

suffolk Humanist & secularist NEWS

September 2010

Car stickers

If you're a member of Suffolk Humanists & Secularists, you'll receive a car sticker this month. Please attach it to the inside of a car window to publicise humanism and secularism.

Anyone with access to the Internet, at home, at work or in the public library, can visit the URL (the website address) shown on the stickers to find out more about an ethical approach to life that doesn't involve religion. The stickers are made from vinyl that clings to glass without adhesive, so it will peel off easily. If you're not a member but would like a sticker you can either join us or make a donation to our funds, or both. See the contact details on the back page.



Note: the new website will be ready by Monday 13th September. Don't use your sticker until then.

Objections to Humanism, August meeting



"What is Humanism? A descriptive word applied retrospectively (from about late 19th century) to a certain set of beliefs and values. However, the beliefs and values described are at least as old as recorded history."

Andrew Copson from the BHA gave a thought-provoking talk at our August meeting, providing answers to all the most usual objections to Humanism, using quotations from leading Humanist thinkers to make his points. You'll find some in this newsletter. One of his main points was that Humanism isn't new and that throughout recorded history there have always been people, all over the world, who've lived good lives free from religion.

NEW Humanist

New Humanist magazine is now on sale in over 1300 stores around the UK. Go to www.newhumanist.org.uk for a trial copy or to subscribe.

The latest issue includes:

Giordano Bruno, my hero—Stephanie Merritt reveals why she made the Renaissance monk her leading man—and **Should**

Britain ban the burqa?

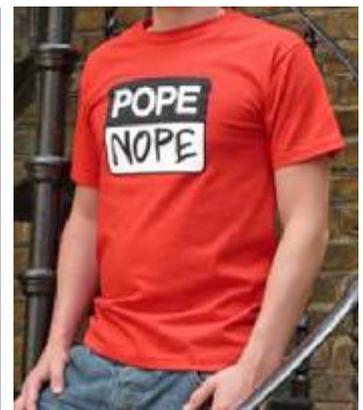
Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Kenan Malik debate whether the UK should follow the French.



Just suppose...

Michael Lawrence, who's visited other Humanist groups, is coming to talk to us at our September meeting. He says,

'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.



Pope Nope T-shirts at £10 +£2 P&P from the NSS at www.secularism.org.uk

For news and information about the Protest the Pope campaign, see page 2

Pope? Nope!

Joseph Ratzinger, leader of the Roman Catholic Church, is visiting the UK this month. The cost of his visit to UK taxpayers is estimated to be tens of £millions at a time when the Government is insisting that we must make severe cuts to public services because of our budget deficit. The Vatican isn't short of money—its assets were recently estimated to be at least \$50billion. The Protest the Pope campaign is supported by diverse groups, including the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. They agree that the Pope, as a citizen of Europe and the leader of a religion with many adherents in the UK, is of course free to enter and tour our country. However, as well as a religious leader, the Pope is a head of state and the state and organisation of which he is head has been responsible for:

1. opposing the distribution of condoms and so increasing large families in poor countries and the spread of AIDS
2. promoting segregated education
3. denying abortion to even the most vulnerable women
4. opposing equal rights for lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender people
5. failing to address the many cases of abuse of children within its own organisation
6. rehabilitating the holocaust denier bishop Richard Williamson and the appeaser of Hitler, the war-time Pope, Pius XII

The state of which the Pope is the head has also resisted signing many major human rights treaties and has formed its own treaties ('concordats') with many states which negatively affect the human rights of citizens of those states. As a head of state, the Pope is an unsuitable guest of the UK government and should not be accorded the honour and recognition of a state visit to our country.

For more information about the campaign, go to www.protest-the-pope.org.uk. They are organising a big demonstration in central London on Saturday 18th September, from 1.30pm at the top of Piccadilly (Hyde Park Corner) to Richmond Terrace, opposite Downing Street, for a rally with speeches. If anyone's interested in going and would like to travel with others from our area, get in touch and we'll put you in touch with one another.

The social instincts – the prime principle of man's moral constitution – with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise"; and this lies at the foundation of morality.

Charles Darwin

On suffering

Denis Johnston

A few weeks ago a couple of us were taking part in an interfaith meeting at a Suffolk school. This took the form of a series of short presentations by representatives of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and ourselves, followed by a lively question and answer session. Right at the end, one of the questions raised was along the lines "Why is there suffering?".

There was only time for a quick response from two of the panellists; the Buddhist and the Christian. The Buddhist explained that suffering was central to his faith and that "Life is suffering" was the primary "Noble Truth". I couldn't really follow what the Christian view was, except that it was something to do with sin and that we had to suffer because Jesus had suffered. A quick Google and it appears that the Muslim view is that it is our own fault because we have broken the rules and Hinduism seems to claim that suffering is a consequence of 'desire'.

On the way home we were thinking about how we would have responded. What is a Humanist's take on suffering? My view was that what we perceive as 'suffering' is a direct consequence of the evolutionary process. The fact that we and other sentient creatures experience suffering, both physical and mental, is simply because it substantially improves our chances of survival. I would have added that there is considerable evidence for this. Some people have a congenital insensitivity to pain and for them survival is only possible if others look after them. Some diseases such as Hansen's disease (leprosy) do not in themselves cause death. However because those suffering from it do not feel pain in the affected areas even serious wounds are unnoticed before it is too late.

Thinking further however, it struck me that as 'non-believers' we are rather unusual. The religious views all have an element of "suffering is our own fault". Indeed there is even an implicit, underlying assumption in the major religions that 'suffering is good'. The deliberate infliction of pain on oneself, from flagellation to voluntary crucifixion, is a direct consequence of such thinking, and once convinced that infliction of pain on yourself is good, it is but a small step believe that it will be virtuous to permit, or even inflict suffering on others. Apparently Mother Theresa of Calcutta summed it up; "The most beautiful gift for a person (is) that he can participate in the sufferings of Christ". Strangely, when she was ill herself this reasoning didn't apply and she was booked into the luxurious Woodlands Nursing Home near Calcutta.

But there is another dimension to this. It is that suffering is not what it used to be. These days, most of us pass through life with comparatively little physical or mental pain; at least compared to that of previous generations.

(Continued on page 3)

(Continued from page 2)

Until the last century suffering was part and parcel of everyday life. Most children who survived being born died in infancy. The average marriage lasted fifteen years because so many mothers died in childbirth. Smallpox, polio, tuberculosis, cholera, tetanus and other diseases were endemic and simple infections were deadly. In a world with few effective medicines, little knowledge of hygiene and with disease and famine always a distinct possibility, it is understandable that superstitious belief was rife, for there was nothing else.

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.

But while we are able to deal so effectively with suffering due to natural causes, the ones that the religious have traditionally associated with "divine retribution", our potential to inflict suffering is now greater than ever.

We also know that suffering—from war, from famine and from simply not caring about others—is often a consequence of our actions (and inactions) as human beings.

We do not have the luxury of simply saying 'suffering is God's will', but at the same time we cannot just glibly say that it is the 'down-side of a wonderful survival mechanism'. For we know that we can do something about it.

This means that as humanists we must go far beyond simply explaining why there is suffering. We have a responsibility to live our lives so that we reduce the suffering of others in everything we do.

A humanist's perspective on suffering is probably as simple, and as difficult, as that.

An Indian Humanist's opinion of Mother Teresa

Denis (page 2) mentioned Mother Teresa. When she was beatified by Pope John Paul II after her death (the first step to sainthood), Sanal Edamaruku, Secretary General of the Indian Rationalist Association and President of Rationalist International, issued a statement about her supposed "good work", saying, "India has no reason to be grateful to her". He went on,



In the overcrowded and primitive little homes, many patients have to share a bed with others. Though there are many suffering from tuberculosis, AIDS and other highly infectious illnesses, hygiene is no concern. The patients are treated with good words and insufficient (sometimes outdated) medicines, applied with old needles, washed in lukewarm water. One can hear the screams of people having maggots tweezered from their open wounds without pain relief. On principle, strong painkillers are even in hard cases not given ... Once she tried to comfort a screaming sufferer: "You are suffering, that means Jesus is kissing you!" The man got furious and screamed back: "Then tell your Jesus to stop kissing."

My apologies to Denis. In some copies of our last newsletter, his name was missing from his article about Down House.
MN

Want to be an editor?

As you may have noticed, our newsletters are published about once every two or three months. Depending on how much copy's been provided by members and others, it takes me a day or two to do each one—though in fact they're often done late into the night, when there are fewer distractions.

Is anyone interested in having a go at producing a newsletter? You needn't commit yourself to doing it on a regular basis, but perhaps you might think about doing one or two a year? You'd need an awareness of what's going on in Humanist circles, locally and nationally, and familiarity with some suitable publishing software. I use Microsoft's Publisher software, which is part of their Office package. You could use Microsoft's Word, or there is some open-source (free) software available on the Internet from Scribus (www.scribus.net), which I haven't tried. Advice and help available. Please get in touch if you're interested.

MN

At a recent Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource study group, we were discussing "Myths of Origin—do they define us as separate from or connected to the rest of humanity". A Muslim sitting next to me said, "There are no myths in Islam, only facts, as set out in the Qur'an". I didn't laugh.
MN

Trick or Treatment—Skeptics in the Pub

John Mellis

Scepticism and pub-dwelling—two pastimes that combine very well—are practised in a casual way by millions of Britons every day. The Ipswich Skeptics in the Pub (ISP) group is elevating these arts to a higher level of commitment by holding monthly meetings—normally in McGinty's—where truly focused scepticism can be unleashed on the topics of the day.

Last month saw the visit of ISP's inaugural guest speaker, Edzard Ernst, who is the UK's only Professor of Complementary Medicine and who has co-authored (with Simon Singh) 'Trick or Treatment — Alternative Medicine on Trial' (Corgi Press), a critical review of alternative and complementary therapies including acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic and herbalism. Professor Ernst's group applies objective analyses and tests to establish the effectiveness (or otherwise) of the treatments, many of which are increasingly popular—the global annual expenditure on alternative treatments is estimated at more than \$60 billion.

The findings of Ernst's evidence-based researches are fascinating and not always predictable. For homeopathic treatments, including arnica, the most studied homeopathic remedy for bruising and sprains, no evidence of efficacy can be found—not surprising given the treatments consist of water containing no active ingredient. Surprising, though, that homeopathic treatments are widely available on the NHS. A few herbal treatments have been found to be effective—St John's Wort is as effective an anti-depressant as mainstream drugs like Prozac. The effectiveness of acupuncture has been tested against 'sham acupuncture', where needles are placed against the skin but do not penetrate. The evidence shows that acupuncture has no effect in treating smoking or drug dependence but has some effectiveness in pain relief for osteoarthritis. This works whether or not the classical Chinese acupuncture points are used, and is unrelated to whether the acupuncturist has had training in Chinese methods.

Ernst warned that some alternative treatments are not just ineffective but dangerous—citing the violent spinal manipulation of chiropractic which have been known to rupture blood vessels in the neck with fatal results. The publication of 'Trick or Treatment' prompted a libel action by the British Chiropractic Association in response to Simon Singh's comment that 'You might think that modern chiropractors restrict themselves to treating back problems, but in fact they still possess some quite wacky ideas. The fundamentalists argue that they can cure anything. And even the more moderate chiropractors have ideas above their station. The British Chiropractic

Association claims that their members can help treat children with colic, sleeping and feeding problems, frequent ear infections, asthma and prolonged crying, even though there is not a jot of evidence. This organisation is the respectable face of the chiropractic profession and yet it happily promotes bogus treatments.' In April, Singh won the case on appeal and the Appeal Court's ruling contained the following notable paragraph:

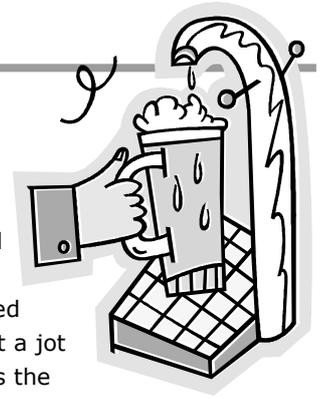
'... the material words, however one represents or paraphrases their meaning, are in our judgment expressions of opinion. The opinion may be mistaken, but to allow the party which has been denounced on the basis of it to compel its author to prove in court what he has asserted by way of argument is to invite the court to become an Orwellian ministry of truth. Milton, recalling in the *Areopagitica* his visit to Italy in 1638-9, wrote:

"I have sat among their learned men, for that honour I had, and been counted happy to be born in such a place of philosophic freedom, as they supposed England was, while themselves did nothing but bemoan the servile condition into which learning among them was brought; that nothing had been there written now these many years but flattery and fustian. There it was that I found and visited the famous Galileo, grown old a prisoner of the Inquisition, for thinking in astronomy otherwise than the Franciscan and Dominican licensers thought."

That is a pass to which we ought not to come again.'

Professor Ernst's talk prompted the audience of around thirty people into a lively Q&A session in which he also referred to his sceptical conclusions on spiritual healing and commented that the most common misconception is that recovery from illness is due to the treatment—a misconception that often applies also to mainstream treatments, which have as much of a placebo effect as ineffective 'cures'. Somewhat unbelievably given the size of the alternative medicine industry, his research group at the Peninsula Medical School has funds for only another nine months of operation. Perhaps in response, a healthy number of copies of the Ernst/Singh book were sold at the back of the room and we seemed successfully to have disproved the assertion that 'beer is the enemy of reason'.

On leaving, I couldn't help noticing the Herbal Viagra vending machine in the Gents. It displayed a 'Not Working' notice—very appropriate.



10 minute topics

SH&S members last discussed 10-minute topics at our June meeting. Everyone was invited to suggest a subject, topical or otherwise. Among other things, we discussed,

- Whether biofuels are desirable or sustainable, and what the alternatives might be.

The consensus was that when they cause deforestation and loss of wildlife habitats to grow vast tracts of monoculture, they aren't the ethical answer to our energy needs, and we should focus more on sustainable fuels and using our cars less.

- Whether the expected rise in faith schools is something we should automatically object to, or do they have any merit at all? What about the higher standards they claim?

It was pointed out that the "higher" standards are due to unfair selection, and we agreed that segregated schools at public expense aren't welcome.

- "Frankenstein" (genetically-modified) foods.

Some members felt that GM foods could be useful, such as potatoes bred to resist blight, and that they aren't a threat to human health, but their sale in developing countries when they were linked to expensive herbicides, etc., isn't desirable when poor farmers are exploited for commercial gain.

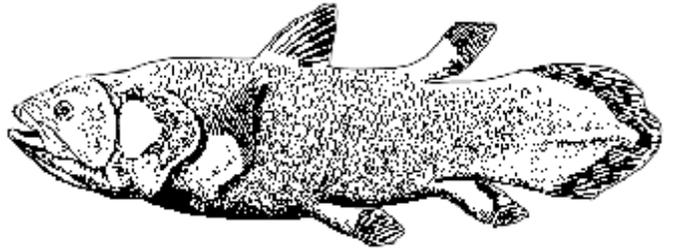
University Campus Suffolk will hold its 4th annual Freshers' Fair, now renamed its **Welcome Week Fair**, at UCS on Thursday 23rd September. They tell us, "Welcome Week has taken on a new format this year and the Fair is now central to the orientation programme for students. The Fair is open to all UCS students and staff."

Members of SH&S will be there with our stall, to spread Humanist/Secularist awareness. If you'd like to help, please contact us ASAP.

Margaret Nelson, as an East of England Faiths Agency tutor, will be talking at a **Suffolk County Council lunchtime seminar on "Faiths in the Public Sphere"** at St Edmund's House, Ipswich, on Thursday 14th October, from 12.30 to 1.30pm. The seminar is open to anyone who's interested.

Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE) is holding a series of study groups on "Building Community—Them and Us?" in Hadleigh, Bealings, Ipswich, Beccles and Bury St Edmunds over the coming months. If you're interested, go to www.sifre.co.uk or contact Margaret (01473 658828).

Evolution, not creation



"We are here because one odd group of fish had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a higher answer – but none exists."

Stephen Jay Gould

The fish shown here is a coelacanth, which was once thought to have gone extinct 80 million years ago, before a specimen was discovered off the East African coast in 1938. A 400 million-year-old fossilised fin from one of the coelacanth's ancestors was discovered in Wyoming three years ago. It was reported, "Unlike fins on living coelacanths and lungfishes, the fossil fin has an asymmetrical pattern in which there are more bones on the front of the central shaft than the back. It has more in common with the anatomy of four-limbed vertebrates, called tetrapods, and even humans, than it does with the anatomy of living coelacanths." (Jeanna Bryner on Live Science at msnbc.com).

The quotation was used by Andrew Copson at our August meeting. Image courtesy of a creative commons licence from Bogdan at Wikimedia (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>).

FAITH SCHOOLS: JUST SAY NO

FUNDING AND RESOURCING BRITAIN'S
ONLY DEDICATED CAMPAIGNER
AGAINST "FAITH" SCHOOLS

If you watched Richard Dawkins More4 TV programme, "Faith School Menace", you may have been appalled at some of the things that are going on in them. Tom Sutcliffe wrote an excellent review in the Independent, starting with, "Religious prejudice may be the only form of discrimination now funded by government."

The BHA is fund-raising for a dedicated campaigner against faith schools. So far, they've raised nearly £34,000 towards their £40,000 target. You can donate at www.justgiving.com/nofaithschools.

SUFFOLK HUMANISTS & SECULARISTS

25 Haughgate Close
Woodbridge
Suffolk
IP12 1LQ
01394 387462
denisjohnston@btinternet.com

Newsletters & Ceremonies

01473 658828
margaret@suffolkhands.org.uk

The Suffolk & N E Essex Humanist group was founded in 1991 to promote Humanism and Secularism, and to provide fellowship, education and support for non-believers in Suffolk and North East Essex. We changed our name to Suffolk Humanists when the Essex group was formed, then again in April 2008, to reflect the importance of secularism when religious organisations are being increasingly assertive.

We're affiliated to The British Humanist Association, The National Secular Society, and Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE). The group is a member of SAVO—the Suffolk Association of Voluntary Organisations.

Sympathetic non-members are welcome, but by joining us you'll help us to raise awareness of Humanism and Secularism, and to challenge the increasing influence of religion in public life, the arts and the media.

The Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies Team, which is independent of the BHA network, has an unblemished record for high standards. We provide non-religious ceremonies for all occasions. For more information, see the contact details above.

HUMANISM: an ethical approach to life without religion; Humanists think we can be good without God.

SECULARISM: the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate.

Dates for your diary - note them now!

Meetings are on the second Tuesday of every month from 7.30-10pm in the lounge at Pinewood Community Hall, Laburnum Close (signed to Pinewood Surgery), Ipswich, IP8 3SL, near the A12/A14 Copdock interchange and Copdock Tesco. The car park is at the end of the close on the right, after the surgery. For detailed directions, or to request or offer a lift, please get in touch.

Refreshments are provided. Members and guests are invited to make a small donation, to help pay for the room hire.

14th September—guest speaker Michael Lawrence "Just Supposes"

about the link between primitive astronomy/astrology and religious theology. See page 1 for details.

Tuesday 21st September, 7.30-10.30pm—Open Talk Night with Ipswich Skeptics in the Pub at McGinty's

(on the corner of Northgate Street, opposite the library). They say, 'We're looking for people to talk for around 10 minutes on a topic that interests them in the sphere of Science, Scepticism and rationalism, or just something you think will interest others.' Wonder if they got the idea from our 10-minute topics?

12th October—SH&S member John Mellis will ask 'How Come We Are Here?'

He says, "It's often said 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."



On 13th September, Peter Tatchell (who visited us in 2007) will be on Channel 4 at 8pm with 'The Trouble with the Pope', scrutinising the beliefs and policies of Pope Benedict XVI, shortly before the Pontiff's state visit to Britain.

After five years in office, the Pope is seen to be shaping a more conservative Catholicism. Peter looks at how many of his proclamations and decisions are in conflict with the values of modern day Britain and western societies. He examines the impact that Benedict XVI's pronouncements have had on both the developing and western world.

He questions the Pope's policies on a range of issues including his opposition to contraception, condom use and embryonic stem cell research as well as the Pontiff's handling of the child sex abuse scandal.

The film examines the Pope's plans for the beatification of Cardinal Newman, a 19th-century theologian and writer who lived for nearly 30 years with a fellow priest, and the controversial readmission to the church of Holocaust denier Bishop Richard Williamson.

Interviewing both critics and supporters of the Pope, many of them Catholics, Peter explores Benedict's personal, religious and political journey since the 1930s, from liberal to conservative theologian.

Photo © M Nelson 2007