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Jan 2013

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Fight evil, read books

Just a reminder that if you order books from Amazon via the link on our home page, we get commission.

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The NSS reports that both the Scouts and Guides have launched consultations to ask their members and the general public if they should develop a non-religious version of the promise that children are expected to make when they join. [Click here to find out how you can respond.](#)

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Plans to open a Steiner free school in Suffolk are still being made by the people behind the Fullledge Ecology School. [The East Anglian Daily Times reports:](#)

The Fullledge Ecology School curriculum would incorporate aspects of the Steiner approach, which is already practised at state-funded schools in other countries like America, Canada and Australia, but bidders say it would not be designated a "Steiner School".

The same news story mentions that plans for another free school from the Maharishi Free School Trust are also being re-submitted to the DfE.

Last year, the BHA was a signatory to [a letter in the Guardian on Steiner schools, Anthroposophy, and Maharishi schools.](#) BHA Education campaigner Richy Thompson explained,

Anthroposophists believe that they have an objective, scientific way in to the so called "spiritual" world. Children with their innocent sense of wonder are particularly well connected to the "spiritual" world, and the motivation for Steiner schools is to nurture this connection. The reason that SWSF schools do not teach children to read and write before the age of 6/7, or use computers before 13, is because anthroposophists believe that to do so damages this connection by quashing this naivety and playfulness. In reality, all it does is damage children's education.

For more information about Steiner schools, type "Steiner" in our search box.

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[Twitter logo](#) [We've changed our Twitter username to @suffolkhands](#). If you don't already follow us, why not?

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Jan 2013  
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The recent European Court of Human Rights ruling on religious "discrimination" cases was just one of several significant victories. The Daily Mail, among others, reported that BA staff member Nadia Eweida had won her right to wear a crucifix to work, despite the fact that BA had already changed its uniform policy, but made less of the fact that the three other litigants, Chaplin, Ladele and McFarlane, were unsuccessful in claiming that UK courts had discriminated against them on religious grounds.

#### [NSS welcomes European Court of Human Rights ruling on 'religious discrimination' cases](#)

The Home Secretary Theresa May has agreed to accept a House of Lords amendment removing the word "insulting " from Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986. Section 5 has a low prosecution threshold and there have been prosecutions for ridiculously trivial remarks made in public, such as when a student was arrested for telling a mounted policeman that his horse was gay.

#### [Victory for free speech](#)

In Scotland, a Catholic adoption agency has been told by the Charity Regulator that if it doesn't lift its ban on applications from gay couples it will lose its charitable status, because it is discriminating against them.

#### [Scottish Catholic adoption agency ordered to comply with equality law](#)

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has won its case against the Department for Education (DfE) over its refusal to publish a list of all groups proposing to establish Free Schools. The BHA is concerned that religious organisations, some with very strange ideas, are hoping to exploit Education Secretary Michael Gove's enthusiasm for free schools to gain access to state funds for faith schools, contrary to the DfE's guidelines.

#### [Landmark Freedom of Information victory for BHA vs Department for Education](#)

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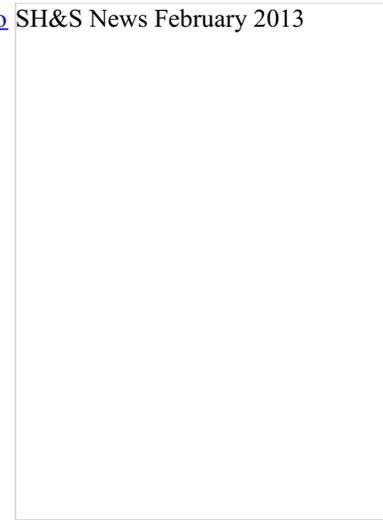
Death blog banner

A brief introduction to the history of death and funerals in England, and attitudes to the same, by Margaret Nelson, retired celebrant and blogger at Dead Interesting.

We'll be in the seminar room on the first floor of Hadleigh library, on the corner of Duke Street and the High Street, from 2pm. There's ample free parking in the council car park opposite, accessed via Magdalen Road (see map). Tea and cake will be provided. Please let us know if you plan to come, so we can ensure that we have enough.

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Our latest newsletter, with details of meetings between now and May, news and views. [Click here to download it](#) (pdf). Why not share it with like-minded or undecided friends and family?

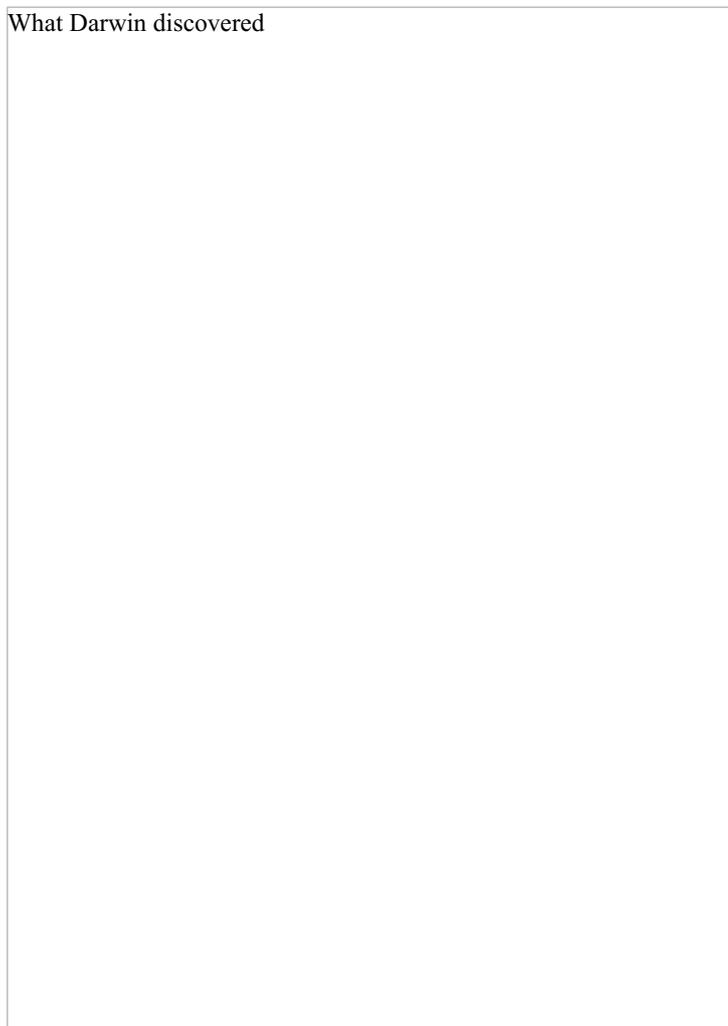


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If you've been asleep or off-planet for the last day or so, you might have missed the news that the Pope's resigned and Catholics everywhere are "shocked". If you weren't asleep, you'll be sick to death of the news coverage and the ruddy awful jokes on Twitter. Anyhow, since it's topical, why not do Christina Martin's Pope quiz to pass the time 'til the next news bulletin?

[Click here to start.](#)

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And now [evolution, not creationism, must be included in the science syllabus of British free schools](#) - a reason to celebrate on the 204th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin - Darwin Day.

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The Rationalist Association is aiming to set up a new online community. Caspar Melville of the RA writes:

We do not think that irrationalism, intolerance, special interests and dogma should go unquestioned or unanswered. We are building a community that can offer questions and better answers. We want to invite you to our own "raising bee". You'll need to register, that is give us your email (and choose a password). That's it. By doing so you become a founder member of the online rationalist community that we are building right here on this website. We then want your help to raise this community. We'll be asking our founder members to help us decide what this community will become and what it stands for.

Want to join now, for nothing? [Click here to go to the RA website.](#) [Click here for more about the 125-year-old Rationalist Association.](#)

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Yesterday was Darwin Day. It's not officially recognised, yet, though some people here and in America would like it to be. There's even talk of making it a public holiday, in recognition of Darwin and his work. But if 12th February is Darwin Day, the 8th January should be Wallace Day, in recognition of the equally important work done by Alfred Russel Wallace, who worked out the theory of Natural Selection as a young man in Indonesia. He sent his ideas to Charles Darwin, who'd been dithering about publishing his theory of Evolution. The realisation that Wallace could beat him to it prompted Darwin to do something with his ideas, after ten years of procrastination. Both of their papers were read to the Linnean Society in 1858. Since then, Darwin has had most of the credit for the theory of Evolution, while Wallace has been largely forgotten. Now, to help put things right, the Natural History Museum in London has launched [Wallace 100 - Celebrating Alfred Russel Wallace's Life & Legacy](#). They have also hung his portrait next to the statue of Darwin in the main hall. About time.

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Dec 2013  
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On 10th December we took part in the annual Celebration of Human Rights organised by the Ipswich UN Association. This year the theme was based upon Article 4 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#):

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

The meeting was hosted by the Ipswich Society of Friends (Quakers) at their meeting house in Fonnereau Road, Ipswich. The Mayor of Ipswich, Councillor Hamil Clarke MBE, and his partner, Daisy Weekes, attended and heard contributions from representatives of several of the faiths and beliefs in the area. Although local MPs and other organisations had been invited, the others attending were mainly from religious groups. Rather surprisingly some of the presenters seemed to have misunderstood what Article 4 was all about and instead spoke of people being slaves to alcohol, drugs, etc., which seemed a bit strange. Sue Hewlett and Denis Johnston represented us, as follows: **Denis** --- Slavery has existed ever since man made the change from being a hunter-gatherer to becoming settled in fixed communities. The irony is that slavery was the cornerstone of what we choose to term 'civilisation' and was part and parcel of all the co-called early civilisations. So much so that it was formally embedded into religious texts and laws. At the core of slavery lies the belief that one group of humanity is in some way inferior to another and should therefore be subordinate. Factors such as skin colour, tribal affiliation, language, gender and religions have all be used to justify this belief. Dehumanisation, treated as a commodity or being bought and sold as 'property', is no longer as prevalent as before and is not legal in any country but let us be clear on one thing; slavery still exists. Slavery today is mainly based upon bonded labour, child labour, sex trafficking, early and forced marriage. Underpinning all of these is debt, poverty and financial control. The vast majority of those enslaved today are those at one end of the global supply chains that provide us with many of the goods that we buy in supermarkets and on the high street. It ranges from the cashew nut industry (20,000 children are engaged in cashew nut processing in India alone) to cotton, cocoa, tea and clothing manufacture. Probably between 10 and 20 million people in the world are enslaved at the present time and the profits generated worldwide are second only to drug

trafficking in terms of global criminal enterprises. It means that not only does slavery still exist but we are all part of it. Only by understanding the nature of modern slavery and by acting to eliminate it both at source and by changing our lifestyles can we hope to stop it. **Sue** --- As humanists we hold that all are entitled to basic rights and freedoms based on their shared humanity. Just as it is not acceptable to enslave people using shackles and leg irons, nor is it acceptable to allow the threat of poverty and destitution to lead to exactly that same end. Also, we believe that everyone loses. It's impossible to know how much human potential and talent has been lost because of individual slaves being denied the opportunity to contribute according to their ability. Nobody can examine the history of slavery without being awestruck by how, despite their hardships, despite their suffering, that inner strength that defines our common humanity has not just survived but has even grown within so many of those who spent their lives in slavery. To end I am going to read part of Maya Angelou's poem, Still I Rise. It expresses that inner strength very well. ([Click here to read the poem](#)).

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Mar 2013  
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Red Nose Day

The BBC's bi-annual [Red Nose Day](#) broadcast, when "doing something funny for money" videos were interspersed with videos about people who need help, in the UK and Africa, included comedian [Rowan Atkinson in a dog collar as a faux Archbishop of Canterbury](#). It's no longer possible to see Rowan's video on the Comic Relief website or on You Tube, thanks to 2,000 complaints from people who found it "offensive". One wonders if those 2,000 people were as irate over the offensive sight of babies in distress in poorly equipped African hospitals, dying from easily preventable diseases like malaria. If not, they should be ashamed of themselves. [Hayley Stevens has written about this on The Heresy Club website](#) (young atheist, skeptic and freethinking bloggers):

Religion should never be exempt from criticism and ridicule, and for as long as the religious think otherwise, the joke is on them.

This was part of Atkinson's sketch:

Anyway, I hope I'll be able to talk to you more often like this but for now, from all of us in the good old C of E, have a wonderful night, keep on giving, keep on laughing, keep on praying – it doesn't work, but it's a good part of a getting-to-sleep routine if you've got insomnia.

There *are* Christians with a sense of humour. They're more likely to win friends and influence people than those who spend all their time being offended. However, I've heard that many young people have been asking how a benevolent god can allow so many babies to die from malaria, which amounts to negative publicity. Red Nose day has raised over £75 million so far.

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[The NSS reports that David Cameron had a reception for religious leaders at 10 Downing Street this week.](#)

He told the religious big-wigs: "This government does care about faith. It does care about the institutions of faith, and it does want you to stand up and oppose aggressive secularisation."

Aggressive secularisation? The PM betrays his ignorance. [There's no such thing](#), and secularism benefits the religious, though they don't appreciate it.

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"We don't have to save the world. The world is big enough to look after itself. What we have to be concerned about is whether or not the world we live in will be capable of sustaining us in it." — Douglas Adams, Speech at The University of California.

If Douglas had lived, he'd have been 61 today. This is a speech he made in 2001, only days before his sudden death: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZG8HBuDjgc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZG8HBuDjgc)

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Nov 2013  
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The Rationalist Association's magazine *New Humanist* has a new editor, Daniel Trilling. When he introduced himself in August, making it clear that he didn't share an anti-religious, hardline atheist point of view, he attracted (predictably) some strong criticism from those who did. [In the winter edition of the magazine he's written,](#)

As anyone who's ventured online knows, to many people "atheist" has become a badge of identity, and an aggressive, exclusionary one at that. In a country like Britain, where being open about a lack of religious belief puts you in no physical danger, and does not hold back your career, your love life or your liberty, it doesn't require much investment. For some, it's become an easy way to feel smugly superior to the ignorant masses. Worse still, for others, it's been co-opted into a paranoid right-wing project that would have us believe that the West is locked in a Clash of Civilisations with the Muslim world.

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Jul 2013  
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If you didn't come to our meeting on 9th July, you didn't miss much. We were going to watch a video of a lecture by physicist Lawrence Krauss, about how everything comes from nothing, but unfortunately Denis's laptop ate it. Instead, he found a video about Charles Darwin's life story. Later, I was surprised to hear someone say that he hadn't realised what Darwin had done, apart from his trip on the *Beagle* and its consequences. So, as compensation for those who didn't see the Krauss video, and to inform those who didn't know about Darwin's interest in all sorts of things here in England, including barnacles and pigeons, as well as the things he saw on the Galapagos Islands, here's one of Krauss's lectures and a link to a site that'll tell you all about Darwin. OK? Don't thank me now... [Click here for Darwin online](#), "The world's largest and most widely used resource on Charles Darwin".

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Jul 2013  
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Michael Gove is the worst education secretary we've had for some time - perhaps all time. I'm not being party political, as I don't think much of Labour's record either - specialist schools and academies were their bright ideas, leading to the gradual, now accelerating, destruction of the state system under local authority control. Since Gove took over at the Department for Education, he's introduced one crazy idea after another, including free schools (see my posts about [the Fullfledge Ecology School](#)). This isn't just my opinion; Gove is deeply unpopular with education professionals and the teachers' unions too. Michael's latest lunatic plan is to hand over secular community schools to the Church of England. [The NSS reports](#) that he's said,

I want the Church to recover the spirit which infused its educational mission in Victorian times and support more new schools — especially academies and free schools — to bring educational excellence to the nation's poorest children.

Does Michael Gove pay any attention to opinion polls, which show that a majority disapprove of faith schools, or to the church's diminishing congregations, or the evidence for the divisions in society caused by segregated education? He's certainly ignorant of history. There's no evident clamour for more religion in education; quite the opposite. It's true that the Church of England was the main provider of education for the poor during Victoria's reign. [I spoke about this, and the issue in general, in 2005.](#)

We've already got a lot of faith schools – Anglican and Catholic – for historical reasons. We have an established church, which has had considerable influence. In the first third of the nineteenth century, voluntary church societies developed a national system of elementary schools. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 created a compromise between the church, which wanted to extend its influence, and radicals like Jeremy Bentham, who wanted a totally secular system. Voluntary schools continued with grants-in-aid, while local school boards ran state schools.



While the motives of some of those who founded church schools in the 19th century may have been altruistic, the overwhelming reason for the church's involvement in education was, as now, to increase its influence. Before the Industrial Revolution, it was usual for children to work in the fields beside their parents or to help the families of those in the wool trade with spinning and weaving. [The Factory Acts](#), from 1802 onwards, prohibited children from doing night shifts, then gradually reduced the number of hours that they were permitted to work. Only the children of the wealthy received any sort of education, but as poor children were prevented for working all day, they represented a problem - what to do with them, and prevent disruptive and criminal behaviour among the idle? As various schemes for educating children were proposed, there was some conflict between those with religious motives, and those who sought social improvements for everyone, free from religion. Victorian society was divided by class and by gender. The church's involvement with education simply reinforced both; the consensus was that you should "know your place". Before church elementary schools were established, many children went to Sunday Schools.

The Sunday schools taught the poor - both children and adults - to read the Bible, but not to do writing or arithmetic or any of the 'more dangerous subjects' which were 'less necessary or even harmful' [Education in England: a brief history, Chapter 2 - Derek Gillard](#)

This attitude changed, but not that much. Girls were not considered worthy of the same standard of education as boys, but were expected to concentrate on domestic science, in the expectation that they would end up in service or married. Just as Mrs Thatcher painted a rosy picture of Victorian values, in her time as PM, Michael Gove is now doing likewise, with his notion of the church's "spirit which infused its educational mission". There are echoes of what happened upon the introduction of the 1870 Education Act, when what Derek Gillard describes as "The Church Problem" arose; it managed to wangle its way into the legislation so that it could continue to control its schools, which had become a financial burden, at public expense. [See D Gillard, Chapter 3](#). The clerics must be rubbing their hands with glee.