as this infringes a child's right to develop his or her own beliefs and values. It is much harder to do this when you've been indoctrinated with religious beliefs from an early age. Those who reject such beliefs can suffer discrimination and harassment. I was always an independent individual. I could articulate my thoughts and feelings about religion clearly, and often did. I was fortunate to have an RE teacher who tolerated my constant questions. Many don't have these advantages, and it's especially difficult for children of very religious families to openly reject religion.

Article 18 of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) says;

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.

The bias shown towards religion in faith schools is a direct infringement of this basic human right.

Catholic schools seek to deny children's rights. The Catholic Education Service has [claimed](#): "When you choose a religious school, Collective Worship and RE Lessons are part of the package". Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society has said,

Some children have no alternative to go to religious schools because they are the only ones in their area "particularly in rural locations. They may also have been admitted at the behest of their parents, whose religious views they may not share. Young people must be given the opportunity to exercise their own conscience, and not depend on their parents to make the decision for them.

I'll be writing to Mr Yeo again.

[Read more about "the abomination" of faith schools from the NSS](#)

[Read about the British Humanist Association's campaign against faith schools](#)

[Read what I said about faith schools to Suffolk Fabians](#)

Tags: [Tim+Yeo+MP](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Catholic+schools](#), [NSS](#)

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Oct 2007
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[Suffolk Coastal MP John Gummer](#) came across the Humanist stand at the Conservative Party Conference and had a bit of a tantrum, as reported on [the new website of Lancashire Secular Humanists](#):

As John Gummer came upon the British Humanist Association's campaign stand in the exhibitors gallery at the Winter Gardens this afternoon he was clearly heard to say to his companion "Do you know there is nothing I hate more than these

Humanists”.

He then launched into a loud abusive rant in which he complained that The British Humanist Association “had no right to be here” and, with spittle-filled passion, he pointed his finger at startled BHA members and declared “The Conservative Party is and always has been a Christian Party” (big emphasis on “Christian”) before turning on his heels and storming off without giving those volunteers (me included) an opportunity to respond.

It’s a pity he left so quickly; had he allowed himself a little more time to think he may well have thought to quote his party leader by adding: “Oh ... and we are a modern, compassionate Conservative Party”.

So that’ll lose him a few Humanist votes then!

[Click here to email John Gummer](#)

[The Tory Party Gummer profile](#)

[John Gummer on ‘They Work for You’, the website with his voting record, etc.](#)

[The Guardian’s Aristotle on John Gummer](#)

Tags: [John+Gummer+MP](#), [Conservative+Party+Conference](#), [Rant](#)

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Oct 2007
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The teaching of evolution is becoming increasingly difficult in UK schools because of the rise of creationism, a leading scientist is warning.

Head of science at London's Institute of Education Professor Michael Reiss says some teachers, fearful of entering the debate, avoid the subject totally.

[BBC NEWS | Education | Teachers 'fear evolution lessons'.](#)

Tags: [Creationism](#), [Evolution](#), [Science+teaching](#)

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Oct 2007
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This is from a book called “Primary teaching in Sunday schools (School of service series)” by Jean Heppell James, published by the Scripture Union & C.S.S.M in 1962.

Click on the image to see a larger version.

I imagine that quite a few Humanists were subjected to this sort of nonsense in their youth.

Tags: [Sunday+school](#), [Indoctrination](#)

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Oct 2007
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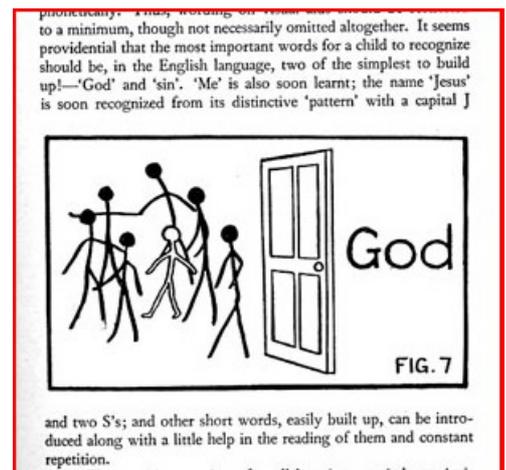
Libby Purves writes in the Times Online:

Interesting debate opened up by [Theos](#) - their research shows major cutbacks in hospital chaplain services. No cause, they say, for secularist triumphalism: chaplains do not primarily exist to offer prayers or communion but “to answer needs that are simply human: coping with the death of a loved one, the suffering of a child, the fear that comes with injury or sickness ...”

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Hospital Chaplains - a clinical need?.](#)

Yet another example of how religion is irrelevant when it comes to meeting people’s “human” needs. If Christian chaplains “do not primarily exist to offer prayers or communion”, their role could be filled by anyone with the right attributes. So why are they paid from the public purse (though they complain there aren’t enough of them), while there’s no public money for Humanist hospital visitors.

Which reminds me; I must fill in the forms for the Criminal Records Bureau check they want at the local hospital so I can become a bona



fide Humanist hospital visitor.

Tags: [Chaplains](#), [Hospitals](#), [NHS](#)

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Oct 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

I'll be talking to BBC Radio Suffolk presenter Rachel Sloane about [the anti-Humanist comments made by John Gummer MP at the Tory party conference](#). The broadcast should start at 8 am. Not sure how long it'll last. Mr Gummer is being invited to participate or to send a statement.

[Rachel met Suffolk Humanists in December 2006](#) and recorded a feature for her Sunday morning series on Suffolk faiths.

BBC Radio Suffolk's FM frequencies are 103.9 (Ipswich), 104.6 (west Suffolk), 95.5 (Lowestoft), 95.9 (Aldeburgh). It's not available on medium wave or DAB, but you can listen live online - see link below.

Further info: www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/

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Oct 2007
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I receive a weekly email from [Laurie Taylor](#) about his programme on Radio 4, [Thinking Allowed](#). Today's sounds interesting:

You've probably had one of these moments yourself. There you are, sitting quietly across the table from a new acquaintance who seems to have all the necessary qualifications to become a new friend. They're reasonably attractive, fairly clever, quite funny, and nicely self-deprecating. They have some good stories to tell and seem refreshingly free of prejudice.

But then at some point in the evening, often at the very moment when you've decided that they've passed all the necessary social tests, they suddenly utter a simple remark which makes you re-consider your whole evaluation.

This happened with our new acquaintance, Mary, just six months ago. There we were, all talking with gusto about the present and past problems we'd had with ageing parents. We'd discussed the inadequacy of nursing homes, the derelictions of doctors, the inhospitality of hospitals and had just moved onto funeral arrangements when Mary suddenly announced that the arrangements she'd had to make for her own mother had been relatively easy because she'd been forewarned of the date and time of her mother's death.

Had she been given such news by a doctor or a consultant? Oh no, she told us with a new-found eagerness in her voice, she'd had a personal presentiment, a sudden moment in a dream in which a page of a calendar had appeared beside a ticking clock. The calendar said June 16th. The clock said 4.30. And that was exactly the date and time at which her mother finally expired.

It is, I suppose, an ugly testament to the inherent intolerance of rationalists, that the gathering broke up pretty quickly after Mary's admission. Did we really want to sit and talk calmly and intelligently about life when at any moment our measured discourse might be interrupted by another outburst of irrationalism?

But it's beginning to look as though I will soon have to go rather short on new friends or find some way of playing down my rationalist snobbery. According to recent surveys, British people are now more inclined than for several centuries to accept the possibility of premonitions and apparitions.

The most alarming statistic tells me that thirty-eight percent of the British population believe in ghosts. That means nearly half of all the people who are sitting in the BBC office in which I write these words, nearly half the people in the pub and the Indian restaurant last night. It's an extraordinary statistic.

Fortunately, I am able to turn to a distinguished social historian for some light on this phenomenon. Owen Davies has written extensively about Witchcraft and Magic and now in his latest book *The Haunted* fixes his analytical sights upon the social history of ghosts, their changing nature, their links to religion and funeral practices, their relationship to the after-life.

Join me at 4 o'clock today (or after the midnight news on Sunday) when I'll also be talking to the author of a research paper on our increasing pre-occupation, both male and female, with removing hair from our bodies. *Ghosts and Hairless Bodies*. That's *Thinking Allowed* this week. Also now available as a podcast.

Laurie

Tags: [Laurie+Taylor](#), [Thinking+Allowed](#), [Radio+4](#)

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Oct 2007
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Suffolk Humanist Nathan Nelson has taken a short break in Laos during his prolonged stay in [Siem Reap, Cambodia](#), where he's been doing voluntary work.

We've had rain; they've had more rain.

You can follow [Nathan's adventures on his blog](#).

Tags: [Nathan+Nelson](#), [Blog](#), [Cambodia](#), [Laos](#)

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Oct 2007
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[Former US-President Al Gore has won a Nobel prize](#) for his Climate Change work, but presumably this won't impress Dover school governor Stewart Dimmock, who tried to ban the film from being shown in schools. He didn't succeed but a judge ruled that, if shown in schools, the film must be accompanied with guidance "giving the other side of the argument", which will gladden the hearts of climate change deniers everywhere.

A High Court judge who ruled on whether climate change film, An Inconvenient Truth, could be shown in schools said it contains "nine scientific errors".

Mr Justice Burton said the government could still send the film to schools - if accompanied by guidance giving the other side of the argument.

[BBC NEWS | Education | Gore climate film's 'nine errors'](#).

Mr Dimmock is a member of [The New Party](#).

Tags: [Al+Gore](#), [Climate+change](#), [Nobel+prize](#), [Legal+action](#), [Schools](#)

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Oct 2007
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[We reported that Newfoundlanders had banned faith schools](#), and a Conservative politician was fighting an election with the promise to bring them back. He lost.

The Canadian province of Ontario had an election this week, which resulted in a change of administration. The Liberals have taken over the reins of power after the Conservatives foolishly promised they would create a system of taxpayer-funded religious schools. The electorate reacted with extreme hostility to the idea, proposed by the aptly named Conservative leader John Tory.

Mr Tory tried during the election campaign to convince people that religious-based schools were a good idea. They didn't agree and he not only lost the election for his party, but also his seat in the parliament.

[National Secular Society – Ontario Election Lost Over Promise Of Faith Schools](#).

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Newfoundland](#), [Canada](#), [Election](#)

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Oct 2007
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Speaking at a lecture at Swansea University's Taliesin Arts Centre, [Rowan] Williams described religious belief as 'naturally self-critical' which was a point that contemporary critics such as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, often missed. 'There are specific areas of mismatch between what Dawkins may write about and what religious people think they are doing,' he said.

Williams was referring to Dawkins's book, The God Delusion, in which the atheist scientist attacks God 'in all his forms' arguing that belief in a supernatural entity is irrational. Williams said that God is real for believers and existed before the universe did. He said Dawkins had 'picked up on' the fact that theologians talk about God as a simple explanation but if God was around before the Big Bang, 'he must be complex'.

[Archbishop: Dawkins got religion wrong | Special reports | Guardian Unlimited.](#)

Tags: [Rowan+Williams](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [God](#), [The+universe](#), [Swansea+University](#)

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Oct 2007
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One of the key religious themes of Philip Pullman's award-winning series of children's novels, His Dark Materials, has been watered down to appeal to a wider audience in the new Hollywood film version of the first book. The original story's rejection of organised religion, and in particular of the historic abuse of power in the Catholic Church, has been altered to avoid offending followers of the faith in the UK and in America.

[Religion row hits Pullman epic | News | Guardian Unlimited Books.](#)

[The Telegraph reports:](#)

The move has been described as "white-washing" by anti-censorship groups.

[Philip Pullman](#) is a Distinguished Supporter of [the British Humanist Association](#) and an Honorary Associate of [the National Secular Society](#).

Tags: [Dark+Materials+film](#), [Philip+Pullman](#), [Religion+row](#)

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Oct 2007
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Libby on the [Laxfield \(Suffolk\) Festival of Tolerance](#). Why haven't we heard about this before?

You don't doom a man for what he believes, even if you think he's wrong. You don't let a neighbour be persecuted, even if he's not of your faith. Thus 450 years later Laxfield holds a festival of tolerance to show solidarity with those long-dead ancestors.

[Zero tolerance for religious intolerance | Libby Purves - Times Online.](#)

Tags: [Libby+Purves](#), [Laxfield](#), [Suffolk](#)

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Oct 2007
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The National Secular Society has called on the Government to permit employers to declare their workplaces to be secular after another incident of conflict over religion emerged.

[National Secular Society – Make The Workplace Secular](#)

Tags: [NSS](#), [Religion+at+work](#), [Discrimination](#)

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Oct 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Exhibition and reflection for World Aids Day (Sat 1 December) at [St Nicholas Centre, Ipswich](#).

People of all faiths and none (including me) have been invited to contribute to the reflection.

HIV and AIDS are still an enormous problem, nationally and internationally. In the UK, many sexually active people are complacent about the risks of unprotected intercourse. In developing countries, millions of children are orphaned by AIDS. Over 25 millions people have died of AIDS since 1981.

Further info: www.open2.net/healthliving/health_socialcare/countingthecrisis_uk.html

Map link: tinyurl.com/2ps4tp

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Oct 2007
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An un-Christian dust-up is under way between John Gummer, the Catholic Tory MP, environmentalist and cow eater, and the British Humanist Association. Each accuses the other of dishonesty.

The humanists claim that Gummer attacked them a fortnight ago at their stall in Blackpool. "He walked up to us and said loudly how much he hated us," says the BHA chief exec, Hanne Stinson.

"He was shouting that we, because of our beliefs about living a good life without religion, had no right to be there; that the Conservative Party is a Christian party. He was spitting angry. It was peculiar behaviour."

[Gummer's unholy row with the humanists - Independent Online Edition > Pandora.](#)

It took a while, but it eventually made the national press. [You can read more here.](#)

Tags: [John+Gummer](#), [The+Independent](#), [British+Humanist+Association](#)

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Oct 2007
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Margaret Nelson led a discussion at a [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource Forum of Faiths](#) on 16 October 2007. The others speakers were Manwar Ali (Muslim), Robin Herne (Pagan) and Shpetim Alimeta ("thinker" of Albanian origin). For those who don't know me, I'm a Secular Humanist. I make that qualification because in the States there are Religious Humanists as well as Secular Humanists. However, in Great Britain and other countries where there are Humanist organisations that are part of the [International Humanist & Ethical Union](#), Humanism is totally non-religious. It's an approach to life for people who've rejected religious and supernatural explanations for life, the universe and everything, and whose ethical outlook is based on our common humanity and our experience. We have a naturalistic view of life, rather than a supernaturalistic one. Science can't explain everything but it can and does help us to understand our place in the natural world, and where there aren't any answers, we prefer to leave a question mark, rather than explain the gap in our knowledge with a religious answer. Humanists believe that this is the only life we have, and we must make the most of it. We're generally described as atheists or agnostics, but I prefer to avoid those definitions, as they can be confusing. Suffice it to say that religion is irrelevant to my life, and if asked if I believe in God, I'm with the first openly non-believing MP, [Charles Bradlaugh](#), who'd respond by asking his questioners to define God. Since none of them could agree on this, Bradlaugh said he couldn't be expected to say whether or not he believed in something they couldn't explain, and for which there's no evidence. But that's not why we're here. I'm here to talk about living in a secular society, and why I believe passionately that it's a good thing. I feel fortunate to live in a democratic secular society, knowing that if I lived in a religious state I wouldn't enjoy the freedom to live as I please or to speak about what matters to me, for fear of recrimination, harassment, persecution and punishment, even death in some cases. There are still many places where non-believers cannot safely express their disbelief, just as anyone who doesn't have the right religion, according to a country's religious rulers, can't be open about their beliefs. I know that what we have here isn't perfect, but it's a lot better than the sort of repression, want and hunger than many people suffer around the world. As for seeking answers for our ills in religion; I agree with Polly Toynbee, who's the new President of the [British Humanist Association](#). She said, "You devalue the good things in life if you really think there's something better somewhere else. This is all there is, but it's pretty good. Those that look elsewhere perhaps sometimes don't look hard enough for what's best all around them." I think this applies to complacency about living in a secular society. Not just complacency, but ignorance too. I like to be clear about what we mean by the words and terms we use, just as the philosophers of antiquity, such as Socrates, insisted on clarity. We can't discuss a subject properly if everyone has their own definition of a word and they all think they know what everyone else means by it. The word "secular" is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean consumerism, or entertainment, or activities other than religious activity. It doesn't mean being "anti-religious", though some who describe themselves as secularists are anti-religious while many Christians support a secular state; "Then give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's". It doesn't mean being value-free, in terms of morality or ethical behaviour. A secular society is one where religion doesn't dictate political decisions - where the state and religion are separate - and where freedom of religion is possible, as no one religion dominates society. [George Holyoake](#), the agnostic British writer who coined the term "secularism" in 1846, used it to describe the promotion of a social order separate from religion, without actively dismissing or criticising religious belief. Holyoake wrote, "Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life." Of course, when Holyoake was promoting secularism, it was unusual to refer to any other religion than Christianity in that sort of context. In general, secular societies are modern, liberal societies. They may not have become so because of organised secularist movements, but through the gradual erosion of old-fashioned religious authority, the modernisation of government, and the development of ethnic mingling through migration. Constitutionally secular states are all very different. There is no one-size-fits-all form of secular government, and there can be some confusion about how secularism is interpreted. In general, however, they allow freedom of religion or the freedom not to be religious, which makes them different from repressive totalitarian states, including communist states, that forcibly suppress religious expression. India's modern secular democracy was founded in 1947, on independence from British rule. India's first Prime Minister was a Humanist; Pandit [Jawaharlal Nehru](#), who believed passionately that India must be a secular state where religious people had to learn to live in harmony with one another. The Muslims, led by [Mohammad Ali Jinnah](#), rejected this principle. The hasty partition of India, mismanaged by the British, caused great suffering and bloodshed. There are still religious tensions in India today, but people of different religious backgrounds can and do live and work side by side. There are many Humanist activists in India who are working to achieve Nehru's aims

of mass education and the relief of poverty, against a background of the widening gap between rich and poor and widespread prejudice against the Dalit people - known as the Untouchables. Section Two of [the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#) details the fundamental freedoms everyone in Canada is entitled to, which are legally enforceable. They are freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, freedom of thought, freedom of belief, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of association. However, the Charter hasn't got it quite right (in my humble opinion) as its preamble includes a reference to God, though this portion hasn't been accorded legal effect and has been criticised for conflicting with the fundamental freedom of conscience and religion guaranteed in section two. [The first amendment of the American constitution](#) ensures that the state won't favour one religion over another, but the country's secular status is confused. George Bush is fond of referring to his God, who seems to be a sort of unelected Co-President, and it's almost impossible to be elected at all if you're open about being an atheist. In a research sample of 2000 households, the [University of Minnesota's](#) department of sociology found that the respondents rated atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in "sharing their vision of American society." Atheists are also the minority group they were least willing to allow their children to marry. This form of prejudice is widespread, but one effect of Professor Richard Dawkins' lecture tours in the States is that an increasing number of people have "come out" as non-believers, risking the criticism and rejection of their families. It appears that America isn't as Christian as some people would like us to think it is. Similarly, there are brave people who are openly rejecting Islam in many parts of the world, despite the threat of punishment for apostasy. A Council of Ex-Muslims has recently been formed in the UK. People who change their religion risk similar condemnation. I was going to talk about France and Turkey, but there isn't enough time, so I'll just mention the reasons that Britain is referred to as "Christian country". It was a pagan country in Anglo-Saxon times. St Augustine's mission was to make it a Catholic country. It remained so until King Henry VIII had a little difficulty with his first wife, his brother's widow, Catherine of Aragon, who he'd married to secure an alliance with Spain. Catherine failed to produce an heir and Henry lost interest in a Spanish alliance because he fancied Anne Boleyn. Henry's marital and diplomatic difficulties led to the establishment of the Church of England. Like many male monarchs who were fixated on their wives' ability to produce male heirs, Henry was, of course, ignorant of the fact that it's the father's chromosomes that determine the gender of a baby, but women have traditionally taken the blame for most things. It's ironic, considering how the established church was founded, that Edward VIII was forced to abdicate when he wanted to marry an American Divorcee, and that the current heir to the throne had to marry his divorcee in a register office. Not only that, but his talk about being a "[defender of faiths](#)" in a multi-faith country has been ruled out of order by Archbishop Rowan Williams. As things stand, if Charles declares himself a convert to another faith or rejects faith altogether, he can forget about the crown. Some have speculated that Prince Harry isn't a religious man, after he chose to talk about his mother rather than do a religious reading at the recent memorial event. There are many inside and outside the Church who think [it's time for disestablishment](#), reflecting the nature of a multi-faith, secular Britain. It's also time to stop allowing the Church to assume control of every state occasion, Government ceremonial, and many other public celebrations. I thought it was significant that [the bereaved and the victims of the 7/7 bombings in London chose to organise and conduct a memorial event in a park that was entirely secular](#), so it included everyone. So why is it important to defend the secular nature of our society? There's been talk from a minority of introducing Islamic [Sharia law](#) in this country, to settle family and neighbourly disputes. It would, say those who advocate its use, be a form of mediation and conciliation service. I say that Sharia law and British law are incompatible, and the form of Sharia law that's practiced in Muslim countries is essentially unfavourable to women. Human rights and British law come before religious "rights" and the claims of some fundamentalists - you can't have a state within a state. There are conflicts between the secular state and ideas like "multiculturalism" and "communities". Over the last few years, under the premiership of Tony Blair, the Government has sought to appease religious organisations that've made increasing demands for recognition by granting them special channels of communication. This has resulted in unelected religious leaders presuming to speak on behalf of British citizens who ostensibly share the same religion, but whose attitudes and values may vary enormously. The Conservatives recently declared that this approach to "consultation" was fraught with difficulties, and that it's better to consult people directly, not through religious leaders. It is also presumptuous to talk about religious "communities", when this assumes a commonality that may not exist. Personally, I look forward to the day when the word "community" is only used to describe people who live in a geographical area, such as my village. We have community concerns, such as the provision of affordable housing for local young people. Otherwise, we're a diverse mix, in terms of attitudes and interests. We don't expect or want special privileges. Neither should groups based on religion. If a group of any sort - the Women's Institute, a sports organisation, a residents' association - wants to campaign on a particular issue, they expect people to sign up, to agree with the aims and objectives. Too often, religious leaders have spoken without any such endorsement, only an assumed authority. As for "multiculturalism"; we must be careful what we mean by that too. The last census allowed you to tick a box that identified you as "mixed" in terms of ethnicity. It's no longer appropriate to talk about the "black community", as though everyone with a dark skin shared the same interests, so why should you assume that everyone who describes himself or herself as Christian, say, share the same attitudes and values? The same applies to all the religions. Faith schools are a bad idea because they're divisive and segregate children according to their parents' religion, or professed religion. A majority of British people don't want them. In Newfoundland, Canada, where they had Catholic and Protestant conflict between schools that sometimes resulted in fights at sporting events, they took all the faith schools back under secular state control about ten years ago. We could do the same here. In the last few weeks, a Newfoundland Conservative politician stood for election on a pro-faith school platform. He lost. There shouldn't be any publicly-funded faith schools in a secular society. They were a disaster in Northern Ireland, where parents who wanted their children to go to desegregated schools had to resort to fund-raising to pay for them. As Professor Dawkins wrote in the Observer in December 2001, there are no Catholic babies, or Protestant babies, or Muslim babies, or Hindu babies - they are all just babies. When my son was born, no one said that he was an Atheist baby. We may be strongly influenced by our parents in all manner of things, from bird-watching to book-loving, but reasonable parents do not assume that our children will be bird-watchers or book-lovers, whatever we might hope for. At the last forum, we spoke briefly about being British. That's the unifying nature of a secular state - we're all British. We have to reclaim the term from the isolationists. As British citizens, we all have an interest in maintaining our basic freedoms, including the freedom of religion, and the freedom from religion - in other words, to keep religion and the state completely separate, and prevent anyone from seeking to impose their religious beliefs on anyone else. Like most Humanists, I'm more interested in how people behave than what they believe, unless their beliefs motivate them to behave badly. I'd also like to see religion become a private matter, not a public one. Religion has no claim to the moral high ground, and it's insulting to over a third of the UK population who don't have a religious faith to suggest it does. Whether religious or not, ethical behaviour is important to everyone. We could all live harmoniously in an Open Secular Society.

This forum was at my suggestion, after comments were made at the last forum on Community Cohesion that suggested some contributors didn't understand secularism. There were far fewer attendees at this forum than the last one, suggesting that most forum members aren't interested in discussing what a secular society means to them. MN

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Oct 2007
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Death is not the end and soldiers need to be spiritually better prepared for war, according to the head of the British Army.

General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, said that Christian leaders and chaplains in the Army needed to equip soldiers for the spiritual issues at stake.

“In my business, asking people to risk their lives is part of the job, but doing so without giving them the chance to understand that there is a life after death is something of a betrayal,” he said.

[*Our soldiers need better preparation for life after death, says army chief -Times Online.*](#)

Tags: [Christianity](#), [Army](#), [Afterlife](#), [Life+after+death](#)

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Oct 2007
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Suffolk County Council’s Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) will discuss guidance for teachers on the discussion of Creationism and Intelligent Design in RE lessons.

We wonder if some RE teachers may not be as informed about the scientific facts as they should be, and if their religious beliefs may influence their approach to the subject. We advocate training in basic science for RE teachers.

We welcome any evidence about good or bad examples of RE teaching when this subject has arisen. [Please email us](#). Emails will be treated in strict confidence.

[You can read more about the subject elsewhere on this site.](#)

Tags: [Teachers](#), [Education](#), [SACRE](#), [Suffolk+Schools](#), [Science](#)

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Oct 2007
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That little man with the round face on the BBC’s business news interviewed a retail boss this morning, who looked forward to the ringing of tills in the run-up to Christmas. He expected people to go out and run up their credit card bills, as usual. It set me thinking; every year, someone will ask what we Humanists do at Christmas. Since we’re not religious, what does it mean to us?



Every year, I have to explain that the Christians high-jacked the old midwinter solstice festival about 1,600 years ago, having had nothing to do with it before then, and said it was Jesus’s birthday. Some Humanists ignore the whole hoo-ha, but most just enjoy a good time with their family and friends, like everyone else.

Anyhow, if you want to read more about a Humanist view of Christmas/Yule/Winterval/Midwinter, or whatever you want to call it, [I've added a page about it](#). Feel free to comment.

Merry Wotsit, one and all!

Tags: [Christmas](#), [Yule](#), [Midwinter](#)

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Oct 2007
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Not for the first time, the Society of Homeopaths (top patron, HM The Queen) has reacted to criticism with threats. What they don’t do (because they can’t) is come up with any evidence that their critic was wrong – in this case, Dr Andy Lewis, who...

... runs a website called Quackometer; he criticised the Society of Homeopaths (Europe's largest professional organisation of homeopaths) in no uncertain terms. In his opinion, they do not enforce their own "code of practice" (you're not even allowed to imply you can cure a named disease!); it is a figleaf; and they fail to censure their members over dangerous claims.

[Bad science: Threats - the homeopathic panacea | Science | The Guardian.](#)

It occurs to me that homeopathy is a sort of pseudo-medical dispenser of holy water. All the priests have to do is bless a bucket of the stuff. All the homeopaths have to do is run a tap.

Tags: [Bad+science](#), [Homeopathy](#), [Superstition](#), [Fraud](#), [The+Queen](#)

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Oct 2007
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Those strongly in favour of faith schools often cite the rights of religious parents, as taxpayers, to ensure that their child has State schooling within a school that promotes their faith. However, in areas where faith schools are over-subscribed, there is a real risk that non-religious parents, who are also taxpayers, do not have the same rights of access. Also, should the number of faith schools substantially increase, many parents may lose the right to ensure that their child goes to a community, non-faith school. Increased parental choice, whilst a mantra of the current government, is not without cost; one parent's choice (and their ability to exercise it) has an impact on the choice of others. Ultimately, with regards to the more popular schools, choice is exercised far more by the school than by the parents.

[Faith schools.](#)

Thanks to [the NSS](#) for drawing our attention to this.

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Education](#), [Teachers'+union](#), [ATL](#)

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Oct 2007
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Richard Dawkins says that it is “the awakening of women” that will solve the problem of “the worldwide menace of Islamic terrorism and oppression”.

His remarks came while praising Mina Ahadi, winner of this year's NSS Irwin Prize for “Secularist of the Year”.

Mina Ahadi is an Iranian woman who was forced to flee her native country after leading a campaign against the compulsory veiling of women. Because of her resistance to the clerical regime, her husband and four of her colleagues were executed, and she only narrowly escaped the same fate.

She now lives in Germany and has founded the Committee of Ex-Muslims, a movement that is rapidly spreading across Europe. She has also founded the [Committee Against Stoning](#), which now has 200 branches worldwide.

[National Secular Society - Iranian dissident Mina Ahadi wins Secularist of the Year prize.](#)

[A British Council of ex-Muslims was founded in June 2007](#)

Tags: [Secularist+of+the+Year](#), [2007](#), [Secularist+of+the+Year+2007](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [National+Secular+Society](#), [Prize](#)

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Oct 2007
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[From the blog “LOL god \(putting the fun back in religion\)” – a collection of cartoons about the absurdity of Intelligent Design.](#) Enjoy.

Tags: [Intelligent+design](#), [blog](#), [Humour](#), [Cartoons](#)

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Oct 2007
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Evan Harris MP, honorary associate of [the National Secular Society](#), who's fought for abortion rights, gay rights, and all the other rights that the Daily Mail thinks we shouldn't have (Harrumph! This country's going to the dogs!), has been subjected to a character assassination in the Daily Mail. He must be doing something right.

Dr Evan Harris hardly fits the mould of cuddly Liberal Democrat MPs, who are usually so desperately anxious to be all things to all people.

Zealous, obsessive, and self-righteous, Harris, a former junior hospital doctor who now sits for the affluent Home Counties

seat of Oxford West and Abingdon, has spent much of his Parliamentary career trumpeting his radical views on abortion, voluntary euthanasia, immigration and gay rights.

[Meet Dr Death, the Lib Dem MP Evan Harris who backs embryo experiments, euthanasia and freer abortions | the Daily Mail.](#)

The Humanist position on abortion

While a few Humanists aren't comfortable with the principle of abortion on demand, most regard the right to a legal abortion as far preferable to the pre-1968 Abortion Act situation, when thousands of women were critically injured or even died through unsafe "back street" abortions. This is what's happening now in many parts of the world, where religious anti-abortion campaigners have prevented the introduction of liberal abortion laws. [George Bush's government has contributed to this situation, by denying funds to NGOs that promote sexual health who offer safe terminations to the world's poorest women.](#)

[The British Humanist Association](#) supports [Amnesty's position on abortion](#), while the Vatican has withdrawn its support for Amnesty because of its stance. Humanists, including [the distinguished supporter of the BHA Diane Munday](#), were involved in the campaign to legalise abortion in the 1960s.

[Read about the UK's abortion rights history here](#)

[See the letter in The Observer, signed by Harris and others, 4 November 2007](#)

Tags: [Evan+Harris+MP](#), [Daily+Mail](#), [Dr+Death](#)

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Nov 2007
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In an Ipsos MORI poll of 1000 people last month, "to examine faith, belief and superstition", one of the questions was -

Do you ever cross your fingers for good luck? 44 per cent of Christians said yes, compared with 31 per cent of atheists.

[Ben Schott's Almanac of Belief -Times Online.](#)

Surely not?

Tags: [Ipsos+MORI+poll](#), [superstition](#), [luck](#), [atheists](#)

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Nov 2007
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Christmas should be downgraded unless other religious festivals are marked on an even footing, a Government think-tank has said.

[Channel 4 - News - Think-tank says 'downgrade Christmas'.](#)

The Institute for Public Policy Research makes the same mistake as many others, by assuming that "Christmas" is a religious festival, and that other "cultures" (i.e. religions) should have similar attention paid to their festivals.

Oh, give me strength! It might be a good idea to downgrade the whole hoo-ha, but not for religious or "multicultural" reasons. It's only November 2nd, and I'm fed up with it already.

[Read about Humanists at "Christmas" \(or whatever you call it\).](#)

[This story inspired a Thought for the Day.](#)

Tags: [IPPR](#), [Christmas](#), [Multiculturalism](#)

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Nov 2007
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AS HER husband works to bring about peace between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims, Cherie Blair put both religions in the dock over their unequal treatment of women.

With characteristic aplomb, she attacked the continuing inequality of women's role in world religion and said differences of culture or religion could not be used as a justification for denying equal rights.

She denounced the treatment of women on religious grounds as a "distortion" of the true message of faiths such as Islam.

Tags: [Cherie+Blair](#), [Inequality](#), [Religion](#), [Faith](#), [Women](#)

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Nov 2007
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Listeners who are, or have been, parents or teachers might have experienced the problem of fair shares, when a child has a sweet or a treat, and the others get wind of it and demand one too. It's no good trying to sneak a treat to one child, without setting off wails of "O-oh! That's not fair!"

Sometimes it seems that some politicians are having similar problems over "multiculturalism". One religious group has faith schools, and they all want some. One religious group has preferential treatment, and they all want some. The latest fair shares idea comes from a think-tank called the Institute for Public Policy Research. According to news reports this week, the IPPR suggests, "Christmas should be downgraded unless other religious festivals are marked on an even footing". That may not be exactly what they said, as their report hasn't been published yet, but it's the gist of it. The report is quoted as follows: "If we are going to continue to mark Christmas – and it would be very hard to expunge it from our national life even if we wanted to – then public organisations should mark other major religious festivals too. Even-handedness dictates that we provide public recognition to minority cultures and traditions."

I've got a better idea. How about we recognise that Christmas isn't compulsory, and neither is religion, and leave the matter of what we celebrate, and how, to individuals? How, exactly, can Christmas be "downgraded"? Some of us wish the commercialisation could be substantially downgraded, but apart from that, you can't dictate what people should do. Besides, the midwinter solstice festival isn't an exclusively religious festival, and never has been. Its history goes back thousands of years. The early church didn't approve of the hedonistic festivities to begin with, so they didn't decide to call it Christmas until the fourth century. They had no chance of trying to stop people from enjoying themselves as they pleased, or not, as the case may have been. So let's forget about using public money to mark any religious festivals, and leave it up to everyone, religious or not, to do as they please. They will anyway.

Tags: [Multiculturalism](#), [Radio](#), [T4TD](#), [Christmas](#)

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Nov 2007
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We've had a mention in [Wikipedia](#), the online encyclopaedia written by volunteers around the world. If you follow the link below and click on the little [1] reference, you'll be brought back here to my [Evolution Day Thought for the Day on 24 November 2006](#).

[Evolution Day - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.](#)

Evolution Day is the anniversary of the first publication of The Origin of Species on November 24, 1859. [1] Also celebrated is Darwin Day which commemorates the birthday of Charles Darwin who established the theory of natural selection which provided for a biological process behind evolution.

The year 2009 will mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of The Origin as well as the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth.

Tags: [Wikipedia](#), [Darwin+Day](#), [Evolution](#), [Evolution](#)

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Nov 2007
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Further to [the story about Dr Evan Harris MP's stance on abortion](#), a letter in today's Observer signed by Harris and others challenges Archbishop Williams' position:

[The Archbishop of Canterbury \(News and Comment, 21 October\)](#) and the Catholic cardinals have raised concerns that there are too many abortions. The best way to minimise unintended pregnancy is not to criminalise or stigmatise abortion, but to ensure that good-quality education, information and contraceptive services are universally available.

[Read more here.](#)

Tags: [Dr+Evan+Harris+MP](#), [Archbishop+Rowan+Williams](#), [Abortion](#), [The+Observer](#)

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Nov 2007

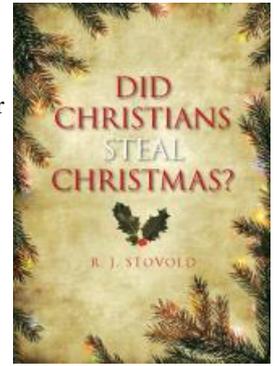
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[Available now from the NSS shop, "Did Christians steal Christmas?".](#) A stocking filler for only £2.99. Give it to a skeptical friend or relative.

Where did Christmas come from? Is it rooted in prophecy or paganism? And why did it take centuries for most Christians to agree on a date for Jesus's birth?

Robert Stovold explores the myths and legends around the December festival that dates back to earliest times, investigating the origins of Christmas trees, the divine child and the virgin birth – and finding some surprising connections.

Tags: [Christmas](#), [National+Secular+Society](#), [Stocking+filler](#)



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Nov 2007

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Prayer is a vital part of life for nearly half of UK adults, with 20 million saying they pray and one in three adults believing that God is watching over them, according to a report published today (November 11th) by Christian relief and development agency Tearfund.

[NEW SURVEY: 20 million pray in the UK.](#)

The survey, conducted among a representative sample of 2,000 adults, reveals strong belief in the power of prayer to bring about positive change in the world. One in three people believes that God is watching over them and will answer their prayers; for the same number of people praying makes them feel better - more peaceful and content (38%), stronger (30%), reassured (21%) and happier (19%); and 12 million adults believe that prayer can change their friends', families' and their own lives. One in five believes prayer changes the world.



Talking to their invisible friend might make people feel "more peaceful and content", but there's no evidence that praying produces any more significant results, like granting wishes. A medical study on the power of prayer, published last year, concluded:

Prayers offered by strangers had no effect on the recovery of people who were undergoing heart surgery.

And patients who knew they were being prayed for had a higher rate of post-operative complications like abnormal heart rhythms, perhaps because of the expectations the prayers created, the researchers suggested.

[Long-awaited medical study questions the power of prayer](#)

Prayer quotes:

"The most odious of concealed narcissisms - prayer." John Fowles

"I'm normally not a praying man, but if you're up there, please save me Superman." Homer Simpson

"Praying is like a rocking chair - it'll give you something to do, but it won't get you anywhere." Gypsy Rose Lee

"The idea that He would take his attention away from the universe in order to give me a bicycle with three speeds is just so unlikely I can't go along with it." Quentin Crisp

"When two or three are gathered together in thy Name thou wilt grant their requests." The Book of Common Prayer

Tags: [Prayer](#), [Tearfund](#), [Survey](#)

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Nov 2007

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Is religion bad for women? That's the question being asked by a conference held in Newcastle this week [8 November]. The main speaker is Professor Daphne Hampson, author of 'Theology and Feminism' who argues that 'religions have proved the ultimate weapon in keeping woman in her "place"'. Professor Hampson joins Jenni along with Dr Tina Beattie, Reader in Christian Studies at Roehampton University and Farah Khan, journalist and practicing Muslim, to ask if women can find a place for religion in their lives.

[BBC - Radio 4 Woman's Hour -Is Religion Bad for Women?](#)

You can listen again to this programme via the Woman's Hour website (see above) if you have a media player – broadband

recommended.

Writing as a feminist, I regard this as a no-brainer. Unfortunately, few people know much about the development of the montheistic religions and patriarchal social control. It's depressing that so many women collude with mainly male religious leaders to perpetuate their delusions.

Tags: [Woman's+Hour](#), [Religion](#), [Women](#), [Patriarchy](#), [Conference](#)

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Nov 2007
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Once upon a time there was a very wise Old Man with a huge white Beard who lived in the clouds and was quite bored, so he decided to create a magical kingdom with all sorts of funny creatures and plants and place them in his new kingdom and let all the funny things learn good and bad things and he did all this in six days... give or take.



[Ipswich Advertiser - Adam and Eve it...](#)

Nick Pandolfi will have Ipswich's Christian fundamentalists frothing at the mouth again. Well done Nick!

Tags: [Ipswich+Advertiser](#), [Newspaper](#), [Ipswich](#), [The+Creation](#), [Adam+and+Eve](#)

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Nov 2007
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In case you thought we were fixated on religion, this post was going to be about ethical issues unrelated to religion, but there's one story about bishops that I couldn't resist, from New Humanist magazine. [Stephen Bates used to be the Guardian's religious affairs correspondent, but now he's had enough.](#)

Now I am moving on. It was time to go. What faith I had, I've lost, I am afraid – I've seen too much, too close. A young Methodist press officer once asked me earnestly whether I saw it as my job to spread the Good News of Jesus. No, I said, that's the last thing I am here to do.

I knew, of course, about the bizarre beliefs of some on the lunatic fringes of religion – some of you might say that it's all mad – but when an Anglican bishop says that people are possessed when a devil gets up their backside, you have to wonder whether the C of E is harbouring some seriously deranged people. Bates wrote,

... [the Churchman](#)'s readership is pretty minuscule, but the vehemence even in the mainstream denominations could be quite startling and bizarrely tunnel-visioned. Graham Dow, the Bishop of Carlisle, has come to public notice for suggesting that the recent floods were God's judgement on a sinful nation, but not only is he not alone – perhaps just naive to speak so openly about it to a friendly journalist from the Sunday Telegraph – but they are not his weirdest views. An earlier book he wrote on demonic possession shows he believes devils enter up the anus (something Freudian here perhaps) and the signs of possession include wearing black, inappropriate laughter, inexplicable knowledge, Scottish ancestry or relatives who have been miners. You may laugh – inappropriately – but Dow used to be an Oxford college chaplain, indeed once prepared Tony Blair for confirmation, and has risen to be a diocesan bishop.

So, if you wear black and laugh inappropriately, maybe you need an ecclesiastical enema? I shall sit firmly on my black-clad backside in case anyone gets any ideas.

Speaking of religious strangeness, I've had a letter from [John "I don't hate anybody" Gummer MP](#), who writes that Humanism "is an intolerant religion". I've pointed out that this is doubly inaccurate. Having responded to his denials and questioned his integrity, I think I'll leave him alone now. However, like the Bishop of Carlisle, he appears to need careful supervision.

I spent Friday morning in a local high school, contributing to their annual marriage conference. I don't attend the introductory session in the hall, when Year 10 are treated to a talk by a Christian motivational speaker (I think that's what they're called) because I find it hard to resist heckling. When I got to my classroom, a solitary young Jehovah's Witness was there, waiting to learn where he'd spend the morning as his family had withdrawn him from religious education – some speakers were religious. He helped me set up the laptop and Power Point projector (I'm getting quite technically-literate) before disappearing. My presentation included some poetry, including a gem from [Ogden Nash](#) that Marie and I have used at [weddings](#):

To keep your marriage brimming
With love in the loving cup,
Whenever you're wrong admit it;
Whenever you're right, shut up.

One young man said he didn't see the point of this, as it was fun to rub it in when you've been proved right. If he finds a woman to share his life, I hope she can hold her own. Another young man asked if we'd conducted weddings for gay couple, and there was an outbreak of tittering. It seems that young people are generally uncomfortable about discussing homosexuality, which makes it especially difficult for [those of them who are gay](#).

Did you know that -

[The world uses over 1.2 trillion plastic bags a year](#). That averages about 300 bags for each adult on the planet. Or another way at looking at it is we are using one million bags per minute. On average we use each plastic bag for approximately 12 minutes before disposing.

I took this photo in a lane not far from my home in rural Suffolk. It was one of several plastic bags that had been thrown onto the verge. Elsewhere, plastic bags kill domestic animals and wildlife when they're ingested or creatures become tangled in them. They waste resources and cause litter. There's [a plan to ban them in London](#). The town of [Modbury in Devon was the first to ban plastic bags on May 1st this year](#), after a campaign launched by local film-maker Rebecca Hosking, who'd seen the damage the bags can cause around the world.



So, how about making a difference here in Suffolk?

Firstly, shun plastic bags. Take shopping bags with you to the supermarket. Tell retailers that you don't want unnecessary packaging, and buy locally from people who don't use it. There are plenty of sources of environmentally-friendly shopping bags, locally and on the web, including [The Natural Collection](#), who have [old-fashioned string bags](#) that don't take up space when not in use.

Secondly, how do you feel about allying ourselves with local environmentalists to campaign against plastic bags in Suffolk? Let us know.

The plastic bag issue is just one of many related to the environment that Humanists, who are supposed to live ethically, should consider. The biggest issue, brought into sharp focus by [the tidal surge and resulting flood along our coast](#) the other week (which fortunately wasn't as severe as [the one in 1953](#)) is climate change and our effect on it. [The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report was launched by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon](#) this week after talks with UN scientists in Spain. He said,

I come to you humbled after seeing some of the most precious treasures of our planet threatened by humanity's own hand. All humanity must assume responsibility for these treasures. Let us recognise that the effects of climate change affect us all, and that they have become so severe and so sweeping that only urgent global action will do. We are all in this together - we must work together.

Surely Humanists, whose philosophy is centred on our responsibility for our behaviour and how it affects other human beings, other species, and the planet, ought to take a high profile role in the campaign for change?

Tags: [The+Bishop+of+Carlisle](#), [Devils](#), [John+Gummer+MP](#), [Plastic+bags](#), [The+planet](#), [Climate+change](#)

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Nov 2007
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You may well have heard about [Facebook](#) in the news, or heard workmates or friends talking about it. You might have had invitations to join Facebook clogging your email inbox. Chances are, you have already given in and joined. Membership of the social networking site is increasing all the time, with an ever-greater range of ages and interests joining. Well, now Suffolk Humanists have set up a [group on Facebook](#) as well!

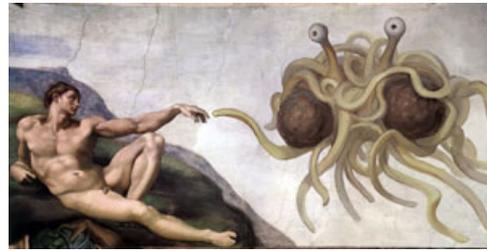


Joining Facebook allows you to find friends old and new, join groups (including ours and those of the NSS, British Humanist Association and even the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster) of interest, and share photos and videos with friends and contacts. Join the Suffolk Humanists group (regardless of where you are), and show your support.

Tags: [facebook](#)

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Nov 2007
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The Flying Spaghetti Monster is being studied by the American Academy of Religion. Honestly. This weekend in San Diego, some of the world's leading religious scholars will be discussing the satirical "deity" in pop culture.



[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Flying Spaghetti Monster theology.](#)

You couldn't make it up. Will they research pirates too?

[The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster](#) (all hail his noodliness!)

Tags: [FSM](#), [Flying+Spaghetti+Monster](#), [American+Academy+of+Religion](#), [AAR](#), [Silliness](#), [Kansas](#)

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Nov 2007
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Dr Jacqueline Watson of the School of Education at the University of East Anglia researched the situation regarding Humanism in RE, including in Suffolk. You can [read the results here](#) (PDF). This is from the [report on the BHA website](#):

New research published today (11/11/07) has suggested that Government policy on including 'secular worldviews such as Humanism' in school RE is not being effectively implemented. The British Humanist Association, which commissioned the research, has expressed its disappointment with the findings, and called for Government action and legislative change to address this failure.

DfES = Department for Education & Skills

QCA = Qualifications & Curriculum Authority

Tags: [SACRE](#), [RE](#), [RE+syllabus](#), [Research](#), [Dr+Jacqueline+Watson](#)

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Nov 2007
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Making the case for the separation of religion and the state in The Economist (1/11/07):

A RELIGIOUS fanatic feels persecuted, goes overseas to fight for his God and then returns home to attempt a bloody act of terrorism. Next week as Britons celebrate the capture of Guy Fawkes, a Catholic jihadist, under the Houses of Parliament in 1605, they might reflect how dismally modern the Gunpowder Plot and Europe's wars of religion now seem.

[Faith and politics | The new wars of religion | Economist.com.](#)

Tags: [The+Economist](#), [Religion+and+the+state](#), [Secularism](#)

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Nov 2007
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Saturday November 24h 2007 is Buy Nothing Day (UK), It's a day where you challenge yourself, your family and friends to switch off from shopping and tune into life. The rules are simple, for 24 hours you will detox from consumerism and live without shopping. Anyone can take part provided they spend a day without spending!

[BUY NOTHING DAY - Saturday November 24th 2007.](#)

Tags: [But+nothing+day](#), [Consumerism](#), [Shopping](#), [Not+shopping](#)

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Nov 2007
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Within the same week, two people have asked me if we have Humanist Sunday Schools in the UK. One drew my attention to this article from [Time magazine](#) about an American Humanist Sunday School. I think we'll have to get our ourselves organised.



On Sunday mornings, most parents who don't believe in the Christian God, or any god at all, are probably making brunch or cheering at their kids' soccer game, or running errands or, with luck, sleeping in. Without religion, there's no need for church, right?

Maybe. But some nonbelievers are beginning to think they might need something for their children. "When you have kids," says Julie Willey, a design engineer, "you start to notice that your co-workers or friends have church groups to help teach their kids values and to be able to lean on." So every week, Willey, who was raised Buddhist and says she has never believed in God, and her husband pack their four kids into their blue minivan and head to the Humanist Community Center in Palo Alto, Calif., for atheist Sunday school.

[Sunday School for Atheists - TIME.](#)

Tags: [American+Humanists](#), [Humanist+Sunday+School](#), [Sunday+School](#), [Children](#), [Humanism+for+Children](#)

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Nov 2007
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The November 2007 edition of IHN is now available online for download in [PDF](#) format.

There are articles on:

Superstition, Witchcraft and Humanism
Leaving Faith
Looking at North America
The Turin Colloquium, 16 June 2007

I wrote some of it, but don't let that influence you!

[International Humanist News](#)

Tags: [IHN](#), [IHEU](#), [International+Humanist+News](#)

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Nov 2007
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Libby Purves writes:

Of all the sure ways to promote a film, one of the surest is to get it criticised by the religious right. On that basis Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*, out in the US (in time for er, um, Christmas), is on a winner.

[Pullman has responded](#). [Newsweek](#) reports on the row; the [Catholic League](#) is incandescent. Parents are being warned not to let their children see the film as it is "spiritual poison".

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Golden Compass Rumpus.](#)

[Philip Pullman CBE is a distinguished supporter of the British Humanist Association](#), and [an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society](#).

Tags: [Philip+Pullman](#), [Film](#), [Catholics](#)

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Nov 2007
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Report Launch: Proposed public service reforms risk discrimination against employees and service users and negative effects on social cohesion

[The British Humanist Association](#) (BHA) today [28/11/07] announces the launch of a major new report into the contracting out of public services to religious organisations. The launch of the report is being supported by the [TUC](#) and its conclusions endorsed by public figures including Lord Warner, former minister at the Department of Health.

The report's findings demonstrate that there is no evidence that religious organisations offer any distinctive benefits to the supply and

provision of public services and actually that the Government's clear policy objective of expanding the role of religious organisations within the public services runs the risk of lowering standards, increasing inequalities, introducing 'parallel services' and damaging social cohesion.

The research warns of the dangers of discrimination against staff not protected by Employment Equality Regulations pertaining to religion or belief or sexual orientation because of the exemptions that religious organisations have from equality legislation, and of potential barriers to accessing public services for the general public.

Hanne Stinson, BHA Chief Executive, said 'We are publishing Quality and Equality to draw attention to our concerns about the current policy to make religion a central feature in the provision and delivery of a wide range of public services. Through the report, we want to make clear our position that the most fair and most inclusive services – for service users of all faiths and none – are secular services. The report sets out the problems for employees and service users, the risks of discrimination and inequality, the damage to social cohesion and the infringements on human rights, which will arise from the Government's policy of contracting out public services to religious organisations. We are calling on the Government to address these concerns.'

Polly Toynbee, President of the BHA, said 'It cannot be right that any provider of public services is permitted by law to discriminate in employment policies or in the manner in which it provides statutory, state funded public services.'

Quality and Equality calls for secular and inclusive services and recommends a more transparent tendering process for religious organisations contracted into public service supply and delivery. In addition, it highlights the need for legislative change to ensure that organisations providing public services:

- could not discriminate between service users on grounds of 'religion or belief', or on any other grounds;
- must respect the human rights of service users;
- have equality-based employment policies, so that no one is privileged for a position because of her/his religion or belief, her/his sexual orientation, or on any other irrelevant ground.

["Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations" can be downloaded from the BHA website.](#)

[Download an executive summary here.](#)

Tags: [BHA](#), [British+Humanist+Association](#), [Government](#), [Public+services](#), [Human+rights](#)

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Nov 2007
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Europeans who have no religion are increasing in number but are becoming increasingly disadvantaged in the political process. This was the claim by the National Secular Society at a meeting in the European Parliament on "Religion and Politics in the New Europe" sponsored by Catholics for Choice.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society said: "The majority of the EU population are either non-religious or do not actively practise any religion and they are being betrayed because increasingly strident religious influence on moral matters in EU institutions."

[*National Secular Society - National Secular Society - Rights of non-believers being compromised by growth of religious power-seeking, says NSS at European conference.*](#)

Tags: [National+Secular+Society](#), [Europe](#), [Catholics+for+Choice](#), [Keith+Porteous+Wood](#)

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Dec 2007
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[An angry Italian priest has persuaded soft drinks company Red Bull to withdraw an advertisement setting its product in a nativity scene on the grounds it is disrespectful to Christianity.](#)

Father Marco Damanti, from Sicily, wrote to the makers of the caffeinated energy drink denouncing their commercial as "a blasphemous act" and said yesterday he had received a prompt reply promising to remove it from Italian television.

Tags: [Red+Bull](#), [Italy](#), [Blasphemy](#)

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Dec 2007
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[Professor Dawkins](#) will be answering questions on the BBC's World Service [Have Your Say programme on Sunday 9 December](#) at 2.06 pm.



Pope Benedict has attacked atheism in his latest encyclical. He says it is responsible for some of the "greatest forms of cruelty and violations of justice" in history. He adds "man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope".

Professor Dawkins says "many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense ... September 11th 2001 changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense".

Did God invent man or did man invent God? Does religion stoke conflict or help to avoid it? Is it possible to have hope without belief? Does science provide more answers than religion? Is atheism a religion?

If you want to take part in the programme, contact the BBC through their website (see link above).

Tags: [Have+Your+Say](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [BBC+World+Service](#)

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Dec 2007
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E-mail: mail@suffolksuffolk.org.uk
Event description:

Margaret Nelson will be interviewed about Christmas by presenter Rachel Sloane on BBC Radio Suffolk.

BBC Radio Suffolk's FM frequencies are 103.9 (Ipswich), 104.6 (west Suffolk), 95.5 (Lowestoft), 95.9 (Aldeburgh). It's not available on medium wave or DAB, but you can listen live online - see link below.

You can [read about Christmas on our site](#), and [buy R J Stovold's little book, "Did Christians steal Christmas?" for the bargain price of Â£2.99 from the NSS website](#). Just the thing to have handy the next time someone starts going on about "the real meaning of Christmas"!

Further info: www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/

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Dec 2007
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I make a mental note of new words I hear or read if I think they may come in useful. Last week someone used the word "anthropocentric", and I had to look it up because it had been used in connection with Humanism.

Anthropocentric is an adjective that means regarding humans as the central element of the universe, or interpreting reality exclusively in terms of human values and experience (I'm not sure how else we might interpret reality, but that's another matter). The person who used the word described himself as an atheist but said he wasn't "a fluffy Humanist", because he thought Humanism is about being anthropocentric and is too "soft" on issues to do with religion.

Apart from denying that I'm at all "fluffy", this set me wondering how many others think that Humanism is all about humans being the centre of the universe, while other life forms hardly matter. I know that some of our detractors imagine that we stand for a form of collective selfish interest, putting our needs and wants before others.

Monday was [Human Rights Day](#), the anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the UN in 1948. I hope that no one seriously imagines that those rights can be claimed without responsibilities. Of course, the weaker members of society – the very old, the very young, the poor and the sick – cannot be expected to accept the same responsibilities as those of us who are more fortunate, but it's nevertheless true that one cannot have rights without responsibilities.

The difference between human beings and the other species who share this small planet is that we know – or at least most of us know – how our behaviour affects other people, other species, and the planet as a whole. Humanity is potentially the most dangerous and the most creative species, capable of great harm or great good, or lots of small harms or many small positive acts.

[Humanism](#) is about responsibilities *and* rights, without religion. That's not "fluffy", is it?

Tags: [Atheism](#), [Anthropocentrism](#)

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Dec 2007

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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Suffolk Humanist Nathan Nelson will report on his latest stint as a volunteer at the Sangkheum Centre for Children, Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Nathan writes:

"I've been living and working in Cambodia for five months now. Cambodia is a country that constantly surprises, amuses and frustrates, where the few rich ride Lexus and Mercedes, while most of the population still live on a dollar a day or less. Despite widespread poverty, massive problems with HIV/AIDS and other diseases, a useless education system and miasmatic corruption, the Khmer people are kind, curious, cheeky and good-humoured, and the country is lush and beautiful. I have been working with young adults at an orphanage and education centre outside Siem Reap (Cambodia's main tourist town and the home to the temples of Angkor) on training and developing them for life outside the orphanage, work and further education.

"I'd love to share progress on this project with you as well as some insights in to Cambodian life, people, food and language, with photos, video and music."

We'll be in Room 1 at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich.

Further info: <http://www.sangkheum.org/index.php>
Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/27bo8p>

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Dec 2007

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The latest salvo in creationism's increasingly ferocious battle with evolution is about to be fired in Lancashire. Not in a fiery sermon preached from the pulpit, but in the form of a giant Christian theme park that will champion the book of Genesis and make a multi-media case that God created the world in seven days.

The AH Trust, a charity set up last year by a group of businessmen alarmed by the direction in which they see society heading, has identified a number of potential sites in the north west of England to build the £3.5m Christian theme park.

[Creationists plan British theme park | UK News | The Observer](#).

If they want to waste their money on this, that's fine, but please, no public money for such silliness!

Tags: [Creationism](#), [Theme+Park](#), [The+A+H+Trust](#)

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Dec 2007

Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrats' new leader, has defied political convention with a frank admission that he is an atheist.

During a round of media broadcasts on the morning after his election to the post, he was asked by one interviewer: "Do you believe in God?"

"No," Mr Clegg answered simply, during an appearance on BBC Radio 5 Live.

[*Nick Clegg says: 'I don't believe in God' -Times Online.*](#)

However Mrs Clegg is a Catholic and their children are being brought up as Catholics. Will they reject religion more easily when they grow up, because their father has, or will the Catholicism be permanent?

Tags: [Nick+Clegg](#), [Liberal+Democrats](#), [Catholicism](#), [Children](#), [Indoctrination](#)

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Dec 2007
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Since I became President of the National Secular Society, I have been aware that some religious people, who know me only through this public persona, regard me as some kind of hateful monster who is trying to kill their faith. People who know me personally, on the other hand, think I am an old softy, who is as anxious to please as an aged golden retriever waddling to fetch a stick.

Being aware of this dual perception, and how easy it is to misunderstand other people's motives, I try not to jump immediately to the conclusion that those who criticise the NSS (sometimes very fiercely) are automatically crazy people who don't deserve to be listened to.

I give them the benefit of the doubt, and if ever I get to meet them – which I do from time to time in broadcasting studios or on debating platforms – I usually find them personable, charming and friendly. They, too, have a public persona and are obliged to summarise their ideas in sound-bites for the media, without much qualification. In those circumstances, it is easy to sound hard and unrelenting. When we get to talk, and expand our ideas and explain them, there is usually at least some area of agreement between us.

So, let's get this right – we're engaged in a battle of ideas, not of people. We all know what happens when people don't talk and discuss – they become suspicious of each other and they fight.

So, my New Year's resolution is to talk, debate, discuss, explore and listen; to continue to struggle for a secular structure for society, but in a reasonable and rational way.

Secularism is about living together in peace and harmony, without exploitation and without coercion. It isn't primarily about attacking religion or religious believers. Although we may have a lot of sympathy with the rationalism of Dawkins and Hitchens, we realise that the argument about the truth or otherwise of religion is separate from the struggle for secularism.

Whatever we may feel about religion – and I know that many NSS members have very strong anti-religious instincts – we have to be pragmatic and understand that religion is not going away. So, secularism tries to create a shared space where no-one can dominate. The veracity or otherwise of religious belief is a legitimate argument, but not one that is central to the creation of a secular society.

Secularism is about listening to other people's point of view, but sometimes agreeing to differ. It goes like this: you do what you want (within the law) in your space (temple, mosque, church, home), and we'll do what we want in our space (likewise within the law), and we'll agree not to interfere with each other while within those spaces.

But in the space that we have to share – the public square as it has been called - there can only be democracy. The direction and shape of our society and culture must be agreed between us, believer and non-believer alike, not imposed by divine right or by superior strength. In that way, we all participate. We don't always get what we want, but at least we have the opportunity to lobby to change things by argument and persuasion, rather than by force and fiat.

But now, as the holiday approaches, and the time comes for reunions with family and friends, for the exchange of presents and for the sharing of good food and drink, we can live in peace with each other, at least for these few days. The churches are open for those who want them, and so are the boozers. Christmas carols will be sung and Monopoly played. Telly will be watched and snoozes taken. For those lucky enough to be in the warmth of good company, there will be a central feast and the sound of children enjoying what is, essentially, their special time.

Our friends from Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu backgrounds will be able to share in the excitement and enjoy the holiday, too. The mischievous forces that try to make life difficult for them should be challenged, but over the holiday time, we can try to put aside those human-made differences and just let it be. Let's leave the point-scoring and the arguing until next year.

Despite the claims of some, this mid-winter holiday does not uniquely belong to one section of the community. Indeed, there is no reason why atheists can't enjoy it with a clear conscience. I certainly will and I sincerely hope you will, too.

So, whatever your religion (or lack of it) and whatever your circumstances, I wish you a very happy Christmas – as well as a peaceful solstice time and a jolly holly-day.

Tags: [NSS](#), [Secularism](#), [Christmas](#)

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Dec 2007
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This time of year is invariably a challenge with small children, particularly if you aren't Christian. For the past few years, my halcyon days of totally ignoring Christmas have been entirely forgotten. I got away with not celebrating when my first child was one, but as she turned two I couldn't hold out any longer. Once my second child came along, I had no choice but to rethink how I'd manage over the festive season.

I work very hard in the run up to Christmas to keep the kids focused on the people they love, and who love them. Part of this is making almost all our gifts and cards, and I try to make something for each of the children too. I occasionally let the kids buy something very small, but usually my response when they ask is "Do you have any money? No? Well we'll have to make something then." Gifts have ranged from sponge-painted underpants (my particular favourite) to hand-painted flower pots with bags of compost and chilli pepper seeds inside them. We've given pine cone bird feeders, decorated oven gloves and lots of truffles, biscuits and cakes. Occasionally, I have to remind the kids to think about what the recipient might like, rather than their own likes. (My son recently made a Spiderman card for Nana's birthday).

I do various things to keep consumerism down in my household, and to try and limit the number of toys the children have. Don't get me wrong... they have unlimited craft materials and access to creative toys like puppets and Lego. It's the nasty plastic rubbish I try to keep under control. My avoidance tactics are pretty stern; the children are allowed some TV, but it's almost always one of the BBC channels. On the rare occasions we watch commercial TV together they know I mute the adverts. My daughter has even started muting them for me. Nevertheless, she knows exactly which brand of dolly she would like from Santa, after a brief exposure to TV ads! One thing we never do is go shopping as a leisure activity; partly because I can't see the point, but also because children can't help but ask for almost every toy they see, even if they know the answer will be "No". There's no point in showing them all the things I won't let them buy for themselves or other people.

We spend the festive season having fun. We eat every meal together round the table (often food we've all helped prepare). We sing carols and Christmas songs loudly and at every opportunity, sometimes with my daughter playing them on the piano. We drive around in the dark with a flask of hot chocolate, looking for the most outrageous Christmas lights. Most of all we spend time together (and remarkably little money). It's during that time together that I talk about why Christmas is celebrated, and what it means to some people, while making it clear that it's not what I believe. We talk about which traditions pre-date Christianity, and why our friends are having a celebration on the shortest day. I stop short of explaining Santa wears red because of an highly effective Coca-Cola advertising campaign...that one, I'm keeping for when they're a bit older. Enjoy the festive season and best wishes for the New Year.

Tags: [Christmas](#), [Children](#), [Family](#)

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Dec 2007
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My letter published in the East Anglian Daily Times on Wednesday, 19th December, after there'd been at least two letters in the last month calling on people to celebrate the "true Christian" origin of Christmas:

In our society the freedom to practice religion is a fundamental right, so Christians are perfectly entitled to celebrate their own take on life, the universe and everything, at this time of the year.

At the same time everyone else is entitled to their own views so, each year as the Winter Solstice approaches, would Christians please refrain from asking, nay demanding, that the rest of us "celebrate the true Christian meaning of Christmas".

There is overwhelming evidence that the origins of our annual end of December jamboree go much further back in human history than the relatively "new kid on the block" Christianity. Our ancient ancestors of the high northern latitudes would have watched with trepidation as the life giving sun slipped lower and lower in the winter sky and the days got ever shorter. They had no means of knowing how or why it happened but, every year, just as it seemed the sun would disappear completely over the horizon it would start rising again, bringing longer days and the promise of another summer of warmth and fertility.

What better excuse for putting aside a regular amount of their meagre food supplies in order to have a mighty 'blow out' as soon as their observations confirmed that the sun was indeed returning for another year. The first day on which they could be confident the sun really was coming back, coincided approximately with 25th December in our modern calendar.

The Christianisation of the pagan festival of Yuletide, which had grown out of those observations, is but one example of how Christianity was created by picking, mixing and borrowing myths and festivals for every purpose from other, pre-existing, beliefs. Off the shelf Virgin birth myths were available from the Chinese, Indians, Etruscans, Egyptians and Greeks, whose deity Dionysos was "the son of Zeus, born of a virgin, who took the guise of a common man". Now where have I heard something like that before?



The mythical storehouse also contained off the shelf myths that were adapted into the stories of "the Star of Bethlehem, the Three Kings, the Stable, and the Massacre of the Innocents" as well as a plentiful supply covering such topics as ordinary everyday miracles and resurrections from the dead, a version of which was woven into the Pagan spring equinox festival of Eostre when that was stolen by the Christians, but that's another story.

Another piece of figgy pudding anyone?

David Mitchell

Tags: [Christmas](#), [East+Anglian+Daily+Times](#)

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Dec 2007

Arranging a humanist funeral

These days most undertakers are familiar with humanist funerals and so should be able to connect you with a local humanist celebrant. However it is important that you let them know that you want them to arrange a humanist funeral and not just a 'non-religious' one undertaken by an "Independent Celebrant" as these can be formulaic and may include hymns, prayers etc. One way of checking is to ask if the celebrant is accredited by Humanists UK or you can find out for yourself [via the humanists UK website](#).

If you are uncertain as to whether or not a humanist funeral is appropriate a concise yet comprehensive book is ["Funerals without God"](#) available from Humanists UK . This explains what a humanist funeral involves and provides practical advice not just on how to arrange one but even on how to conduct one yourself.

Finally, as there is no legal requirement to have a funeral celebration it may be decided not to have a formal funeral at all. "Unattended funerals" as these are known are often followed up with a memorial event. Again the undertaker should be able to advise.

Tags: [Funerals](#), [Weddings](#), [Baby-namings](#), [DIY+ceremonies](#)