

suffolk Humanist & secularist NEWS

May 2016

Get well soon Margaret.

Margaret Nelson who normally edits the newsletter isn't too well at the moment so I have stepped in for this issue. I am afraid I don't have her flair but I hope you find something of interest.

Denis Johnston

Our new poster

Perspectives
on
Humanism

What is Humanism anyway?

What is Secularism?

"When I do good, I feel good. When I do bad, I feel bad. That's my religion." - Abraham Lincoln

A series of free, open, informal talks & discussions

Darwin Room
Arlingtons Brasserie
13 Museum St. Ipswich IP1 1HE
7.30 pm 2nd Tuesday every month
All welcome

Who are our well-known Humanists?

Are religions always a force for good?

I don't believe in heaven and hell. I don't know if I believe in God. All I know is that as an individual, I won't allow this life - the only thing I know to exist - to be wasted. - George Clooney

Suffolk Humanists and Secularists
www.suffolkhands.org.uk

How many reports do you need before taking action?

It is striking that in the past year there have been several major publications touching on the future of Religious Education in schools. Amongst them are;

- “RE for Real”: Adam Dinham and Martha Shawby of the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London. In this 331 students, teachers, parents and employers about their views on the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief in schools.
- “Living with difference: community, diversity and the common good”: E. Butler-Sloss. This is a systematic review of the role of religion and belief in the UK today
- “A New settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools”, C Clarke and L Woodhead. This provides a series of recommendations covering the act of collective worship, the curriculum and the future of faith schools.

All the above can be downloaded from the web and what is striking about them is that they all clearly stress that the present legal framework for RE and Collective Worship in schools is currently unworkable and with the proliferation of free schools, faith schools and academies will get worse.

News from the chair

The past couple of months have been quite busy. We have had our usual rather poorly attended monthly meetings and slightly better attended pub lunches PLUS a tea and cakes 'special' at Margaret's however I seem to have had rather a lot of extra activities related to our group which may be of interest.

In February I presented a talk entitled "The humanist view of nature" (subtitled "The nature of humanism") at University Campus Suffolk. This was the second in a series of monthly talks being hosted by SIFRE (Suffolk Interfaith Resource) throughout 2016. The series focuses on how various faiths and beliefs view nature and are open to all. The audiences for these events span a broad range of beliefs - although usually from the 'liberal' end of the beliefs spectrum - and they provide an opportunity for us to explain and discuss our similarities and differences.

It is always a bit difficult pitching a talk to an audience likely to consist mainly of 'curious believers' but which might have some with more fundamentalist views. I started by covering the basic ideas of humanism and secularism as well as explaining why the scientific method has proved to be the most powerful and widely used method of inquiry humans have ever discovered for finding out how life and the universe work. This was contrasted with the process of finding truth the religious way - essentially by revelation. In a similar vein I touched on the absurdity of supernatural claims in all their forms pointing out that although almost many mainstream faiths these days tend to rationalise their beliefs in practice belief in "spiritual things" and "miracle cures" remain widespread even amongst the more enlightened of believers. While researching this I came across particularly thought provoking observation by John Morley: "Where it is a duty to worship the sun, it is pretty sure to be a crime to examine the laws of heat".

While preparing the talk it struck me more than ever just how devastating the discoveries of Galileo ("Nature is relentless and unchangeable and it is indifferent as

to whether its hidden reasons and actions are understandable by man or not") as well as Darwin ("Good things happen and bad things happen, because that's the way the world is") must have been at the time.

I then introduced a few more recent discoveries - like the fact that Neanderthals were probably not only as intelligent as homo sapiens but also that we interbred with them so that most of us (the exception being those who are pure sub-Saharan Africans) contain 2% to 4% of Neanderthal genes. Also that we now know that there were at least two other forms of humanity until fairly recently - the Denisovans who died out 40,000 years ago and Homo Floresiensis who possibly became extinct as recently as 10,000 years ago.

These discoveries (to me) raised many really interesting questions e.g. did Neanderthals have a sense of morality similar to ours? Were they altruistic? And how does the discovery that humanity was not as unique as we had previously thought square with the various religious perspectives? How do religious groups react when faced with such knowledge?

Finally, I touched upon aesthetics and its possible role in evolution finishing with a video of Carl Sagan's "The Pale Blue Dot". There was a lot of follow up discussion!

Denis Johnston

Suffolk Interfaith Resource (SIFRE)

As many of you will know the two founders of SIFRE David and Cynthia Capey have said that they will be retiring in September this year. Although some question why we as non-religious people should be involved with an organisation that notionally seems to promote faiths in practice SIFRE been very welcoming and supportive of us and our activities particularly with regard to education. Recent times have been particularly difficult as local funding has virtually dried up, the premises at Suffolk College are no longer available the office has gone and the library has put into storage. However, there is still a comprehensive series of talks and many other activities that encourage people of different backgrounds and beliefs to meet together and understand each other. Since December a sub-set of the board has been meeting to decide the best way forward and we have met every four weeks or so to decide what our future strategy must be. I will keep you posted.

Denis Johnston

Budgets, academies and unintended consequences

In the recent budget the chancellor declared that all schools would be expected to aim to be Academies by 2020. This is of great significance for the Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) which currently fall under Local Education Authority (LEAs) control and are required by law to set the RE syllabus for schools in each area. One possibility (and the most likely) is that a National RE Curriculum will be created and Academies will be free to choose whether to use it or not. However, this is a potentially explosive political issue, probably more so than the removal of parent governors - and one that has completely bypassed the Ministry of Education. In particular, it may also bring to a head the absurd situation where SACREs are supposed to ensure that all state funded schools (except those with a special religious dispensation) are required to have an act of daily worship of a

'broadly Christian character". This is something which few (apart from C of E VA schools) do and it is well known that it is an issue cautiously avoided by politicians. My suspicion (and hope) is that the government will attempt to use academisation (backed up by the Butler-Scloss report recommendations) and quietly drop the requirement of daily worship. If it doesn't perhaps we can look forward to a national enforcing body of militant vicars that will police future school assemblies.

All in all, it looks as though we may have an interesting and/or challenging few years ahead of us.

Denis Johnston

Future Events

Tuesday 10th May 7:30 pm - "Things I believe that I cannot prove". Discussion led by Denis. Darwin room at Arlington's Brasserie, Ipswich.

Saturday 28th May: 12:00 noon - Lunch meeting at Duke of York Woodbridge.

Tuesday 14th June.: "Is marriage outdated?" Discussion led by Liz. Darwin room at Arlington's Brasserie, Ipswich.

Sunday afternoon event in Hadleigh July TBA.

Saturday 30th July: 12:00 noon Lunch meeting at Duke of York Woodbridge.

August (date TBC) Garden party at Stutton and AGM.

Tuesday 13th September: The nature of Humanism An introductory talk by Denis Darwin room at Arlington's Brasserie, Ipswich.

Saturday Lunch meetings at the Duke of York, Woodbridge, May 28th and July 30th

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