

*An introduction to Humanism for kids (and anyone else who's interested).* How did it all begin? Where did we come from? Thousands of years ago, there were fewer people than there are today - about a million on the whole planet in 10,000 BC, after the last Ice Age. Today there are over 6.8 billion people - that's 6,800 times more than there were. Human beings were widely scattered in small groups thousands of years ago, so they rarely came across anyone from outside their own tribe or community. They made up stories to explain how they came to be here because they didn't know what we know now. These stories were handed down from parents to children, and so on. One story began in the ancient city of Babylon, which was where modern Iraq is now. It became so popular that it formed the first chapter of the Bible story of Genesis, where the world was created in seven days. Even today, when we know much more than the Babylonians did about how the world began, some people still believe it's true. I think the true story is much more interesting. 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. In the last few years, NASA (The American National Aeronautics and Space Administration) 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. And here we are, whirling round a relatively small star, our sun, on a tiny planet in all the vastness of space. 3½ billion years ago, the Earth was uninhabitable. There was nothing here that you'd recognise - no plants, no animals. If we travelled back in time, you and I wouldn't be able to survive because the air wasn't fit to breathe and there was no food. Half a billion years later simple organic compounds were formed - the basis of life. They were just microscopic specks of chemicals. It was a very long time before DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) evolved, which made more complex life forms possible, but they were such small, primitive life forms that you wouldn't have been able to recognise them. You might have heard people talking about DNA on TV, in crime or medical dramas. Gradually, over a very long

Evolution clock

period of time, these small things evolved into creatures that you might have recognised; insects appeared about 300 million years ago. The first dinosaurs didn't appear until over 250 million years ago. 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. In the beginning there was just space, stars and planets. No one knows exactly how the universe began, but scientists think it just happened with a big bang, billions and billions of years ago. Scientists know a lot more about how life on Earth began, because they've found the evidence for what happened. They've been able to work out how old the rocks in the Earth's crust are, and they've looked at the stars and seen how they're formed, and they've studied fossils to work out how animals and human beings have changed over the centuries. The variety of species is amazing. The natural world is amazing and there is still so much more to learn. Humanists use science and reason to understand the universe and how we came to be here. We are amazing. You are amazing. We are different from all the other creatures that live on our small planet. As we've evolved, our brains have got bigger and cleverer, though we don't always use them as well as we should. We can think about all sorts of things, find out all sorts of things, and know all sorts of things. We can make things and destroy things. We can use our imaginations to help us to understand about other people and other

creatures. People like me are called Humanists because we think that we human beings have a special responsibility. As we don't believe in a supernatural being, a sort of superman, that might come and sort out any mistakes we might make, we think it's up to us to make the world a better place for each other and for future generations. We don't think that there's a life after death, but we do think that the effects of our behaviour can be felt after we're dead. If we are kind and generous towards other people and try to avoid hurting anyone, they are more likely to think well of us and to remember us with affection. We don't think you need to believe in a God to be good. People should be good to one another because it's the right thing to do. Most people know this. Many people, not just Humanists, follow the Golden Rule. The Golden Rule has been part of the teachings of many societies and religions, as well as Humanism. There are different versions of it but they all mean the same thing. These are some of them:

- Do as you would be done by.
- Treat other people as you would like to be treated yourself.
- Don't treat others as you wouldn't like to be treated.
- You should always ask yourself what would happen if everyone did what you are doing.

Humanism isn't a religion; it's a way of understanding life for people who live without religion. Many people are Humanists without realising it, because they don't know it has a name. They hear about what it means and they'll say, "That's how I feel!". Although only a small number join a Humanist organisation, many more live as Humanists. There are local groups of Humanists. There's a British Humanist Association, and there are Humanist organisations in other countries too. There's an International Humanist & Ethical Union. The history of Humanism goes back over 2,500 years, to great thinkers of ancient Greece and the Far East. There have been people who

think like us for a very long time, but as we've learned more, we've changed our ideas, mostly because of what we've learned about the world from scientists and other great thinkers. That's essentially what Humanists do; we think a lot, we ask questions, we work things out for ourselves, and we try to live good lives. The international symbol of Humanism is the Happy Human. What do you think it looks like? One of the ways some of us try to help other people is by providing rite of passage ceremonies. A rite of passage is an event or ceremony that marks a stage in someone's life; a birth, a wedding, or a funeral. There've been rites of passage for a very long time, since before Christianity and the other main religions began, because people have always wanted to celebrate these special events and show they care. So what do you do if you're not religious? People used to think that you had to be baptised or married in church, because that's all most people knew about. They thought you could only have a funeral with a religious minister. Now more and more people who live without religion know that they can choose to have ceremonies without hymns or prayers or Bible readings, so they do. You can do these things yourself, or you can hire someone to lead a ceremony for you. Humanist Celebrants lead baby-namings, weddings and funerals for people, without religion. Baby-namings are the equivalent of a christening or baptism. Have any of you been to a rite of passage ceremony? What sort? What was it like? A lot of people like to ask what Humanists do at Christmas, as we don't believe in God. Most of us do much the same as everyone else, apart from going to church - and a lot of people don't go to church anyway. We have presents and parties and good food and drink, and we get together with our families. Most of us try not to go mad and not to spend too much money - we just enjoy ourselves. What religious people may not know is that Christmas is celebrated at around the time of the shortest day of the year, the midwinter solstice, which falls on 21st December. Humans have been celebrating the solstice all over Europe, Scandinavia and around the Mediterranean Sea since long before the Christians called the midwinter festival "Christmas". In fact, for the first four centuries of Christianity the church leaders didn't approve of all the jollity, and didn't celebrate anything. So while other people may celebrate the birth of Christ in the middle of winter (which probably isn't when he was born), we just carry on an ancient tradition because we enjoy it. Sometimes, people ask us if it isn't difficult to be a Humanist, because we don't have a set of rules to obey; we have to work out the answers to our problems ourselves. The trouble with having a set of rules is that the world is changing so fast, they're not much use if they don't change too, or they're soon out of date. We think it's much better to get into the habit of thinking about what we should or shouldn't do when we're young, rather than expecting other people to supply all the answers. What do you think?

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[Irish atheists are set to challenge the new blasphemy law in court](#), if necessary. It's going to be interesting.

If I were to tell you that I sincerely believe that my invisible, all-seeing, everywhere-at-once friend (the one who takes a benign interest in everything I do) is real, would you believe me? Maybe you would, but maybe you wouldn't believe he or she is real, only that I believe he or she is real. You might humour me, for the sake of a friendship or a quiet life, as long as this imaginary friend didn't start interfering in your life. When I say "interfering", of course an imaginary friend can't do anything, but I might try to interfere in your life because (as I might tell you, for your own good) I care about you, and my imaginary friend would like to be your friend too, if you could believe in him, her or it.

You might think I was bonkers if this imaginary friend started dictating my behaviour. Lonely children have imaginary friends, but they usually grow out of them. If adults have invisible friends like Chief Sitting Bull, the spirit guide who attends séances, you might think that there's some trickery involved - there's usually a fee for séances. If adults hear voices, it's usually because they're mentally ill, and with the right medication, the voices are hushed. Most people who have an imaginary friend never actually hear or see him, her or it. Other people, the enlightened ones with the fancy dress, will tell them about this invisible deity:

Immortal, invisible, God only wise  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
Almighty, victorious, thy great Name we praise.

God only wise? Sounds like [Walter Smith](#) had trouble getting his hymn to rhyme.

Praising's fine, as long as I'm not expected to join in. It's when people start making threats I get cross. For example, in the Bible it says:

But those mine enemies, which would not that I should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me (Luke, 19:27).

That's not nice, is it? The Qur'an is full of similar threats, such as:

As for the unbelievers, neither their riches nor their children will in the least save them from God's judgment. They shall become fuel for the Fire (3:10).

As an unbeliever, I'm not in the slightest bit worried about "the Fire", but I do worry about the increasing number of zealots who are keen to slay people like me. Recently, in conversation with a couple of religious friends, I said, "Either you believe or you don't, and they said it wasn't as simple as that; doubt is, apparently, experienced by many of the faithful. Maybe that's one of the reasons why so many zealots are so keen to ban blasphemy - they don't want any doubters, dithering on the brink, to see that poking fun at religion or being rude about it isn't any worse than poking fun at politicians, or being rude about anyone with a tendency to make absurd pronouncements. God does nothing to unbelievers - no lightning strikes, or anything. It's just God's self-appointed enforcers who do the nasty stuff - the maiming and the slaying.

If you have to defend your opinions and ideas with the force of law, even with capital punishment, are they really worth defending?

Surely, if you're confident that you're right, it shouldn't matter what anyone says about what you believe. You may feel annoyed, you may be angry, but, as my mum used to tell me, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names may never hurt me." Words are just words. Challenge them with more words. Don't seek to punish people you disagree with. What matters is what people do, not what they say. I don't much care for the sort of things that a lot of religious people do, like spending my taxes.

What does "blasphemy" mean, anyway? It's "irreverent talk about God or sacred things". That covers a lot, doesn't it? What does "irreverent" mean? It means "disrespectful", and that means "lack of respect or courtesy". It's all so vague. What it boils down to is anything that a sensitive religious person doesn't like, or anything that upsets him or her. Some people are easily upset, so, again, the notion of blasphemy covers a lot. It really doesn't make sense to have a law that involves punishing people for upsetting other people. I get quite upset about being told I shall go to hell because I don't believe in a sky fairy, not because I believe there is such a place, but because the people who tell me this clearly think I'm worthless.

So, [Irish Atheists](#), if you don't win the fight to scrap the stupid law they've brought in over there, so soon after [we got rid of blasphemy on this side of the Irish Sea](#), the old jokes about stupid Irishmen will come back to haunt you. And if [the Islamic States who want to make the defamation of religion a crime at UN level](#) succeed, we'll all be in big trouble.

It only seems right to end with a bit of blasphemy:

So you're gonna live in paradise,  
With a ten-foot cock and a few hundred virgins,  
So you're gonna sacrifice your life,  
For a shot at the greener grass,  
And when the Lord comes down with his shiny rod of judgment,  
He's gonna kick my heathen ass.

*Tim Minchin, Ten-foot Cock and a Few Hundred Virgins, 2005*

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[HumanistLife](#), the BHA's new website, offers a varied selection of stories. Bob Churchill from the BHA says,

The aim is that [www.HumanistLife.org.uk](http://www.HumanistLife.org.uk) will become a major node for expression and discussion of issues close to Humanism on the web.

We want to provide a space where our members and supporters, affiliated humanist groups, staff and Distinguished Supporters can build a content-rich, quality site, giving many humanist and other perspectives on current affairs, society,

science and culture, as well as philosophical, artistic, video-based and other contributions. We want to bring together everyone who shares our broad worldview to present a bold, diverse vision of modern Humanism: its interests, its concerns and its inspirations.

[Leo Igwe](#)

One of the latest reports is about [the courageous Nigerian Humanist, Leo Igwe](#), whose campaign against the "witch-hunters" who target defenceless children, and other human rights violations, have attracted threats against his life.

Postscript: [Today \(5th January\), Leo Igwe was arrested in Nigeria.](#)

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For the latest news about Leo Igwe in Nigeria, see [Think Humanism](#).

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Near the station - 7 Out Northgate, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 1JQ. 01284 754600.

If driving along the A14, come off at the junction where you can see the sugar beet factory silos.

Linden Tree

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To donate to the Disasters Emergency Committee Haiti Appeal, click on the image.

[DEC Appeal](#)

The DEC distributes money to thirteen member agencies, all charities registered in the UK: ActionAid, British Red Cross, CAFOD, Care International UK, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Help the Aged, Islamic Relief, Merlin, Oxfam, Save the Children, Tearfund, and World Vision. To find out more about these organisations, go to [www.dec.org.uk](http://www.dec.org.uk).

Outside the UK, there are a variety of aid agency appeals, including [the International Red Cross](#) appeal.

If you're in the UK, do **not** donate through the new [Non-Believers Giving Aid](#) site, set up by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science. Your donations, via PayPal, won't qualify for gift aid, which could add Â£1.41 to every Â£5 you give. Is your anti-religious prejudice worth that? You can claim gift aid through DEC.

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Jan 2010

Events to commemorate the 65th anniversary of [the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps](#) will be held in and around Suffolk this week.

Holocaust Memorial Day

There is an exhibition in the Waterfront building at University Campus Suffolk from 10am to 4pm on 26th, 27th and 28th January, with a time for reflection from noon until 1.15pm on Wednesday 27th January. Speakers will include councillors from Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council.

Several years ago, our membership included someone who'd been liberated from the Theresienstadt Ghetto in 1945. Nearly 141,000 Jews were sent to the ghetto; only 17,247 survived. The rest died from disease or malnutrition, or were sent to the death camps.

I knew nothing about Henry's history when he was a member of Suffolk Humanists, enjoying social events amongst friends. He never spoke about it, and most people took him for a typically English, mild-mannered gentleman.

Henry Green was the youngest of four children who were raised in a small Jewish community in Poland. They didn't have much money but it was a close, loving family. His father was a pillar of the local community who taught his children his strong ethical values. Everything that Henry knew was destroyed by the Nazis. In his teens, Henry witnessed horrors that most people have never imagined, and few could comprehend. Henry died by suicide, tormented all his life by what he had seen and heard. He lost faith, not just in the religious sense, but in human nature. He found it hard to trust anyone, and hard to settle anywhere. After the war, he spent some time with his brother in Israel and his sister in America, before making his home in England, where he eventually married and had a family.

I learned about Henry's story when I was asked to conduct his funeral, which was at Oakfield Wood green burial ground at Wrabness. His widow spoke at the graveside. Among other things, she said, "Slight of stature, probably due to a childhood when his stomach was frequently empty, Henry was a small man with a big heart, a very generous nature." Among the mourners was a coachload of small men from London. They were members of [the 45-Aid Society](#), holocaust survivors who'd come to England with the [Kindertransport](#), a movement that enabled young refugees to escape. They were all small because, like Henry, they'd been starved when they were growing up. They respected Henry's wish to have a non-religious funeral, but asked if they could say [the Kaddish](#) at the end, which they did. Afterwards, they lined up to hug and kiss me, and thank me for what I'd said, before they climbed aboard the bus and went back to London. It was very moving, and I felt very privileged.

I've befriended two other Jews who were refugees, and eventually conducted their funerals. Their stories were also moving, but Henry's was perhaps the saddest, possibly because of the way he died.

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Feb 2010

The NSS has started a petition calling on the Prime Minister to ask the Catholic Church to pay the estimated £20 million cost of the Pope's visit. If his followers want him to come and see them, fine, but there are better things to spend taxpayers' money on.

Nope

[To sign, click here.](#)

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You may remember the 2007 Pledgebank campaign to send a copy of Richard Dawkins' 'God Delusion' to every MP, if enough people pledged a copy. It succeeded. Now the same person behind that campaign has begun a new one, asking you to pledge:

I will donate one pound to the International Red Cross for each of the 26 Anglican bishops sitting in the House of Lords who completes the Sober Survey but only if 999 others will do the same.

The 'Sober Survey' requires the bishops to answer the following questions:

1. Do chimpanzees and humans share a common ancestor?
2. Did the earth exist 100,000 years ago?
3. Is a long and happy life available to those without religious faith?
4. Are prayers responded to?
5. How do you explain the diversity of life on earth?

6. Can one be moral/ethical without a belief in God?
7. Do you support blood donation and transfusion?
8. Who made man? Who made God?
9. What will happen to you after your death?
10. Does a supernatural intelligence take an interest in your daily activities?

If you think this is a good idea, you'd like to know the bishops' answers and can spare £26, go to [the Pledgebank website](#).

I'm not really interested in what the bishops might say, I just think they ought to quit the House of Lords, and if you can afford to give the Red Cross £26, why not give it to them anyway? [Click here for the Red Cross website](#). BTW, if anyone imagines that the Red Cross symbol has anything to do with the church, you're wrong. It's based on the Swiss flag, because of its neutrality.

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If you live in Suffolk or N E Essex, and you're interested in training as a celebrant, have you considered joining us? I ask, because I've just been talking to someone who didn't know about our training and went elsewhere for some, and only found out when it was too late. You can find out more about us on [our ceremonies page](#).

We don't charge for training, we're local, and we're good. We're also very fussy about selecting people - but if you've got the right qualities, that won't be a problem. You'll be expected to join our group and get to know people, but we're very friendly. [Get in touch!](#)

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If you want to join the campaign, go to

[www.robinhoodtax.org.uk](http://www.robinhoodtax.org.uk).

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Sorry to have delayed posting this, but in case you missed it, [last week's Saturday Play on BBC Radio 4 was Slaughterhouse 5](#), a dramatisation of Kurt Vonnegut's powerful anti-war novel. You have until 4.02pm this Saturday, 20th February, to listen on i-player.

[Kurt Vonnegut](#) was honorary president of the [American Humanist Association](#). He thought religious doctrine was "so much arbitrary, clearly invented balderdash."

Vonnegut said,

New knowledge is the most valuable commodity on earth. The more truth we have to work with, the richer we become.

Kurt Vonnegut

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On Tuesday 23rd February (next Tuesday) there'll be a parliamentary debate about the Government's own amendment to its Children, Schools and Families Bill, which would enable faith schools to teach their own skewed versions of sex and relationships education. [Please read the BHA's report on this](#), and contact your MP urgently.

(Note: the asterisk used in the heading is to avoid the wrong sort of Internet attention).

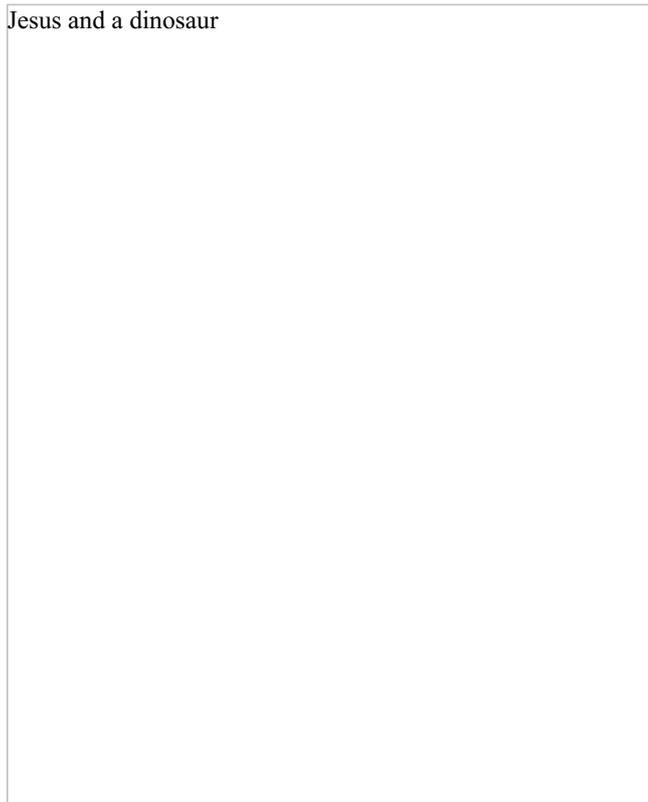
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You may have read elsewhere about the shameful way that the House of Commons voted for [Ed Balls' amendment to the Children, Schools and Families Bill](#), which means that the Catholics are crowing that they've won the right to teach a different version of sex education to other schools. [Mark Steel \(in the Independent\)](#) asked,

How can there be so many lunatics opposed to sex education? And apart from anything else, what makes them think a lesson about sex is going to make kids go out and immediately have sex? It's education about it, not an instruction to get it done before dinner break. Maybe they should demand an end to history lessons as well on the grounds that "I don't want my fourteen-year-old learning about Napoleon as he's too young to invade Italy."

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Jesus and a dinosaur



Picture from [www.defaithed.com](http://www.defaithed.com).

This reminds me of the young man who phoned BBC Radio Suffolk after I was interviewed recently. He said that there were dinosaurs on Noah's Ark, but God chose baby dinosaurs, otherwise there wouldn't have been room.

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Feb 2010  
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Suffolk Humanists & Secularists committee seldom meet face to face  
- we use [Skype](#) because we're scattered all over the county. So far, we haven't done this. Maybe next time. I like the baby best.

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Yesterday, [representatives of the Secular Coalition for America met White House officials](#) to discuss issues of concern to American atheists, humanists and secularists. Before the meeting, they said,

... it will be the latest indication that the secular movement is gaining significant momentum, and that secular Americans, numbering in the tens of millions, are a constituency that must be included.

Predictably, [fundamentalist Christian right-wingers have reacted](#) as though President Obama was making a pact with the devil (who doesn't exist, though try telling them that).

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BHA Chief Executive Andrew Copson was interviewed on BBC News about the amendment to the Children, Schools and Families Bill (see previous posts), before it was debated. Sadly, the Commons voted for Ed Balls' amendment.

Video courtesy of [the BHA](#)

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Mar 2010  
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Newsletter heading

Our March newsletter is now available - [click here to download it](#) (pdf)

[Click here for help with pdf files.](#)

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Mar 2010  
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Thanks to [Catherine Bennett](#), I've learned a new 'ology - [eschatology](#), literally the study of the last. So, if there's an eschatology, there must be eschatologists, right? Gosh, they must be fun in the pub. "Oh, hello, what do you do?" "I study the end of the world." Pause. "Really? How does that happen?" "Well, the dead could be resurrected, or the Devil could be set free, or adultery and fornication will be performed in the open, or ..." "Where's my drink?"

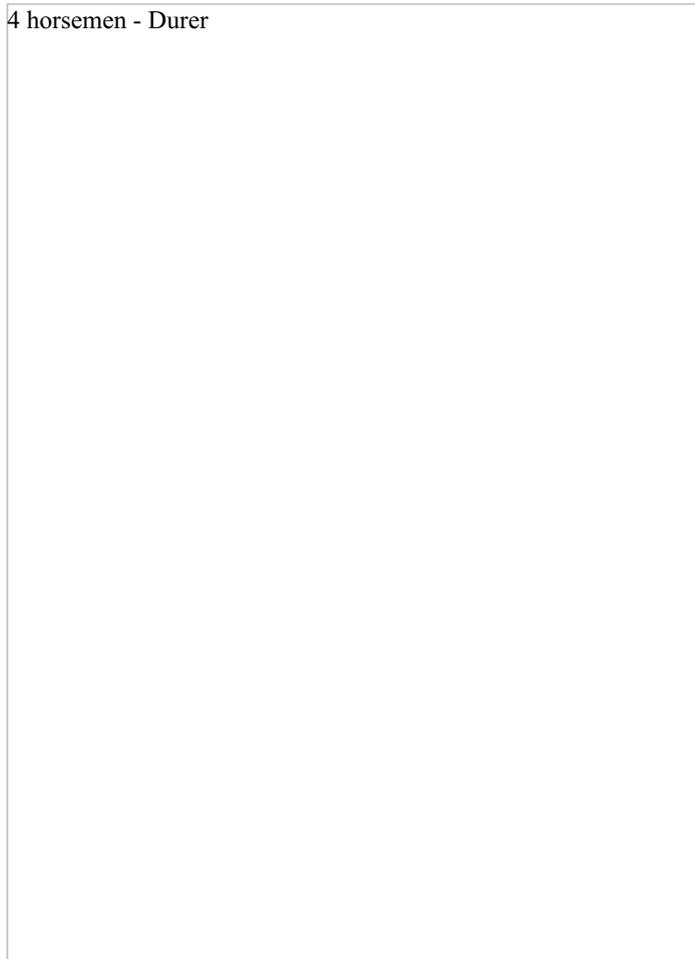


Illustration: [Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse](#), by [Albrecht Dürer](#).

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[Sinéad O'Connor](#), the Irish Catholic singer-songwriter, has reacted angrily to the news that [the Bishop of Ferns, Denis Brennan, has asked parishioners to help pay the compensation](#) claimed by the church's abuse victims. Apparently, he was "â€œasking for help to fulfil a God-given responsibilityâ€. [O'Connor wrote to the Irish Independent](#):

How long do they expect us to restrain ourselves? We have put up with this bull dung for hundreds of years.

A true Christian is someone who, in any given situation, is supposed to ask themselves what would Jesus do, then try to do that.

How an organisation which has acted, decade after decade, only to protect its business interests above the interests of

children can feel it has the right to dictate to us what Christians should do is beyond belief.

From the Pope on down, through the Vatican and therefore through the lower echelons, the whole organisation, in my belief, is utterly anti-Christian and evil, as proven by centuries of torture, bloodshed, burnings, terrorism, and coverings-up of "the worst crime" known to man.

And if Jesus Christ is to be seen in the vulnerable of this world, then all the church has done is crucify the man over and over and over again.

If Christ was here, he would be burning down the Vatican. And I for one would be helping him.

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If you've been following the campaign to stop the funding for homeopathy on the NHS, and [the mass overdose](#) outside branches of Boots, you'll be delighted to hear that Parliament's [Science and Technology Select Committee, after hearing all the evidence, has called for the complete withdrawal of NHS funding and official licencing of homeopathy.](#)

Peter Fisher, director of the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, told the committee that the remedies' efficacy depended on how you shook them (Note: shaken, not stirred):

Dr Fisher stated that the process of 'shaking is important' but was unable to say how much shaking was required. He said 'that has not been fully investigated' but did tell us that 'You have to shake it vigorously [...] if you just stir it gently, it does not work.

Note that the BHA referred to in the news report is the British Homeopathic Association, not the British Humanist Association. I have, however, been dismayed to learn from a reliable source that there are members of the latter organisation who use homeopathy:

... a surprising number of humanists dabble with altmed ... because they haven't really grasped the point about scientific enquiry and evidence, etc.

Oh dear. get your brains in gear people! Didn't you see Richard Dawkins' 'Enemies of Reason' on TV? Members of SH&S can borrow the DVD from our library.

For more on homeopathy, see [Skepticat's blog](#), and [Homeopathy by the \(mind-boggling\) numbers](#).

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Mar 2010

The BHA is appealing for its supporters to use an Internet tool to send a message to the 26 bishops who sit in the House of Lords: Time for a reformed second chamber! [Click here to go to the BHA site.](#)

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RE teacher Mr Thingummybob got our mailing last September, suggesting that they might not have included humanism and secular world views in RE yet, as they're supposed to - I helped to devise a new syllabus that was introduced in September 2007. As Year 10 don't do any RE, though they're supposed to, he has a cunning plan; ask me and a bunch religious speakers in for a morning for a RE "carousel", where we each talk to four of six groups for 50 minutes at a time. Strictly speaking, that's tick box RE. Anyhow, I said I would, and told him where to find some speakers from the minority faiths. We were asked to talk about rites of passage, which suited me fine, as a celebrant.

One teacher asked a group to put up their hands if they'd describe themselves as atheists. Almost all of them did. Didn't surprise me, as various bits of research have shown that a majority of secondary school students and teachers are atheists or agnostics. Had the same sort of response when I asked members of a 6th form at another school the same question, a couple of years ago. If RE covers a variety of faiths, it has the effect of putting kids off religion - they can see the contradictions and inconsistencies. Whether it's any different in faith schools, I'm not sure.

There was one girl who asked me what it would take to convince me there's a god. "Evidence," I said. She asked similar questions several times, with a slightly furrowed brow. "You're worried about me, aren't you?" I asked. "Yes," she said. I've met kids like her before. She seemed to think that I might be in peril as a non-believer. "Don't worry," I said, "I'm fine as I am." She seemed to be having difficulty coming to terms with the idea of a happy atheist.

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Mar 2010  
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Commissioned for the online music festival [Geek Pop](#), a hip-hop anthem for rationalists and atheists. We like.

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Mar 2010  
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As the Catholic church has to find Â£millions to pay compensation to victims of clergy abuse, the excuses being trotted out by the hierarchy are staggeringly creative. Archbishop of Westminster the Most Rev Vincent Nichols, leader of the Catholics in England and Wales, told [the BBC's Newsnight programme](#), "The level of abuse in the Church is actually quite small in terms of the overall levels of abuse in any country." Now Pope Benedict, in his [pastoral letter to Irish Catholics](#), blames the abuse on "the creeping influence of liberal, secular society for weakening resolve against it."

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In a not-too-shocking turn of events in 2008, a tantric guru failed to kill Sanal Edamaruku of the [Indian Rationalist Association](#) on live television using only his mystical powers.

Edamaruku challenged the guru to demonstrate his powers on him after hearing the guru's boasts of being able to kill a man in three minutes using only black magic. The guru obliged. TV ratings went through the roof as India waited to see what would happen.

Pandit Surender Sharma tried several techniques including chanting mantras, sprinkling water on his intended victim, ruffling his hair, and waving a knife around. None of these worked, and two hours later, the guru was forced to admit defeat.

I crush you! I crush you!

The guru said Edamaruku must be under the protection of a very powerful god, to which Edmarku replied that he was an atheist.

The story is recounted in full on the [Rationalist International website](#), and you can [see the 'tantra challenge' on YouTube](#).

Sanal Edamaruku remains a busy man exposing India's wide variety of gurus and fakirs, including one guru having been arrested over prostitution, one who kidnapped a female follower, and one who had been involved in a sex tape scandal.

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Apr 2010  
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Late on Easter Day, BBC One aired a programme that asked, "[Are Christians being persecuted?](#)" (you have 6 days left to view it on i-Player). Presenter Nicky Campbell (of the Big Questions, Sunday's God-slot programme), implied that they are. There was no attempt to present a balanced report. Instead, we got the usual aggrieved BA crucifix wearer and nurse who was sacked for offering to pray for a patient - anecdotal "evidence" of people being mean to Christians. They introduced Polly Toynbee as "President of the National Secular Society", not the BHA, which was typical of the sloppy approach.

[Jonathan Bartley of Ekklesia has blogged a fair assessment of the programme.](#) I've complained to the BBC. [Maybe you might do the same?](#)

[Nicky Campbell is on Twitter.](#)

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Apr 2010  
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Our latest newsletter is ready. [Click here to download it](#) (pdf).

Contents include: what group members have been reading, AGM reports, an addition to our Ceremonies Team, and meeting dates for the year.

Members are reminded that your 2010 subscriptions (a minimum of Â£10) are due now. You can pay by cheque or standing order.

For help with pdf files, [click here](#).

April Newsletter

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AGM 2010

Excellent AGM at Pinewood Community Hall last night. For the first hour, our guests were The Worshipful The Mayor of Ipswich Councillor David Goldsmith and Mayoress, Mrs Goldsmith. We talked about their experiences of visiting various faith and community groups in the town, council prayers, and humanist ceremonies (amongst other things).

The picture shows (left to right) retiring group Chairperson Margaret Nelson, the Mayor, the Mayoress, and newly elected Chairperson Andrew Morrison, who'd just got back from his Humanist wedding in Devon - we wish Andrew and Angie every happiness.

The new committee members are: Chairperson, Andrew Morrison; Vice-Chairperson, John Palmer; Secretary, Denis Johnston; Treasurer, John Mellis; committee members Margaret Nelson and Colleen Nunn.

Photo by John Palmer

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May 2010

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey, has forecast "civil unrest" as a result of recent court decisions involving Christians. This was in response to Lord Justice Laws' dismissal of an appeal by a Christian marriage guidance counsellor who was sacked for refusing to give advice to gay couples.

[The Guardian reported,](#)

Lord Justice Laws said legislation to protect views held purely on religious grounds could not be justified. He said it was an irrational idea "but it is also divisive, capricious and arbitrary".

As [Stephen Bates noted,](#) Lord Carey was most upset that his suggestion should be dismissed so emphatically.

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May 2010

Our May 11th meeting will be a brain-storming session, as we make plans for events over the coming year, mainly for Humanist Week, beginning 21st June, when we've booked a display case at Ipswich Central Library for an exhibit. We'll be in the lounge at Pinewood Hall, as usual.

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May 2010

The theme for the forum on May 11th 2010 was "What on Earth are YOU doing?". SIFRE members from the Faith and Belief communities around Ipswich were asked to speak for not more than ten minutes about the activities, aspirations and needs of their particular communities. SIFRE hoped to be able to identify areas of common concern, areas for cross-faith co-operation, which will be mutually beneficial and where one community might be able to help or advise another on issues of common concern.

As no SH&S member was available to attend the forum (it clashed with our regular meeting), I sent a paper, which ends:

We look forward to the day when everyone, regardless of their beliefs, will be treated as individuals and consulted as such, rather than through their "community". Although some Humanists talk about a "community", the idea is generally anathema to most of us. Some say that trying to organise Humanists is like trying to herd cats, with good reason, because we like to think for ourselves rather than accept any authority. The only form of "community" we recognise is the one we live in "our street, neighbourhood or district" where we have diverse beliefs, interests and opinions, and where we must try to get along together in spite of our differences. The same applies to society in general.

[Click here to download the full text \(pdf\).](#)

[Click here for more about SH&S and Inter-Faith work.](#)

[Click here for help with pdf files.](#)

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May 2010  
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[The Ceremonies Team](#) keep in touch by email and phone between face-to-face meetings. We're friends, we support one another, and we share information, observations and ideas.

During an online discussion about films today, Sophie recommended a speech from a Dustin Hoffman film entitled *Mr Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, aimed at fairly young children, with death as its theme. The passage Sophie particularly loves, "for its simplicity and dignity and honesty", is the following:

Mr. Edward Magorium: [to Molly, about dying] When King Lear dies in Act V, do you know what Shakespeare has written? He's written "He dies." That's all, nothing more. No fanfare, no metaphor, no brilliant final words. The culmination of the most influential work of dramatic literature is "He dies." It takes Shakespeare, a genius, to come up with "He dies." And yet every time I read those two words, I find myself overwhelmed with dysphoria. And I know its only natural to be sad, but not because of the words "He dies." but because of the life we saw prior to the words.

[Pause, walks over to Molly].

I've lived all five of my acts, Mahoney, and I am not asking you to be happy that I must go. I'm only asking that you turn the page, continue reading... and let the next story begin. And if anyone asks what became of me, you relate my life in all its wonder, and end it with a simple and modest "He died."

Molly Mahoney: [starting to sob] I love you.

Mr. Edward Magorium: I love you, too. [picks Molly up, sighs heavily] Your life is an occasion. Rise to it.

Sophie wrote, "Although the film got mixed reviews, I was really impressed with how it treated death."

David Mitchell likes a conversation from the Robert Altman Film *Prairie Home Companion*:

"I'm of an age when if I started to do eulogies, I'd be doing nothing else," the Garrison Keillor character says in Robert Altman's last film. "You don't want to be remembered?" he's asked. "I don't want them to be told to remember me." But it's good and necessary to do just that anyway.

Can you recommend any death-related film scenes?

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May 2010  
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Finalising plans for Humanist Week & 10-minute Topics. We'll be deciding what to put in the display case we've booked at Ipswich Central Library for Humanist Week (starts 21st June). Then, if there's time, it'll be 10-Minute Topics; everyone writes a subject for discussion on a bit of paper, then they all get mixed up and drawn at random. Any bees in your bonnet this week?

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May 2010  
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International Humanist Day is on 21st June, the summer solstice. This year, British Humanists will be marking [Humanist Week](#) from 21st to 27th June with a variety of events. We'll have a display in one of the cases at the entrance to Ipswich Central Library.

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May 2010  
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I'm not one for traipsing round stately homes, being of the opinion that once you have seen one Queen Anne chair and polished mahogany table you have seen them all. However, when the Woodbridge [U3A](#) group planned a visit to Down House – the home of Charles Darwin – I thought this might well be worth a visit. And indeed it was.

The house is important because it was there that Darwin not only wrote his masterpiece, *On the Origin of Species*, but applied scientific reasoning and performed numerous experiments to confirm that his ideas were sound.

The time scales are surprising. Darwin moved into the very substantial Down House in 1842, but this was a full five years after his journey on the Beagle. Perhaps, even more surprisingly, it was only after another seventeen years of reflection (and probably worry) on what he had observed on that voyage that Darwin published his greatest work.

Everything about the house gives me the feeling that although Darwin realised early on just how scientifically significant his discoveries were, he was also acutely aware of the potential social, economic and political impact. In short, he did not want to publish until he was really, really sure of his ground and it was at Down house that he confirmed and reconfirmed that his hypothesis was correct.

A tour is broken into three sections – the ground floor restoration, the second floor exhibition and the garden laboratories.

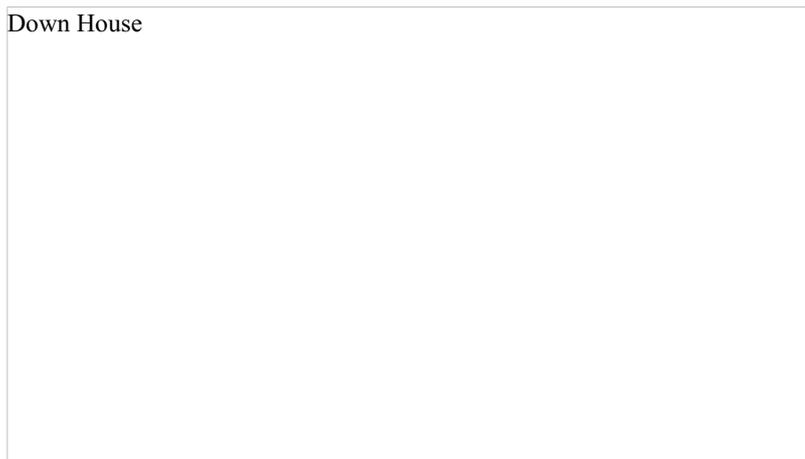
The ground floor of the house has been restored to look much as it would in Darwin’s day with the large dining room set for dinner, the billiard room fully equipped and the drawing room arranged as it was then, including the grand piano. However, for me it was the study that was most intriguing. This wasn't just because of many of the original artefacts – Darwin’s castor wheel chair and microscope amongst them – but that he undertook such a vast amount of ground-breaking research with such simple, even rudimentary, tools.

The second floor is set out as an exhibition of his life and work. Darwin had a reputation for being an unusually liberal father who let his children have the run of the house and who involved them in his work. Much of what is on view here, such as the ‘stair slide’, confirms this. This floor houses many of his books and original manuscripts as well as a large glass cabinet containing what must be hundreds of stuffed birds.

However it is outside in the garden and surrounds where you can really imagine what it was that gave Darwin his inspiration, for here is his open air laboratory. The triple stage hot house was home to experiments involving carnivorous plants and exotic species. On display here are examples of the climbing plants that Darwin studied – measuring how quickly they curled and twisted. Areas of the garden were partitioned to prevent (or encourage) predatory activity, all part of his estimating the impact of the environment upon growth and sustainability. Some were of startling simplicity. For more than seventeen years Darwin measured the extent to which earthworms undermined his ‘worm stone’, observations that led to his conclusions about the importance of worms to many other forms of life and to his book, *The formation of vegetable mould through the action of worms*. Clearly he understood the importance of a catchy ‘must read’ title!

Beyond the immediate garden is his ‘Sandwalk’. Here it is easy to imagine how Darwin, after spending some time writing, would leave his desk and head for his ‘thinking path’ for a period of contemplation, before rushing back to one of his hothouses where he would configure yet another experiment that would further confirm or deny his theory.

I suppose for me there was only one disappointment. It was that upstairs in the exhibition there was a display board making the rather patronising claim that religious belief and the theory of evolution by natural selection were compatible. Somehow I don’t feel that Darwin would have been entirely comfortable with that.



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Edzard Ernst is the first Professor of Complementary Medicine in the United Kingdom. In 2008, Ernst and Simon Singh published *Trick or Treatment? Alternative Medicine on Trial*. Professor Ernst will be the inaugural speaker at Ipswich Skeptics in the Pub.

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As notified to all the Facebook group members, our Facebook group is now closed. Instead, we have a Facebook page. Feel free to sign up there.

[www.facebook.com/suffolkhands](http://www.facebook.com/suffolkhands)

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June newsletter

Our June newsletter is ready for you to download now.

Contents include:

Humanist weddings can be fun (and one of them was for our chairperson);

A visit to Down House with the U3A;

Changes at Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource;

Our car sticker designs - you choose;

Dates for your diary, including a pub lunch and a trip to the seaside.

[Click here to download the newsletter](#) (pdf).

Need [help with pdf files](#)?

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Jun 2010  
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[The BBC has reported an Ofsted report](#) on the teaching of RE in secondary schools, which describes it as "inadequate" in one in five secondary schools. They say, "Its study suggested many teachers were unsure of what they were trying to achieve in the subject."

I'm not surprised. A few years ago, a report was presented to Suffolk's SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) by a middle school teacher who'd been given a grant from an independent body for a sabbatical to research RE provision in the county. Her report showed that, in many schools, RE was a low priority subject that came bottom of the list for resources and staffing. Teachers who were in charge of RE in their schools struggled to maintain standards because of frequent time-table changes, so that a different group of non-specialist teachers might be delegated to teach the subject in different terms. Consequently, a lot of RE was taught by teachers who knew very little about it.

Various research projects have indicated that a significant proportion of secondary school teachers and students aren't religious, and aren't very interested in it. The results from RE departments in the county vary widely. Humanism and secular world views were included in the syllabus introduced in Suffolk in September 2007, but when I visit schools I get the impression that many RE departments haven't begun to include them; they just haven't found out enough about them.

In general, primary school teachers tend to be more religious than secondary school teachers, but they're not necessarily any more informed about religions other than their own, which is overwhelmingly Christian.

My overall impression is that politicians seem to be far more keen on RE than most teachers, who regard it as largely irrelevant. I agree with the NSS that it ought to be an optional subject. RE should have a national syllabus that includes more about the historical and social context of different religions. The Church of England is right to be alarmed; their influence has been steadily declining in schools and elsewhere.

Instead of compulsory RE, philosophical enquiry ought to be part of the National Curriculum, from Year 1 upwards. Teaching children to think would benefit everyone.

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After many years as a Humanist representative on Suffolk's [Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education](#) (SACRE), a full member\* for the last two years, I resigned at today's meeting and recommended Andrew Morrison, our group chairperson, as my replacement. I've enjoyed my involvement with SACRE, though there are so many changes in the offing that I'm happy for Andrew to deal with them. He'll be fine!

I'll provide a full report for members in the next newsletter.

*Margaret*

\*Full membership of a SACRE is still being denied to many Humanists, who are treated as co-options without voting rights.

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I enjoy visiting schools and talking to students but I'm so glad I'm not a teacher any more. All the teachers I know have complained about frequent changes of government policy, masses of paperwork, and SATs testing (Standard Attainment Tests), which have reduced young children to gibbering wrecks with the stress.

Schoolchildren

I'm glad I'm not the parent of a school-age child either. There's been a lot of talk about parental choice, but from what I've read, your choices have been limited. If you're not religious, for example, and all the local schools have a religious ethos, you can either do what many parents do, and pretend to be religious to get your child into the best school, judged by its exam results and Ofsted reports, or what? Find the money to transport your child to a school that's free from religion? It's become so complicated that pushy parents are having to devote a lot of time to researching their options.

The Labour party introduced [academies \(many run by religious organisations\) and specialist schools](#). I'm sorry, but I don't get it. Specialist schools can "specialise" in a number of subjects: arts, business and enterprise, engineering, humanities, languages, mathematics and computing, music, science, sports, technology, and applied learning. What's "applied learning" anyway? Around here, I've come across schools calling themselves "technology colleges" and "science schools". Apparently, the idea is that specialist schools can attract private sponsorship, which could mean lots more computers, for example. [A University of Buckingham report last year](#) questioned the value of specialisation, saying that specialist schools had names that "did not mean very much". The main advantage of becoming a specialist schools appears to be attracting extra money from business sources. But why specialise? Surely secondary schools should offer a good *general* education, with opportunities for students to develop their strengths as they grow older. How does a child whose aptitude is for music or art fit into a specialist science school?

Until recently, local authorities were mainly responsible for schools. Now, any wealthy business person or powerful organisation, including religious organisations, can open a school and call it an "academy". This has resulted in some flashy new buildings (some [without playing fields](#), so they're obviously not sports academies), while local authority school buildings disintegrate from lack of investment, no matter how positive the schools' ethos or high their standards.

The latest fad is "free schools". [Toby Young was one of the first to enthuse about this idea](#). Rumour has it that his group had its inaugural meeting in a wine bar. Even if it's not true, you kind of feel it ought to be. Michael Gove's been busy dismantling the education system over the last few weeks, and is pushing the [free schools](#) idea, to the dismay of teaching unions and others. [The evidence suggests that Swedish free schools may have only short-term positive effects](#), and that their system is different from ours, so there was hardly any alternative to non-selective state schools when they were introduced. If groups of parents start free schools here, what happens when their kids move on? And what if you're not part of the in-crowd? There's ample scope for tyrannical parent-power; who'd want to teach in one of their schools? Yes, I have heard that groups of teachers want to set up free schools too. It's turning into a potential free-for-all, resulting into a fragmented system.

In all this confusion, there'll be ample scope for religious opportunists to grab a slice of the cake and impose their ideologies on young minds. Gives me the shivers.

If I had school age children, I think I might research what other countries offer, pick the best, and move. If you can't afford to do that, perhaps it's safer not to have children.

**Read about [the National Secular Society's view of ideology in education](#)**

**Read [the British Humanist Association's view on free schools](#)**

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Ipswich library June 2010

A belated post on [World Humanist Day](#), the beginning of [Humanist Week](#), but some of us have been busy window-dressing. We've put together an exhibit in one of the display cases at the County Library in Ipswich (Northgate Street) to mark Humanist Day and Week, so if you're in town, take a look.

While we were assembling it all (or while Andrew and John were assembling it - I supervised), a couple of people stopped to talk about it, expressing approval. We gave them leaflets.

My thanks to Andrew, John and Marion, and Sue, for all their help. Couldn't have done it without you!

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An outing to the seaside, starting with fish 'n chips at the Flora Tea Rooms on the beach at Dunwich, then a walk, then tea at the National Trust Centre nearby (if you're thirsty). Family, friends and neighbouring group members welcome. Please let us know if you're coming by Monday 2nd August.

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An email from [One Law for All](#):

Several hundred people joined One Law for All on 20 June at Downing Street to show their opposition to Sharia and religious-based laws in Britain and elsewhere and to demand universal rights and secularism.

A new report ["Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights"](#) was published on the day to coincide with the rally. Human rights activist Gita Sahgal said of the report: "I think it is highly significant that in Britain there has been silence where there should have been condemnation. There is active support for "Sharia laws" precisely because it is limited to denying women rights in the family. No hands are being cut off, so there can't be a problem. Unfortunately for us, senior law officers will find that human rights expert bodies often have a similar attitude. They have done little research on the impact of family laws and the denial of justice caused by parallel systems of justice. That is why the findings of this report are so important. It is such dedicated work that changes the thinking of the experts."

She went on to say: "This campaign stands at the heart of a debate over the future of Britain. It also stands at the heart of global attempts to destroy the most basic rights, to invade liberty and to crush equality and to do this in the name of upholding and promoting human rights. We stand here today facing down forces of racism and fundamentalism as we struggle for secularism."

The pro-Sharia Al-Muhajiroun organised a counter-demonstration to the One Law for All rally. One of their members said: "We

find many of these people who call for human rights and one law. They come and they say that they want equality. But what equality do you get when one man legislates over another? In response, One Law for All Spokesperson, Maryam Namazie, said: "The fight against Sharia law is a fight against Islamism not Muslims, immigrants and people living under Sharia here or elsewhere. So it is very apt for the Islamists to hold a counter-demonstration against our rally. This is where the real battleground lies. With a few members of the far Right English Defence League also there to showcase their bigotry, it became abundantly clear to everyone why our Campaign is fast becoming the banner carrier for universal rights, equality, and one secular law for all in this country and beyond."

MC Fariborz Pooya of the Iranian Secular Society said: "The One Law for All Campaign has brought to centre stage an important debate about the kind of society we want to live in whilst defending the rights of everyone irrespective of religion, race, nationality"; this Campaign is truly the voice of the voiceless."

Women's rights campaigner Yasmin Rehman said: "We Muslims have been a part of the UK for many, many years but the generations before me did not feel the need for or call for segregation in the way that is being demanded now. At the beginning of my career as a women's rights advocate there was no need to apply for a certificate of Khula in divorce cases. Muslim women are now being told that divorces under the English legal system are not valued or recognised without a certificate of Khula and should they remarry without this they will be committing Zina a "crime" punishable by death in many Muslim countries. This is not a view shared by all Islamic scholars but a view that is being pushed through the Islamic councils and tribunals across the UK."

Anna Waters of One Law for All's Legal Team said: "Any reasonable interpretation of the Human Rights Act shows us that there are certain things that it doesn't allow - and one of the things it doesn't allow is for a woman to have an inferior or second class status when she stands before a judge in a court of law. This is exactly what is happening"

Sue Robson of the Gay And Lesbian Humanist Association said: "This is a human rights issue. Here in the UK, it's an egalitarian issue; it's a feminist issue. Elsewhere in our world, the issue is life - and death."

Gerard Phillips of the National Secular Society said that Sharia Law was "nothing less than an attack on human rights and on equality." He went on to say: "It undermines our democracy. It must be opposed."

The rally also heard from others including Naomi Phillips of the British Humanist Association, poets from the Anti-Injustice Movement and singer Adam Barnett.

Protesters then joined a march organised by Iran Solidarity to the embassy of the Islamic regime of Iran. Patty Debonitas of Iran Solidarity UK said: "By coming today you are showing your solidarity with the people here who are victimised under Sharia law and people in Iran who are being victimised under the state power of Sharia." The rally was held on 20 June to mark the killing of Neda Agha-Soltan at a protest in Tehran last year and link the fight against Sharia here with that in Iran and elsewhere.

On the day, Maryam Namazie was interviewed on BBC 1 TV's Breakfast Programme, and some other media outlets.

#### **Notes:**

1. The new One Law for All report "Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights" can be downloaded free of charge or a paperback copy purchased from One Law for All for £5.00 plus £2.00 Shipping and Handling. To purchase the book or donate to the work of One Law for All, please either send a cheque to our address below or [pay via Paypal](#). One Law for All wants to send the report to MPs, the Archbishop of Canterbury and others. It would be very helpful if you could buy extra copies for us to send on to others free of charge.

2. Full speeches of speakers will be available on the website soon as will video footage of the day. [Photos can be found on our website.](#)

3. The One Law for All Campaign was launched on 10 December 2008, International Human Rights Day, to call on the UK Government to recognise that Sharia and religious courts are arbitrary and discriminatory against women and children in particular and that citizenship and human rights are non-negotiable.

4. For further information contact:

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The latest International Humanist & Ethical Union News email:

This is the regular update of news from **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU). You can find the full versions of these news stories [on our web site](#). We are also on [twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#). **Tell your friends** about this newsletter: you can forward it (visit [this link](#)) or ask them to visit [www.iheu.org/newsletter](http://www.iheu.org/newsletter) to subscribe.

*Read more...*

### **APPLY NOW for IHEU-HIVOS 2010 grants**

IHEU invites applications for funding in the IHEU-HIVOS Humanist Network and Development programme for 2010. The deadline for applications is 1 September 2010. [Read more](#)

### **New activities section on iheu.org home page**

A new section highlighting some of IHEU's international activities has been added to the iheu.org home page. These activities include Representing Humanism to the world, Growth and development, Congress travel grants and the Ugandan schools project. [Read more](#)

### **Hundreds join London protest against religious laws**

Several hundred people joined One Law for All on 20 June at Downing Street to show their opposition to Sharia and religious-based laws in Britain and elsewhere and to demand universal rights and secularism. A new report "Sharia Law in Britain: A Threat to One Law for All and Equal Rights" was published on the day to coincide with the rally. [Read more](#)

### **Australian Atheists welcome new Prime Minister "who keeps religion out of politics"**

The Atheist Foundation of Australia (AFA) today congratulated Julia Gillard on her appointment as the new Prime Minister of Australia. [Read more](#)

### **Challenging "untouchability" in Nigeria**

Discrimination against "untouchable castes" afflicts nearly quarter of a billion people around the world. Although many people assume "untouchability" is restricted to communities with a Hindu background, this dehumanizing tradition is found in cultures as different as Japan and Nigeria. In an article in a leading Nigerian newspaper, Leo Igwe explained how the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is working to overcome "untouchability" in Nigeria, despite the government's official denial of the problem. [Read more](#)

### **Slavery and non-belief**

In a statement to the Human Rights Council on 15 June 2010, IHEU Main Representative, Roy Brown, protested against discrimination against non-believers, which, in several states that belong to the Human Rights Council, includes the death penalty for those who reject belief in any god. Brown highlighted a case from the Maldives earlier this month, where Mohammed Nazim was threatened with the death penalty after publicly stating that he found himself unable to believe in Islam. [Read more](#)

### **Women's right to life**

In a statement to the Human Rights Council on 15 June 2010, IHEU Main Representative Roy Brown, highlighted the vital need to recognize the reproductive rights of women. Acknowledging the importance of better reproductive health care, Brown went on to emphasize that "women also desperately need reproductive rights: the information, the means, and the freedom to decide whether and when to become pregnant" in order to reduce the "appalling toll of maternal mortality". [Read more](#)

### **Pakistan "playing with fire"**

In a strong statement to the Human Rights Council on 9 June 2010, IHEU Main Representative Roy Brown accused Pakistan of encouraging discrimination and hatred against religious minorities. Citing condemnation of Pakistan by the Muslim Canadian Congress and a recent resolution of the European parliament calling on Pakistan to remove expressions of hatred from its government approved school textbooks, he reminded the Council and the government of Pakistan that it was government and media support for expressions of hatred that led to the Nazi Holocaust and the genocide in Rwanda. [Read more](#)

### **Prisons should focus on secular programmes, not on religious interventions, say British Humanists**

Prisons should avoid making a fetish of faith and treat prisoners equally, regardless of their religion or belief, the British Humanist Association (BHA) said today. The BHA made comments following the publication of a report, by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, on Muslims in prison. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU condemns UK, Ireland and Pakistan over Freedom of Expression**

In a speech condemning the recent passage of a blasphemy law in Ireland, and UK legislation which criminalises, among other things, causing "religiously aggravated distress", Roy Brown, IHEU Main Representative at the UN Geneva, asked the Human Rights Council whether these two governments have forgotten that it is individuals not ideas or beliefs that merit protection. He also criticized the way in which, at the other extreme, Pakistan permits expression of hatred in the media against Ahmadiyyas and other religious minorities to go unchecked. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU pleads for women's autonomy at UN**

In the annual all-day debate on the Human Rights of Women at the UN Human Rights Council, IHEU representative Magali Prince got the only laugh of the day when she suggested that rather than expecting women to veil themselves from head to foot to avoid provoking men's lust, a more appropriate solution would be for men to stay indoors until they learned some self-control. [Read more](#)

### **Maldavian faces death for "failure to believe"**

When the renowned Islamist preacher Dr Zakir Naik visited the Maldives this week his audience of over 11000 was the largest ever assembled in that island state for a religious lecture. What Dr Naik may not have anticipated, however, was the earthquake that erupted at the end of his talk. A young Maldavian, Mohammed Nazim, asked Dr Naik how Islam viewed a man like him, who had learned all about Islam, had read many books, but was unable to believe? He now knows the answer. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU cites misogyny and corruption as major obstacles to development**

At the Millennium Summit in New York exactly ten years ago, the UN General Assembly adopted ten "Millennium Development Goals" (MDGs) aimed at eliminating poverty, hunger and inequality, and improving healthcare and education worldwide by the year 2015. Today the goal furthest from achievement is MDG 5 "improving the health of women" with an estimated 500,000 women still dying every year from pregnancy related causes. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU welcomes UN focus on Nigerian witch hunts**

The disgraceful problem of child witch hunts in Nigeria has been addressed for the first time by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). In a May 26 meeting with a large delegation of senior government representatives from Nigeria, the CRC raised a number of child rights issues, including birth registration, children in conflict with the law, adolescent health, adoption, child trafficking, street children, child marriage as well as witchcraft allegations against children. [Read more](#)

### **Christian advert declaring "there definitely is a God" is most complained about non-broadcast ad ever**

An advertisement campaign run by the Christian Party, declaring "There definitely is a God. So join the Christian Party and enjoy your life", has not only topped the Advertising Standards Authority's Top 10 of most complained about adverts in 2009, it is the most complained about non-broadcast advert ever. The adverts were on the sides of buses, deliberately mirroring the British Humanist Association's high-profile "Atheist Bus Campaign" from earlier in the same year. [Read more](#)

### **British Humanists give mixed response to new Government policies**

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has responded to policy announcements by the new UK Government. The BHA welcomed the commitment to human rights outlined in a major speech by new Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, but expressed "surprise and disappointment" with the new government's pledge to create more state-funded religious schools. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU General Assembly 2010**

The IHEU General Assembly 2010 will be held at the offices of Centre d'Action Laique (CAL), Campus de la Plaine "CP 236, Avenue Arnaud Fraiteur, Acces 2, 1050, Brussels, Belgium on Friday 6 August 2010 (9.30 am to 5.30 pm) and Saturday 7 August 2010 (9.30 am to 12.30 pm). There will also be a preliminary session at the same venue on Thursday 5 August 2010 (2.00 pm to 5.00 pm) with presentations on campaigning in India, Humanism in Belgium and Secularism. All those registering will be sent further information. [Read more](#)

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Jul 2010  
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Humanist Celebrant Margaret Nelson will be talking about baby-naming ceremonies on BBC Radio Suffolk. Not sure how long for - tune in before 11.30 to be sure. If you're not in Suffolk or N Essex you can listen online. Note: This has been changed from Tuesday 13th.

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Jul 2010  
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IHEU is seeking donations to its Human Rights Defense Fund to help cover legal fees for Leo Igwe, IHEU's Representative in West Africa. Mr. Igwe and members of his family have been subjected to a sustained campaign of harassment by local police involving multiple arrests on unsubstantiated charges since he began a campaign to bring to justice a powerful local man accused of raping a ten year old girl.

Leo Igwe

[Read more here and please donate if you can.](#)

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I have a feeling that Eric Pickles, our Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (heaven help us!), probably isn't one of [Nick Clegg's](#) favourite cabinet colleagues. Here's why:

Eric Pickles

**[Mr Pickles wants us all to go back to Church - Terry Sanderson.](#)**

To [let Mr Pickles know what you think](#), go to his website.

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Just did a radio interview about [baby-naming or welcoming ceremonies](#). Didn't get a chance to say a lot but was asked how much we charge. I said £130. One of the other contributors, a clergyman, said theirs are free. Of course they are - he's paid a salary by his church. We're self-employed. I asked the presenter, James Hazell, to point this out.

To hear the item, wait until the programme is available on Listen Again on the BBC website, and listen from about 11.45am.

To find out more, [read about our ceremonies](#).

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Muslims deficient in a sense of humour or proportion are upset about [a scene from BBC TV's Eastenders](#) in which a gay Muslim character handles his copy of the Qur'an rather roughly, upset about his love life. He probably didn't even say "Oops!", though I wouldn't know because I never watch it.

Oh please! Taking offence has become a full-time occupation for some people.

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Thank you if you emailed your MP about the Academies Bill in response to an urgent appeal a few days ago, but it doesn't look as though we've had much success. One of our members had an email from his MP, as follows:

Thank you for your email ... and I note your concerns.

However, I have a different view to you on this matter and am a great advocate of faith schools.

I think you will find that there are safeguards for a balanced curriculum and I will not be tabling any amendments.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Therese Coffey MP  
Suffolk Coastal

[The Academies Bill](#) is being rushed through Parliament with undue haste to try to get it sorted before the summer recess, which starts on 27 July. Amendments tabled by Dr Julian Huppert MP, vice chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group, would have prevented or restricted religious discrimination in the new Academies' admissions policies.

[The BHA's Head of Public Affairs, Naomi Phillips](#), said:

The reality is that new religious Academies will be able to discriminate against children on religious grounds, excluding those of the "wrong" or no religion. It will prevent many existing "faith schools" from ever becoming inclusive and could lead to some discriminating in admissions when they didn't before. By freeing these new "faith Academies" from the national curriculum, the Bill could also expose children to extreme religious views, including creationism.

The majority of the public are concerned about the influence of religious groups in our schools, but the Government has simply refused to address their concerns. It has rushed through this legislation without proper scrutiny and in doing so risks permanently entrenching religious discrimination and privilege in our schools system. It will be parents, teachers and

children themselves who will be left to pick up the pieces.

Our main fear has been the opportunities that the bill will create for those who wants to set up more faith schools, but another should be the prospect of greater social division if Education Secretary Michael Gove's pet project, free schools, become popular. [Dr Susanne Wiborg of the Institute of Education](#) says that they could create social segregation and that the net improvements will be limited:

If the neo-liberal reforms increased inequality of achievement as well as social segregation in Sweden, a country with a universal welfare state and a relatively high level of social equality, then other countries could risk an even greater increase in inequality from implementing similar kinds of independent schools.

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According to [The White Roses](#), Islam is incompatible with [secularism](#), no matter what "moderate" British Muslims might say.

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Throughout the current debate about faith schools and the Conservatives' determination to muck about with our education system so that we have more "academies" run as faith-based independent schools at public expense, the example of Northern Ireland has been conveniently ignored. One of the main reasons why [the Troubles](#) lasted so long was because of religious segregation. Those of different faiths or no faith were largely invisible. Several generations of children went to segregated schools, continuing to demonize each other and never mixing.

The integrated schools movement started in 1981 with the foundation of Lagan College, thanks to the efforts of parents who wanted a better way of life for their children. Read more about it on the website of the [Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education](#), and ask yourselves why so many people in England are determined to move in the opposite direction?

Integrated Education can best be described as the bringing together in one school of pupils, staff and governors, in roughly equal numbers, from Protestant, Catholic, other faith and no faith backgrounds. It is about cultivating every individual's self-respect and therefore their respect for other people and other cultures. Integrated Education means bringing children up to live as adults in a pluralist society, teaching them to recognize what they hold in common with each and to accept and enjoy any differences.

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[Phillip Hollobone MP has said that he expects niqab wearing constituents to remove them before he'll talk to them. Liberty has warned him of potential legal action under the Equality Act 2006](#), because this would constitute religious discrimination.

Burqa

Maybe Mr Hollobone is right. It would be reasonable to ask someone wearing a crash helmet with tinted face shield to remove it, or a paper bag, so why should a niqab be different? In this instance, I think Liberty is wrong. You might argue that this isn't about religion, but about culture. I've emailed Liberty (not that they'll take any notice of me, having forgotten that I was once on their National Executive committee). This is what I commented on the Guardian website:

I saw two very young women being interviewed on TV about their burqas and niqabs the other day. They were clearly unaware, as are most who are raised in the UK and adopt this form of dress, that this is as much a cultural issue as a religious one. Many Muslim women's families originate in countries where the burqa and niqab aren't worn by a majority, and their interpretation of the Qur'an is quite different; they don't wear Islamic dress. I recently spoke to a young man from Egypt who said he was shocked at the difference between the liberal attitudes back home and the rigidity of the attitudes in a British mosque. He said he'd never go there again as he felt he had nothing in common with the mainly Pakistani people who worshipped there.

Rather than adopting a confrontational attitude, the health education approach might be more successful. There is plenty of evidence here and in Pakistan that covering yourself from head to foot in dark clothing causes rickets and other health problems due to a lack of exposure to sunlight. Unless women are treated for Vitamin D deficiency, they risk having children with rickets too. This is a disease that was virtually wiped out in this country with the Clean Air Act, and now it's returned due to the adoption of the burqa and niqab.

Before the problem can be tackled, we need to deal with the influence of immigrant imams who have very little understanding of British values, and who are determined to keep women in ignorance. The two girls I mentioned earlier, aged 16 and 17, said that they were willing to rule themselves out of the possibility of a career in medicine or law, for example, because of a refusal to remove their veils.

The issue is far more complicated than banning the burqa.

[Read about rickets among British Asians](#)

[Read about prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in South Asia](#)

Illustration (c) M Nelson 2010

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A Protest the Pope march and rally will take place in Central London on 18 September. [See the Protest the Pope website](#) for details. If anyone from Suffolk is planning to go could they please [let us know](#)?

Ekklesia, the liberal Christian organisation, has published a report on the BBC's Thought for the Day that "challenges the terms of the current controversy over BBC Radio 4's flagship "God slot" by actually analysing its content" with some surprising results." [See their website for more.](#)

BHA President Polly Toynbee tackles Labour leadership contender Ed Balls about his support for faith schools in [a video on the Guardian website](#), about 10 minutes in.

[Christina Patterson of the Independent has a go at multiculturalism, female genital mutilation \(FGM\) and bad manners](#), and I say "Hear hear!".

Click on the links for more.

Oh, BTW, let me know if the video's any good. Rural broadband's so rubbish these days I've given up trying to watch them.

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Guest speaker Michael Lawrence introduces his presentation as follows:

"Just suppose" is a one hour production, which is an exposé on the link between primitive astronomy/astrology and religious theology. It aims to demonstrate how all theology is inexorably linked with ancient astrological perceptions, and

ultimately, the folly of theological worship. Its purpose is not to discredit the benefit many people gain from following a theological belief, but to provoke lively debate on the future role of religion in the public realm of politics and education given theology's demonstrably fictitious foundation.

Michael has given his talk at a number of other humanist groups, where he's been favourably received.

As always, friends are always welcome. We'll be in the usual place at the usual time.

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While Michael Gove's Academies Bill offers more opportunities for people to set up faith schools or to make existing ones less accountable, the Labour leadership candidates all say they're pro-faith schools. Faith schools are a part, a rather large part, of the problem of "multiculturalism", about which so much nonsense has been spoken and written by ignorant politicians.

Multiculturalism

Romy Hasan's book, *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths*, ought to be on every MP's holiday reading list. [Barry Thorpe's review](#) for the NSS explains clearly *why*:

This book articulates very clearly the dangers and fallacies inherent in the current concept of multiculturalism, illustrated with example after example. It should be compulsory reading for every MP and every government department.

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[DEC Pakistan Floods Appeal](#)

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Something that's been on the Internet for a while, but maybe you haven't seen it - how to deal with homophobes who justify their bigotry by quoting the Bible -

[Dr. Laura Schlessinger](#) is a US radio personality who dispenses advice to people who call in to her radio show. On one of her shows she said that, as an observant

Orthodox Jew, homosexuality is an abomination according to Leviticus 18:22 and cannot be condoned under any circumstance. The following is an open letter to Dr. Laura penned by a US east coast listener, which was posted on the Internet.

Dear Dr. Laura:

Thank you for doing so much to educate people regarding God's Law. I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws and how to follow them:

When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev.1:9. The problem is my neighbors. They claim the odor is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual uncleanness - Lev.15:19- 24. The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev. 19:27. How should they die?

I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? - Lev.24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14)

I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help. Thank you again for reminding us that God's word is eternal and unchanging.

Your devoted fan,  
Jim

Some people have suggested that this was "hijacked" from a [West Wing](#) episode. We don't know which came first, but here's the clip. Makes you wish we had a PM Bartlett.

My thanks to the [Humanists of Utah](#), from whom I lifted this story.

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A great quote in today's [NSS Newsline](#):

Defining spirituality is like shovelling fog -  
[Jim Barksdale, The Big Think](#)

One of our members is keen to "reclaim" the word from the religionists and demonstrate that Humanists aren't mere "materialists". He persuaded us to have five minutes of reflection on a piece of music, a poem, a picture, or something else at each meeting, introduced by individual members in turn. This is a good idea, but some of us are less happy about describing it as a "spiritual" interlude.

I prefer not to use the words "spirituality", "spirit" or "spiritual" in a Humanist context, because they're used in ways that are so vague as to be meaningless, they're commonly associated with religion, and because there are better ways to describe those aspects of our lives that make us more than materialists. I don't think that there's any need to prove that we're *not* materialists. I have no wish to "reclaim" them, because this involves wasting time arguing over definitions with religionists.

See the OED for definitions of [spiritual and spirituality](#), and [spirit](#).

What do you think? To join in the discussion you must be a member of our group and a registered user of this website. We had to do this

to restrict spam, sorry.

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Their first open talk night, when three speakers will give a talk on a subject of science, skepticism or general interest.

ISP say,

The format that we're going to try and keep to is a speaking event every other month, alternating between a guest speaker, and an open talk night, where anyone can take the floor and talk about something that interests them. Non speaking nights will be a casual get together over a beer.

**Note: This meeting has been postponed from the 21st.**

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Our member John Mellis poses the question, and will talk about how science can address metaphysical questions. His introduction...

It's often repeated that science is good at explaining how things work, but is incapable of addressing deeper questions concerning the meaning of life, the universe, and "everything". Such "metaphysical" questions "meaning literally, above physics" are often cited as the exclusive domain of religious belief and explanation. However, recently the ultimate metaphysical question "which could be phrased as: "Why does the Universe exist? Why is there something rather than nothing at all?" has begun to be addressed by science, and interesting answers are emerging!

In this presentation this question is approached in ordinary language, via recent developments and hypotheses arising from recent discoveries in physics and cosmology. The presentation progresses with reference to science's most current knowledge, and emphasises the excitement and challenge of addressing unknown "but not unknowable" questions using the scientific method. Our understanding of the nature of the Universe, and our place in it, has progressed rapidly in the past 50 years, and in the past 10 years our view has been transformed by astonishing discoveries enabled by new instruments (including the Hubble space telescope).

We'll be at the Pinewood Hall, as usual, where sympathetic guests will be welcome.

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Did you watch More4 TV last week, when Richard Dawkins launched his [attack on faith schools](#)? Were you horrified by some of the things that were going on, such as those girls in a Muslim school, who thought the Qur'an's version of our origins was true, and didn't believe in evolution? [Tom Sutcliffe wrote an excellent review](#) for the Independent (and yes, I'm biased). If you're a BHA member, you should have had an email from Richard Dawkins today, appealing for funds for the BHA's campaign. If you didn't, here's what he wrote:

I am writing to you today to ask for your help in fighting the expansion of state-funded faith schools. This is not a campaign against religious education (teaching about religion) but against faith schools, which teach a particular religion as the one true faith (indoctrination in religion).

There are nearly 7,000 state-funded faith schools in England. These schools have many special privileges "they can select pupils on the basis of parents' religious observance, discriminate on religious grounds in the employment of teachers, and teach their own RE syllabus, free of Ofsted supervision and free of any National Curriculum. By the way, RE is the only subject (together with religiously "sensitive" subjects like Sex Education) for which there is no National Curriculum.

Some faith schools, as I discovered while making my recent television documentary, use their state-subsidized freedoms to undermine the teaching of science. It should be unthinkable in the 21st century to have a state-funded school whose science teachers believe the world is less than 10,000 years old, yet that is what I found. And at a school that is little short of a flagship for state-funded Muslim education, I found the pupils regurgitating the Koranic claim that salt and fresh water do not mix. Once again, with the blessing of the teachers, a Holy Book takes unquestioned precedence over scientific evidence "as the pupils could have discovered for themselves in a trivially easy experiment.

As you know, the [British Humanist Association](#) has for many years challenged the spread of these divisive and

discriminatory schools. For the past three years they have employed the UK's only dedicated campaigner against faith schools.

The campaigner (at present James Gray) makes sure that the voices of all those who oppose faith schools are heard " by supporting local campaigns against new religious schools, representing the secularist view in the media, and lobbying government to reform the laws that entrench religious discrimination in our education system. James also works with the [Accord Coalition](#), an alliance of religious and non-religious groups for the reform of faith schools, chaired by Rabbi Jonathan Romain.

With the recent introduction of religious free schools, the power and influence of religious groups in our schools system will increase significantly in the next few years. That's another reason why it's so important that the BHA's campaign against state-funded faith schools should continue to grow louder and stronger.

This work is difficult to fund " and the BHA has this week launched a major new fundraising appeal to ensure that this important post is supported for another twelve months. To find out more and to join me in making a donation, please visit [www.justgiving.com/nofaithschools](http://www.justgiving.com/nofaithschools) and follow the instructions. British taxpayers might consider filling in the Gift Aid form, which will enable the BHA to collect back tax and increase the value of your gift at no extra cost to you.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Dawkins  
Chairman, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science  
Vice President, British Humanist Association

NH promo

There's some good news: New Humanist magazine is now much easier to find. It's on sale in newsagents across the UK. New subscribers can learn about a special offer on the [New Humanist website](#). Laurie Taylor interviewed philosopher Mary Warnock, who says:

Hume was absolutely right when he said that it's only when you think of things from a steady and general point of view that that particular pleasure we call moral pleasure comes into operation. There's a generality about what one thinks is right or wrong, a capacity to think not only about how you'd feel if this or that happened to you, but what society would be like if this was generally done and permitted.

Perhaps we might apply this principle to our behaviour in relation to the environment. Our profligate use of energy is causing climate change, which in turn has led to the recent floods in China and Pakistan. [William Dowell, in Global Post, writes about the floods with a warning](#) that more is to come:

Pakistan's floods, the worst natural disaster in recent memory, have the potential to spark a series of crises that could affect large parts of the world, illustrating perhaps better than ever the political and economic consequences of climate change, analysts and international aid groups say.

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Sep 2010

Steve Martin and the Steep Canyon Rangers sing the first song in the Atheist Hymnal.

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Our latest newsletter is here for you to download with articles on the Pope's visit to the UK, an Indian Humanist's opinion of Mother Teresa, Skeptics in the Pub, and suffering. There's also news about our next meetings and Peter Tatchell's forthcoming TV programme.

[September newsletter](#)

This is from Denis Johnston's article on suffering:

We are alive during the first period in history where we're able to substantially control physical pain—and because we can do that we can also reduce the mental pain associated with having to endure watching the suffering of others.

The understanding that suffering is a consequence of natural and evolutionary processes must be very perplexing for religious people. For once it is recognised that suffering is not caused by supernatural forces it is obvious that it cannot be cured by appealing to the same. At a stroke, prayers and rituals for those who are suffering are rendered meaningless.

[Click here to download the newsletter](#) (pdf). Why not print more than one copy, and give some to your friends?

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[Car sticker](#)

Suffolk Humanists and Secularists members are receiving car stickers this month. They're printed with an easy-to-remember URL. Anyone who investigates will find it leads them to several sources of information about Humanism (click on the image to see where it takes you). An increasing number of people are either fed up with religion altogether, they're indifferent towards it, or [they're rather confused](#). Maybe some of them will be pleased to know that there are many others who feel as they do, and that it's not difficult to live a good life without religion.

Stickers are free to members or to anyone making a donation. Either [click here to pay online](#), or [here to download a membership form](#) for you to post.

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If you missed Margaret Nelson on James Hazell's BBC Suffolk programme this morning, talking about the Pope's visit, you can listen again later online. [Click here to go to the BBC website](#). The item is at the beginning of the programme.

For an alternative view of the Pope's visit, see [The Daily Mash](#).

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Sep 2010  
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I've written to [the East Anglian Daily Times](#), as follows:

Having just heard the Pope's speech on arrival in the UK, I'm absolutely furious. It's bad enough that we're paying tens of thousands of £s for his promotional tour when the Government's telling us we're broke, then one of his minions describes us as like a "Third World country" ironically, the man's supposed to be a "diplomat". Now those of us who don't have a religious faith are aligned with the Nazis. Coming from someone who was in the Hitler Youth, this is astonishing.

In his speech, Pope Benedict referred to "atheist extremism of the twentieth century", meaning the Nazis. Nazism and atheism aren't synonymous, and the "extremism" was entirely Hitler's. Although Hitler seems to have been

confused about his religion – he was raised a Catholic, but his views changed according to who he was talking to – he wasn't an atheist. In a speech made in 1933, he said, "The National Government ... regards Christianity as the foundation of our national morality, and the family as the basis of national life."

Pope Benedict isn't welcome here. He presided over the Vatican's attempts to keep a lid on child abuse accusations. Its record on human rights is appalling. Its attitude to 21st century liberal human values is medieval. And now he compares people like me with Nazis? We're owed an apology, and a refund of the taxes that paid for the Pope's visit.

If it's printed and anyone replies, please let me know. I don't get the paper these days - part of my economy drive.

[Read the Pope's speech here.](#)

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Sep 2010  
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**Review: The New Atheism – Taking a stand for Science and Reason, by Victor J Stenger.** Prometheus Books NY.  
*Michael Imison*

Victor Stenger is an American particle physicist, now retired to Colorado University, where he is an adjunct professor of philosophy. This book is the latest of ten or more well-received popular polemics he has written exploring the interface between physics and religion.

In this work he takes as his starting point the series of best-sellers which started with *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris (2006) and continued with Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God is not Great*. To this group Stenger himself contributed *God the failed Hypothesis* which reached the New York Times bestseller list in March 2007. It can be said that all these works have a self-confident tone which more or less implies that science has settled forever that there is no God (which many of us believe). It should have been foreseen perhaps that this would promote a backlash from the religious and in particular religious scientists anxious to show this view mistaken.

Accordingly, rather than simply re-iterating the arguments of the New Atheists, Stenger concentrates on the books written to refute them. He takes all the significant arguments used to attack atheism and support the existence of God, particularly from scientists, and shows that they are not based on credible evidence and mostly rely on unsupported assertions. His own arguments, on the contrary, are massively bolstered by evidence and copious references to original research. In this sense the book is truly scholarly. But this does not prevent it being highly readable. Take the following succinct paragraph:

"It seems rather obvious to me that as humans began to live closer to one another they were forced to develop codes of behaviour beyond those necessary in a family or tribal setting. Ancient life was violent enough and if everybody lied, robbed and killed with abandon, there would be few people left. Those who were left would have a highly dysfunctional society."

Stenger claims one original contribution to the debate. He takes the philosophical tenet (used to argue that the God hypothesis cannot be disproved) "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence" and turns it on its head to say "Absence of evidence where there ought to be evidence is evidence of absence". Accordingly if there were an all-powerful being who intervened in the Universe to answer prayer or to alleviate suffering there ought to be observable independent evidence of the fact and without it there is no need to posit such a being.

Reading this well argued and enjoyable book I felt it provided me with all the arguments to counter scientific supporters of religion and ample suggestions for further reading.

Though, there is one question that, it occurred to me, no-one has ever asked, which is why a God with the expertise in physics and medicine to create the Universe never revealed to his followers anything useful, such as how to build a steam engine or vaccinate against smallpox – his pronouncements being confined to imposing duties on his followers of precisely the sort that a priesthood seeking to establish its authority would want him to impose.

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Sep 2010  
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The cats can relax. Now that the Pope's gone home, I've stopped shouting at the TV. Who does he think he is, coming over here and telling us we're aggressive secularists, and why does he imagine that the thousands of people who live here quite happily without religion have no morals? As for all that rubbish about atheists and the Nazis – he obviously reads the wrong history books.

I've complained to the BBC about the coverage – too much of it, too biased, too silly. I'm hoping that lots of other people did too, or they may not take much notice. They may not take much notice anyway. If that were the case, I might boycott BBC News, if it weren't for the lovely Gavin Esler.

I wasn't at the grammatically incorrect "Protest the Pope's demonstration, but lots of people I know were, so there's loads

of stuff about it on the Internet.

If you didn't find any of it, here's some that's worth reading...

This is [what the Pope said when he arrived](#), immediately insulting and upsetting a significant proportion of the UK population.

Dr Evan Harris, the former MP who campaigned for the scrapping of the blasphemy law, gave [a lesson in secularism for the ignorant](#).

The BHA's [Andrew West took lots of photographs](#) of the Protest the Pope march and rally in London last Saturday. Just click on a picture to see it large.

The BHA's other [Andrew, Mr Copson, gave the first speech](#) at the same rally.

The BHA's [Bob Churchill answers some of the protesters' critics](#) in Humanist Life.

Dr Ben Goldacre has something to say about [the Pope and AIDS](#).

I'm sure you can find lots more.

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Oct 2010  
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[The BHA](#) and [the NSS](#) have both campaigned to have the next census, due in March 2011, changed to reflect a more accurate picture of religion in Britain, though their approach has differed.

The NSS says,

The information gained from the religion question "widely thought to have been inaccurate and misleading" is used by government departments when deciding about allocation of resources. Religious groups have used it to justify privileges.

A majority ticked 'Christian' in the last census, yet we know that hardly any nominal Christians go to church, belong to any organised religious group, or understand much about the theology of the religion they claim. Many mistakenly think that being Christian is synonymous with being good.

The 2011 census will be the first that we can complete online. Between now and then, secularists like us will be trying to persuade people to think about how they fill in their forms. If you don't want the church to continue to enjoy all the privileges it currently enjoys at public expense, don't give them the ammunition. You might begin by adding the link below to your email signature.

[www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com](http://www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com)

[Click here for more about the Census Campaign.](#)

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Oct 2010  
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*From a lunchtime seminar organised by the East of England Faiths Agency for Suffolk County Council Staff in Ipswich on 14 October 2010. The previous seminar was led by a local vicar and more seminars would be led by various faith representatives. My introduction was followed by a Q & A session.*

I'm a Humanist. Humanism is a descriptive word applied retrospectively (from about the late 19th century) to a certain set of beliefs and values, free from religion. These beliefs and values are at least as old as recorded history.

Humanists accept naturalism (rather than supernaturalism) and we value scientific method as a means to gain knowledge. We accept that this life is the only one we have, and we think that morality arises out of human nature and culture. These ideas are a "permanent alternative" that recur throughout time and place. They've been evident in Europe from the 6th century BCE to about 6th century CE, in China from the 6th century BCE onwards (the followers of Confucius were humanists), in India from the 6th century onwards, in the Arab world from about the 12th century, and in the Western world from about the 17th century onwards.

Humanism isn't a religion for atheists. It's not equivalent to religion. It's not a "faith" - the word "faith" means believing in something without evidence, which is anathema to a humanist. Humanists use reason to try to make sense of life and the world we live in, and if there's something we don't know or understand we're content to admit that we don't know.

Some people misunderstand the word "humanist" and think that it means an anthropocentric (meaning human-centred) view of the universe, as though we're the most important species. We are important because we're potentially the most dangerous species, but humanism's about being aware of this potential and of our responsibility to live in a way that will cause the least harm.

Many humanists might describe themselves as atheists, or are willing to be described as atheists, but I'm uncomfortable with the term, for several reasons. The word atheist comes from the Greek "atheos" meaning "without god," and "theos," meaning god. I don't care to be described in terms of something I'm not or in relation to a belief I don't share. I don't believe in fairies either, but I don't call myself "afairyist." Some humanists might call themselves agnostics, a term invented by the 19th century naturalist Thomas Henry Huxley to mean "without knowledge," as Huxley said it's impossible to say whether or not God exists. Again, this would mean defining yourself in religious terms.

The notion of a God or gods is irrelevant to my life. So is religion. I live perfectly happily without any of it. If other people have faith, that's up to them, but I don't believe that they have any right to try to persuade me to accept their beliefs, or to impose their faith on me or anyone else. This is why I'm a secularist. I reject the opinion expressed by Canon Jenkin last week that faith has a legitimate place in the public sphere. If we're talking about institutionalised religion at public expense, it does not.

Just as the word "humanist" has been misrepresented and misunderstood, so has the term "secular," which was invented by an agnostic British writer called George Holyoake in 1846. He 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." Holyoake referred to Christianity rather than religion in general because this was a culturally Christian country in pre-multiculturalism 1846.

A secular society is one where religion and the state are kept separate, where politics and religion don't mix, and where everyone is free to practice his or her religion, or not to have a religion, according to his or her own conscience, as long as he or she does no harm. There are many religious people who support this principle, as well as humanists like me. In religious states, such as Yemen and Iran, you aren't free to practice any other religion but the state religion and it would be dangerous to assert that you don't believe in a god or gods. In some societies, it would be impossible for Canon Jenkin to assert his Christian beliefs in public.

There are secular states around the world; America, Canada, France, and Turkey (where secularism is under threat from Islamists) are just a few where secular principles are written in their constitutions. In Britain, we're not a secular state because we have an established church, a legacy from King Henry VIII, who split with Rome when he had some difficulties over divorce, an heir, and alliances. The Queen is head of state and the church, and so we have a confused and confusing system. Let's think about how faith in the public sphere works in practice. It's not about censoring people who want to talk about their faith in public, though soap-box preachers are generally ignored.

The Church of England, which has bishops sitting in the House of Lords despite its dwindling congregations and lack of accountability, tends to dominate all national and regional ceremonial, including remembrance events. We live in the only democratic country that has religious representatives in the legislature as of right. If you're a member of the judiciary, the military, or the government, you're expected to participate in Christian services on special occasions, whether you're a believer or not, whatever sort of belief you may have. This makes hypocrites of thousands. I'm told that serving soldiers, sailors and airmen are not excused from church parade, regardless of their religion or lack of it. Religion, or faith, in this sense, is something that's foisted on you, not something you choose. If religious authorities were confident that they were offering people something they wanted or needed, they would allow us to opt in, rather than making it difficult for us to opt out.

I, and many others like me, find it very annoying that whenever an ethical issue is being reported in the news, the media, particularly the broadcast media, invariably find a cleric to comment on the issue, as though the clergy were the only moral authority. Handing over the moral high ground to religious people gives the impression that they have a natural entitlement to it; they do not.

Whenever there's a disaster of some sort, how is it commemorated? With a church service. Any event of this type excludes a significant proportion of the population because the religious terminology, the hymns and prayers, are meaningless to many of us. It was interesting, I thought, that the families and friends of the people killed by the bombs in London on 7th July 2005 organised their own memorial event in Regent's Park a year later, and it was entirely secular so that it included everyone "of all faiths and none." That's how all such public events should be, if they're to be considered inclusive.

Then there's the difficult matter of multiculturalism, a concept that was promoted by Tony Blair, when he was Prime Minister, and his Communities Secretary, Hazel Blears. This has caused more problems than it pretends to solve. If you were as cynical as me, you might be inclined to blame it on the Iraq War, and a clumsy attempt to woo back the Muslim voters who'd abandoned the Labour Party. But even if you're not a cynic, you might recognise that it isn't fair or democratic to offer religious groups special channels of communication to local or national government, especially when those channels have been used by unelected, unaccountable self-appointed "leaders," who presume to speak on behalf of British citizens who ostensibly share the same religion, but whose attitudes and values may vary enormously. The Conservatives rejected this approach to "consultation" as fraught with difficulties, saying that it's better to consult people directly. It's also presumptuous to talk about religious "communities," when this assumes a commonality that may not exist. I recently met a young Egyptian Muslim who said that he'd visited a British mosque that was dominated by Pakistani Muslims, and that he'd never go again as he had nothing in common with them. In places like Oldham and Bradford, where there was rioting a few years ago, immigrant imams, who don't speak English as a first language, impose their backward tribal values on young British people, and wonder why they're resented.

So, in many instances, faith in the public sphere is about people taking liberties by imposing their beliefs on other people, whether they like it or not "a recipe for dissatisfaction."

I wasn't surprised, but I was irritated, to note from Canon Jenkin's summary that he linked atheism with "several of the most

destructive and vile regimes of the 20th century. Within minutes of landing in Britain on his recent visit, the Pope mentioned atheism in connection with Nazism. The Pope should know, and probably does, that Hitler was raised a Catholic and although he may have lapsed, he wasn't an atheist. He developed a personal religious faith that seemed to have something to do with his Aryan ideals. Many Nazis were also Christians, and many Catholic priests openly collaborated with the Nazis in Germany and Italy. Like the other "destructive and vile regimes" Canon Jenkin might have been referring to, atheism didn't have anything to do with the ideologies concerned. As I mentioned earlier, atheism simply means "without god". Describing someone as an atheist doesn't tell you any more than that; it doesn't tell you anything about his or her values and attitudes. Conversely, saying that someone is religious doesn't necessarily mean that he or she is a good person. Whether you are good or bad, or mostly good or bad, doesn't depend on whether or not you believe in a god; it depends on how you behave.

Another fallacy that some religionists are fond of suggesting is that atheists never do anything charitable. This is nonsense. Most of the humanists and atheists I know have contributed or are contributing their voluntary efforts to good causes, but they do it without waving a banner in organisations like the Red Cross, Oxfam, UNICEF and so on, which don't have a religious agenda but do include people of all faiths and none. They're also likely to be found supporting other people on a one to one basis, without making a fuss. I've conducted about a thousand funerals for people who've lived without religion, and I've heard many stories of unselfish actions that have benefitted other people.

Finally, there is another reason why no religious organisation is entitled to claim a legitimate presence in the public sphere, and that's because they don't speak for a majority of those who have a religious faith. Only a minority of nominal Christians, the ones who tick the "Christian" box on the census form or hospital admission form, actually know or understand the theology of Christianity. A minority of British people subscribe to religions that never get a look in, because they're barely recognised – though apparently the Druids have just been recognised as a religion. An increasing number of people will say that they do have a faith, or that they do believe in a god, but don't subscribe to any form of organised religion. They've worked out their own personal set of beliefs, which can be a mixture of paganism, pantheism and pacifism, and they're happy to just try to live quietly by their own values, without coming into conflict with anyone. The conventions and rituals of organised monotheistic religions don't interest them. I seem to remember that there was a newspaper report about some research that demonstrated this not long ago, but I can't remember where it was. My own experience, having talked to people at Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource events, is that this is fairly common. My experience of young people, as a school visitor, is that most wouldn't describe themselves as religious, but they do feel very strongly about ethical issues.

So, my view is that a secular society is the best sort of society for everyone, because it allows you to freely practice whatever faith you choose, or to live without religion without interference, as the case may be, and that the representatives of organised religion have no right to claim a stake in the public sphere, because they speak for a small minority and it's presumptuous of them to do so. As a humanist celebrant with twenty years experience, I can confidently say that there'd be no problem providing ceremonial or other public events to suit any occasion that would include everyone.

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## Notes:

[Funding the Church of England](#): over £200 million is given tax-efficiently each year through Gift Aid and a further £60 million is recovered from the Inland Revenue in tax.

Church voluntary aided schools: the school is owned by the church, a majority of the governors are appointed by the Church, the teachers are appointed and employed by the governing body, the cost of repairs and capital projects is raised by the governing body with 90% grant from the DfES, religious education and worship are distinctively Anglican, the governing body is the admissions authority; Church voluntary controlled schools: the school is owned by the Church, the Church appoints governors, but there is no Church majority on the governing body, the teachers are employed by the Local Education Authority, the LEA funds repairs and capital projects, religious education follows the local agreed syllabus, the worship is Anglican; Academies: some academies are designated as having Church of England character. Academies are independent schools, owned by their trustees, governors employ the staff and are the admissions authority. The church appoints a minority of governors, religious education and worship are distinctively Anglican, set up capital is provided partly by the trustees. Revenue, and continuing capital funding are provided by the DfES. No fees are charged. (Source: [Church of England](#))

In rural areas, the only local primary school is often owned by the church, so non-religious families don't have a choice. LEAs have provided free school transport for children attending religious schools outside their catchment area but an increasing number have had to cut this free provision for financial reasons, including Suffolk.

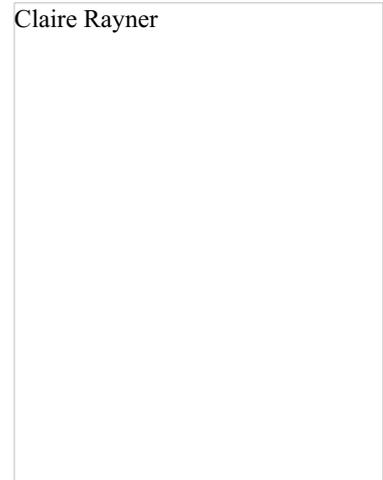
The NSS had undertaken research under the Freedom of Information Act to discover how much is spent on chaplains. The research revealed that £32 million was spent in the UK on wages alone. We estimated that when national insurance, pensions, administration, office space, prayer rooms and chapels were taken into account this was likely to be in the region of £40 million. (Source: [The National Secular Society](#)).

In a classic example of the distinct lack of separation between church and state in Britain, the start of the UK legal year was formally marked last week with a religious service in Westminster Abbey. The service was attended by judges, senior judicial officers, the Law Officers, Queen's Counsel (QC), Government ministers, lawyers, members of the European Court and other overseas judges and lawyers. (Source: [The National Secular Society, 15 October 2010](#)).

My thanks to [Andrew Copson of the BHA](#) for the stuff about the history of Humanism, cribbed from his talk 'Objections to Humanism.

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Oct 2010  
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Claire Rayner has died. A few Suffolk Humanists (including me) went to hear her speak at an Essex Humanists meeting in Chelmsford a few years ago, when her humour and warmth made a strong impression. I have good reason to identify with some of the things that Claire said, especially when she got cross about lazy journalists who wrote about people with cancer "losing their fight" - stuff and nonsense!



Anyhow, there are tributes aplenty on the web. Here are just three of them:

[From the British Humanist Association](#)

[From the National Secular Society](#)

[From Baroness Helena Kennedy](#)

And here's Claire in her own words:

[Her Humanist Hero, Miss Peach](#)

[How she coped with cancer](#)

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Oct 2010  
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Member Colleen Nunn will be talking about geology. She says:

How much do you know about the ground beneath your feet and what it can tell us about about the geological history of Suffolk? Did you know, for example, that our county once had a climate like the present day Caribbean or that the River Thames once flowed through Suffolk? I will be exploring the rocks found here and demonstrating how they can reveal all sorts of clues as to how the landscape and climate have evolved through time.

There will be pictures and samples to see.

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Oct 2010  
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Following on from the film about the history of freethought in Europe shown at a previous meeting, a presentation about the history of the development of Humanism in the UK and in Suffolk, followed by a discussion about where we go next.

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Nov 2010  
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Our November newsletter is here for you to download and print. Why not make several copies and hand them on to your friends?

SH&S News November 2010

In this month's issue:

- Suffolk Humanist Sue Hewlett on her involvement with a scheme to link the village school in Stutton, where she taught, with one in Yendi in Ghana.
- Details of this month's meeting, when we'll be electing a new chairperson and member Colleen Nunn will tell us about the geology of Suffolk.
- A list of books recommended by last month's speaker, Dr John Mellis, after his talk on theoretical physics.
- Details of our activities through the East of England Faiths Agency and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource.

[Click here](#) or on the image for your copy.

[Click here for help with pdf files.](#)

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Nov 2010  
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Whenever there's any mention of turning weapons into something useful, like tools, or beautiful, like art, someone will quote Isaiah II: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." It's a great idea, whether or not you believe it was God's. There've been two recent examples.

Guns

The first is from Mexico. You can [read about it on the Inhabitat website](#):

The city of Culiacán, in western Mexico has the highest rate of gun deaths in the country. After speaking with family members of victims of drug crimes in the city, artist Pedro Reyes decided to use its prolific amount of firearms to help the local botanical garden. In the ultimate act of recycling, Reyes and the garden started a campaign for residents to hand over their guns to the artist in exchange for a coupon that they could use to buy electronics or household appliances. He collected 1,527 guns for the project "Palas por Pistolas" had them melted down and transformed into 1,527 shovel heads that are now being used to plant trees in the community.

The second is from the recent BBC series, [A History of the World in a 100 Objects](#), the Throne of Weapons:

This sculpture is made out of decommissioned weapons from the Mozambique civil war (1977 - 92), which claimed almost 1 million lives and left 5 million people displaced. It represents both the tragedy of that war and the human triumph of those who achieved a lasting peace. It was made by the Mozambican artist Cristiano Canhavato (Kester) in 2001 for the Transforming Arms into Tools project, where some of the seven million guns left in the country are voluntarily exchanged for useful tools and hardware.

A good idea is a good idea, whoever you credit it with.

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Nov 2010  
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From the National Secular Society, [a report on the Church of England's opportunism](#) as the Government promotes a "Big Society":

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: "This is the clearest indication that the Church has been in detailed consultation with the Government about implementing the Big Society idea. Very sensibly, the Church is wary of being used as a means of shoring up the social catastrophe that is coming through the cutting of welfare spending. At the same time, it cannot resist the opportunity to force itself into the lives of those who otherwise are utterly indifferent if not hostile to it."

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Nov 2010  
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[Equal Love](#) is about a legal bid to overturn the twin bans on same-sex civil marriages and opposite-sex civil partnerships in the United Kingdom. They say, why shouldn't heterosexual couples have civil partnerships, and homosexual couples get married?

Equal Love

We heard about this via the BHA's regular e-bulletin. If you'd like to sign up for one in your inbox, [click here](#).

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Nov 2010  
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It's Armistice Day on Thursday, 11th November, when we remember British service personnel who've fought and died in the First World War and all the conflicts since. As usual, the contribution made by those who died without religion will largely be ignored at local remembrance ceremonies on Sunday, but this year it will be different in some British cities.

[The UK Armed Forces Humanist Association](#) has issued the following press release:

For the first time ever, Humanists will be included in the Remembrance Sunday service which will take place in Bedford, on the 14th November, and this year the wreath will be presented by David Brittain, who will not only be representing Humanists in Bedford, but also in his position as Humanist chaplain of the United Kingdom Armed Forces Humanist Association (UKAFHA).

“It is of vital importance to the families of many service people, that in a ceremony which is fundamentally religious in nature, that the one in eight who are of no religion should specifically be remembered also. Everyone who fought and died for their country should be honoured, whatever their religion.”

The wreath will carry the inscription: “For those who gave their lives for us. We shall remember them. On behalf of Humanists in Bedfordshire and the United Kingdom armed Forces Humanist Association.” This is being repeated all over the UK, including capitals like Edinburgh and Belfast, and for the first time ever “ but not in London...”

David Brittain commented that it was ... “Disappointing indeed that the authorities have not yet agreed to let Humanists participate in London ...” he continued, “... Neither the bullet nor the bomb discriminates, so nor should our remembrance ceremony. We Humanists are not looking for the world, just a nod of recognition to the sacrifice made by those of no religion as well, is all we ask!”

Footnote ... Of the major religions which are recognised and represented, there are 690 Hindus, 600 Muslims, 120 Sikhs and 80 Jews in the British armed forces. To compare with those figures, there are 23,770 service people recorded as of no religion.

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Nov 2010  
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The nominees (from [New Humanist](#)) are...

- Hojatoleslam Kazem Sedighi
- Sheikh Maulana Abu Sayeed
- Baroness Warsi
- Cardinal Walter Kasper
- Lauren Booth
- Pastor Terry Jones
- Prince Charles
- Ann Widdecombe

Bad Faith Award

[Click here to vote for this year's leading enemy of reason.](#)

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Nov 2010  
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We're told:

In our last event before Christmas, the theme is Music. Mark Aaron will talk about online activism in the context of saving BBC 6 music, and John Benton will talk about common logical fallacies regarding hifi equipment.

You'll find ISP in the green room at the back of McGinty's.

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Nov 2010  
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European parliamentarians have set up a new website as a platform for secularism in Europe. [The European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Europe \(EPPSP\)](#) is a forum for Members of the European Parliament and civil society. Sophie in 't Veld MEP, its chair, explains the purpose of the new website:

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Nov 2010  
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[Norfolk Fire Service's chief fire officer Nigel Williams has arranged a secular Remembrance Day event](#) this year, to avoid the exclusion of some staff members. This quote amused me:

The Ven Jan McFarlane, from the Diocese of Norwich, said: "We often hear that we're a 'secular society' - but attendance at Remembrance Services today and on Sunday, and the numbers who turn to the church at times of significant national events would suggest otherwise.

Could it be, Ven. McFarlane, that people attend Remembrance services and those held for "significant national events" because there's no alternative? A significant proportion of those who attend such services aren't believers but go through the motions because they want to share the commemoration of something important. Give people the choice of an inclusive event, and you may see even more people attending.

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Nov 2010  
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The Pope started his visit to Spain in much the same way that he greeted the UK; by blaming just about everything he disliked on atheists and rewriting Spanish history. Prime Minister Zapatero was more forthright in response, it seems, than our Prime Minister. [The NSS reports,](#)

The Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero reminded the Pope last week that Spain is a secular state after the pontiff attacked Government legislation on abortion, gay marriage and divorce.

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Nov 2010  
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With reference to my last post about the Pope and his repetition of the atheism=Nazism lie, here's Christopher Hitchens. He begins by saying, "Atheism is not a moral or political position of any kind," which of course it isn't. Yes, there are some nasty atheists, but Hitler

wasn't one of them. He was just nasty.

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Nov 2010  
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[The NSS Council has devised a new Secular Charter](#) that seeks to be fair to everyone, to be achievable and to be benign. Seems good to me.

The Society promotes the separation of religion and state where law and the administration of justice are based on equality, respect for Human Rights and objective evidence without regard to religious doctrine or belief.

**We campaign for the following constitutional principles:**

1. There shall be no established state religion.
2. The state shall not engage in, or fund, religious activities or practice.
3. All public and publicly-funded services must be non-discriminatory and non-religious [no proselytising or preaching or religious requirement to access services].
4. Publicly-funded schools shall be non-discriminatory in admissions and employment and there shall be no religious instruction or organised worship.
5. The state shall not have the right to amend religious doctrine nor interfere in religious hierarchies. The state or any emanation of the state shall not express any religious beliefs or preferences.
6. Religious beliefs, ideas, organisations and people shall not enjoy privileged protection from the right to freedom of expression.

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Nov 2010  
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[Ekklesia reports on the results of a YouGov poll](#) commissioned by ITV at around the time of the Pope's visit. They show that a school's religion doesn't necessarily come top of their priority list.

Factors such as performance of the school, how easy it is to get into, the area the school is in, curriculum (which may of course have a religious influence), class sizes and facilities all seem to have been more important for parents.

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Nov 2010  
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Our new single-page website, [A Good Life Without Religion](#), went live at the beginning of September to coincide with the distribution of [our car stickers](#) to members and others. So far, it's been viewed 29,928 times. Many of the visitors may have come through search engines, some through our online publicity. The site is designed as an introduction to humanism for anyone who's disillusioned with religion, or simply looking for like-minded people. It should appeal to anyone, anywhere. The language is simple, designed to be accessible to people of all ages, from early teens upwards. There's a set of frequently asked questions, such as "What's the purpose of life, if you don't believe in an afterlife?". It was a Suffolk Humanists & Secularists' initiative, but it may lead to any humanist or secularist group, through the links.

A good life without religion website

We suggest that you add the URL to your email signature and any other humanist and/or secularist publicity.

Our thanks to the generous group member who paid for the car stickers, and to our webmaster, Nathan Nelson, for putting it together.

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Dec 2010  
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Christians are saying that they're '[Not Ashamed](#)', apparently, and [Eric Pickles has declared war on the war on Christmas](#). I didn't know anything about the Not Ashamed campaign when I came out of the shower this morning and answered the phone from BBC Radio Suffolk. Due to some crossed wires, I was expected to comment on air. Had to ask what I was supposed to be commenting about. So if it makes no sense, that's why.

Anyhow, for a few days you can listen again. [I'm on about 40 minutes into James Hazell's programme](#). Incidentally, James says he's a Star Trek fan. Jolly good! [Gene Roddenberry](#), who wrote Star Trek, was a humanist.

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Dec 2010  
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This was an article in a newsletter from 2008 by Sophie Lovejoy, when her children were young. It provides ideas for parents with limited budgets who'd like to keep their spending under control, yet still have a good time.

Christmas 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 Tess was one, but as she turned two, I couldn't hold out any longer. Once Toby 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. (Toby 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. Tess 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 at Daddy's house! 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 Tess 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 older.

Xmas cooking

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Dec 2010

**A Humanist contribution to an inter-faith Celebration of Human Rights hosted by the Ipswich & District Bahá'í community at Ipswich Central Library, 10 December 2010. The theme was Article 26:2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Spiritual Education": Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.**



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The Article we're celebrating today refers to "Spiritual Education". I have a problem with this, because I don't know what "spiritual" means. I know what other people say it means, but there are several definitions, some of them religious, and I find them mostly too vague to agree with them. So, if you don't mind, I'll ignore that part of the Article and talk about the rest: about education, and about understanding and tolerance. These are things without which no civil society can function properly, and without which there is endless scope for disharmony and conflict.

I don't think that understanding, tolerance and friendship can be achieved by osmosis, while reciting lovely, cuddly sentiments about loving everyone. They must be learned, partly through example. Human beings have a natural tendency towards altruism. We're also inclined to favour the well-being of those closest to us, but we're not unique in this. Our cousins the apes set an example that many humans would do well to follow. However, it can be more difficult to behave well towards those who are different from us. I've observed just how easy it is for people to adopt a "Them and Us" position. It may be politically motivated, or religiously motivated, or atheistically motivated, or tribally motivated. Whatever the reasons, it happens a lot. The main consequence of such postures is that they dehumanise those who fall into the "them" category, while conferring a false sense of righteousness on those in the "us" category, completely ignoring the Golden Rule, which is not to do to others what you wouldn't like done to you.

Today I shall quote two leading thinkers; Professor Anthony Grayling, a Vice President of the British Humanist Association, and Baroness Mary Warnock. Firstly, Grayling, from an essay on education, which he defines much more widely than studying for academic or vocational qualifications. I'm sure we can all think of people who've been good at passing exams, but whose outlook in life is narrow and prejudiced. Grayling is describing what he terms "liberal education". He writes:

By "liberal education" is meant education that includes literature, history and appreciation of the arts, and gives them equal weight with scientific and practical subjects. Education in these pursuits opens the possibility for us to live more reflectively and knowledgeably, especially about the range of human experience and sentiment, as it exists in the now and here, and in the past and elsewhere. That, in turn, makes us better understand the interests, needs and desires of others, so that we can treat them with respect and sympathy, however different the choices they make or the experiences that have shaped their lives. When respect and sympathy is returned, rendering it mutual, the result is that the gaps which can promote friction between people, and even war in the end, come to be bridged or at least tolerated. The latter is enough.

The vision is utopian; no doubt there were SS officers who read Goethe and listened to Beethoven, and then went to work in the gas chambers; so liberal education does not automatically produce better people. But it does so far more than the stupidity and selfishness which arise from lack of knowledge and impoverishment of insight.

Baroness Warnock addressed a more basic question of how we might learn moral behaviour in an interview she gave to Laurie Taylor recently, for New Humanist magazine. She'd been asked where she derived her moral standpoint from. She said,

I think I derive my position almost entirely from my husband Geoffrey, who wrote a book called *The Object of Morality*. His account of origins of morality starts from the view that the world is pretty awful place filled with human beings who don't get on with another very well because they're always terribly greedy. This means that if society is to grow, then we all have to realise that other people are of the same importance as we are. Once you start realising that, you recognise that you can't do what you like as far as other people are concerned. That's the beginning of morality. So when you have a small child who's behaving badly, being nasty to another child, then what you have to get into his head is the simple point, "How would like it if you were the object of this?" Then you've got him on the road to morality. Hume was absolutely right when he said that it's only when you think of things from a steady and general point of view that that particular pleasure we call moral pleasure comes into operation. There's a generality about what one thinks is right or wrong, a capacity to think not only how you'd feel if this or that happened to you, but what society would be like if this was generally done and permitted.

Couldn't be more simple, could it? But it requires much more than a feeling of goodwill towards one's fellow human beings to behave well towards them. It can be extremely difficult.

*The other contributors were: Siva Cooper and Richard Togher (Ipswich & District Bahá'is), Rev. Andrew Kleissner (Christ Church, Ipswich), Robin Herne (Pagan), Bishop Paulo Pereira (Ipswich Ward, The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints), Martin Spettigue (follower of Sri Chimnoy), Shirley Smith (Christian Scientists), Richard Stewart (The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers), Anna-Marie Allbones (Resource Officer, Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource), Rev. Cliff Reed and Paulette Reed (Ipswich Unitarians), and Charles Croydon (Ipswich & District UN Association).*

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Dec 2010  
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You may have read that the Pope, Eric Pickles MP, the Daily Mail, and many others are blaming atheists, Muslims, councils and various other killjoys for "banning Christmas" in the interests of not offending anyone - "PC gone mad!" - and are calling the festive season "Winterval" instead. Calm down. It's not true. Kevin Arscott, who writes the [Angry Mob](#) blog, explains that the story is all due to bad journalism (and there's a lot of it about) in [an essay you can download as a pdf file](#).

[Click here if you don't know what to do with pdf files.](#)

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Dec 2010  
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Sheikh Maulana Abu Sayeed, head of the UK Islamic Sharia Council, has won the [2010 Bad Faith Award](#) for asserting that there's no such thing as marital rape. "Clearly there cannot be any "rape" within the marriage," he's reported as saying. "Maybe "aggression", maybe "indecent activity".

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Christmas 2010



Stay safe, keep warm, and don't forget to feed the birds.

[Click here for some seasonal thoughts from Terry Sanderson, NSS President.](#)

Robin woodcut by [Thomas Bewick](#).