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Secularism is the belief that religion should have no place in civil affairs; that the church and state should be kept separate. There are religious secularists who agree with these principles but we are not religious. A fully secular state is the only sort where everyone is free to practice his or her religion or to live free from religion without interference, provided that he or she doesn't expect any privileges because of his or her personal beliefs, and doesn't seek to impose them on anyone else. The UK is not a completely secular state. We have an established church, bishops in the House of Lords, public subsidies for religious organisations, and preferential treatment for people of "faith". However, we are more secular than we were. Organisations like the [National Secular Society](#), the [British Humanist Association](#) and Suffolk Humanists & Secularists are constantly challenging the influence of religion in public life. We agree with the mission statement of the National Secular Society:

We want a society in which all are free to practise their faith, change it or not have one, according to their conscience. Our belief or lack of it should neither advantage nor disadvantage. Religion should be a matter of private conscience, for the home and place of worship; it must not have privileged input into the political arena where history shows it to bring conflict and injustice. The National Secular Society is the leading pressure group defending the rights of non-believers from the demands of religious power-seekers. We campaign on a wide range of issues, including religious influence in the government, the disestablishment of the Church of England, the removal of the Bench of Bishops from the House of Lords and for conversion of religious schools (paid for by the taxpayer) to community schools, open to all. Additionally: 1. We fight to protect free expression from attacks by religious groups, often keen to restrict comment about, and examination of, their activities. 2. We want the blasphemy law to be abolished* and artistic expression to be protected from religious censors. 3. We lobby the BBC to reduce the amount of religious propaganda paid for by licence-payers, very few of whom are interested. 4. We want to ensure that human rights always come before religious rights, and to fight the massive exemptions religious bodies are granted from discrimination laws that everyone else has to observe. The NSS was prominent in the campaign to frustrate religious bodies' attempts to opt out of the Human Rights Act – we fought to limit exemptions in the employment discrimination legislation and other equality law. Even now the government seems anxious to increase religious involvement in public life. Each increase disadvantages those who have no religion. Only by secularising our institutions can we ensure that no religious ideology can dominate and discriminate against others.

[National Secular Society - About the NSS.](#)

[Read what was said about secularism at Suffolk Forum of Faiths in October 2007.](#)

[Read more about Secularism on this site.](#)

[Douglas Todd on why secularisation is the best thing that ever happened to religion.](#)

**Since this was written, the [blasphemy law has been abolished](#).*

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Listen to podcasts from [the Institute for Humanist Studies](#) through the HNN Podcast Flash Player. To listen you'll need the iTunes player, [which you can download here](#). Press the title to select a track, and scroll down for more.

Tags: [podcasts](#), [IHS](#), [Institute+for+Humanist+Studies](#)

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Does God exist?

Alan Alda, perhaps best-known as Hawkeye in the 70s series MASH. He now hosts Scientific American Frontiers on US television:

"Until I was 20 I was sure there was a being who could see everything I did and who didn't like most of it. He seemed to care about minute aspects of my life, like on what day of the week I ate a piece of meat. And yet, he let earthquakes and mudslides take out whole communities, apparently ignoring the saints among them who ate their meat on the assigned days. Eventually, I realised that I didn't believe there was such a being ... I still don't like the word agnostic. It's too fancy. I'm simply not a believer."

[Second thoughts on life, the universe and everything by world's best brains | Science | The Guardian.](#)

Just one of several people who are happy to admit they've changed their minds.

Tags: [Second+thoughts](#), [Life,+the+universe+and+everything](#), [Best+brains](#)

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On the 30th of September 2007, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens sat down for a first-of-its-kind, unmoderated 2-hour discussion, convened by RDFRS and filmed by Josh Timonen.

All four authors have recently received a large amount of media attention for their writings against religion - some positive, and some negative. In this conversation the group trades stories of the public's reaction to their recent books, their unexpected successes, criticisms and common misrepresentations. They discuss the tough questions about religion that face the world today, and propose new strategies for going forward.

[WATCH THE VIDEO FREE ONLINE:](#)

Hour 1
the four horsemen - part 1
[Google Video](#) | [Quicktime](#) (78.7 MB) | [Torrent](#) | [Audio Only](#) (mp3, 26.6 MB)

Hour 2
the four horsemen - part 2
[Google Video](#) | [Quicktime](#) (73.6 MB) | [Torrent](#) | [Audio Only](#) (mp3, 27.1 MB)

[RichardDawkins.net - The Official Richard Dawkins Website.](#)

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Daniel+Dennett](#), [Sam+Harris](#), [Christopher+Hitchens](#)

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[The US Presidential race begins in Iowa.](#) Since what happens there affects us here, itâ€™ll be interesting to see which Republican candidate wins the most religious votes. Religion isnâ€™t supposed to be an election issue, but try telling them that.

Out in Iowa, with the bell at last ringing and the combatants charging out of their corners, the Republican card has come down to the Maulinâ€™ Mormon versus the Battlinâ€™ Baptist. Would the Framers be pleased? Doesnâ€™t seem likely, somehow. The deists, freethinkers, and assorted Protestants (plus two Catholics) who drafted the Constitution sternly forbade theological sucker punchesâ€™â€œNo religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United Statesâ€™ was how they put itâ€™but todayâ€™s Republicans make their own rules.

[Round One: Comment: The New Yorker](#)

Tags: [Religion](#), [America](#), [US](#), [Elections](#), [Presidential+elections](#), [Republicans](#), [Iowa](#)

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The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) representing the 56 Islamic States renewed its attack on the Universality of Human Rights at the 6th Session of the Human Rights Council that ended on 14 December.

On Human Rights Day, 10 December, Ambassador Masood Khan, speaking on behalf of the OIC, claimed that the 1990 Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam

“.. is not an alternative, competing worldview on human rights. It complements the Universal Declaration as it addresses religious and cultural specificity of the Muslim countries”.

[Universality of Human Rights under attack at the UN | International Humanist and Ethical Union](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [UN](#), [HUman+Rights](#), [Islam](#)

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Rather than the usual New Year’s resolutions about reducing your credit card debt, losing weight or giving up smoking, we would urge you all to make one about something much more important to future generations. To vow to support Human Rights. For it is they which underpin our way of life – for many they represent one of the greatest achievements of Western civilisation.

The body overseeing Universal Human Rights is the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Taking part in their meetings is a sobering experience. While there are countries, groups and individuals who make wonderful contributions, Human Rights are undoubtedly becoming less universal and inalienable. The individual’s rights are in great danger of becoming alienated in favour of group rights – often for religions.

[National Secular Society - Make the defence of Human Rights your New Year’s Resolution](#).

Tags: [NSS](#), [Human+Rights](#), [UNHRC](#), [National+Secular+Society](#)

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This week, on Wednesday 9th January, an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill will be proposed by [Dr Evan Harris MP](#) (honorary associate of the NSS) to abolish the offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel.

We’re affiliated to the [The British Humanist Association](#) (BHA) and [The National Secular Society](#) (NSS), who’ve campaigned for the blasphemy laws to be abolished and have briefed MPs about the present amendment, as well as representing the case for abolition to Government.

Contact your MP NOW!

The BHA says there are a number of compelling reasons to abolish the blasphemy laws:

- The blasphemy law is contrary to the principle of free speech and is probably contrary to human rights laws adopted by the UK, which protect freedom of expression. The law fundamentally protects certain, Christian, beliefs and makes it illegal to question them or deny them.
- There is considerable evidence that the blasphemy law restricts free speech even in the absence of recent prosecutions. It undoubtedly influences the behaviour not only of individuals and the media, but also of bodies exercising official functions.
- The blasphemy law protects beliefs, not people. It is right, subject to safeguards, for society through its laws to protect individuals and groups within it from hatred and attack. It is quite wrong to extend the protection of the law to propositions, creeds and truth-claims.
- In a free society we must be allowed to criticise religious doctrines and practices, even if that offends some people. While it may be offensive to some Christian believers to hear their beliefs mocked or denied that is equally true of people of other faiths, and of unbelievers, who repeatedly hear atheism equated with a lack of values or immorality. In an open and pluralist society there should be no inhibition to free speech without the very strongest justification, and robust debate should be expected and accepted in religious as in political and other spheres.
- The blasphemy law is uncertain. As common law, with a very limited number of cases, it is impossible to predict how the courts might interpret the law in any putative case. This is contrary to the principles of good law, and unacceptable in practice.
- The blasphemy law lacks credibility. Although no one has been imprisoned for blasphemy since 1921, and private prosecutions are no longer possible, the possibility of a prison sentence remains, and a law that is only enforced at intervals of many years is an indefensible lottery.
- The blasphemy law allows no defence of merit or lack of intent, which is contrary to the principles adopted in other areas, for example, obscenity.
- The blasphemy law defends only Christianity (and principally the doctrines of the Church of England), which is unacceptable in a society characterised by its diversity of beliefs. Such unequal treatment naturally arouses resentment and demands for the privilege to be extended to other groups.
- Rather than extend the blasphemy laws to other religious beliefs, which in practice would constitute the severest restriction on discussion of fundamental matters of profound significance and interest, the most fair and most equal and equal solution would be to abolish the laws.

The NSS says:

We have been working closely with our Honorary Associate Dr Evan Harris MP, who has identified an opportunity to challenge the blasphemy law in the House of Commons.

On Wednesday, 9 January, Dr Harris will table as an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill. Below is a letter we have been working on with him which will appear in the Daily Telegraph signed by a large number of other Honorary Associates and prominent supporters of the NSS as well as some other worthy names from a religious and other spheres.

The letter itself makes the case forcibly:

"In the light of the widespread outrage at the conviction of the British teacher for blasphemy in Sudan over the name of a teddy bear we believe it is now time to repeal our own blasphemy law.

"The ancient common law of blasphemous libel purports to protect beliefs rather than people or communities. Most religious commentators are of the view that the Almighty does not need the "protection" of such a law. We are representatives of religious, secular, legal and artistic opinion in this country and share the view that the blasphemy offence serves no useful purpose. Yet it allows small partisan organisations or well-funded individuals to try to censor broadcasters like the BBC and to intimidate small theatres, the printed media and book publishers.

"Far from protecting public order — for which other laws are more suited — it actually damages social cohesion. It is discriminatory in that it only covers attacks on Christianity and Church of England tenets and thus engenders an expectation among other religions that their sensibilities should be also protected by the criminal law (as with the attempt to charge Salman Rushdie) and a sense of grievance among minority religions that they do not benefit from their own version of such a law.

"As the Law Commission acknowledged as far back as 1985, when they recommended repeal, it is uncertain in scope, lack of intention is no defence and yet it is unlimited in penalty. This, together with its chilling effect on free expression and its discriminatory impact, leaves it in clear breach of human rights law and in the end no one is ever likely to be convicted under it.

"The Church of England no longer opposes its abolition and the Government has given no principled reason to defend its retention. We call upon MPs to support the amendment proposed by Dr Evan Harris, Frank Dobson and John Gummer (tbc) tomorrow during the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill Report stage proceedings and for the Government — which rightly criticises countries like Sudan for their blasphemy laws — to give it a fair wind."

If you support the abolition of blasphemy laws, we urge you please to write immediately to your MP, preferably by email, explaining you would like them to support Dr Harris's amendment on Wednesday and add in your own words why you think this is important. You could perhaps use some of the ideas in the above letter, but please do not reproduce them all.

It is best if you can to contact your MP by email – you can find out details if you don't know them from this website: <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/mp/>. This allows you to write to the correct MP by putting in your postcode. Whatever method you use to contact your MP, it is essential to include your name and full address.

If for any reason you would prefer to write by letter, you can send it by fax by phoning 020 7219 3000 and asking for the MPs office and requesting a fax number. Alternatively you could write to them at House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA, but in view of the urgency we would urge you to use email or fax if possible.

The NSS has been fighting for the abolition of blasphemy for the whole of its 140 year history. We have been working with Dr Harris on this important issue for some weeks including over the seasonal break assisting with research and soliciting the support of many influential individuals. We know you will want to add your support.

Tags: [Dr+Evan+Harris+MP](#), [Blasphemy](#), [Bill](#), [Abolish+blasphemy](#), [BHA](#), [NSS](#)

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Thank you to everyone who lobbied his or her MP on the blasphemy issue. In the House of Commons this evening, Dr Evan Harris MP stated the case for abolition clearly and eloquently. At the end, Government Justice Minister Maria Eagle said they had "every sympathy for the case for formal abolition" and promised that the Government would bring in its own amendment, after a swift consultation with the C of E. Dr Harris withdrew his amendment.

Assuming nothing goes wrong, it seems that blasphemy will be removed from the statute books before long.

After [a letter in favour of abolition in the Telegraph yesterday](#), signed by former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey and former Archbishop of Oxford Lord Harries, the Government feared a backbench revolt over the issues as a result of considerable lobbying by NSS and BHA members, amongst others.



[An article by NSS President Terry Sanderson in Index on Censorship sets out the argument for scrapping the law on blasphemy:](#)

Religion in Britain was, until relatively recently, sinking quietly into oblivion. It was suffering a lingering death brought on

by utter indifference.

But now, suddenly, it is on the front page of the newspapers just about every day of the week. It often leads on the news and its ubiquity is beginning to alert even the most news-averse citizen that something extraordinary, and quite alarming, is going on.

One of the aspects of the religious revival that seems to anger people most is the desire by religious bodies to restrict freedom to examine, criticise and mock their beliefs. Proposed restrictions on 'incitement to religious hatred' and 'defamation of religion' are suddenly pre-occupying legislators in parliaments around the globe, in the United Nations and the Council of Europe. We don't need to go over again the many cases that have sparked this frenzy of demands for censorship, from Salman Rushdie to Jerry Springer The Opera, from Bezhti to the Mohammed cartoons.

[Britain: New attempt to end blasphemy law.](#)

Tags: [Blasphemy](#), [NSS](#), [Terry+Sanderson](#), [House+of+Commons](#), [Criminal+Justice+Bill](#), [Parliament](#)

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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Tickets are still available for the 2008 BHA Darwin Day Lecture, to be chaired by Richard Dawkins and given by Tim Lewens. Tickets are available by telephoning the BHA on 020 7079 3580 and cost £5 for BHA members and £7.50 for non-members. Email the BHA for more information - info@humanism.org.uk

Tim Lewens on Charles Darwin: a philosophical naturalist

Chair: Professor Richard Dawkins

The Darwin Lecture Theatre, University College, London, Gower Street, WC1

Tim Lewens is Senior Lecturer in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. His research interests embrace the philosophy of biology and bioethics. Tim is the author of Darwin (Routledge, 2007), a critically acclaimed 'philosophical introduction to Darwin', and Organisms and Artifacts (MIT, 2004). His most recent book is Risk: Philosophical Perspectives (Routledge, 2007).

Professor Richard Dawkins FRS is the Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. His most recent books are a collection of his articles and essays, The Devil's Chaplain, The Ancestor's Tale and The God Delusion. He is a vice-president of the British Humanist Association and a supporter of the Darwin Day Celebration campaign.

Further info: www.humanism.org.uk/site/cms/contentViewArticle.asp?article=2290

Map link: tinyurl.com/yw6hte

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Tags: [Darwin+Day](#), [lecture](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Tim+Lewens](#)

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The Jan/Feb issue of New Humanist is out now and packed with new year goodies. In a natural history special Laurie Taylor interviews David Attenborough, and we ask four scientific experts what they would like to talk to Darwin about if he happened to invite them for dinner. Plus brilliant pieces on the UK Government's Muslim policy (Dave Rich says they are finally getting it right), the need for luxury, the return of torture as policy and the great photographers EO Hopper and Don McCullin.

[New Humanist Magazine \(Rationalist Association\).](#)

[You can sign up for the New Humanist e-newsletter on the site.](#)

Tags: [New+Humanist](#), [Magazine](#)

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Amongst other things, Huckabee is a Creationist. Scary!

Tags: [You+Tube](#), [America](#), [Religion](#), [Evangelicals](#), [Huckabee](#), [Republicans](#)

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The UK government is planning to review the law on 'collective worship' in state schools. It is compulsory - indeed more compulsory in the letter than in the usual practice; and teachers must, however wearily, devise a 'broadly Christian' message for the whole school.

[*Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: School Assembly revamp.*](#)

Click the link above to read more.

Tags: [Schools](#), [Education](#), [Assemblies](#), [School+assemblies](#)

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[*The Jonathan Dimbleby Big Debate - Religion in Schools | Teachers TV.*](#)

You can either watch the 60 minute video online or download it from the Teachers' TV website. The synopsis is as follows:

Jonathan Dimbleby and a panel of experts come together to debate the controversial subject of religion in Britain's schools.

The role of religion in education is a subject rarely out of the headlines. Despite Britain's multi-faith society, schools are still required to include a collective act of worship of a Christian nature, while faith schools and religious academies have raised fears about community cohesion and covert selection.

Claims by some religious educationalists that faith is the best way to teach moral values is challenged by others in schools who believe religious morality to be outdated and dangerous.

Dimbleby is joined by Professor Richard Dawkins, Schools Select Committee chairman Barry Sheerman MP, and a multi-faith studio audience.

Tags: [Teachers'+TV](#), [Religion+in+schools](#), [Debate](#), [Faith](#)

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Tags: [Eh?](#), [You+Tube](#), [Peanut+butter](#), [Evolution](#)

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The first Jedi Church in the UK is to open on Holyhead. Two brothers, who consider themselves Jedi Knights, have decided to set up the church as a meeting point for the 300,000 Britons who claimed Jedi as their religion in the national census in 2003.

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Britain to get Jedi Church.](#)

May the Force be with them!

Tags: [Jedi+Church](#), [Star+Wars](#), [Census](#)

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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Humanist & Secularist campaigns. A briefing on all the current campaigns that you might contribute to with letters or emails. They include the Scouts' promise (the Scout Association discriminates against non-religious young people by the requirement to make a promise to God), and the Government policy of handing over welfare and health care to faith-based organisations.

We'll be at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester - near The Mercury Theatre and the water tower.

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

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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Go out and buy carrots. Make soup. Have fun. You'll see much better in the dark!

A silly idea that started [on Facebook](#).

Further info: <http://www.panicbuyers.co.nr/>

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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Margaret Nelson provides a Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk for 2 minutes sometime between 7.25 and 7.35 am. Today's will be about Darwin Day - the anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin.

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

Apologies for giving the wrong time, so you may have missed the broadcast. T4TD has been brought forward to an earlier slot and I hadn't realised. Sorry!

Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/local_radio/index.shtml

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Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/local_radio/index.shtml

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It takes quite a lot to make Richard Dawkins look like a charitable, kindly injured innocent, but the trick has been managed by a ghastly group calling themselves the Pilgrim Baptist Church, who run a funeral oration site and (though the Prof is in robust health) have announced Dawkins' memorial service for Friday, pronouncing "Richard Dawkins has proven to be one of the most wicked human beings to ever walk the earth" (hard luck, Hitler).

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: Dawkins ghouls.](#)

It all depends how you define "wickedness", doesn't it? Prof Dawkins has used the word "wicked" in entirely different contexts, such as describing parents who claim their very young children on behalf of their own religion, before they're old enough to understand what religion is. I prefer Dawkins' definitions.

Tags: [Libby+Purves](#), [Times+Online](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Wickedness](#)

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Go to the Independent's website to sign a petition calling on the Foreign Office to use its influence to prevent the execution of Sayed Pervez Kambaksh for "blasphemy" in Afghanistan.

[Sentenced to death: Afghan who dared to read about women's rights - Asia, World - Independent.co.uk](#)

A young man, a student of journalism, is sentenced to death by an Islamic court for downloading a report from the internet. The sentence is then upheld by the country's rulers. This is Afghanistan – not in Taliban times but six years after "liberation" and under the democratic rule of the West's ally Hamid Karzai.

The fate of Sayed Pervez Kambaksh has led to domestic and international protests, and deepening concern about erosion of civil liberties in Afghanistan. He was accused of blasphemy after he downloaded a report from a Farsi website which stated that Muslim fundamentalists who claimed the Koran justified the oppression of women had misrepresented the views of the prophet Mohamed.

Tags: [Urgent+action](#), [Independent](#), [Execution](#), [Death+sentence](#), [Afghanistan](#)

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Join the International Humanist and Ethical Union and the American Humanist Association for the 17th annual World Humanist Congress in Washington DC at the L'Enfant Plaza Hotel. This exciting event will be held June 5-8, 2008, with extended activities June 4 and 9.



Plenary sessions include topics on human rights, bioethical issues, religious reform, freedom of conscience and expression, Humanist approaches to social problems, and many others.

Speakers include IHEU President Sonja Eggerickx, AHA President Mel Lipman, Maryland State Senator Jamie Raskin, Feminist Majority Foundation President Eleanor Smeal, Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Lori Lipman Brown of the Secular Coalition for America, and many others to be announced. Accepting the Humanist of the Year award is U.S. Representative Pete Stark, the first openly nontheist member in Congress.

The IHEU World Humanist Congress is a triennial event that has been held in France, India, and the Netherlands. The last Congress held in the United States was 20 years ago. Don't miss this rare opportunity to participate in this unique conference and meet Humanists from around the globe.

[Keep checking our website](#) for more updates on the conference schedule, speakers, and Humanist awardees.

[AHA 2008 Conference.](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [Humanist+World+Congress](#), [ASA](#)

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We used to conduct gay weddings in Suffolk – by “we”, I mean [our Ceremonies Team](#). When they introduced legal partnership ceremonies, the demand for Humanist ceremonies ceased abruptly. Now it looks like civil ceremonies are losing popularity too.

The number of gay weddings has plummeted by more than 50 per cent in the past year. Civil partnerships became legal for homosexuals in December 2005, allowing them to acquire the same sorts of tax and pension rights as straight married couples.

Initially, thousands of gay and lesbian couples held ceremonies. However, a survey by the Local Government Association found that all the 40 councils across England they surveyed had experienced a fall in the number taking place - the figures show an average drop of 55 per cent in 2007 from 2006.

[Honeymoon is over for gay weddings | UK News | The Observer.](#)

Tags: [Gay+weddings](#), [Ceremonies](#), [Civil+partnerships](#)

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Thought for the Day, BBC Radio Suffolk, Saturday 2 February 2008

Thirty-odd years ago, I met a suffragette. She'd known the Pankhursts – Emmeline and her daughter Christabel, who led the Women's Social & Political Union, popularly known as suffragettes. Although Mrs Birnberg was an old woman when I met her, she still felt as strongly about women's rights as she'd ever done and was scornful about the young women who didn't use the vote that she and other women had fought for. I thought about her when, during election campaigns here in Suffolk, women would say they couldn't be bothered to go and vote.



I didn't know about the Suffolk connection with the women's suffrage movement then. [Millicent Garrett Fawcett](#) was born in Aldeburgh in 1847. When visiting her older sisters Elizabeth and Louise in London she was influenced by the radical political views of their friends. In 1865, she heard a speech on women's rights by John Stuart Mill MP, a strong influence on the Humanist movement, and through him she met other campaigners. One was the blind MP Henry Fawcett, who she married. Millicent's sister [Elizabeth Garrett Anderson](#) is famous as a doctor who won the right for women to train in medicine, and as Mayor of Aldeburgh. The new Garrett Anderson Centre at Ipswich Hospital is named after her.

Millicent Fawcett became leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, which campaigned for women's right to vote. Unlike more militant suffragettes, who caused criminal damage and other crimes in pursuit of their aims, Millicent believed the suffragettes could win by constitutional means. [The Fawcett Society](#), of which I'm a member, is still campaigning for equality between men and women at work, in the home, and in public life.

I chose to talk about this today because this Wednesday we celebrate the 90th anniversary of women winning the vote. In many parts of the world, women still don't have a vote or anything close to equality. I hope it won't take another 90 years before they do.

Tags: [Millicent+Fawcett](#), [T4TD](#), [Votes+for+Women](#), [Suffragettes](#)

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Feb 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Margaret Nelson will talk about [the Scout Association's discrimination against non-religious young people](#) with presenter Rachel Sloane and the Scouts' County Commissioner.

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

Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/local_radio/index.shtml

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Feb 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

BBC Radio Suffolk presenter Rachel Sloane will phone [Suffolk \(and Cambodian\) Humanist Nathan Nelson in Siem Reap, Cambodia](#), to talk on air about what he's doing there.

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

Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/local_radio/index.shtml

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Reasons for God's "existence", not meant to be taken seriously (although many believers do).

Hundreds of Proofs of God's Existence

Formerly: Over Three Hundred Proofs of God's Existence

Hours of entertainment – click the link...

[*Hundreds of Proofs of God's Existence.*](#)

Tags: [Humour](#), [God](#), [God's+existence](#)

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The Archbishop of Canterbury provoked a chorus of criticism yesterday by predicting that it was "unavoidable" that elements of Islamic sharia law would be introduced in Britain.

Christian and secular groups joined senior politicians to condemn Rowan Williams' view that there was a place for a "constructive accommodation with some aspects of Muslim law" over such issues as marriage.

[*Archbishop of Canterbury warns sharia law in Britain is inevitable - Home News, UK - Independent.co.uk*](#)

The Archbishop seems to have made himself deeply unpopular with this pronouncement, apart from with some Muslims. He apparently told The Telegraph's legal correspondent Joshua Rosenberg, who was interviewed on BBC News 24 this morning, that he was going to retire with a paper bag over his head to escape the furore. Good idea. Don't come out until you've accepted the error of your ways, Archbishop Williams.

[Read what Libby Purves says in the Times Online.](#)

Tags: [Archbishop+of+Canterbury](#), [Rowan+Williams](#), [Sharia+law](#)

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From the official Richard Dawkins website:

SCIENCE is useful but that is not all it is. Science can be uplifting, thrilling, life-enhancing. Originally broadcast on Britain's Channel 4 in 1996, Break the Science Barrier follows the Oxford Biologist Richard Dawkins as he meets with people who have experienced the wonders of science first-hand. We meet the astronomer who first discovered pulsars, the geneticist who invented DNA fingerprinting, a scientist who discovered a protein that causes cancer, and others. Dawkins interviews famous admirers of science such as Douglas Adams and David Attenborough, and asks them why science means so much to them. We also see how dangerous ignorance of science can be in classrooms, courts, and beyond.

[RichardDawkins.net - The Official Richard Dawkins Website.](#)

Tags: [Science](#), [DVD](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#)

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An extraordinary — one might almost say unbelievable — industrial tribunal case in Manchester in March gave a rare insight into how attempts to accommodate “multicultural” religious needs at work actually appear only to apply to Muslims. It developed around a spat between Muslim employees at the Royal Mail and a member of the Odinist Fellowship (a group that apparently worships the old Nordic gods).

[National Secular Society - The Extraordinary Case Of The Pagan And The Multicultural Prayer Room.](#)

“Multiculturalism” actually means “multifaithism”, an unworkable concept developed during Tony Blair’s premiership. At the international Humanist Colloquium in Turin last June, the BHA’s Executive Director, Hanne Stinson, said,

What is multiculturalism? The first difficulty we have is that people define ‘multiculturalism’ in different ways.

If you define it as policies that allow people to live their lives according to their own beliefs and culture, so long as that does not disadvantage others, few people would have any difficulties with that. An approach like that is firmly based on human rights and equality (the European Convention on Human Rights and the UK Human Rights Act) and few humanists would object to such policies.

On the other hand, multiculturalism can also be defined as policies that choose to define people by just one or two characteristics: by their race or, more typically, their religion, and then lump everyone who shares that characteristic together as a ‘community’. If you then treat those ‘communities’ as if they were completely homogenous, and allow certain people who have been appointed, or have appointed themselves, as ‘community leaders’ or ‘faith leaders’ to speak for the group, you have created a situation that encourages separateness, and can lead to the oppression of people within those groups. Such an approach also favours so called ‘group rights’ over individual human rights.

This second definition is currently government policy in the UK.

Tags: [Multiculturalism](#), [Paganism](#), [Islam](#), [Prayer+rooms](#), [Industrial+tribunal](#)

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Feb 2008
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If you’re the romantic type and want to give flowers to your beloved on Valentine’s Day, consider an alternative to expensive flowers flown from abroad and do your bit for conservation by adopting a British wild flower on his or her behalf.

Adopt-a-flower is a simple way to support a serious issue. The way we look after our countryside has changed enormously over the last sixty years, particularly with the introduction of modern agricultural methods. These changes have resulted in the destruction of habitats on a major scale and the inevitable decline of wildflower populations.

Research by Plantlife shows that, on average, every county across Britain loses a wildflower every year.

By adopting a flower, either as a gift, or for yourself, you will be helping to support Plantlife in our work to halt this decline. Our conservation programme, Back from the Brink, looks after all six of the flowers available for adoption.

[Adopt-a-flower.](#)

[Read an alternative history of Valetine’s Day.](#)

Tags: [Valentine's+Day](#), [Valentine](#), [Flowers](#), [Adopt-a-flower](#), [Plantlife](#)

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Feb 2008
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UK scouts must be prepared to make the Scout Promise:

On My Honour, I promise that I will do my best
To do my duty to God and to the Queen,
To help other people
And to keep the Scout Law.



[The Scout Association's website](#) claims that,

Scouting is open to all young people aged 6 to 25 of every faith and background. There are also plenty of opportunities for adults to become involved as Leaders, Assistants or Administrators.

However, what it doesn't say is that scouting is *not* open to those who don't have a faith. Since [65% of 12–19 year-olds aren't religious](#), this policy effectively excludes a majority of young people.

On 24 January, Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society and Hanne Stinson of the British Humanist Association met the Scouts' Chief Executive, Derek Twine, together with Scout Company Executive David Shelmerdine and the Chairman of Trustees Mike Goodison. Keith and Hanne sought to persuade the Scouts to change its discriminatory policy and make the religious part of its promise optional. So far, the Scouts have refused to consider this.

The NSS has offered to fund a poll of Scouts to find out if they support the continuation of a ban on non-believers, but its offer was refused.

So if you're not a believer (the Scouts will accept all faiths, they say, but not someone with no faith), you're either excluded, or you'd have to lie and pretend to believe – which is hardly the sort of behaviour that the Scouts encourage.

The Scouts need more leaders, but their discriminatory policy effectively excludes a significant number of adults who'd otherwise become enthusiastic leaders.

When I discussed this issue on BBC Radio Suffolk today (10 February) with presenter Rachel Sloane and the Scouts' County Commissioner, I got the impression that he really didn't understand the problem. Several listeners phoned or emailed with their comments, which included,

Humanists should not impose their beliefs on the Scouts. They've [presumably the Scouts] have been going a long time.

If they're not happy they should start their own organisation.

They're trying to be politically-correct (from a local Cub Scout leader). There must be other youth organisations they can join.

They should develop an alternative organisation.

[Read the NSS on the Scouts' Promise.](#)

[Read the BHA on the Scouts' Promise.](#)

If you know anyone who's affected by this issue, [please get in touch](#).

Tags: [The+Scouts](#), [Scout+Association](#), [The+Scouts'+Promise](#), [Discrimination](#)

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Feb 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

A special [SIFRE](#) Forum of Faiths Meeting at the Unitarian Meeting House, Friars Street, Ipswich, IP1 1TD.

A Debate on the reaction to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lecture
"Civil and Religious Law in England: a religious perspective"
delivered by the Archbishop at the Royal Courts of Justice on Thursday 7th February.

SIFRE says,

Speakers from the Christian and Muslim Faiths will debate Rowan Williams's thoughts on the accommodation of some aspects of Sharia Law by the English legal system and the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of his proposals by the media and politicians.

As this event has been widely publicised and will probably be covered by the local media, some Humanists might be interested in it.

[Read British Muslim Yasmin Alibhai-Brown in the Independent.](#)

[Read what the NSS says.](#)

[Read what the BHA says.](#)

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/2el4cm>

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Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource is having a debate at the Unitarian Meeting house on Thursday 14 February, starting at 6pm. [See our events calendar for details.](#)

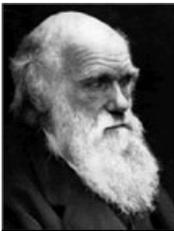
SIFRE says,

Speakers from the Christian and Muslim Faiths will debate Rowan Williams's thoughts on the accommodation of some aspects of Sharia Law by the English legal system and the misunderstandings and misrepresentations of his proposals by the media and politicians.

Tags: [SIFRE](#), [Debate](#), [Archbishop+of+Canterbury](#), [Sharia](#)

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This was supposed to be broadcast on BBC Radio Suffolk on 12 February 2008, after being recorded. I didn't hear it, so I'm not sure if anyone else did.



Today is Darwin Day, the 199th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, the man who first described biological evolution via natural selection. On Darwin Day we celebrate the enormous benefits that scientific knowledge, acquired through human curiosity and ingenuity, has contributed to the advancement of humanity, and in particular we celebrate the achievements of a great man.

If he were alive today, I'm sure Darwin would be fascinated by the current BBC TV series, *Life in Cold Blood*, with Sir David Attenborough, some of which was filmed on the Galapagos Isles, where he made the discoveries that sowed the seeds of doubt about the conventional biblical explanation for the origin of life. I think he'd have been delighted to find how much of his original theory of natural selection has been confirmed by subsequent discoveries. Being a scientist, he'd also have been interested to learn how other scientists have corrected some of his errors, in the light of research that's only become possible with the development of modern scientific instrumentation and methodology. It's possible to date fossils much more accurately now, for example, and discoveries like DNA have contributed to our understanding of the similarities and the differences between species.

Since Darwin's time, human beings have had a huge effect on the natural world. Natural selection has been overtaken by unnatural development; a rapidly increasing population, industrialisation, the exploitation of fossil fuels, and the wasteful lifestyle of those who live in developed countries. Evolution is a slow process. We're losing species that can't adapt to an environment that's being destroyed by humankind. Darwin might have expected us to have sorted ourselves out by now, but it seems we're slow learners.

Maybe, if more people catch on to the significance of Darwin Day and begin to celebrate it, it will be because they've begun to appreciate the wonders of the natural world, such as those that Sir David Attenborough draws our attention to, and have realised that we are part of it. If our environment suffers, so do we.

Tags: [Darwin+Day](#), [Charles+Darwin](#), [Sir+David+Attenborough](#)

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Excellent resource from the Guardian to mark Darwin Day.

150 years ago, Charles Darwin unveiled his theory of natural selection. To mark this anniversary we bring you the definitive guide to the naturalist's great book, with extracts from key chapters and essays from leading scientists and thinkers



[On the Origin of Species | Science | guardian.co.uk](#).

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

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[Here's the latest Suffolk Humanist newsletter in glorious colour](#) – it has information on our February meeting where Nathan Nelson will be talking about Cambodia and the voluntary projects he is involved with there, as well as food for thought on free speech, the Burston Strike School, Christmas with kids, how you heard about God and more. Aren't we good to you?

[Download the February newsletter \(pdf\)](#)

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More on the Archbishop's position on Sharia, from Andrew Copson, Education & Public Affairs Officer at [the BHA](#):

Imagine that you are sitting in Lambeth Palace as Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the established church in England. It may not seem an enviable position (even without the fracas of recent days).

Although your church is nominally the national church, most people don't even [get married \(pdf\)](#) in it any more, hardly anyone comes to your services, most people don't believe in the doctrines that your church promotes, [they're not religious](#) and a lot of them don't even believe in god(s) at all.

Still, it's not all bad. You and 25 bishops of your church sit as of right in the nation's parliament, something no other religious group can claim; your church controls a third of all the state schools in the country at almost no expense to itself and the government actually wants you to take on the provision of more public services at no cost but with potentially positive consequences for your claim to national significance.

[Comment is free: The archbishop adapts to survive.](#)

Tags: [Archbishop+of+Canterbury](#), [Andrew+Copson](#), [BHA](#), [Comment+is+Free](#)



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The Government has responded to the following e-petition on faith schools, signed by many secularists and humanists:

"We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Abolish all faith schools and prohibit the teaching of creationism and other religious mythology in all UK schools."

Its response is,

The Government remains committed to a diverse range of schools for parents to choose from, including schools with a religious character or "faith schools" as they are commonly known.

Religious Education (RE) in all schools, including faith schools, is aimed at developing pupils' knowledge, understanding and awareness of the major religions represented in the country. It encourages respect for those holding different beliefs and helps promote pupils' moral, cultural and mental development. In partnership with national faith and belief organisations we have introduced a national framework for RE.

In February 2006, the faith communities affirmed their support for the framework in a joint statement making it clear that all children should be given the opportunity to receive inclusive religious education, and that they are committed to making sure the framework is used in the development of religious education in all their schools and colleges.

The Churches have a long history of providing education in this country and have confirmed their commitment to community cohesion. Faith schools have an excellent record in providing high-quality education and serving disadvantaged communities and are some of the most ethnically and socially diverse in the country. Many parents who are not members of a particular faith value the structured environment provided by schools with a religious character.

[faithschools - e-petition response](#).

The response refers to “the faith communities”. They are a minority of religious organisations that claim to represent “communities”, but they aren’t elected or necessarily representative of the people they claim to speak for. Which “faith communities” does the Government mean? How has it “consulted” them?

The Government hasn’t responded to the part of the e-petition about Creationism and religious mythology.

Some of the Government’s response to the e-petition is irrelevant. The new national frame work for RE *doesn’t* make it all right to continue encouraging faith schools. [The IPPR warned that faith schools are “colonised by middle-class children”](#); they are, in effect, selective.

The fight goes on.

Does anyone know if any of the e-petitions on the Downing Street website have resulted in a positive response? Cynically, I suspect that the only petitions likely to receive a sympathetic response are those that have very little effect on Government policy and that the e-petition site is just a PR exercise, like [“The Big Conversation”](#).

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Government](#), [e-petition](#)

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The BHA's annual Darwin Day Lecture is held each year on or around Darwin Day (12th February) in the Darwin Theatre at University College London.

In 2008 the Lecture was again chaired by Richard Dawkins.

The Lecture was given by Tim Lewens whose talk was entitled "Darwin: A Philosophical Naturalist?"

Audio files are available of Dawkins's introduction and Lewens's lecture as well as the Q & A session which followed.

[Go to the BHA website for the audio files](#).

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Charles+Darwin](#), [BHA](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Tim+Lewens](#)

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On Tuesday, the Florida Board of Education was going to discuss whether or not children should learn about evolution. We might point a finger and giggle at such silliness, if it weren’t for the fact that a vocal minority over here think that British children shouldn’t learn about evolution either.

The author of [an article at Tallahassee.com](#) wrote:

The intensely heated and divisive discussion over the veracity of evolution elevates the updating of standards that were adopted in 1996 — a review of what our students are learning or ought to be learning — to a level of, well, craziness.

We hear lots of talk about world-class education, about our state's children keeping up with other states and other nations, and preparing them for a future in which science and technology play key roles. The new standards in math and science will be critical to our progressing in that direction.

Suddenly, though, some school districts — including Jackson, Madison and Taylor counties here in the Big Bend — are passing formal resolutions against the inclusion of evolution in the standards. Suddenly, there is grave concern over holes in the fossil record. Suddenly regular citizens are experts in entropy and in what constitutes scientific "theory."

Curiously, these same opponents aren't demanding that we not teach atomic theory, even though Einstein attacked one of the philosophical problems of quantum mechanics by saying, "God does not play dice with the universe." Nor are the critics too worried about gravity, despite incomplete knowledge of how that works.

I especially like the last bit.

And [the result of the debate](#)?

A sharply divided State Board of Education decreed today that evolution is a “scientific theory,” not necessarily a fact, that Florida schoolchildren should be exposed to - in the hope that they will be curious and explore science thoroughly.

Chairman T. Willard Fair of Miami cast the deciding vote in a 4-3 decision that ended an hour of lively debate.

Yet another example of ignorance about what a "[scientific theory](#)" is.

Tags: [Creationism](#), [Florida](#), [Science+education](#), [Theory+of+evolution](#)

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It seems that the archbishop was wrong to compare sharia with the Jewish [beit din](#).

Earlier this month Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams stunned much of his own church and the rest of the world by saying that it seems unavoidable that elements of Sharia will be adopted into the British legal system...



But perhaps even more disconcerting was one of the reasons Williams offered as justification for his thinking: "We have Orthodox Jewish courts operating in this country." To the archbishop, the system of [beit din](#) that has long operated in the United Kingdom, as well as here in the United States, offered some sort of evidentiary support for argument. It doesn't.

[There Can Only Be One Law of the Land - Forward.com](#).

Thanks to [the NSS](#) for the link

Tags: [Beit+din](#), [Beth+din](#), [Sharia](#), [The+Archbishop+of+Canterbury](#)

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While voters in the US are getting themselves in a tizz at the prospect of either a black(ish) or female president, and there's no chance of an open atheist in the White House, the Dutch don't seem to have the same hang-ups.

78% of voters in Holland would be comfortable with a homosexual leader, a wide-ranging opinion poll has revealed.

Under a third would find an Islamic Prime Minister acceptable, while a mere 33% would be happy with a fundamentalist Christian.

[Dutch OK with gay, atheist, female Prime Minister- from Pink News- all the latest gay news from the gay community - Pink News.](#)

Tags: [Holland](#), [Dutch](#), [Tolerance](#), [Pink+News](#)

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We've tended to post items about biology on this site, because of our opposition to children being taught that Creationism or Intelligent Design explain the origin of life, rather than evolution, but there are some fascinating things going on in physics too. Maybe the physicists don't attract as much attention, particularly from religious people why deny science, because their work is so mind-boggling that few people understand it. There are two stories that have caught my attention over the last week. The first is the idea that our universe is just one of many; that there is a "multiverse", as a group of cosmologists, astrophysicists, particle physicists and philosophers speculate in a Cambridge University Press publication:

Recent developments in cosmology and particle physics, such as the string landscape picture, have led to the remarkable realization that our universe - rather than being unique - could be just one of many universes. The multiverse proposal helps to explain the origin of the universe and some of its observational features.

[Universe or Multiverse? Edited by Bernard Carr. CUP](#)

The second is the work going on in Europe's gigantic particle accelerator:

If you were to dig a hole 300 feet straight down from the center of the charming French village of Crozet, you'd pop into a setting that calls to mind the subterranean lair of one of those James Bond villains. A garishly lit tunnel ten feet in diameter curves away into the distance, interrupted every few miles by lofty chambers crammed with heavy steel structures, cables, pipes, wires, magnets, tubes, shafts, catwalks, and enigmatic gizmos.

[The God Particle - National Geographic Magazine.](#)

With such fascinating developments in science, it's scandalous that [the UK does badly in international league tables for science education](#).

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The following was posted on [Facebook](#) by Laurence Boyce of Cambridge (a member of the NSS and the Liberal Democrats), in response to the accusation from pro-religion people that he's "a bigot" elsewhere on the Internet. Laurence wrote that one of his accusers had asked him ...

... to justify my sweeping assertion that the claims of religion have largely been debunked by science and philosophy ... determined to answer everyone's points (though nobody much was answering mine), I put together a little series of notes which I now collect here for future reference. Not to be taken too seriously – a bit like religion itself, I suppose!

With his permission, I'm sharing Laurence's notes. Religious people of an easily-offended disposition are asked to read carefully, and learn.

Note: All the books mentioned here can be bought from Amazon, via the search box on the right, so we get commission (Note: the Amazon box will be reinstated shortly). *MN*

Contents

1. Plato 2. David Hume 3. Charles Darwin 4. Darwin's theory 5. Sam Harris 6. Reading list

[1. Plato \(428 - 347 BC\)](#)

OK, this is just a touch embarrassing. Hume and Darwin may have been largely responsible for holing religion below the waterline in modern times, but in fact God had already been dealt a fatal blow hundreds of years before Jesus and Mohammed even strutted their stuff. Here's the rough idea:

According to this story by Plato, Socrates meets a guy called Euthyphro on his way to the court house. He's going there to testify against his own father over something or other. So Socrates naturally asks him why the hell would he do that? Euthyphro replies that he believes it to be the will of the gods. And then Plato (in the words of Socrates) delivers the immortal punch line: "Do the gods wish for what is good, *because* it is good; or is what is good, good, because the gods *wish* for it?" Or something like that. This then came to be known as the *Euthyphro dilemma*, after the geezer who was off to condemn his dad because that's what he thought the gods wanted.



Here is [Julian Baggini](#)'s version of the story from his amusing book of philosophical anecdotes, *The Pig that Wants to be Eaten*:

And the Lord spake unto the philosopher, "I am the Lord thy God, and I am the source of all that is good. Why does thy secular moral philosophy ignore me?"

And the philosopher spake unto the Lord, "To answer I must first ask you some questions. You command us to do what is good. But is it good because you command it, or do you command it because it is good?"

"Ur," said the Lord. "It's good because I command it?"

"The wrong answer, surely, your mightiness! If the good is only good because you say it is so, then you could, if you wished, make it so that torturing infants was good. But that would be absurd, wouldn't it?"

"Of course!" replieth the Lord. "I tested thee and thou hast made me pleased. What was the other choice again?"

"You choose what is good because it is good. But that shows quite clearly that goodness does not depend on you at all. So we don't need to study God to study the good."

"Even so," spake the Lord, "you've got to admit I've written some pretty good textbooks on the subject . . ."

So, after a moment's thought, we may see that God (or the gods) cannot reasonably be the source of all goodness. Whatever goodness is (and that is another question really), it is a standard against which both man and God must be measured equally. Unless we would prefer it that whatever God commands should go unchallenged, even including a command to torture infants.

But of course God would never issue evil commands like that. Well . . . not quite so fast. One biblical story that sticks in the memory is that of Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22). God commands Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a blood sacrifice because . . . well, God just needs a regular supply of blood sacrifice to keep him going. Don't you? So Abraham says, "right you are God," and takes Isaac up a distant mountain, puts him on a pyre, ties him down, sharpens the knife, raises it into the sky, ready to plunge it into the heart of his only son. By this stage, Isaac is really shitting himself. Then, at the very last moment, God says, "Aha!!! Only kidding!!!" Now both Abraham and Isaac are pissing themselves at the sheer hilarity of the situation. They're miles from home, cold and tired, Isaac is still tied down on the altar, and Abraham is laughing so hard that he can't even undo the knots.

The point of the story, as I'm sure you know, is that God was putting Abraham to the test – a test he passed with flying colours. But I don't see it that way at all. I think that both God *and* Abraham failed the test big time. God, for asking Abraham to do such a sick and twisted thing in the first place; and Abraham, for going along with it. Because, as Plato showed, God has to be judged by the same standards that we are judged. We have every right, and indeed a responsibility, to question God's wishes, to call God to account, and ultimately even to condemn God after a fair hearing.

Question for the reader: What would you do if God appeared to you in the middle of the night and asked you to kill your only child?

[2. David Hume \(1711 - 1776\)](#)

I love Hume. Not that I knew him personally you understand. The peaceable Scot who was way ahead of his time, and yet liked nothing better than to relax with his mates of an evening around the billiard table. Mindful of the fact that not so long ago, an eighteen year old student named Thomas Aikenhead had been convicted and hanged for "blasphemy," Hume had to tread with caution. For this reason, his Dialogues concerning Natural Religion were written in the form of a . . . dialogue (amazingly!) between fictional characters, and even then were only published posthumously. Here is an interesting passage from the Dialogues which is often cited for its spooky anticipation of Darwin:



If we survey a ship, what an exalted idea must we form of the ingenuity of the carpenter who framed so complicated, useful, and beautiful a machine? And what surprise must we feel, when we find him a stupid mechanic, who imitated others, and copied an art, which, through a long succession of ages, after multiplied trials, mistakes, corrections, deliberations, and controversies, had been gradually improving? Many worlds might have been botched and bungled, throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out; much labour lost; many fruitless trials made; and a slow, but continued improvement carried on during infinite ages in the art of world-making.

Wow! But for me, Hume's greatest contribution lies in his brilliant demolition of the whole concept of "miracles." While Protestants may feel a sense of smug superiority upon hearing of bleeding Catholic statues and the like, the truth is that miracles are central to the entire project of religion. For put simply, a miracle is the opening up of a channel of communication between the domains of nature and supernature. Normally the channel stays open for a very short period (for some reason) – but if there is no channel at all, if the two domains are completely cut off from one another, then . . . what is the point? You might as well be telling me about Pluto, which would doubtless be very interesting – but not *that* interesting.

Anyway, it all began when Hume was staying at the theological college of La Flèche in France, so he could get on with some writing in peace. One day, Hume fell into conversation with a Jesuit who sought to impress him with some tale about a miracle which had supposedly taken place within the college. Hume, deciding that this tommyrot simply had to stop, tried gently explaining his maxim (which we will come to in a minute). Upon hearing it, the Jesuit dropped his jaw like a fish and exclaimed, "But sir, if you are right about this, then the same would hold for all the miracles in the Bible!"

Hume was at a loss as to how to respond. Two paths opened before him: He could either slap his forehead and say, "Doh! Silly me! Just forget everything I said!" Or he could say, "Yes, well the Bible's a pile of shite – I thought we all knew that anyway." Uncertain of his ground, Hume beat a hasty retreat to his study and promptly wrote out his famous essay *Of Miracles* – first published in 1748, anonymously of course for fear of all the usual reprisals.

It's a terrific piece of prose in two parts, though Part I does most of the damage. Hume gradually assembles his argument that "a wise man [should] proportion his belief to the evidence," by way of an entertaining series of stories and anecdotes. In order to believe in a miracle, clearly some sort of evidence is required, but the key thing is that the evidence must scale with what is being claimed. Here is how Hume sums up his case in what, now I come to think of it, must be my favourite paragraph in the whole of the English language:

The plain consequence is (and it is a general maxim worthy of our attention), that no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavours to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, and the superior only gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains after deducting the inferior. When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact which he relates should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.

I love that, "When anyone tells me he saw a dead man restored to life." Not mentioning any names of course! Prison would have been no picnic for Hume – he certainly wouldn't have enjoyed the luxury of a billiard table in jail, like you would today. (What a foul disgrace that, even as I write, the Blasphemy Act of 1698 has yet to be repealed.)

There's also a bit of a technical argument to Hume's maxim. Even if the quality of the evidence were to *surpass* the required level, we are still left with this "mutual destruction of arguments" between the testimony on the one hand, and the entire weight of human experience on the other – experience which in general would suggest that the dead do not rise up from the grave. So, *still* no reason to stand back in amazement. Don't worry if you can't get your head around that part. The bottom line is that "miracles" are just a complete load of bollocks. At any time. In any place.

But for me, Hume's essay does so much more than simply procure for us a handy "miracle test" with which to shoo away simpletons

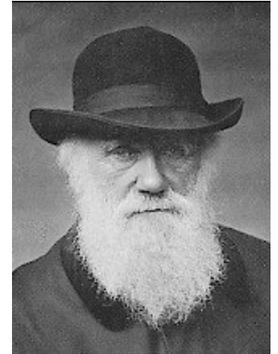
making preposterous claims. Hume seems to be telling us that we wouldn't even want a miracle story to be true. For example, I love fine wines. The ones I love the best are the ones I can't afford. But had I been a guest of the Wedding at Cana, I think I would have taken Jesus to one side and given him a little lecture along the lines of: "Very clever superman, now why don't you just turn the wine back into water, and we'll say no more about it, eh? There's a good Saviour of mankind."

Think about it. What do we stand to gain? Some wine. What do we stand to lose? Reason and sanity. It hardly seems worth the risk. Certainly not for a wine which pre-dates the Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée scheme. It does make you wonder though whether that story might not have been devised specifically to appeal to pissheads.

Question for the reader: Which do you think is more likely: that Jesus turned water into wine, or that somebody made that story up?

[3. Charles Darwin \(1809 - 1882\)](#)

Charles Darwin invented Darwin's theory of evolution. You knew that, didn't you? But possibly the most important thing to understand about Darwin's theory is that it is . . . just that – a *theory*. A bloody good theory, but nonetheless . . . just a theory. A theory of massive explanatory and predictive power, which has, over the course of the last century, forged a compelling unity and coherence out of the biological sciences, while simultaneously shedding a powerful light upon that which could scarcely be of greater import – the very nature of the human condition itself. But . . . when all's said and done (and I really can't stress this enough) . . . *just a theory*.



Darwin studied theology at Cambridge (now there's an irony) before heading off on a sailing trip around the Galapagos Islands off the coast of modern Ecuador. The adventure was to have a number of onerous consequences. Firstly, it resulted in Darwin losing his Christian faith. Sadly, he also lost his health which was never to return for the remainder of his life. And finally, he changed the world utterly and irrevocably. Not bad for a boat trip.

Darwin made a close study of fauna, especially finches, and discovered that they were all slightly different from one island to the next. This led him to the conclusion that, though distinct, the various species of finches were clearly descended from some common ancestor. So this got him to wondering whether in fact all species might not be related by way of a gradual series of increments, the overall difference (and this is the key insight) being one of *degree not of kind*.

Darwin spent the rest of his life working on his little theory, including a whacking eight years on barnacles alone. He liked barnacles. The writings of Thomas Malthus provided him with the explanatory mechanism – now known as "survival of the fittest" – for why species might undergo such a gradual "evolution." Really the only bit missing was the genetic understanding which was to come later. Eventually, spurred on by the knowledge that Alfred Wallace was coming to roughly the same conclusions, he let off his little bombshell in 1859.

Reaction to *The Origin of Species* was mixed. Some people said that his findings contradicted the Bible, and therefore could not possibly be true. These folk live on to this day and are known as "creationists," but they are a very tiny minority – in America, only 53% for instance (according to those pesky polls). Others performed a soft shoe shuffle and said that they had never really believed in Genesis literally anyhow. These people are called religious "moderates." Darwin's own reaction was a little more dramatic. He said he felt as though he were confessing to a murder.

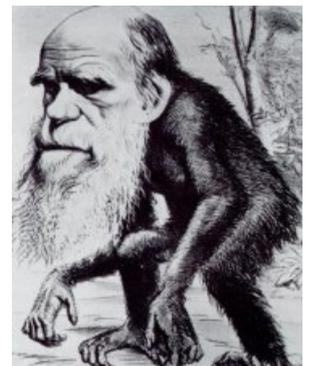
But perhaps the most telling reaction of all came from the wife of the Bishop of Birmingham who is reported to have said to her husband, "My dear, let us hope that it is not true; but, if it is true, let us hope that it does not become generally known." So much for the Protestant liberal tradition! Of course I have no idea whether or not she actually said that, but it's certainly what she *should* have said. For nothing, but *nothing*, has been more corrosive to the project of religion than the theory of evolution through natural selection. Here's why:

Question for the reader: How concerned should we be to learn that the most powerful nation on Earth appears to be in the grip of a medieval superstition?

[4. Darwin's theory](#)

The first and perhaps most obvious problem is, as has already been touched upon, that evolution falsifies a literal interpretation of Genesis. However, most Christians don't seem to get too exercised over the fact that the "word of God" is wildly inaccurate. Six days, 14 billion years – we've all been there, especially the software engineers among us. Besides, this was not exactly news in 1859. Earlier that century, geologists had already noted, through studying rocks and stuff, that the biblical time-scales were simply infeasible.

Nevertheless, to this day the "debate" still largely seems to centre around questions concerning whether the Hebrew word for "day" means just one revolution of the earth, or whether it really means "f***ing ages." Indeed, there are times when I get to wondering if this fatuous argument is not prosecuted purely in order to distract attention away from what is possibly the bigger embarrassment – namely that evolutionary theory drives a coach and horses through the foundational Christian doctrine of the fall and redemption.



If you attend the extended Christmas or Easter liturgies, as bizarrely I still do, you will find that the story begins (where else?) with Adam eating an apple – the *felix culpa* from which all else follows. Of course modern Christians don't take this too literally either. There was no apple, no Adam and Eve as such, no serpent, no garden – rather the story merely *symbolises* mankind's fall from grace into its present disordered and unhappy state from which it now cries out to the Almighty for salvation. It's just an allegory, stupid!

Except . . . it's not exactly a brilliant allegory either. I thought that allegories were supposed to inform and illuminate, but this one just misleads. Because neither was there any "fall from grace." Instead, we started out as pond scum, became fish, then small furry creatures, monkeys, and finally humans (missing out a few steps there). And how did that happen? It all came about on account of the struggle for survival – a bitter and ongoing fight over finite resources – ultimately, a fight to the death. And get this: it's been that way for the best part of *500 million years*. Here's [Dawkins](#):

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation. During the minute it takes me to compose this sentence, thousands of animals are being eaten alive; others are running for their lives, whimpering with fear; others are being slowly devoured from within by rasping parasites; thousands of all kinds are dying of starvation, thirst and disease. It must be so. If there is ever a time of plenty, this very fact will automatically lead to an increase in population until the natural state of starvation and misery is restored.

Great! And whose fault is all of that? It's God's fault. That's right – the big cheese himself. That's the way he chose to set things up, in his "infinite wisdom." But now, maybe sensing that we were not far off stumbling upon the truth, God plays an absolute blinder – he tries to blame it all on us! He tells us that all this misery is a consequence of human "sin" and then, just to complete the illusion, sends his only son to "save us" by allowing him to be brutally tortured and executed, doubtless imagining (correctly as it happens) that we might be impressed with that sort of thing.

This is what I mean when I state unequivocally that the position staked out by the religious moderate is intellectually and theologically bankrupt. I'm not terribly impressed with Christians who believe in evolution. Granted, they may not be flying in the face of modern science with all the arrogance and ignorance of an evangelical nut-job. No, instead they're just worshipping – yes, *worshipping* – the most cynical bastard in all of history, literature, or mythology.

I'm really looking forward to the day of judgement. I can't wait to see the look of dismay on God's face when it finally dawns on him that he's actually going to be entering the dock himself.

Question for the reader: Why would the omniscient, benevolent, and omnipotent creator of the universe appear to be so cruel, wasteful, and lazy?

[5. Sam Harris \(born 1967\)](#)

Sam Harris shot to prominence in 2004 with his best-selling book *The End of Faith*, which has managed to draw sharp criticism from religionist and secularist alike – a sure sign that he must be doing something right! It's a superb book – packed with useful insight and displaying a fine mastery of the English language to boot. I don't agree with all of it. In particular, the final chapter caused some of us a few difficulties, especially when he started quoting Padmasambhava approvingly! But for exposing the duplicitous role of the "religious moderate" in unwittingly providing comfort and cover for the extremist, I'm afraid he scores a perfect ten in my book. "By failing to live by the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally." I don't think I could have put it any better myself!



But that is all by the way, because our interest here is in questions of science and philosophy – and so to his lesser-known day job as a neuroscience PhD student at the University of California, Los Angeles. When I first heard about Harris's research, I assumed that he was going to stick probes onto people's heads, and try to show that religious beliefs were fundamentally different in some way from "normal" beliefs. In fact, he's doing something far more interesting – he's trying to show that they're the same! I'll let him explain what he's up to:

What I believe, though cannot yet prove, is that belief is a content-independent process. Which is to say that beliefs about God – to the degree that they really are believed – are the same as beliefs about numbers, penguins, tofu, or anything else. This is not to say that all of our representations of the world are acquired through language, or that all linguistic representations are on the same logical footing. And we know that different regions of the brain are involved in judging the truth of statements drawn from different content domains. What I do believe, however, is that the neural processes governing the final acceptance of a statement as "true" rely on more fundamental, reward-related circuitry in our frontal lobes – probably the same regions that judge the pleasantness of tastes and odours. Truth may be beauty, and beauty truth, in more than a metaphorical sense. And false statements may quite literally disgust us.

All of this is very much in its infancy, and doubtless will not be the work of just one man. Ultimately this may turn out to be a futile quest – it may not be possible to prove that all belief is fundamentally on an equal footing, indeed it may not even be true. But we'll just follow the evidence wherever it leads, even if it leads to God (which would be a first)! If you're interested, Harris had an initial paper published before Christmas. It's available [here \(pdf\)](#), though I can't claim to understand any of it.

That said, I do find this idea highly plausible. We all know, or should do, just how malleable and suggestible the human brain is. One of my favourite demonstrations of this involves [Derren Brown making a nice lady act like she was under some kind of voodoo spell](#). First, she can't move her legs, then she can't move her arms, and finally she can't even speak – all courtesy of Derren manipulating the little levers in her brain to convince her that there really might be something in this voodoo doll malarkey after all.

The moral is that, "As a nice lady thinks, so she will act." Or as Harris would say, "A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life." Yet, time and again, I seem to come right up against this tired old false dichotomy, so cherished by liberals, between belief and action. "People are free to think and say whatever they like, as long as they keep off my front lawn." If only I had a pound – hey, 50p even! – for every time I had heard that glib sentiment, I would have long since retired to Hawaii and you could all blissfully carry on without me.

Of course the sentiment is valid in a strictly *legal* sense but, in just about every other sense, it is hopelessly outdated. Beliefs are in no way separate from actions. In fact, *beliefs are actions*, and can be just as lethal. The neural activity which constitutes a belief connects directly to a nervous system running through your arm and finger, which pulls the trigger, that fires a bullet, that kills the President, which starts a nuclear war – *it's all of a piece*. To think otherwise, is essentially to buy into a philosophical dualism of the mind which bit the dust absolutely ages ago.

Beliefs have potentially devastating consequences – 9/11 should have proved that beyond any doubt but, as the fatuous search for "root causes" continues apace, one has to wonder whether 2,998 may not have died in vain. Yet Harris is out to show that the core beliefs motivating the hijackers – beliefs in the Koran, Islamic jihad, the afterlife, and so on – are fundamentally no different in character from beliefs about the weather! Of course, some of the more batshit crazy ideas may be a little harder to *acquire*, taking years of persistent indoctrination not unlike the lengthy process of learning a musical instrument. But once acquired – once the brain, finding that the belief "tastes good," grants it canonical status – then pretty much everything else follows for better or for worse.

Religious belief, or indeed any other belief, is emphatically *not* a private matter. Rather, a belief is merely an action primed, cocked, and ready for battle. If we are "as liberals" to insist that it is not beliefs but only actions which matter, then I fear we may find ourselves having to clear up the mess following one 9/11 and 7/7 after another. It is time that we went after the bad ideas with a vengeance. *The claims of religion are false* – we are now in a position to state this with overwhelming confidence. If liberalism means one thing, then it must surely be about setting the individual free. It isn't entirely clear to me just how shackling ourselves to the ignorance of the past can form any part of this project.

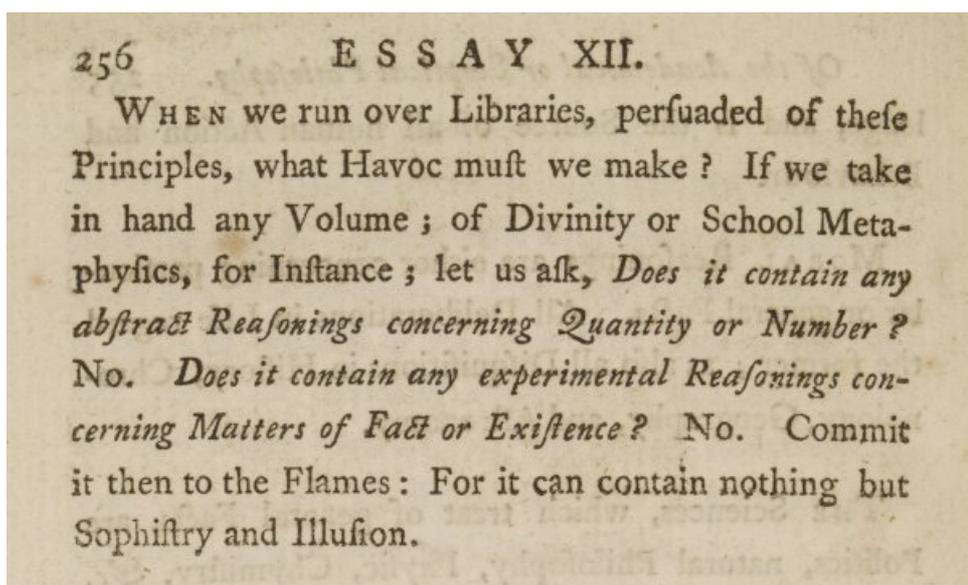
Question for the reader: When we observe how easily the mind may be altered by hypnosis or drugs, why do some of us appear to imagine that religion is quite incapable of performing the same trick?

6. Reading list

No lecture series, facetious or otherwise, would be complete without a recommended reading list. This basically covers the arse of the lecturer against the inevitable errors and omissions of his own exposition. "You'll have to turn to the reading list for a fuller treatment," he will say. So here it is!

- **David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding** – A bit heavy going as you might expect, but the chapter on miracles is fairly readable, and that is the important bit.
- **Richard Dawkins, River Out of Eden** – Explains evolution as only Dawkins can. Should be read by every child in the land.
- **Sam Harris, The End of Faith** – In my view, the best of the post 9/11 anti-God diatribes. Should be read by every condescending atheist in the land.
- **Julian Baggini, Atheism** – This tiny book sets out the philosophical arguments against God in the simplest possible terms. Another one for the Christmas stocking methinks.
- **Victor Stenger, God, the Failed Hypothesis** – And this one sets out the scientific arguments against God. Probably wouldn't appeal to those without a strong interest in science.
- **Ludovic Kennedy, All in the Mind** – Superb historical sweep charting the rise and fall of God. Great reference book.

OK, that's enough books. If you're still "doing God" after reading that little lot, then I don't think there's a great deal more I can do to help you. But make no mistake – you do need help! I think I'm going to leave the last word to Hume. This, the final paragraph from the Enquiry:



By 16 August 2008, this page had been viewed 34718 times.

Grinding poverty and the escalating war is driving an increasing number of Afghan families to sell their daughters into forced marriages.

Girls as young as six are being married into a life of slavery and rape, often by multiple members of their new relatives. Banned from seeing their own parents or siblings, they are also prohibited from going to school. With little recognition of the illegality of the situation or any effective recourse, many of the victims are driven to self-immolation – burning themselves to death – or severe self-harm.

[Women's lives worse than ever - Asia, World - Independent.co.uk](#)

If you'd like to do something, write to President Karzai:

President Hamid Karzai
President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Presidential Palace
Shahr-e-Now
Kabul
Afghanistan

More information: The [Women's Rights in Afghanistan Fund](#)

Photo of Afghani women discussing human rights in the context of Islamic culture from the WRAF website.

Tags: [Afghanistan](#), [Women's+Rights](#), [The+Independent](#)

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Feb 2008
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Faith charities encouraging or promoting violence or hatred risk losing their charitable status as part of a radical overhaul proposed by the Charity Commission.

For the first time all charities - including those advancing religion - must show that their aims are for the benefit of the public. Draft guidance, issued today, will explain to the registered religious charities what constitutes a public benefit and warns that "the abuse or misuse of religious teachings" might lead to a charity being stripped of its status.

Public benefit would also be affected in the case of any religious organisation that promotes hatred or violence or criminal acts.

[New warning to faith charities | World news | The Guardian](#)

Tags: [Charity](#), [Charities](#), [Faith+charities](#), [Charity+Commission](#)

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Feb 2008
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[Humanist Network News podcasts](#) have been praised in [The Independent](#). Now [you can listen via our website](#). There are interviews with Philip Pullman, Salman Rushdie, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and the late Arthur Miller, and topics include Camp Quest and Darwin Day.

Tags: [Podcasts](#), [Institute+for+Humanist+Studies](#), [IHS](#), [Humanist+Network+News](#), [Interviews](#)

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Feb 2008
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The abolition of the blasphemy laws took a decisive step forward this week with the tabling of a government amendment to do so in the House of Lords.

The Bill is scheduled to be debated on Wednesday (5 March 2008).

[National Secular Society - Stop press: Blasphemy abolition moves closer.](#)

If you have digital TV on Freeview or otherwise, you may be able to watch the debate on [BBC Parliament](#).

Tags: [Blasphemy](#), [House+of+Lords](#), [TV](#)

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Mar 2008
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Back in April 2007 we [reported](#) on the stage play Re:Design, a dramatisation based upon the correspondence between Charles Darwin and Harvard Professor of Botany Asa Gray, and performed at the Cambridge Science Festival.

The [full performance](#) is now available via the MIT website – you'll need [RealPlayer](#) to see it. Charles Darwin's birthday is 12 February, now more commonly referred to as Darwin Day.



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Mar 2008
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Damning new evidence that faith schools are siphoning off middle-class pupils can be revealed today, as research shows they are failing to take children from the poorest backgrounds nationwide.

Even when they are situated in deprived inner-city areas, religious schools have fewer poor children than local authority secondary schools.

New figures show that religious schools, in England, admit 10 per cent fewer poor pupils than is representative of the local area. Local authority schools, meanwhile, take in 30 per cent more and have a disproportionately deprived intake. The result is a school system deeply divided by social class.

[Religious schools 'show bias for rich' | Schools special reports | EducationGuardian.co.uk](#)

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Discrimination](#), [Education](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Mar 2008
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If the UN were to order us to 'respect all political beliefs', conservatives would say they weren't prepared to respect communists, leftists would say they weren't prepared to respect fascists and everyone else would burst out laughing. Yet the UN Human Rights Council is proposing in all seriousness to protect religion by doctoring its universal defence of freedom of expression.

[Nick Cohen: The awful squeal of fundamentalism | Comment is free | The Observer](#).

Tags: [Nick+Cohen](#), [UN](#), [UN+Human+Rights+Council](#), [Fundamentalism](#)

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Mar 2008
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A talk by [Raymond Tallis](#), 10th April 2008, 6pm - 8pm

J Z Young Lecture Theatre, The Anatomy Building, University College London, Gower Street, London.

Admission is free but tickets must be booked in advance.
Call 020 7079 3580 or email info@humanism.org.uk.

[British Humanist Association](#).

Tags: [Voltaire+Lecture](#), [Raymond+Tallis](#), [BHA](#), [London](#)

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Mar 2008
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The concept of blasphemy seemed for some decades to be in decline in the West, but not any more. It may be useful to look back at some recent cases of militantly religious outrage...

Rated by:

- **Vulgarity** –the piece shocked through its conflation of the sacred and the profane
- **Criminality** –the piece contravened laws in a given country
- **Religious impact** –the work caused outrage from religious leaders
- **Political impact** –speeches were made by governments, laws were created or changed.
- **Deaths** – outrage at the work led to the death of one or more people

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: The Blasphemy Collection.](#)

Tags: [History](#), [Blasphemy](#), [Times+Online](#)

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Mar 2008
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An article from the latest Humanist Network News. You can subscribe via [the Institute for Humanist Studies website](#).

Throughout history, women with independent minds who have made significant contributions to our body of knowledge, have been mocked, censored or even killed for their perceived outspokenness.

Hypatia of Alexandria, was a gifted female philosopher, astronomer and mathematician who flourished in Roman Egypt during Arcadius' reign.



[IHS :: HNN :: Women in History: Hypatia.](#)

Tags: [Hypatia](#), [Women+in+History](#), [Humanist+Network+News](#), [IHS](#)

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Mar 2008
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After an acrimonious debate in which the bogeyman of secularism was repeatedly invoked, on Wednesday March 5th 2008 the House of Lords accepted the amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill that abolishes the common law of blasphemy and blasphemous libel.

The amendment had originally been introduced by Lib Dem MP Dr Evan Harris in the House of Commons, but the Government had persuaded him to withdraw it after promising to introduce its own amendment later in the Lords. This it has now done, although – if Baroness Andrews' speech was anything to go by – with something less than enthusiasm.

[National Secular Society - Lords Approve Abolition Of Blasphemy.](#)

Tags: [Blasphemy](#), [Secularism](#), [House+of+Lords](#), [Debate](#)

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Mar 2008
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An Iranian lesbian who fled to Britain after her girlfriend was arrested and sentenced to death faces being forcibly returned after losing the latest round in her battle to be granted asylum.

The case of Pegah Emambakhsh, 40, comes a day after The Independent reported on the growing public outcry over the plight of a gay Iranian teenager who fears he will be executed if he is deported to Iran.

Both cases have provoked international protests against Britain and led to calls for an immediate moratorium on the deportation of gay and lesbian asylum-seekers who fear they will be persecuted in Iran.

[Now Iranian lesbian who fled to Britain faces deportation - Home News, UK - Independent.co.uk.](#)

There is overwhelming evidence that Iranian gay men and lesbians whose sexuality is discovered are likely to be executed, but the British Government is still refusing them asylum. [Simon Hughes MP](#) wrote,

My strong view is that, in the present political climate, no person who is lesbian or gay should be sent back to Iran...

The Home Office claims that a gay person can return to Iran and avoid persecution by being "discreet". All the advice is that in Iran, to be discreet means that you would have to deny your identity. The punishment for giving in to personal feelings might well be nothing less than torture or death. This is clearly a form of discrimination and a serious breach of his human rights. It must now be clear to the Home Office that it is wrong to send back gay and lesbian people to Iran (or any other

country with similar laws and practice) where all the evidence shows they will be persecuted.

[Read the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association's briefing on Islam & Homosexuality.](#)

Write to your MP via the [They Work For You website](#).

Tags: [Urgent+action](#), [Gay+&+lesbian+people](#), [Iran](#), [Persecution+of+gays](#), [Homophobia](#)

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Mar 2008
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Saturday 8th March is International Women's Day.

Click on the image to go to the IWD website and find out about International Women's Day, and what events are happening in your area.



Tags: [International+Women's+Day](#), [IWD](#), [Women](#)

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Mar 2008
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The International Society for Science and Religion (ISSR), many of whose members are Christian, has issued a statement saying that Intelligent Design "is not science":

We believe that intelligent design is neither sound science nor good theology. Although the boundaries of science are open to change, allowing supernatural explanations to count as science undercuts the very purpose of science, which is to explain the workings of nature without recourse to religious language. Attributing complexity to the interruption of natural law by a divine designer is, as some critics have claimed, a science stopper. Besides, ID has not yet opened up a new research program. In the opinion of the overwhelming majority of research biologists, it has not provided examples of "irreducible complexity" in biological evolution that could not be explained as well by normal scientifically understood processes. Students of nature once considered the vertebrate eye to be too complex to explain naturally, but subsequent research has led to the conclusion that this remarkable structure can be readily understood as a product of natural selection. This shows that what may appear to be "irreducibly complex" today may be explained naturalistically tomorrow.

[ISSR Statement on the Concept of 'Intelligent Design'](#).

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

Tags: [Intelligent+Design](#), [Scientists](#), [ISSR](#)

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Mar 2008
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A gay teenager who claims he faces the death penalty in Iran after his boyfriend was executed there two years ago has spoken of his anger and disappointment at losing his legal battle against deportation.

Mehdi Kazemi, 19, who sought sanctuary in Britain in 2005 when he discovered that his partner had been hanged in Tehran for engaging in homosexual acts, is expected to be returned to Iran in the next few weeks.

[Gay teenager faces return to Iran after Dutch ruling - Home News, UK - Independent.co.uk](#).

Write to:
Jacqui Smith MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Tags: [Gay+teenager](#), [Deportation](#), [The+Independent](#), [Jacqui+Smith+MP](#), [Iran](#)

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Mar 2008
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[The long-awaited Humanist website for teachers is now online.](#) It should prove very useful for teachers who include Humanism in their RE lessons, as they do in Suffolk.

Andrew Copson, the BHA's Education Officer, writes,

The site will be a growing resource, and so do let me know of any themes that may be covered in your syllabuses that you think it would be good to cover in our resources.



[Email us](#) with any comments, queries or requests, and we'll forward them to Andrew.

Tags: [Humanism+for+schools](#), [BHA+for+schools](#), [Humanist+wesbite](#)

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Mar 2008
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When the leaders of 27 countries meet in Berlin today to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the EU, there will be one significant absence. To the annoyance of many Poles, who have what is arguably the most crackpot right-wing government in Europe, God has not been invited to the party. Neither Christianity nor the deity feature in the declaration which Europe's leaders will sign to mark the occasion, signalling the high point of what has been a fantastic week for secularism.

[Joan Smith: Sorry, God. You're not on the guest list - Joan Smith, Commentators - Independent.co.uk.](#)

Tags: [EU](#), [Europe](#), [God](#), [Joan+Smith](#), [The+Independent](#)

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Mar 2008
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Society is ill-prepared to handle scientific breakthroughs because it lacks understanding of human life, the Archbishop of Canterbury has claimed ...

In an interview with The Sunday Telegraph, he also criticised evolution theory as "limited", urged politicians to be open about their faith, and attacked religious conspiracy theories such as the Da Vinci Code.

[Rowan Williams: Society can't handle science - Telegraph.](#)

Tags: [Archbishop+of+Canterbury](#), [Rowan+Williams](#), [Evolution](#)

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Mar 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Margaret Nelson provides a Thought for the Day on BBC Radio Suffolk for 2 minutes sometime between 7.25 and 7.35 am.

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

Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/local_radio/index.shtml

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Mar 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Reports and elections, then a discussion.

Ten Minute Topics is about everyone bringing a burning issue they'd like to discuss. We write them down, put the bits of paper in a hat (or equivalent), and discuss them in the order they come out of the hat. If something generates a lot of interest we may discuss it for longer, with everyone's agreement.

Guests and raffle prizes welcome. Subscriptions are due - you can pay at the meeting.

We'll be in Room 3 (upstairs) at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be

admitted.

To offer or request a lift, email us (see link below).

Please note: this meeting is on a Thursday, not our usual Wednesday!

Map link: <http://tinyurl.com/27bo8p>

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Mar 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

Is there a topical issue you'd like to discuss? Have you got a bee in your bonnet? The idea is that everyone writes down a topic, all the suggestions go in a hat (or similar container) and we draw them out at random to be discussed for 10 minutes. If there's something that gets everyone fired up, we can go on for longer if we all agree.

This has been postponed from our AGM in Ipswich last month, when we were locked out of our meeting room by mistake and wasted time looking for somewhere else to go.

We'll be in the Parnell Room at the Quaker Meeting House, Church Street, Colchester - near The Mercury Theatre and the water tower. Nearest car park - the multi-storey on Balcerne Hill, then just walk over the footbridge.

There are no raffles at the Quaker Meeting House.

Map link: tinyurl.com/2242bj

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Mar 2008
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We'll be in Room 1 (next to the front door) at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be admitted.

To offer or request a lift, email us.

The BTO aims to promote and encourage the wider understanding, appreciation and conservation of birds by:

- conducting high-quality, impartial research in field ornithology.
- providing scientific evidence and advice on priority issues in bird conservation.
- basing this work on a partnership between amateurs and professionals, conducting fieldwork that is both enjoyable and scientifically rigorous.

Thanks to a Heritage Lottery Fund grant, Suffolk became the first county in the UK to have its own garden bird Ambassador. On Saturday 26 January, Carl Powell said, "I'm delighted to take up this position, by raising the profile of the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch Survey in Suffolk I will also be helping to highlight the importance of Suffolk's gardens for birds. More people than ever are feeding the birds in their gardens and by taking part in this survey they are adding to the knowledge already gained. In the long run this can only benefit the birds. The more we know now the better position we will be in to protect them in the future."

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Mar 2008
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The BHA says,

The Local Development Project exists because the BHA believes that there is a lack of representation in some areas for humanists and non-religious people. Our experience shows that local authorities communicate with their citizens about diversity, equalities and social cohesion via a complex web of forums, networks and consultations. These feed into higher level organisations eventually reaching national bodies. At a local level, the non-religious are often left out of this dialogue because of a lack of organised and recognised mechanisms of communication and a lack of resources. In many cases local authorities do not even consider including humanists and non-religious people as they are not considered to have any distinct needs as a group; unlike ethnic minorities or the religious. However, this leads to a gap in knowledge about humanism at local level and exclusion of humanists and non-religious people from decision making bodies. It can also lead to a lot of support for interfaith work which helps to add to cohesion between faiths but does not add to dialogue between the religious and the non-religious.

Some secularists have reservations about volunteering to get involved with quangos like Local Strategic Partnerships (the Suffolk LSP

offers a role for one person to represent all religious organisations) on the same basis as religious representatives, as we feel this isn't consistent with the principle of secularism. How do you feel? We'll be in The Hall (turn left in the entrance lobby, then right and up a couple of steps) at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be admitted. To offer or request a lift, email us.

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Mar 2008
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Jim Herrick is former editor of New Humanist and International Humanist News. His books include Vision and Realism - A History of the Freethinker; Against the Faith: Sceptics, Deists and Atheists; Humanism : an Introduction (new edition shortly). He has spent the greater part of his working life in the Humanist movement. He is editor of a revised edition of the Humanist Anthology and co-editor of Seasons of Life - readings for humanist ceremonies.

We'll be in The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich - through the front door, turn left, then right. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be admitted.

To offer or request a lift, email us.

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Mar 2008
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Is there an issue you'd like to discuss? We all write something on a piece of paper, which goes into a hat (or suitable alternative), then the topics are picked at random.

We'll be in Room 4, next to the back door on the ground floor, at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich - not in The Hall, as previously stated. There was a muddle over bookings. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be admitted.

To offer or request a lift, email us.

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Mar 2008
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[The National Union of Teachers](#) has been having its conference, where teachers were inconsistent in their attitudes towards religion and the military.

[Head teachers should allow imams, rabbis and priests to offer religious instruction to pupils in all state schools, teachers' leaders have said.](#)

The National Union of Teachers (NUT) said the move would be a way to reunite divided communities.

The NUT said parents had a right to have specific schooling in their own faith, if that was what they wanted.

NUT members are against faith schools, they say (so are we), but then they suggest allowing religious instruction on school premises? This is ironic, as within a day or two the NUT's members ...

[... voted to oppose military recruitment activities in schools if they employ "misleading propaganda".](#)

Young people must be given a true picture of Army life, not a "marketised version", the National Union of Teachers conference heard.

So, religious propaganda is OK, but not military propaganda?

Tags: [NUT](#), [National+Union+of+Teachers](#), [Faith](#), [Schools](#), [Military](#)

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Mar 2008
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[Gordon Brown says Labour MPs will get a free vote on the most controversial parts of the new embryo Bill.](#)

The MPs will be able to follow their consciences in three areas - including allowing scientists to create embryos with human DNA and animal cells.

But the prime minister expects all Labour MPs to back the whole bill when it comes to the final Commons vote.

The PM offered the deal after warnings that some Catholic Labour MPs and cabinet ministers were ready to rebel.

Meanwhile,

In his Easter sermon at the weekend, the leader of the Scottish Catholic Church, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, described the proposed legislation as a "monstrous attack on human rights, human dignity and human life", adding that it would allow experiments of "Frankenstein proportion".

Human rights? Frankenstein proportion? The Catholics are using highly misleading language and demonstrating their scientific ignorance at the same time.

The Medical Research Council, The Royal Society, The Wellcome Trust and The Academy of Medical Sciences say,

"This research has massive potential to provide treatments for serious debilitating disorders ranging from developmental abnormalities in young children, to stroke, cancer, HIV/Aids, diabetes and Parkinson's disease, as well as better and safer treatment for infertile couples."

[BHA](#) President [Polly Toynbee writes about this in The Guardian](#):

Whatever the religious claims, the human fertilisation and embryology bill is not in some special moral category of its own. It allows scientists to use the outer empty shell of animal eggs, for lack of spare human eggs, in which to implant purely human DNA for 14 days, to derive stem cell lines which model a particular disease to be studied in the lab. The UK pioneers stem-cell research into Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, motor neurone disease and muscular dystrophy, as well as cancer, diabetes, strokes and infertility. Contrary to the cardinals' wilfully ignorant campaign of misinformation, no animal hybrid, no monstrous Island of Doctor Moreau chimeras loom. Forget spurious "thin end of the wedge" arguments: no further step can be taken without another act of parliament. After wide public consultation, three years of parliamentary scrutiny and passage through the Lords, this has strong support from by the Medical Research Foundation, the Royal Society and the Academy of Medical Sciences, as well as Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation.



Tags: [Embryology+Bill](#), [Polly+Toynbee](#), [Catholic+Church](#), [Catholics](#), [Medical+Ethics](#)

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Mar 2008
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Has the Easter holiday given you a headache? Not because of all that chocolate, but because it's on a different date every year and messes up the school holidays, especially if you have kids at different schools in different areas.

[The National Secular Society is campaigning to have the Easter holiday fixed](#), while [a parents' organisation, The Day Care Trust, says the staggered holidays cost parents a fortune](#) in child care costs.



[One of the latest 10 Downing Street e-petitions calls on the Government to fix the holiday on the second weekend in April](#). Petitioner Norman Wells writes:

Easter Sunday is arcanelly defined as the first Sunday following the first full moon following the vernal equinox. This is not only absurd and even pagan, but has the consequence that it can randomly fall on any one of 35 different dates. As a result, Easter wanders through the calendar like a drunk at closing time.

[Easter is a Spring Equinox Pagan festival](#) (not "even pagan"), high-jacked by the Christians. However, whether Pagan, Christian, or Chocoholic, it's about time the date was fixed so everyone could plan ahead.

Tags: [Easter](#), [Festival](#), [Holidays](#), [Schools](#)

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Mar 2008
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[Go to the BHA site to read more.](#)

Tags: [BBC](#), [BBC+News+24](#), [Embryology+Bill](#)

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Mar 2008
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For the past eleven years the organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), representing the 57 Islamic States, has been tightening its grip on the throat of [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Yesterday, 28 March 2008, they finally killed it.

With the support of their allies including China, Russia and Cuba (none well-known for their defence of human rights) the Islamic States succeeded in forcing through an amendment to a resolution on Freedom of Expression that has turned the entire concept on its head. The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression will now be required to report on the "abuse" of this most cherished freedom by anyone who, for example, dares speak out against Sharia laws that require women to be stoned to death for adultery or young men to be hanged for being gay, or against the marriage of girls as young as nine, as in Iran.

Click on the link below to read more.

[Vote on freedom of expression marks the end of Universal Human Rights | International Humanist and Ethical Union](#)

[Visit the IHEU website to sign up for its e-newsletters.](#)

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Apr 2008
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A woman was beaten up and shot dead by her father for talking online with a man she met on the website Facebook.

The case was reported on a Saudi Arabian news site as an example of the "strife" the social networking site is causing in the Islamic nation.

[Facebook girl beaten and shot dead by her father for talking online | the Daily Mail.](#)

Yet another example of Islamic family values.

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Apr 2008
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The vast majority of faith schools are breaking the law when admitting pupils, according to Government research published yesterday. The study shows that some seek money from parents and fail to give priority to children in care.

A survey of 106 voluntary-aided schools by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) revealed that 96 are

in breach of a new statutory code on admissions. Of those, 87 are faith schools.

[*Faith schools, a law unto themselves - Education News, Education - The Independent.*](#)

Are we surprised?

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Apr 2008
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Things are changing in America. Harvard has a Humanist chaplain.

Over the past two years, Greg Epstein, 30, has become a kind of ministerial paradox, a member of the local clergy who disavows God, preaches to atheists and agnostics, and seeks to build the equivalent of a church for nonbelievers and others skeptical of or alienated by religion. A former lead singer of a rock band, he now serves as the humanist chaplain at Harvard University, one of a small but growing number of such chaplains for nonbelievers on college campuses. In his position, which is endowed, he has helped marry and bury fellow atheists. He has presided over baby-naming ceremonies and organized a "coming out" ceremony for a congressman, Representative Pete Stark of California, one of the few public officials to acknowledge he doesn't believe in God. He also counsels students and approximates evangelizing by handing out pamphlets with the question: "Are you a humanist?"

The Boston Globe

[*The Nonbelievers - The Boston Globe.*](#)

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Apr 2008
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Few people can be unaware of the protests associated with the Olympic Torch Relay in [London](#) and [Paris](#), but some may think that they are just about the Chinese in Tibet. This is only part of the story. China's human rights record is appalling. There's no sign that it might improve as a consequence of staging the games in Beijing. Read more on [the Amnesty website](#)...

As the Olympic torch approaches China for its momentous entry into the Olympic stadium, the stage is overshadowed by China's deteriorating human rights situation. This deterioration is happening not just despite the Olympics, but because of the Olympics.

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Apr 2008
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At our AGM on 10th April, we decided to change our name to "Suffolk Humanists & Secularists" in response to a suggestion by Terry Sanderson, President of [the National Secular Society](#), that such a name change would make our commitment to secularism more explicit, and hence more appealing to the increasing number of people who might like to campaign on secular issues at local level. This website will be updated accordingly. Meanwhile, [read more about secularism](#).

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Apr 2008
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The evolutionary biologist and best-selling author of *The God Delusion* will appear as a guest star in the new series of *Doctor Who*, which began last night [12 April 2008]. "People were falling at his feet," says Davies, creator of the BBC's flagship show. "We've had Kylie Minogue on that set, but it was Dawkins people were worshipping."

[*Russell T Davies: Return of the \(tea\) Time Lord - Media, News - The Independent.*](#)

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Apr 2008
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This is the project that Suffolk Humanists & Secularists member Nathan Nelson told us about at our meeting in February. You can now donate online to support the children at the centre.

The Sangkheum Center for Children provides education, training, scholastic support and care to children between the ages of 4 and 17. In Khmer, Sangkheum means 'Hope'. Since 2001, the Sangkheum Center for Children has given hope to over 260 orphaned, abused or neglected children and provided education and vocational training to many more that otherwise would not have the opportunity to go to school. In addition we run a Young Adult program with a focus on preparing and re-integrating young adults into the community.



[Justgiving - Sangkheum Center.](#)

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Apr 2008
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If you've been following [the US election trail](#), you may have noticed that the main candidates have been trying to establish their religious credentials. I don't know what, if anything, any of them has said about evolution, but since a large proportion of the electorate doesn't believe in it, I guess they have to avoid the subject if they're at all skeptical. Lewis Black is very funny about George Bush's beliefs. Shame they're not that unusual.

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Apr 2008
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The British Humanist Association (BHA) has today [10/4/08]welcomed the forthcoming repeal of the Fraudulent Mediums Act 1951 and its replacement with much stricter regulations, offering often very vulnerable consumers much greater protection against fraud and dishonest behaviour when they access spiritualist 'services'.

Hanne Stinson , BHA Chief Executive, said, 'With only a handful of convictions against dishonest and fraudulent mediums and others in their field, it is clear that the current law is not fit for purpose. We hope that the new regulations will make real changes to the current situation, where psychic 'practitioners' are permitted to make completely unsubstantiated claims, and to take payment for their services, without fear of legal action.'

[British Humanist Association.](#)

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Apr 2008
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The Telegraph asks its readers to comment about Humanism being included in RE syllabuses. [Go to their website to add your comment.](#)

Thousands of teenagers will be taught about humanism for the first time as part of a religious education GCSE.

[Have Your Say: Should humanism be taught at GCSE?](#)

Pupils will be encouraged to debate controversial issues from the standpoint of all the major faiths - as well as those that reject the existence of God.

[Humanism to be taught at GCSE - Telegraph.](#)

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Apr 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Andrew Marr's programme Start the Week on Radio 4. Guests include the philosopher Daniel Dennett, author of "Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon". The programme's repeated at 9.30 pm. Listen online via the link below.

Further info: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/factual/starttheweek.shtml>

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Apr 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk
Event description:

Grace

By Mick Gordon and AC Grayling

Issues of faith, love, and humanity are at the core of this intimate family drama in which Grace, a scientist and champion of atheism, is faced with the decision of her son Tom to become a priest. A collaboration between Humanist philosopher A.C.Grayling and theatre writer and director Mick Gordon, the characters offer solutions to their deeply opposed ways of looking at the world even as they rage.

Further info: http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/arts/afternoon_play.shtml

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Apr 2008
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Old news, but still good news. Can you imagine having a similar event here?

In Norway this spring (2007) over 10.000 youths aged 15 celebrated their Humanist confirmation. Keeping up a more than 50 years tradition they meet in concert halls and medieval castles, municipal cinemas and cultural centres, city halls and community houses. They gather in bigger and smaller towns all over the country. They celebrate from the southern "bible belt" of small towns with white painted wooden houses to the far north close to the border of Russia and in the Sami community of Karasjok. And of course, they celebrate in the bigger towns and regional centres as Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim as well. These Saturday or Sunday events take place from late April till late May every year.

[Humanist confirmation in Norway - a rite of passage has come of age - Human-Etisk Forbund.](#)

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Apr 2008
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Ann Keen, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Health, has written to [the BHA](#) about the planned celebrations for the 60th anniversary of the NHS, including a "national service of celebration" for NHS staff, patients and stakeholders to be held in Westminster Abbey on 2 July. The BHA wrote back to ask why a national institution is being celebrated with a religious event that will exclude many people involved with and committed to the NHS. If you count yourself amongst "NHS staff, patients and stakeholders", you can write to Ann Keen MP at the Department of Health, Richmond House, 79 Whitehall, London SW1A 2NS or email her at annkeenmp@parliament.uk.

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Apr 2008
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This is [the story that The Telegraph was on about the other day](#):

For the first time, pupils will have the opportunity to study Humanism as part of a Religious Studies GCSE, according to draft proposals for a new Philosophy and Ethics course from exam board OCR .

OCR's Religious Studies suite offers two courses, including a traditional faith-based approach with its World Religions GCSE, where students can study Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

The Philosophy and Ethics GCSE takes a modern issues-based approach and encourages students to examine the perspectives which different belief systems take to real-life concerns such as euthanasia and abortion.

[Read more on the BHA site.](#)

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Apr 2008
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A CHARITY set up by an ardent Christian to fight slavery and the opium trade has identified a new social evil of the 21st century - religion. □

A poll by [the Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) uncovered a widespread belief that faith - not just in its extreme form - was intolerant, irrational and used to justify persecution.

Pollsters asked 3,500 people what they considered to be the worst blights on modern society, updating a list drawn up by Rowntree, a Quaker, 104 years ago.

The responses may well have dismayed him. The researchers found that the “dominant opinion” was that religion was a “social evil”.

[Religion is “the new social evil” - Times Literary Supplement.](#)

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Apr 2008
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I received a mail order catalogue of kitsch in this morning's post. The praying gnome caught my eye. I hadn't realised that gnomes are religious. The blurb says,

Wishing Well Planter Gnome – Bring a little good luck charm into your garden. This three-in-one light sculpture is made from hand-painted resin and is weather-proof. Solar panel charges by day and comes on at night, with two LED lights to cast a delightful glow



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Apr 2008
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Editorial from Terry Sanderson of the NSS:

“The Secularists” (that’s you and me and anyone else who doesn’t trust religion to behave properly when it gains any kind of power) have been given a new adjective to go before their name. We’re familiar with the "militant" secularists, "fundamentalist" secularists and "extremist" secularists tags, but the Archbishop of Canterbury has decided that he will call us “principled secularists”. We are the people he seems to fear most, the ones who he claimed in a speech last week, are staging an organised assault on all religion. [Read it here](#)

[National Secular Society - Archbishop and Pope blame secularists for their failing faiths.](#)

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May 2008
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At the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) on Tuesday, 15 April, states belonging to the Organisation of Islamic Conference demanded that Holland prosecute one of its MPs for "defamation of religion".

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May 2008
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A report by Muriel Fraser, via the [NSS](#):

"The increasing emphasis on religion and religious identities has led to the transformation of multiculturalism into multi-faithism" – and the ones who suffer the most are South Asian women. This is the conclusion of Pragna Patel's important new study, *Faith in the state? Asian women's struggles for human rights in the U.K.*

Patel has long experience working with these women in a London-based resource and advocacy centre, the Black Southall Sisters. She points out that the multicultural approach has done little to protect women, because it focuses on relations between groups, rather than within them. Yet, it is inside the family group that women "are most vulnerable to abuse, violence and unequal treatment". Also problematic is the space which multiculturalism provides for unelected community spokesmen to represent the whole group. A third problem is that multiculturalism is often applied indiscriminately, with no distinction between cultural demands which are valid and human rights, which must remain non-negotiable.

But there's worse to come, since we are now seeing a shift from multiculturalism to multi-faithism. Patel ascribes this in part to the attempts by the British Government to sponsor "faith leaders" who will condemn jihad. She also notes that Government encouragement of "faith-based" schools and other social services "happens also to fit neatly into a wider neo-conservative agenda" to privatise public services.

To the women at risk, this multi-faith approach poses an even greater threat to human rights and secularism than multiculturalism, since it offers a more comprehensive justification than "This is the way we've always done it". When religion becomes the badge of identity in minority communities, broader arguments become available to bolster traditional ways. The "faith leaders" then claim that the human rights principles of individual choice and autonomy are "western" or "alien" concepts.

Nor is this all. From the Government's side, human rights are being sidelined in favour of something called "core British values", which Patel notes are "are mostly about the maintenance of public order". (The cynical message seems to be: treat your women as you please, just don't plant any bombs – that's un-British.)

If secularism and human rights continue to be eroded, almost all of us will eventually feel the effects, but even now the most vulnerable, among them South Asian women, are beginning to suffer.

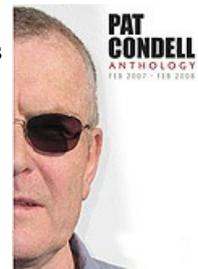
[Read the full tex \(PDF\)](#)

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May 2008
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Internet atheist firebrand Pat Condell has had 35 of [his YouTube rants](#) collected, re-mastered, and packaged into one DVD. As [The Freethinker](#) first revealed in [its February interview with Pat](#), the DVD is produced by [Richard Dawkins.net](#).

The 35 videos, plus an exclusive introduction by the man himself, add up to three hours of hard-hitting, no-punches-pulled irreligious wit. A snip at \$15 - and all for a good cause!

[The Freethinker : Pat Condell DVD released.](#)



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May 2008
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The British Humanist Association (BHA) has made a submission to the DCSF's Rose Review of the Primary Curriculum, calling for a reform of religious education (RE), a focus on the development of morals, values and social interaction, inclusive assemblies and the teaching of evolution and scientific method in all primary schools.

Andrew Copson, BHA Director of Education and Public Affairs, said, 'Our submission to the Primary Review incorporates a vital and large part of our work in education – the reform of the primary curriculum to suit better the needs of all children, and to ensure that primary education is inclusive and consistent across all maintained schools.'

[British Humanist Association.](#)

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May 2008
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Just one of several letters in response to an article by Esther Addley in The Guardian on 2nd April – [Cardinal attacks 'aggressive' secularism gaining ground in UK](#). Read down the page for another from the [BHA](#)'s CEO, Hanne Stinson.

Tony Blair and Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor deliberately conflate secularism with atheism. Atheism is lack of belief in gods. Secularism is a belief in equality in politics, education and law, regardless of religious belief. So when they refer to "militant secularism" and "aggressive secularism", respectively, then they are implying that such equality of treatment is a bad thing. The truth is that both men are more concerned with holding on to political power than any kind of moral advancement. At least the Cardinal was honest enough to admit that he thought faith leaders should have a privileged position in public policy. Secularists are forced to defend democracy against such religious lobbyists. No wonder they are becoming more militant.

Richard Gilyead
Cirencester, Gloucestershire

[Letters: Blair's faith tested by the evidence | World news | The Guardian](#).

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May 2008
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E-mail: mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Event description:

A report on the subjugation of women in Iraq - the programme will examine claims that 'honour' killing is being used as a weapon to fill them with fear.

Further info: tinyurl.com/6mpghq

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May 2008
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An animated film about Noah's Ark is due to be released this year. [The Internet Movie Database lists it as "science fiction"](#). That'll upset [the loonies who think it's a true story](#).

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May 2008
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Global food shortages, soaring prices and alarm over the environment. But every day, Britain throws away 220,000 loaves of bread, 1.6m bananas, 550,000 chickens, 5.1m potatoes, 660,000 eggs, 1.2m sausages and 1.3m yoghurts

A new study has exposed the staggering amount of food thrown away every day by the British public, calculating that the annual total of wasted products adds up to a record £10bn.

Each day, according to the government-backed report, Britons throw away 4.4 million apples, 1.6 million bananas, 1.3 million yoghurt pots, 660,000 eggs, 550,000 chickens, 300,000 packs of crisps and 440,000 ready meals. And for the first time government researchers have established that most of the food waste is made up of completely untouched food products – whole chickens and chocolate gateaux that lie uneaten in cupboards and fridges before being discarded.

The roll call of daily waste costs an average home more than £420 a year but for a family with children the annual cost rises to £610.

[What a waste: Britain throws away £10bn of food every year - News, Food & Drink - The Independent](#).

This is a shocking report. I'm old enough to remember post-war food rationing and my mother's frugal habits, some of which have rubbed off on me. She would have been astonished by this sort of wastefulness. Reports about the recent local elections mention people's concerns about the cost of living. I wonder how many of those who complain about it, waste food like this? I doubt that it occurs to those who throw a lot of food away that this is highly unethical behaviour.

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May 2008
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The latest Suffolk Humanists and Secularists newsletter is [online now](#), featuring more on our name change, birds in Ipswich, the 2011 census and more. Our website will be having a change of address and another facelift soon - watch this space!

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May 2008
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The House of Commons voted overwhelmingly on Tuesday (6/5/08) to support the abolition of the common law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. This was the final stage in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, and the amendment was carried by 378 votes to 57. The Bill received Royal Assent yesterday, so the blasphemy law is now officially dead and buried.

[*National Secular Society - Finally the blasphemy law is dead and buried.*](#)

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May 2008
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Terry Sanderson, President of the [NSS](#), blasts Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor:

Where does one start with a speech as specious and self-serving as the one given by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor in Westminster Cathedral yesterday [8/5/08]?

The BBC headed its report of the event: "'Respect atheists', says Cardinal". Can you imagine anything so utterly patronising than the leader of some rapidly diminishing religious sect (in the UK at least - with a 40% decline in attendance in a generation) telling a huge proportion of the population that he's prepared to tolerate them? And why is he prepared to tolerate them? Well, because even if they say they don't believe in God, God is still with them and, really, atheism is just a "distorted kind of Christianity".

[*I don't believe it | Comment is free.*](#)

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May 2008
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[Addict-o-matic](#) searches the web for news stories, blogs, videos, photos and all sorts on any subject you like, including [Humanism](#). Go explore!

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May 2008
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Sign the Brussels Declaration today.

As the 50th anniversary of the creation of the European Union approaches, the principles and values on which modern Europe was founded are once again under threat. Recent events have thrown into sharp focus the divisions that exist between those who share our liberal, humanitarian values and those who seek to create a more authoritarian society, or would use our culture of tolerance to promote intolerance and undermine democracy.

Unless we stand firm and defend our values now, fundamentalism and authoritarianism will once again ride roughshod over our rights.

[*A Vision for Europe.*](#)

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May 2008
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An Employment Tribunal in Abergele has today [May 16] unanimously found in favour of a former employee of a Christian

charity who was claiming constructive dismissal and discrimination on grounds of religion or belief. [The British Humanist Association](#) (BHA), which paid the legal costs of the claimant, today welcomed the Tribunal's decision and warned religious employers that they can no longer discriminate wholesale in their employment on grounds of religion or belief.

The Tribunal heard that Prospects, a Christian charity which receives public money for its work with people with learning disabilities, and which had previously employed a number of non-Christian staff and volunteers – including a number who were transferred to them under TUPE Regulations – acted illegally when in 2004 it began recruiting only practising Christians for almost all posts, and told existing non-Christian staff that they were no longer eligible for promotion.

[British Humanist Association.](#)

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May 2008
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We hope you like the new Suffolk Humanists & Secularists site design - jazzier than before, but the site is still full of good stuff! [Register](#) today to join our community, whether you are in Suffolk, NE Essex or elsewhere.

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May 2008
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What do the terms "refugee", "asylum seeker", "immigrant" and "migrant" mean? Some of them have been used a lot in the media lately, often inaccurately. Rebecca will give us the facts, including statistics, about the situation here in the East of England. She'll also be able to tell us about some of the refugees and asylum seekers' stories. We'll make a collection for the forum's fund that benefits people suffering hardship, as well as the usual raffle. We'll be in the Hall at the Centre - press the buzzer at the front door for access.

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May 2008
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There are so many worldwide problems – how do we prioritise them? A group of eminent economists tried to work out a plan...

Imagine that you are Bill Gates. Not to daydream about what to buy with a \$58 billion fortune, but to consider how, like the Microsoft entrepreneur, you might give much of it away.

There are dozens of global challenges that could benefit from your philanthropy, but large as your financial resources are, they are not limitless. What would be your priorities? This week [24/5/08] The Times is asking readers for their answers — while the Copenhagen Consensus project invites eminent economists to do the same.

[An introduction to the Copenhagen Consensus 2008 - Times Online.](#)

Tags: [Economics](#), [Copenhagen](#), [Global+challenges](#)

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May 2008
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I think Disney World sounds more attractive...

Amid cell phones ringing, video cams rolling and ice cream melting under the Florida sun, a blood-spattered Jesus stumbles through the crowd on his way to Golgotha, where nasty Roman soldiers strip him, nail him to the cross and crucify him— while perspiring tourists look on in Bermuda shorts. After the resurrection sequence, visitors applaud and line up for a photo op, not with Mickey or Minnie, but a disciple or bloody-handed yet friendly centurion. Welcome to Orlando's most unusual theme park, the Holy Land Experience.

[Orlando Theme Park Mixes Christianity, Judaism | Newsweek Religion | Newsweek.com.](#)

Tags: [Theme+Park](#), [Newsweek](#), [Orlando](#), [Crucifixion](#)

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Jun 2008
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It's time to respect the Japanese puffer fish. It nearly killed Homer Simpson, and now PZ Meyers suggests that it has the edge on us when it comes to its genome:



Our DNA contains approximately 3.2 billion base pairs, about the amount of information that can be stored on a single CD, but only about 5 percent of that information plays a significant role in constructing the human form. Our human CD contains, in effect, the equivalent of one really good, but short, pop song, with the rest of the tracks being staticky hisses, noise, and repetitions of the same short phrase, over and over again.

The Japanese puffer fish however has a genome one third the size of ours, and uses a full third of it for its genetic makeup. So while our human CD is the equivalent of a Girls Aloud 3-CD compilation, the Japanese puffer fish's album is Led Zeppelin 2 in comparison.

Next time you go out for sushi, remember that you might be eating something more sophisticated than yourself.

[Random Acts of Evolution](#) | [PZ Meyers](#) | [Seed Magazine](#)

For more from PZ Meyers, one of the most consistently entertaining science writers going, see his blog [Pharyngula](#).

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Jun 2008
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Forget about Obama, Clinton & McCain, and follow something more interesting un the US. The [IHEU](#) reports:

The 17th World Humanist Congress starts this week in Washington, DC, USA. We hope to bring you [live updates from the Congress on the web site](#). The Congress runs from 6th to 8th June, with the IHEU General Assembly on 5th and 8th June, and other meetings of the American Humanist Association, IHEYO, the International Liaison Committee of Atheists and Freethinkers and other Humanist organizations also taking place. Full reports will also be made available in the weeks following the Congress.

[World Humanist Congress 2008](#) | [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#).

Hampstead Humanist & BHA Trustee Josh Kutchinsky will be there – we'll relay reports in due course.

Tags: [Humanist+conference](#), [International+Humanism](#), [IHEU](#), [US](#), [Washington](#), [World+Humanist+Congress](#)

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Jun 2008
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The church in Zimbabwe has been dragged into Mugabe's mire:

The imposing Anglican Cathedral of St Mary and All Saints in central Harare was almost deserted on Sunday following months of violent clashes and legal wrangles between rival factions.

Zimbabwe's deep political divide has spilled over into the religious arena.

[BBC NEWS](#) | [World](#) | [Africa](#) | [Zimbabwe's turbulent priests](#).

Tags: [Zimbabwe](#), [Mugabe](#), [BBC+News](#), [Human+rights](#)

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Jun 2008
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Lots of links to articles about evolution here...

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his theory of natural selection amid an explosion of controversy. Like the work of Copernicus in the 16th century revealing the movement of the Earth, Darwin's idea shook the foundations of the establishment and profoundly altered humanity's view of its place in the universe.

Today evolution is the unifying force in modern biology; it ties together fields as disparate as genetics, microbiology and palaeontology. It is an elegant and convincing explanation for the staggering diversity of Earth's five million or more living species.

Evolution has several facets. The first is the theory that all living species are the modified descendents of earlier species, and that we all share a common ancestor in the distant past. All species are therefore related via a vast tree of life. The second is that this evolution is driven by a process of natural selection or the - "survival of the fittest".

[Special Report on Evolution - New Scientist](#).

Tags: [evolution](#), [science](#), [New+Scientist](#), [Darwin](#), [Charles+Darwin](#)

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Jun 2008
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If you're visiting us for the first time after reading Lynne Mortimer's feature article in the Evening Star on 2 June, please explore our site and maybe let us know what you think.

Tags: [Evening+Star](#), [Ipswich](#), [Press](#)

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Jun 2008
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[Friends of the Earth Australia](#) is putting pressure on its new government to deliver on policies relating to the displacement of climate refugees in the Pacific. Pacific Island nations are increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events, collapsing ecosystems and the contamination of their fresh water and crops with salt water. These detrimental impacts of climate change are already evident but are predicted to worsen.

It's likely that the UK and other European countries will face pressure to take in climate refugees from Africa in the not-too-distant future, yet the subject has (so far) received little attention, maybe because our politicians are wary of raising an unpopular subject.

To learn about the refugees and asylum seekers in our area, come to [our meeting in September](#).

Tags: [Climate+change](#), [Environment](#), [Australia](#), [FOEI](#), [Friends+of+the+Earth](#), [Pacific+Islands](#)

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Jun 2008
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East Suffolk Morris Man Alan Tong was given a Humanist funeral at Oakfield Wood green burial ground on June 5, conducted by our [ceremonies team](#) member Michael Imison. If you go to [the Morris Men's website](#) and click on "Alan Tong" on the ticker at the top, and then "ulogy" [sic] at the bottom, you can read what was said.

If you click on the "Anglia News" link at the bottom of the same page, you can see a video of the Anglia News report. It seems that they used the [BHA](#) for their background material, and ignored us!

Tags: [Ceremonies](#), [Funeral](#), [Morris+men](#)

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Jun 2008
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[The latest edition is now available to download as a PDF file from the International Humanist & Ethical Union website](#).

It contains articles about the difficulties of attracting Africans to Humanism, the portrayal of religion in the media, the destruction of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference), how to adopt a Dalit village in India, and an interview with George Broadhead of GALHA (Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association).

[IHEU](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [IHN](#), [International+Humanism](#), [Magazine](#)

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Jun 2008
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The church is upset about being ignored. Oh dear. I shall keep my sarcasm to myself, but it is amusing.

A report commissioned by the Church of England will accuse the government of marginalising the Church.

The report - by [the Von Hugel Institute in Cambridge](#) - will say ministers are failing to understand the Church's role in providing social services.

It will also accuse them of favouring Islam and other religions, and paying only "lip service" to Christianity.

[BBC NEWS | Politics | Ministers 'ignoring Church role'](#).

In addition, The Telegraph has been running a ["Save our Churches" petition](#). Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, Archbishop of Westminster, says,

I approve of this campaign - it is important that we all support churches in this country as places of prayer for the benefit of the entire community.

Tags: [Church](#), [State](#), [Secularism](#), [C+of+E](#), [BBC](#)

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Jun 2008
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Charles Darwin was only partially right when he put forth his theory on evolution. We did evolve; that much is clear.
What Darwin fails to mention in his papers is that our DNA was programmed to evolve by a dying race of superintelligent aliens who once lived in our galaxy.

Don't believe me? Let us turn then to Star Trek, The Next Generation, 6:20. It is here that we learn of how Captain Picard and the crew of the Enterprise, along with some Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians discovered a hologram which tells us the story:

[DC Comictician on Star Trekiology: How Life Began.](#)

What Elvis doesn't mention here is that [Gene Roddenberry](#), who chronicled the adventures of Star Trek, was a Humanist.

Tags: [Star+Trek](#), [Darwin](#)

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Jun 2008
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"There's a vaguely new-age feeling going around that any form of inner agitation is bad and that we should all be heading for inner peace. I think that's morally outrageous. There's something deeply self-centred about aspiring to be the kind of person who's not perturbed by anything."



[Julian Baggini: The gripes of wrath.](#)

In [an interview with Humanist philosopher Baggini in the Sunday Herald](#), it says,

He singles out Buddhism as "one of those religions which are most explicit in encouraging us not to complain" and, when he does, his argument seems convincing. But this is largely because persuasion plays a major role in complaining, and Baggini makes his points persuasively. He calls it "selfish" to bask in unflinching serenity when suffering and prejudice are so widespread. Homophobia would go unchallenged; slavery would never have been abolished. But can there really be a people, or religion, that never complains? And would this not run contrary to human nature?

Interesting what he says about Buddhism. There's something very irritating about people who remain apparently unbothered, whatever happens, like someone I used to know who kept telling me to "calm down". She suffered from frequent headaches and duvet days – I wonder why? All that repressed anger must have somewhere to go.

Tags: [Humanism](#), [Philosophy](#), [Anger](#), [Wrath](#), [Book](#), [Sunday+Herald](#), [Julian+Baggini](#)

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Jun 2008
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It's a little over seven years since the death of Douglas Adams, atheist author of "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy". In his ["Lament for Douglas Adams"](#), written on hearing of Adams' death, [Richard Dawkins](#) wrote,

To illustrate the vain conceit that the universe must be somehow preordained for us, because we are so well suited to live in it, he mimed a wonderfully funny imitation of a puddle of water, fitting itself snugly into a depression in the ground, the depression uncannily being exactly the same shape as the puddle. Or there's this parable, which he told with huge enjoyment, whose moral leaps out with no further explanation. A man didn't understand how televisions work, and was convinced that there must be lots of little men inside the box, manipulating images at high speed. An engineer explained about high-frequency modulations of the electromagnetic spectrum, transmitters and receivers, amplifiers and cathode ray tubes, scan lines moving across and down a phosphorescent screen. The man listened to the engineer with careful attention, nodding his head at every step of the argument. At the end he pronounced himself satisfied. He really did now understand how televisions work. "But I expect there are just a few little men in there, aren't there?"

[The tribute on the h2g2 website](#) (an unconventional guide to life, the universe and everything, an encyclopaedic project where entries are written by people from all over the world, founded by Adams, launched in April 1999, and taken over by the BBC in February 2001) begins,

“I was the only kid who anybody I knew has ever seen, actually walk into a lamppost with his eyes wide open. Everybody assumed that there must be something going on inside because there sure as hell wasn’t anything going on on the outside!” (Hitchhikers, 1). Little did anyone know that this young, not-so-bright kid would be revered as a break-through Science-Fiction writer, leavening his legacy in; literature, Television, radio, and the computer world.

“[The Salmon of Doubt](#)” (buy the book via our Amazon link!), published posthumously, contains chapters from his last, unfinished book, and pieces on dogs, manta rays on the Great Barrier Reef, the Save the Rhino stunt climb, and PG Wodehouse. It includes an interview with Adams by [The American Atheist](#), in which he’s asked if it’s accurate to describe him as a “radical atheist”. As part of his answer, Adams says,

I don’t accept the currently fashionable assertion that any view is automatically as worthy of respect as any equal and opposite view. My view is that the moon is made of rock. If someone says to me, “Well, you haven’t been there, have you? You haven’t seen for yourself, so my view that it is made of Norwegian beaver cheese is equally valid” - then I can’t even be bothered to argue. There is such a thing as the burden of proof, and in the case of god, as in the case of the composition of the moon, this has shifted radically. God used to be the best explanation we’ve got, and we’ve now got vastly better ones. God is no longer an explanation of anything, but has instead become something that would itself need an insurmountable amount of explaining. So I don’t think that being convinced that there is no god is as irrational or arrogant a point of view as belief that there is. I don’t think the matter calls for even-handedness at all.

Adams’ wit is widely quoted. Some of my favourites...

Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.

The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.

Capital letters were always the best way of dealing with things you didn’t have a good answer to.

I love deadlines. I love the whooshing sound they make as they fly by.

In the beginning, the universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and is generally considered to have been a bad move.

Very deep. You should send that in to Readers’ Digest, they’ve got a page for people like you.

Tags: [Douglas+Adams](#), [Hitchhiker's+Guide+to+the+Galaxy](#), [h2g2](#)

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Jun 2008
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If you read about us in today’s East Anglian Daily Times and this is your first visit, hello and welcome. Please explore.

As [the late Douglas Adams](#) (a Humanist author) would have said, we’re “mostly harmless”.

Tags: [East+Anglian+Daily+Times](#), [EADT](#), [Welcome](#), [Douglas+Adams](#)

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Jun 2008
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Turkey's embattled prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, launched an attempt to save his political skin yesterday by seeking to lower tensions in a power struggle with the state's secular establishment that threatens to split the country, close his party and oust him from office.

After days of simmering government anger, Erdogan pleaded with his supporters and Turkey's most senior judges to avoid a "clash of powers" following a ruling that overturned a law allowing female university students to wear the Islamic headscarf.

[Turkish PM fights for survival with plea for Islamists and secular judges to avoid clash | World news | The Guardian.](#)

Tags: [Turkey](#), [Islam](#), [Headscarves](#)

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Jun 2008

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We all like celebrations, holidays and ceremonies – why should the religious claim them all? [The Institute for Humanist Studies](#) has provided a website that details all of the above for those who live free from religion – the [Secular Seasons](#) site.

Find out about Thomas Paine Day, Darwin Day, the equinoxes and solstices, and all about Humanist ceremonies – though we're not mentioned, so go to [our ceremonies page](#) for local info.

Tags: [Seasons](#), [Holidays](#), [Celebrations](#), [Anniversaries](#), [Ceremonies](#)

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Jun 2008
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If you're interested in joining us, please email by 28 July at the latest, so we know how many to expect. We can't book at The Seal, so need to get there early and grab a table or tables. Varied menu includes vegetarian options.

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Jun 2008
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The Ipswich & Suffolk Indian Association says, "If the Bollywood beat moves your feet, then bring yourself, your family and friends to the sixth Indian Summer Mela hosted by the association. 'Mela' means 'to meet' and describes community celebrations and festivals in the Indian subcontinent. It is open to all and admission is free. Experience the world of South Asian arts, culture and music. Performances on the covered stage feature local, national, established and up-and coming artists. Explore the large covered market marquee packed with a wide range of Indian wares and fairs, information and advice. And if all the dancing and activity leaves you feeling hungry, visit the food marquee and sample a range of Asian delights designed to tempt you. Bring a chair or rug."

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Jun 2008
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Darwin's 200th birthday has become a rallying point for scientists opposing creationism as the 18 month long celebrations of his birth and the 150th anniversary of his theory started this week.

Four out of ten Britons now believe either in Creation or in its watered-down cousin Intelligent Design, and Creationism is being taught in state-approved schools.

Dr Bob Bloomfield of the Natural History Museum who is a key player in the Darwin 200 project expressed his concerns: "The statistics in this country are quite frightening. I don't think society can be complacent when ideas which are unsound are perpetrated. We are trying not to compromise people's faith views, other than where they are absolutely inconsistent with science".

[National Secular Society - Darwin's birthday challenge to creationism.](#)

Tags: [Charles+Darwin](#), [NSS](#), [Evolution](#)

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Jun 2008
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Parents will have to sign agreements promising to support the ethos of faith schools in a concession to religious leaders unveiled by Ed Balls today.

Children could be denied places if their parents refuse to make the commitment following a 'clarification' of guidelines by the Children's Secretary.

[Children could be refused places at faith schools if parents don't sign-up to religious agreements | Mail Online.](#)

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Ed+Balls](#)

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Jun 2008
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The Telegraph offers a typically facile report about atheism. Reminds me of something a member of our group said. One of her relatives asked "Don't you have to be clever to be a Humanist?" She replied, "No, but you do have to use the brains you've got."

A retired professor has said that a higher proportion of clever people consider themselves atheists than the national average.

Professor Richard Lynn, though no doubt clever himself, is hardly uncontroversial.

[Clever people are atheists. Cleverer ones aren't - Telegraph.](#)

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

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Jun 2008
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A historic precedent was set at the European parliament today [18 June]. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Mrs Asma Jahangir, addressed the European Parliament, much as religious leaders such as the Pope and the Grand Mufti of Syria have done.

Sophie in't Veld MEP, Chair of the European Parliament Working Party for the Separation of Religion and Politics, said: "I welcome the European Parliament's invitation to Mrs Jahangir. The religious leaders who have addressed the European Parliament have all been men, and so are not representative of their religious groups, far less of the population as a whole.

"They have not been asked to answer questions, hardly the open dialogue envisaged by the Treaty of Lisbon."

[National Secular Society - First Woman To Address European Parliament On Religious Matters Will Do So Today.](#)

Tags: [UN](#), [EU](#), [MEP](#), [NSS](#)

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Jun 2008
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The latest news from our webmaster, Nathan, based in Siem Reap, Cambodia, who's spent a few days in Borneo and met orang-utans, ants and assorted tourists.

Travel misconception number 316 shattered – I got off the plane in Borneo and there weren't bowl-cutted natives blowing darts at me, my luggage wasn't stolen by a wasp the size of a poodle, my transportation to the guesthouse wasn't a dugout canoe but a five-door Proton, and I didn't have to hunt my own dinner.

[Read more - Quickie to Borneo.](#)

Tags: [Blog](#), [Borneo](#), [Travel](#), [orang-utan](#)

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Jun 2008
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In early 1858, on Ternate in Malaysia, a young specimen collector was tracking the island's elusive birds of paradise when he was struck by malaria. 'Every day, during the cold and succeeding hot fits, I had to lie down during which time I had nothing to do but to think over any subjects then particularly interesting me,' he later recalled.

Thoughts of money or women might have filled lesser heads. Alfred Russel Wallace was made of different stuff, however. He began thinking about disease and famine; about how they kept human populations in check; and about recent discoveries indicating that the earth's age was vast. How might these waves of death, repeated over aeons, influence the make-up of different species, he wondered?

[How Darwin won the evolution race | Science | The Observer.](#)

Tags: [Darwin](#), [Charles+Darwin](#), [Alfred+Russel+Wallace](#), [Evolution](#)

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Jun 2008
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A curious postscript to the blog on the US Religious Landscape survey - one in five of the atheists questioned by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's survey of the religious beliefs of 35,000 American adults said they believe in God or a universal spirit. That's 21 per cent of the atheists who took part in the survey. And of those, six per cent of admitted they believed in a personal God. Which makes you wonder what they understood by the word "Atheist".

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: The atheists who believe in God.](#)

Just goes to show – Americans are confused. Why else would they elect George Bush?

Tags: [atheism](#), [America](#), [US](#), [God](#)

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Jun 2008
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[Labour MP Tom Harris caused a row ... when he said people should stop being so "bloody miserable"](#) and appreciate what they have. [Philosopher Julian Baggini](#) considers whether we are a nation of whingers and asks if that is such a bad thing anyway.

[BBC NEWS | Magazine | What's wrong with whinging?](#)

I'll whinge if I want to, such as complaining about people who don't know when they're well off, or when people are inconsiderate. How about you?

Tags: [Whinging](#), [Whingers](#), [Complaining](#), [Julian+Baggini](#), [Tom+Harris+MP](#)

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Jun 2008
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Many of you will have seen the coverage in today's press (30 June) of a new pamphlet on 'faith schools', published by the Centre for Policy Studies, written by Christina Odone, which seeks to portray the UK's state-funded faith schools as inclusive and under attack from hostile secularists.

The BHA's Andrew Copson responded to the pamphlet today on The Guardian's 'Comment is Free' website. You can read the blog and post a comment at <http://tinyurl.com/4nze3u>

We are also asking our members and supporters to post messages on the websites of these newspapers that have covered the story:

Daily Mail: <http://tinyurl.com/5dgdev>

Daily Telegraph: <http://tinyurl.com/5mv87j>

This is London: <http://tinyurl.com/6dwhh7>

We are also asking members and supporters to write to their own MPs, expressing their opposition to faith schools.

You can write to your MP via 'House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA' and you can find details of why faith schools should be opposed at <http://tinyurl.com/d7yes>

You can read the BHA's press release on the issue at <http://tinyurl.com/3qyppc>

Tags: [BHA](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Centre+for+Policy+Studies](#)

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Jun 2008
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The British Humanist Association (BHA) and the religious thinktank Ekklesia are amongst those who have today criticised as 'misguided' a report published today by the Centre for Policy Studies, written by Christina Odone, which seeks to portray the UK's state-funded faith schools as inclusive and 'under attack' from hostile secularists.

The Church of England and those running other faith schools have previously tried to champion them as having a good track record of inclusion. However, although attempting to defend faith schools, the findings of the latest report suggest that local authorities are approaching very small numbers of faith schools to place vulnerable Looked After Children. It also found that faith schools were turning away more than one in twenty of Looked After Children when local authorities did ask if the schools would take them.

[Report on faith schools 'fails to address issues of inclusion' | Ekklesia](#)

Tags: [Ekklesia](#), [BHA](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Centre+for+Policy+Studies](#), [Christina+Odone](#)

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Jul 2008

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[A new feature on BBC Radio Suffolk's website](#) by Andrew Woodger includes references to Humanism.

More people have been going to church in Suffolk, but the diocese has concerns that it may be a blip in the face of long-term decline. However, Muslims say they're buoyant in the county, as do the humanists who don't have any faith in a god.

We're constantly hearing that religion, particularly the Christian Church of England, is in decline with fewer bums-on-pews. At the same time there's been the dramatic success of books such as Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and claims that popular films/books such as Philip Pullman's *The Golden Compass*, or even Harry Potter, are spreading an anti-religious message.

Tags: [BBC](#), [BBC+Radio+Suffolk](#), [Faith+in+Suffolk](#), [Suffolk](#)

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Jul 2008
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An article about the British education system, and the "Academies".

For Blair, the two classes of school that really mattered were the voluntary-aided schools, now usually called 'faith' schools, and a new type of school, the city academy.

Of the two, Gordon Brown's government is clearly putting its money on the academies. The faith schools were a particular enthusiasm of Blair's but are viewed with suspicion by the Labour Party as a whole. Their admirers believe they have an 'ethos' and an academic discipline close to those of the grammar schools... But faith schools are inherently divisive: that is their function. And their admissions practices hardly square with Labour's policies of social inclusion. In a surprisingly frank statement to the House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families in January, the education minister, Ed Balls, made it clear that it was 'not the policy of the government . . . to promote more faith schools'. Communities, if they wanted, might establish them but his department was not 'leading a drive'... The city academies are a much more serious matter. The CTCs, with their private sponsorship and independence from the LEAs, were a precedent, but it seems to have been the influence of Andrew Adonis on Blair that drove the academies forward.

[LRB · Ross McKibbin: An Element of Unfairness](#).

Tags: [education](#), [Labour+Government](#), [Tony+Blair](#), [LRB](#)

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Jul 2008
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Like many local authorities, [Babergh District Council](#) has Christian prayers at the beginning of full council meetings. It's assumed that all the members will participate. Together with humanists and secularists in other parts of the country, we regard this practice as archaic and discriminatory. **We have no problem with prayers before meetings, provided they are optional.** If they're held 10 minutes before meetings start, say, and it's made clear that members are under no obligation to attend, we feel that non-Christians or members of other faiths would feel much happier about getting involved with the democratic process.

Babergh council has previously rejected my suggestion that they should review their practice. I recently tried again, and this was the response from their Chief Executive, Mrs Pat Rockall:

Our Solicitor has looked at this for us, and concurs with the statement on the website by the spokesperson for the Equality and Human Rights Commission that Article 9 of the European Convention is about allowing people to exercise their religious freedom, not about stopping them expressing their religion. She is satisfied that saying prayers before Council meetings does not contravene that right, and does not consider there are any legal grounds for advising Members that prayers should not be said before Council meetings.

I have drawn the attention of our Political Leaders' Group to your e-mail (as I did when you raised this with me the first time), together with that legal advice, and once again sought their steer to enable me to reply to you. Whilst they genuinely respect your views on this matter, I have been asked to advise you that we will continue with the practice of saying a prayer at the beginning of Council Meetings.

I replied:

Our committee has discussed your response, and we've heard what's happening in other parts of the country. We can't accept your position.

My point was not that prayers shouldn't be said, but that they should be optional. In other words, there should be no assumption that members and staff are willing to participate.

By having prayers 10 minutes or so before meetings begin, you can be sure that those who do participate are happy to do so. It may be that all the current members and staff would freely participate if you changed your practice, but that doesn't alter the principle.

Advice from the National Association of Local Councils has been obtained by colleagues elsewhere, and the advice is that prayers are discriminatory and that Councils that continue with them may be open to legal challenge. It's likely that, in order to clarify the situation, a complaint will be made against one of the councils who persist with this practice. We believe that The British Humanist Association has said it will support such action, and if the legal position is clarified in favour of prayers being defined as discriminatory then they will help to mount a national campaign.

Babergh is populated mainly by ethnically white British people, many of whom may describe themselves as "Christian" (though, with the BHA and the NSS, we're campaigning for the 2011 census questions to be altered, to clarify this). We believe that many self-styled "Christians" are only nominally so. We'd argue that old-fashioned practices like Christian prayers before meetings, where it's assumed that everyone will participate, may discourage some members of the community from getting involved with the democratic process, including those from the minority faiths.

We'll be mounting a local campaign to encourage Suffolk local authorities who still have prayers before meetings without offering the option to avoid them, to think again.

Any information about your Suffolk local authority's practice regarding prayers would be welcome. Please [email us](#).

[Click to read what the NSS said in March this year.](#)

Tags: [Local+authorities](#), [Prayers](#), [Council+meetings](#), [Councils](#), [Discrimination](#)

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Jul 2008

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We wouldn't argue that puppies can be "unclean", what with the puddles and all, but offensive?

This is Rebel, the black German Shepherd puppy whom Tayside Police chose to feature in their postcard (above) advertising a new non-emergency telephone number. It was printed and distributed in the Spring, but according to reports today some Muslims in the Dundee area allegedly find this image of the six-month old puppy "offensive" and "ritually unclean".

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: The police puppy considered \ritually.](#)

Tags: [Puppy](#), [Offensive](#), [Unclean](#), [Police](#)

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Jul 2008

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This reminded me of a woman who came to visit a few years ago, in search of info about Humanism. She was one of those try-a-new-weird-belief-a-month brigade, who can sometimes subscribe to two or more contradictory sets of beliefs at the same time. She seemed to think that Humanism was a new agey thing, with everyone sending each other healing energies, only not religious (she said). When she mentioned the healing power of [crystals](#), I said I thought they had as much healing power as clutching your favourite pair of wellies would do. She departed, never to return.

Anyhow, [The Daylight Atheist ponders crystals...](#)

To mark the tenth installment of Popular Delusions, I'm turning my attention to one of the most common and enduring superstitions among the New Age set: the belief that naturally occurring crystals have some sort of special power to store, concentrate, or focus vaguely defined "energies".

Tags: [Crystals](#), [Daylight+atheism](#), [Daylight+atheist](#)

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Jul 2008

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No love lost between Yasmin and Cristina. I know whose side I'm on.

I cannot stand [Cristina Odone](#), and the feeling is mutual. We haven't spoken for years, since the week when, as deputy editor of the New Statesman, she commissioned a hatchet profile on me by a female journalist (of course), who had met me once on a radio show. Even I, well used to abrasive attacks, was knocked back by the virulence in a left-wing magazine I had previously worked for. Time has not healed that bruise, and never will.



[Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: Religions should not be allowed to make ghettos - Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, Commentators - The Independent.](#)

Tags: [Yasmin+Alibhai-Brown](#), [Christina+Odone](#), [The+Independent](#)

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Jul 2008
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It's usually a waste of time responding to Creationist nonsense privately, as nothing penetrates their stubbornness, but is worth doing so in public, if it makes people think. Accordingly, here is an exchange of correspondence between me and Mr George Gardner, who wrote to the local Evening Star about a feature article (see attachment) on Humanism with the usual anti-atheist, pro-Creationist drivel.



The Star published my letter in response to his:

George Gardner responded to Lynne Mortimer's feature about Humanism by writing that it's "founded" on atheism. I'm an atheist, but I'm also a-fairyist, a-ghostist, a-lots-of-other-things. The prefix "a" simply means "without". Humanism is a positive approach to life, not just a lack of something. True, I don't have faith; faith means believing in something without evidence; I reject the notion that this is commendable.

Humanists have values, though they may not be "spiritual" (whatever that means); we use reason and experience to form those values. Mr Gardner writes, "if there is no God we can do what we like." We can do what we like anyway, but Humanists like to be responsible for their actions. Relying on some external authority to tell us what we can or can't do is infantile. Grown-up people can make up their own minds about right and wrong, and altruism is a natural human tendency because it benefits everyone. You don't have to believe in God to be good, while many cruel and destructive acts are committed in the name of God.

Mr Gardner asks, "Is Margaret Nelson content with a purposeless and meaningless life?" Does he imagine that everyone who lives without religion is living without purpose and meaning? That's about a third of the population; people who help to keep Mr Gardner warm and fed, housed, clothed, healthy, and supplied with all his needs. Having interviewed thousands of people while preparing funerals for the religion-free, I can assure Mr Gardner that the majority of them were honest, decent, and moral. Most are more tolerant and less judgemental than the religious fundamentalists I've come across. So yes, I'm quite content with my life, thank you, despite its challenges.

Mr Gardner writes that the alternative to "creation" (presumably the mythical "creation" of Genesis) is that "everything came about accidentally". Well, since the earth is about 4.5 billion years old and life began in a primordial soup about 3.85 billion years ago, it's inaccurate to describe evolution as "accidental", as though it "just happened". Each stage depended on a precise set of circumstances that allowed living things to develop, including Mr Gardner. The story is far more awe-inspiring than the creation myth, and there's plenty of evidence for it, while there's no evidence for "creation".

One friend got very indignant about the "purposeless and meaningless life" bit. "He doesn't know you!" she said, "stupid man!"

Next, I had a typewritten letter from Mr Gardner:

Dear Margaret [*such familiarity!*],

Yes, I am the person who replied to your dissertation on humanism. I replied to your reply, but one cannot expect the Evening Star to continue correspondence; that is why I am replying direct.

I am in my 80s and throughout life have had numerous correspondents with whom I have had controversy. I always, even in my 80s, 'come alive' when there is a debate. One of my sayings is that life is a jigsaw puzzle many parts of which are missing. They are missing for the Christian who cannot explain why God created him; they are missing for the atheistic scientist because he does not know how the universe came about, and, if he believes in the Big Bang, how order came out of sheer chaos.

I shall now get down to the business of a reply to your reply.

(1) One must accept - everyone accepts - that either the universe was created or it happened accidentally. You speak of 'each stage depended on a precise set of circumstances that allowed living things to develop'. Thus, you dodge the issue. I repeat my point that if everything came about by chance, how is it that you are able to reason about it?

(2) You speak of humanists being honest, decent and moral, which is fine, and relevant to this you state 'we can do what we like anyway'. That is precisely my point, and why I quoted H.G.Wells in my original comment. If there is no God we can choose to do what we like: there is no moral imperative.

(3) You also state that there is no evidence for creation. The entire order of the universe, you allege, came about accidentally. This is nonsense. Order is crying out to be recognized. May I tell you the story of initially four stones. If they were randomly placed no one would think that they were placed there. ~they were positioned in an exact square, one might think that someone had so placed them. If one put two more stones equidistant from the others to form two squares, one would certainly begin to consider that they were so positioned. Add a few more stones and there would be no doubt in one's mind that they had been deliberately so placed. The universe is a little more complicated than my array of stones: there is no doubt that it was created.

(4) In your original symposium you decried faith. Faith pre-eminently, but not exclusively, is a religious phenomenon. You have faith only in the rational world, as do atheistic scientists. You must have faith, with them, that you are right. They hope, and you hope, if you think about it, that they will find a formula called The Theory of Everything to explain how everything arose. Christians believe that there is a person behind the universe who created it.

C.S. Lewis was originally an atheist. A chap called Alister McGrath, once an atheist, wrote a book called The Dawkins delusion about Richard Dawkins. As you know, Richard Dawkins is the epitome of atheists. There is hope for you yet.

Yours sincerely,

G. L. Gardner

My reply (and I won't be writing again):

Dear Mr Gardner,

Thank you for your letter. I'm glad to learn that the prospect of a debate still excites you as an octogenarian. However, your letter is full of erroneous assumptions.

"Many parts are missing"

This is true, in terms of human knowledge, but I prefer to leave a question mark where there are gaps in our knowledge, rather than fill them with God-based explanations. I'm happy to admit my ignorance and to look for more answers, which inevitably lead to more questions. This is different from taking a pride in being ignorant and doing nothing about it.

"Either the universe was created or it happened accidentally"

There's a third alternative. Using the terms "accident" or "chance" to describe the theory of evolution by natural selection is inaccurate. These words describe an incident, rather than a process. In his book, "Climbing Mount Improbable", Richard Dawkins explains the process as follows:

"One side of the mountain is a sheer cliff, impossible to climb, but the other side is a gentle slope to the summit. On the summit sits a complex device such as an eye or a bacterial flagellar motor. The absurd notion that such complexity could spontaneously self-assemble is symbolised by leaping from the foot of the cliff to the top in one bound. Evolution, by contrast, goes around the back of the mountain and creeps up the gentle slope to the summit: easy!"

Unfortunately, few people understand evolution, which has, so far, taken millions of years. Many people have had only a limited science education. I recommend Prof. Dawkins' book, mentioned above, if your mind isn't closed to challenging ideas. We do *not* say that the alternative to "creation" is chance, and Prof. Dawkins explains this in terms that any intelligent person ought to be able to understand.

As for the ability to reason; as the dictionary says, reason is the power of the mind to think, understand and form judgements logically. There is evidence that other species, including our first cousins, the apes, share this ability, but human beings have developed their cognitive abilities as our brains have developed over millennia. It's been said that most people use less than 10% of these abilities most of the time, allowing the organ between their ears to atrophy for lack of use, which is a huge waste. The more I've learned about what religious people choose to believe, the more I despair of their lazy illogicality.

"If there is no God, we can choose to do as we like"

We always could, and we always will, by which I mean humanity, and not just the religious. Some say that they do what they do because their god tells them to, and some of these religiously-inspired acts are appalling, cruel, and destructive. Neither believers nor non-believers have a monopoly of either morality or immorality. Moralisers of all types seek to impose their views about how we ought to behave on everyone else, and the worst of them are prejudiced, illiberal tyrants. We ought to know by now that exhortations to behave responsibly towards each other are a waste of time if there is no appreciation or understanding of the reasons why we should. Small children may not need to know why they shouldn't do some things – for their own safety, for example – but any responsible adult is capable of working out his or her values, and most do. Religious fundamentalists may not like some of those values – about sexuality, for example – but that's just too bad.

"The entire order of the universe ... came about accidentally. This is nonsense."

Yes, it is, but that's not what we say. I refer to what I wrote earlier. You may have no doubt that the universe was created, but your story about four stones doesn't change the fact that "creation" is a myth, and there is no evidence for it, and never will be. [As my son wrote in an online essay](#), "I find the idea that millions of years of struggle, survival, mutation and development by life on Earth, and that we have become Earth's most successful species, awe-inspiring – and the idea that it was all the work of a divine creator abhorrent and laughable."

Every religion has its own version of how life on earth began. The Jains don't believe in creation; they say that there was always life, and always will be. The Zulus' creator, the "Ancient One" called Unkulunkulu, taught them how to hunt, they say. According to the Qur'an, the skies and the earth were joined together at first, then "cloved asunder", and God made man out of earth, clay, sand and water, and then breathed life into him. The biblical Genesis myth is just one of many creation myths, all reflecting the circumstances of the people who first spoke about them. When humankind had no other explanations for how life began, or our existence, they told stories about supernatural beings or events. These were passed down, elaborated on, and are now largely forgotten. Some, however, were written into the teachings of the

dominant patriarchal monotheistic religions because it was expedient to do so; as long as the devout accepted nonsense like creation, they'd accept a lot of things without questioning them. Religion thrives on ignorance.

"You have faith only in the rational world."

No, I don't, because I don't have faith at all. "Faith" means accepting something without proof, and in the case of religion, it makes a virtue of this. The sub-editor at the newspaper wrote "We put faith in humans," but I didn't say that, and never would. I have trust in people, if I have good reason to, but I don't have faith.

"... you hope ... they will find a formula called The Theory of Everything to explain how everything arose..."

No, I don't.

"There is hope for you yet."

This is patronising. Atheism simply means "without god", from the Greek "a-" (without) and "theos" (god). Calling oneself an atheist only tells others that you don't believe in God. It doesn't tell them anything about one's values and principles. Richard Dawkins is indeed an atheist, but that's not all he is, and it's not all I am. By the way, we're also a-ghostist, a-fairyist, and a-Father-Christmas-ist.

I'm a Humanist and a Rationalist. I think that we human beings are responsible for making the most of the life we have, and the planet we have, because no one else, neither God, nor Superman, will come and clear up any mess we might make and bequeath to our descendants. There's no such thing as an "act of God"; we can't influence natural phenomena, but how we respond is up to us. Altruism is a natural human tendency. "God" has no power to change anything; we do.

With best wishes,

Margaret Nelson

[File Attachment: Ipswich Evening Star.pdf \(1131 KB\)](#)

Tags: [Letters](#), [Evening+Star](#), [Creationist](#), [Atheism](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#)

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Further to our earlier report on [Babergh District Council's position on council prayers](#), [Devon Humanists](#) have issued the following press release:

Campaign to end the discriminatory practice of having prayers at Council meetings

Do you know that your local Council starts its meetings with prayers? If you say that to most people nowadays they think that you are joking.

Devon Humanists today announce the launch of a campaign to end the discriminatory practice of having prayers at Council meetings. Spokesman for Devon Humanists, Keith Denby said "The history of local Councils in Britain goes back to Saxon times and in the distant past the Church was very much a part of local administration, so to begin a Council meeting with prayers would have been very natural. But now in the 21st Century, Council taxpayers come from many cultures and belief systems and a large proportion of them do not think that religion should have influence in politics.

According to an IPSOS/Mori poll in 2006, 'more people think that the government pays too much attention to religious groups and leaders than to any other domestic group'. Having prayers at Council meetings is discriminatory even if there is an attempt at multicultural prayers because one or another group will always be left out. The only sensible thing is to do away with them altogether and for people of faith to express that faith in private, not in the public domain."

Keith Denby continued "Having prayers at meetings is genuinely off-putting for many people, from the outside it looks as if you need to be part of a special clique to participate in local government either as a member of the public or as a prospective councillor for election. The standing of local Councils is diminished by this gulf of understanding between taxpayers and their governing Councils."

Members of Devon Humanists will be writing to local Councils to ask them to stop having prayers at meetings. Modern equality and anti-discrimination laws will be cited to show that Councils that continue with prayers at meetings are in breach of the law and of guidance from their own advisory bodies. The legal department of the National Association of Local Councils has written that the 'Council should consider removing the saying of prayers to ensure compliance with general statutory duty set out in s. 71 (1) of the 1976 (Race Discrimination) Act and to eliminate any risk of challenge under the Human Rights Act 1998'. Many Councils now expressly state an Equality & Discrimination policy that is directly at odds with continuing to have prayers at Council meetings. In many parts of the country Councils have taken note of their own policy statements and have ceased prayers but a surprising number – even the new unitary authorities - have retained prayers as 'being traditional'.

The campaign is supported by the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.

The legal situation would be clarified by a suitable test case, and members of Devon Humanists are prepared to embark on such a test case if it should prove necessary.

[Devon Humanists website](#)

Suffolk local authorities like Babergh will no longer exist soon, when the new unitary authorities are established. [As reported on the BBC website](#),

Suffolk could be controlled by three local authorities if the government's Boundary Committee proposals are accepted.

The proposal is for two unitary authorities, one for Ipswich and Felixstowe, and the other covering the rest of the county

except Lowestoft.

Lowestoft would split away from Suffolk and become part of the Norfolk local government structure.

In view of these imminent changes, it's unlikely that we would consider legal action against any of the current authorities. However, we will be very interested to see what the new authorities do. It's likely that they won't observe quaint customs like council prayers, unless they adopt the county council's current practice, which is to have optional prayers ten minutes *before* full council meetings.

Tags: [Council+prayers](#), [Prayers](#), [Devon+Humanists](#), [NSS](#), [BHA](#)

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The July edition of [New Humanist](#) magazine is on sale, containing articles on the following:

[Torch bearers](#) – Politics, religion and money may be wrestling to control the Olympics. But, argues Paul Sims, they'll never be a match for the sheer drama.

[Gender traitors](#) – From 19th century anti-suffragists to today's anti-feminists, Sally Feldman finds a common link between women who turn against themselves.

[The genius myth](#) – Lisa Jardine tells Laurie Taylor why she believes in doubt, precision and uncertainty.

[Inside the global rebellion](#) – The 21st century has seen the world rocked by a variety of religious challenges to the secular state. Mark Juergensmeyer went in search of common features.

[Mistaken identity](#) – Obsessing about culture traps people in their own history, argues Kenan Malik.

Tags: [New+Humanist](#), [Magazine](#)

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In a decision with potentially disastrous implications for the government's equality agenda (not to mention the idea of a secular society), an employment tribunal has upheld a claim from a Christian registrar that she suffered direct discrimination after she was "bullied" and "harassed" for refusing to conduct civil partnerships for gay couples.

The ruling appears to place the religious "conscience" of registrars above their legal duty to carry out parliament's legislation. If it is not overturned on appeal, and it sets a precedent, where could it lead? Will other public servants be permitted to refuse services on the grounds that their religion does not permit them to approve of their clients lifestyles?

Firemen refusing to rescue co-habiting couples from burning buildings? Doctors refusing to treat people with HIV? Police officers refusing to come to the aid of unmarried mothers?

[Terry Sanderson: The decision in favour of a registrar who refused to deal with gay couples sets a dangerous precedent | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk.](#)

Tags: [Registrar](#), [Terry+Sanderson](#), [NSS](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [Employment+Tribunal](#)

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From P Z Myers' blog:

There are days when it is agony to read the news, because people are so goddamned stupid. Petty and stupid. Hateful and stupid. Just plain stupid. And nothing makes them stupider than religion.

[Here's a story that will destroy your hopes for a reasonable humanity.](#)

"Webster Cook says he smuggled a Eucharist, a small bread wafer that to Catholics symbolic of the Body of Christ after a priest blesses it, out of mass, didn't eat it as he was supposed to do, but instead walked with it."

This isn't the stupid part yet. He walked off with a cracker that was put in his mouth, and [people in the church fought with him to get it back](#). It is just a cracker!

[Pharyngula: IT'S A FRACKIN' CRACKER!](#)

Tags: [P+Z+Myers](#), [Pharyngula](#), [Cracker](#), [Catholics](#)

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A typical assumption the religious make is that the absence of God deprives life of essence and meaning – that the cold eye of reason is arrogant and robs life of its soul and mystique. Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor has colourfully described this as "spiritual homelessness". He opined that: "Many people have a sense of being in a sort of exile from faith-guided experience."



This sense of alienation cuts across theological lines. "It's difficult to have a spiritual life in a modern society," believes Tariq Ramadan, the Swiss-born reformist Islamic scholar.

As a non-believer, I do not feel like a spiritual refugee slumming it out in some frontier camp for exiled souls. You do not need God or religion to experience the sublime and poetic.

[Khaled Diab: Contemplating God-free zones | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#).

Tags: [God](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [Khaled+Diab](#), [God-free+zones](#)

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It looked increasingly unlikely yesterday that cinema audiences will get to see the planned film sequels in Philip Pullman's children's fantasy trilogy, His Dark Materials.

Sources in the film industry said that plans for a sequel to The Golden Compass appeared to have been put on ice following the fervent Christian protests surrounding the first film, which led to boycotts and box office disappointment in the United States.

[Christian protests may leave Philip Pullman's trilogy as one of a kind - News, Film & TV - The Independent](#).

[Philip Pullman](#) is a distinguished supporter of the [BHA](#) and an honorary associate of the NSS.

Tags: [Philip+Pullman](#), [The+Independent](#), [Film](#), [His+Dark+Materials](#)

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Responding to the Ministry of Justice White Paper, the British Humanist Association (BHA) has urged the Government to ensure that there will be no reserved places for Bishops in a reformed House of Lords.

Andrew Copson, BHA Director of Education and Public Affairs, commented, 'The UK is the only Western democracy to give religious representatives the automatic right to sit in the legislature. Modern Britain is a society with a great diversity of religious and non-religious beliefs and it is outrageous that both Labour and Conservatives are proposing that this anachronistic policy should continue.'

[British Humanist Association](#).

Tags: [House+of+Lords](#), [White+paper](#), [BHA](#)

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From Humanist Philosopher [Julian Baggini](#)'s [Herald](#) column; he doesn't seem overly impressed by the increase in Humanist weddings in Scotland.

Humanist weddings, and other ceremonies, are unusual in that they provide a like-for-like replacement for what religions offer. Since people will always want to mark significant events in life in a shared, public way, once humanist weddings were made legal in Scotland it was inevitable that those who held broadly humanist views would take them up. But I do not expect humanism as a mass movement to gain much from this. The wedding statistics show the limitations as well as the strengths of humanism as an organised movement. The self-limiting paradox of humanism is that it is most popular when it does what religions would otherwise do; but it would not be humanism if it tried to do all that religions have done.



[More Couples Decide To Tie The Knot With Humanism \(from The Herald\)](#).

Tags: [Julian+Baggini](#), [The+Herald](#), [Weddings](#), [Humanist+Weddings](#)

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DURING HIS US TOUR in 2008, Biologist and bestselling author Richard Dawkins met with some of the world's leading scientists to discuss topics such as Quantum Physics, Biology, Evolutionary Psychology, Science education, religion, atheism and more. This video brings you the fascinating unedited discussions between Richard

Dawkins and Nobel Prize-winning Physicist Steven Weinberg, Physicist Lawrence Krauss, Biologist and blogger PZ Myers, and Evolutionary Psychologist David Buss.

From a public conversation at Stanford University to private conversations in Austin and Minneapolis, this collection offers a rare and inspirational opportunity to observe some of today's top scientists as they discuss some of the big issues without interruption.

['VOICES OF SCIENCE: PZ Myers - Buy it now on DVD' by Richard Dawkins, Steven Weinberg, Lawrence Krauss, PZ Myers, Davis Buss - RichardDawkins.net.](#)

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Lawrence+Krauss](#), [P+Z+Myers](#), [David+Buss](#), [Steven+Weinberg](#)

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In 1963 the magazine New Society ran an article by Ronald Fletcher, then a lecturer in sociology at Bedford College, London, entitled "A Humanist's Decalogue". The author was suggesting an updated version of the Biblical list of dos and don'ts as a set of non-commandments – "principles on which the individual must work out his/her own conduct when faced by particular problems". The article was one of a series dealing especially with young people's values. Fletcher's four page article expanded on each non-commandment. Ronald Fletcher finished his academic career as Emeritus Professor of Sociology, University of Reading.

Fletcher's list made an impression on me, at that time a lad of twenty-something years of age, and I kept the article. I have it still, and although it's brown with age and getting increasingly tatty, its content still seems relevant to me. I thought it might be of interest to Suffolk Humanist and Secularist Group members to read what was thought to be appropriate for a "good life" forty-five years ago. The article was originally printed in New Society, 2nd May 1963 and is the copyright of New Statesman Ltd.

The ten non-commandments, with Fletcher's and my amplifications:

Never accept authority

Whether that of a jealous god, priest, prime minister, president, dictator, school teacher, social worker, parent, or anyone else whatsoever, unless, in your own seriously considered view, there are good grounds for it.

Base your conduct upon simple humane principles

Strive to eliminate war

A variant of "Thou shalt not kill".

Strive to eliminate poverty, and work for greater material prosperity for all

Do not be a snob

A variant of "Thou shalt not covet ...". Use material possessions for enjoyment and for enriching your own experience: not as an insignia of status for competitive snobbery.

In sexual behaviour, use your brains as well as your genitals and always in that order

Written when HIV/AIDS was generally unknown and abortion was not common.

Enjoy family life and marriage

Written when marriage was still the popular state. Fletcher says that the family you make for yourself will be the group which will be far and away the most important in your life for determining your happiness or unhappiness. These days, marriage may not be required, but family life is still considered useful, however broadly it is defined.

Keep the law

Commit yourself to active citizenship

Have confidence in the modern world and in your powers to improve it

See that the world does not end, either with a bang or a whimper, but lives a happier life.

A comparison with the Biblical commandments can be made by referring to [the article at Wikipedia](#), for example. It describes the ten (or is it seven, or 14 or 15?) Judaeo/Christian moral imperatives.

There are many other decalogues or sets of commandments to examine. Bertrand Russell's "Liberal Decalogue", reproduced here by permission of the British Humanist Association from their publication entitled "A Short Course on Humanism", was intended to supplement the Biblical commandments.

Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.

Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.

Never try to discourage thinking for you are sure to succeed.

When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your (partner) or your children, endeavour to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.

Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.

Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.

Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.

Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for, if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.

Be scrupulously truthful, even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.

Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fools' paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.

Some humanists argue that sets of rules are unnecessary. We should know how to behave and don't need to be told. Margaret Nelson, our group's secretary, said in a recent article on the BBC Suffolk website that the important thing about humanism is that we haven't got a set of rules like a Bible or a Qur'an. We should work things out for ourselves and be aware of the consequences of our actions. [The whole article can be seen on the BBC Suffolk website](#). But Fletcher's first non-commandment certainly agrees with Margaret's view on external authority.

Perhaps, especially when dealing with young people, it might not be a bad thing to provide some sort of guidance. Even if religious education were to be removed from the school curriculum, advice on ethical behaviour would occur in other disciplines, and hopefully would also be provided by parents or carers. Why not have a handy checklist?

However, all humanists do appear willing to allow at least one "commandment", the so-called Golden Rule. "Treat others as you would like to be treated."

Tags: [10+commandments](#), [Humanist+decalogue](#), [John+Palmer](#), [Ronald+Fletcher](#), [Bertrand+Russell](#), [BBC+Radio+Suffolk](#)

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The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain was one year old on June 21.

For many, this will come as a surprise given the organisation's importance and the scope of its activities so far. In the short time since the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain was launched in June 2007, it has achieved much with volunteers alone. Some of the highlights are:

- We currently have 120 members and 90 supporters. Given that membership in our organisation comes with certain risks, these numbers represent many more that are unable or unwilling to renounce religion and Islam publicly. Moreover, there are thousands of members across the world and councils have been formed in a number of countries.
- Our website has 7-8,000 unique visitors a month and up to 298,729 hits per month; our forum has over 300 members and is a crucial place for people to debate, share information and talk about issues and problems.
- We have provided referrals and assistance to tens of ex-Muslims in need of refuge and in fear for their safety and lives.
- We have organised a successful launch in the Houses of Parliament in June 2007, which was covered in all the major newspapers. So far, over 45,000 people have seen [the launch on You Tube](#). We also organised a conference in March 2008 on the topic of "Sexual apartheid, political Islam and women's rights" and are organising a one year anniversary celebration in central London on 5th July 2008 and an International Conference entitled Challenging Islam and Political Islam on October 10, 2008.
- Our spokesperson, Maryam Namazie, has written articles and been quoted in the media and appeared on a number of television programmes. In March 2008, Times published an article on Maryam entitled: It's time to take a stand against Islam and Sharia, Maryam Namazie, head of the Council of Ex-Muslims in Britain, says that rights are for individuals, not religions or beliefs. Also in February 2008, Elle Quebec selected Maryam as one of the top 45 women of 2007.
- Maryam has also spoken at numerous events and conferences including to Humanist MPs at the Houses of Parliament, the European Parliamentary Working Group on Separation of Religion from Politics, and at the World Humanist Congress in Washington, DC in early June.
- 26 MPs supported an Early Day Motion in support of the CEMB's launch...

Clearly, though, we cannot continue like this for much longer - as a solely volunteer-run organisation without office space or any substantial resources. This untenable situation has to change - and soon - if the CEMB is going to give those who leave Islam the full support they need, challenge political Islam, defend humanist, secularist and progressive values from the perspective of those who have suffered and lived under Islam, and change society for the better.

It can with the support of like-minded people. With your donation - however small or for that matter large - we can begin to further professionalise the organisation and carry out life-saving and crucial work, such as:

- Provide support to atheist free-thinking ex-Muslims by breaking the taboo that comes with renouncing Islam and religion but also to provide access to services, resources and information for those who fear for their lives.
- Document and highlight the status of ex-Muslims.
- Respond and challenge the political Islamic movement.
Campaign against the political Islamic movement, sharia law and in defence of rights, free expression, and secularism.
- Create a regular publication and annual report to inform members, supporters, media and the public about activities, campaigns and positions.
- Work closely with kindred organisations and others on issues of mutual concern.
- Facilitate the establishment of Councils of Ex-Muslims internationally. Right now we have already had requests from the USA, Canada, Australia, and other European countries but have been unable to meet the demand for assistance and support and more...

In this day and age, political Islam is one of the greatest threats to civilised humanity. Challenging this movement and supporting those on the frontlines risking their lives to stand up to this reaction is a task for 21st century humanity. If you can, please donate. You can:

- Send a cheque made payable to the CEMB and mail to BM Box 1919, London WC1N 3XX, UK.

- [Donate via Worldpay on our website](#) .
- Leave a legacy to our organisation.
- Hold a fundraiser for us either at home amongst your friends or organise larger fundraisers, concerts or socials.
- Mention CEMB in articles and letters to the editor that you write...

You will help decide the success of the CEMB and its place in progressive history. Thank you.

Maryam Namazie, Spokesperson

P.S. For more information or an update on our activities visit our website: www.ex-muslim.org.uk.

Tags: [Ex-Muslims](#), [Council+of+ex-Muslims](#), [Maryam+Namazie](#)

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Our latest newsletter contains articles on depleted uranium, getting involved with "equality bodies", care of the elderly, and more, plus our full programme of meetings and events.

[Suffolk Humanist & Secularist News, August 2008 \(pdf\)](#)

To open a pdf file, you need the free [Adobe Acrobat Reader](#).

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A city council has blocked its staff from looking at websites about atheism. Lawyers at the National Secular Society said the move by Birmingham City Council was "discriminatory" and they would consider legal action. The rules also ban sites that promote witchcraft, the paranormal, sexual deviancy and criminal activity.

[BBC NEWS | England | West Midlands | Council ban on atheist websites](#) .

Tags: [BBC](#), [Birmingham+City+Council](#), [Atheism](#), [Discrimination](#)

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TV to look out for; Richard Dawkins on Charles Darwin, Monday 4 August, 8pm, Channel 4.

As we approach the 150th anniversary of the publication of Charles Darwin's masterpiece, *On The Origin Of Species*, ethologist and writer Richard Dawkins presents the ultimate guide to Darwin and his revolutionary theory of evolution by natural selection. Dawkins considers this to be the most important idea to have ever occurred to a human mind.

In this powerful three-part polemical series, Dawkins explains who Charles Darwin (pictured) was, how he developed his theory, what it is, and why it matters. He reveals how Darwin changed forever the way we see ourselves, the world and our place in it, and hopes to convince us that "evolution is a fact, backed by undeniable evidence".

According to recent polls, four out of ten British people still believe in God as the creator of the universe and everything in it. As a scientist, and Britain's best-known atheist, Dawkins believes that such people simply don't know enough about the evidence for Darwin's entirely natural explanation of life on Earth - evolution.

[The Genius of Charles Darwin showing on Channel 4 : DigiGuide Forums](#) .

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

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Darwin's theory of evolution was simple, beautiful, majestic and awe-inspiring. But because it contradicts the allegorical babblings of a bunch of made-up old books, it's been under attack since day one. That's just tough luck for Darwin. If the Bible had contained a passage that claimed gravity is caused by God pulling objects toward the ground with magic invisible threads, we'd still be debating Newton with idiots too.

[Charlie Brooker's screen burn | Culture | The Guardian](#) .

"[The Genius of Charles Darwin](#)" is on Channel 4 on Monday 4 August at 8pm.

Tags: [Charlie+Brooker](#), [The+Guardian](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#)

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Have you explored them? Want to know about [secularism](#)? Or [why the Creationists are wrong](#)? Or [which page has been read the most times](#)? Wondering what to do about [Xmas](#)? If you have any suggestions about content, [please let us know](#), but before you do, check that it's not already there – use the search box at the top of the page on the right.

Registered users of this website can contribute stories and articles. [Send them as emails](#), and if they conform to [our terms and conditions](#), they'll be published in your name.

Tags: [website](#), [search](#), [invitation](#)

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[Libby Purvis writes in the Times Online](#) that Prof. Dawkins is "bitchy" (wrong gender, surely?), and sarcastically refers to a "coming-out party" for American atheists as "a blast" – it's not a blast for those American atheists who are shunned by their religious relatives and neighbours. She also writes,

I am indebted to Matthew Parris who has contributed to a British Humanists campaign to put an ad on a bus saying "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and get on with your life".



Sorry Libby, you got that wrong too. It's not a [BHA](#) campaign, but was [launched by blogger Jon Worth, who invited atheists to pledge a fiver via Pledgebank](#). I heard he didn't get enough pledges.

Tags: [Libby+Purvis](#), [Times+Online](#), [Atheists](#)

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Aug 2008
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Communities Secretary Hazel Blears today set out how Government envisages working in future alongside the many faith based organisations already making a real difference to their communities.

[The Framework for Partnership published today \[21 July 2008\]](#) outlines new support and £7.5m worth of investment to encourage and enable greater local activity bringing people from different religions and beliefs together. It also reaffirms government support for the valuable work faith groups contribute to delivering services, responding to some of the toughest challenges that society faces.

[The National Secular Society](#)'s position (and ours) is:

Public services that are intended for the whole community should be secular. The trend towards handing them over to religious control must be stopped, and the NSS is working to ensure that "faith based welfare" does not impose religious conditions on service provision. We do not want the "soup for prayers" situation that has arisen in the USA to become the norm here, where public services have traditionally been provided by secular local authorities and other public bodies that served all without favour.

After the last budget, the NSS reported:

The Government's plans to hand over large tracts of welfare provision to the "third sector" (voluntary and charitable groups) means that religious groups will increasingly be funded by taxpayers' money. In Wednesday's budget, Gordon Brown confirmed that the Government will establish the largest-ever consultation with charitable organisations, and it will be for this purpose.

[Read more from the NSS](#)

Tags: [NSS](#), [Hazel+Blears](#), [Faith-based+welfare](#), [Government](#)

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Aug 2008
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From Rosie Millard in The Times...

Dawkins is about to chew up religion again now, in a television series about his hero, Charles Darwin, which holds up to ridicule those who refuse to accept the theory of evolution. Astounding though it may seem, 150 years after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, there are many people who don't believe its findings, he says.

Some of these are evangelicals in far-off countries who think that God created everything in six days and that rainy days began with Noah's Flood. Others, however, are a bit closer to home. British secondary-school science teachers, for example.

[Review interview: Richard Dawkins - Times Online](#).

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Science+teachers](#), [Faith+schools](#), [The+Times+Online](#)

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Aug 2008
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All through Sunday night Anglican bishops were leaving their student rooms on the campus of the University of Kent and getting into mini-buses and taxis for the airport, and journeys to most of the 160 countries they represent.

After almost three weeks in Canterbury what would they have to tell their scattered flocks about the state of the fractured Anglican Communion? Did they succeed in bringing it back from the brink of schism?

[BBC NEWS | UK | Lambeth diary: Anglicans in turmoil](#).

Tags: [C+of+E](#), [lambeth+conference](#), [Church+of+England](#)

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Aug 2008
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For centuries, mankind knew all there was to know about the shape of the Earth. It was a flat planet, shaped roughly like a circle, with lots of pointy things hanging down from the underside. On the comparatively smooth topside, Europe sat in the middle of the circle, with the other continents scattered about the fringes, and parts of Africa hanging over the edge. The oceans lapped against the sides of the Earth, and in places ran over, creating currents that would pull over the edge ships that ventured too far out to sea. The space beyond the edge of the world was a dark realm inhabited by all sorts of unholy beasts. Fire and brimstone billowed up from the very depths of hell itself and curled 'round the cliffs whose infinite length jutted straight down to the darkest depths.

[The Flat Earth Society -- Home](#).

There's a disclaimer at the foot of this website's home page, as follows:

The Flat Earth Society is not in any way responsible for the failure of the French to repel the Germans at the Maginot Line during WWII. Nor is the Flat Earth Society responsible for the recent yeti sightings outside the Vatican, or for the unfortunate enslavement of the Nabisco Inc. factory employees by a rogue hamster insurrectionist group. Furthermore, we are not responsible for the loss of one or more of the following, which may possibly occur as the result of exposing one's self to the dogmatic and dangerously subversive statements made within: life, limb, vision, Francois Mitterand, hearing, taste, smell, touch, thumb, Aunt Mildred, citizenship, spleen, bedrock, cloves, I Love Lucy reruns, toaster, pine derby racer, toy duck, antelope, horseradish, prosthetic ankle, double-cheeseburger, tin foil, limestone, watermelon-scented air freshner, sanity, paprika, German to Pig Latin dictionary, dish towel, pet Chihuahua, pogo stick, Golf Digest subscription, floor tile, upper torso or halibut.

Do you think they'd make Humanist [Terry Pratchett](#) an honorary member?

Tags: [Flat+earth](#), [Absurdity](#)

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Aug 2008
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The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain presents its first international conference: **Political Islam, Sharia Law, And Civil Society**



Friday 10 October 2008 - International day against the Death Penalty – 10am-6pm (Registration begins at 9am)

Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL (Closest station: Holborn)

Speakers:

Mina Ahadi, Mahin Alipour, Roy Brown, Andrew Copson, Richard Dawkins, Giles Enders, AC Grayling, Johann Hari, Ehsan Jami, Houzan Mahmoud, Rony Miah, Maryam Namazie, Taslima Nasreen, Fariborz Pooya, Terry Sanderson, Joan Smith, Bahram Soroush, Hanne Stinson, Hamid Taqvaei, Ibn Warraq, Keith Porteous Wood, Zia Zaffar

Event includes a comedy act by Nick Doody, Fitna Remade by Reza Moradi and Breaking the Taboo by Patty Debonitas.

£40 statutory organisations/businesses; £20 voluntary sector; £10 individuals. Donations are welcome.

For a booking form, please contact: Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, BM Box 1919, London WC1N 3XX, UK. Tel: 07719166731, E-mail: exmuslimcouncil@gmail.com or [download it from the Council of Ex-Muslims site](#).

Tags: [Council+of+Ex-Muslims](#), [Conference](#)

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Aug 2008
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Last week, Mr Justice Silber ruled that Aberdare Girls' School in South Wales had been guilty of racial discrimination when it excluded Sarika Watkins-Singh for insisting on wearing a religious bracelet. It was a trivial case, which made you wonder about the dogmatism of both sides and the quality of their lawyers. The school could have given way - the bracelet was little more than a slim band. Watkins-Singh's parents could have accepted that they had a duty to uphold the authority of the teachers. Still, for all the pettiness, Mr Justice Silber's judgment was remarkable for his inability to recognise that a just society should treat people equally. He didn't rule that all the girls at Aberdare had the right to wear bracelets, just Watkins-Singh, because she was its only Sikh pupil.



[Nick Cohen: A cast-iron case for a secular society | Comment is free | The Observer](#).

Tags: [Nick+Cohen](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [The+Guardian](#), [Discrimination](#)

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Aug 2008
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The Saudi religious police have reportedly vowed to strictly enforce a ban on the sale of pet cats and dogs in Riyadh and walking animals in public.

A senior official said it was to stop a rising trend of people trying to evade strict rules on sex segregation.

The claim is that men were using their pets as an excuse to meet women, which is banned in places like restaurants and cafes between non-married people.

[BBC NEWS | World | Middle East | Saudi police to enforce pet curbs](#).

Tags: [Pets](#), [Saudi+Arabia](#), [Sex+segregation](#)

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Aug 2008
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[Ariane Sherine writes in Comment is Free](#):

In June, I blogged for Cif about the rather unsettling religious adverts which were running on London buses. These ads featured a link to a website warning that non-Christians would "spend all eternity in torment in hell" if they failed to recognise Jesus Christ other than at the height of passion. A solution, I suggested, was for 4,680 atheists to spread reassurance by each giving £5 towards a bus ad saying: "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and get on with your life."



[Jon Worth started an unsuccessful appeal to raise the money on Pledgebank](#), but now they're talking about having another go.

Tags: [Buses](#), [Pledgebank](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [Ariane+Sherine](#)

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Aug 2008
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Iran has suspended the punishment of death by stoning, state media say.

A judiciary spokesman said four people sentenced to die by stoning had had their sentences commuted and that all other cases had been put under review.

[BBC NEWS | World | Middle East | Iranians suspend death by stoning](#).

Tags: [Stoning](#), [Iran](#), [Execution](#)

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Aug 2008
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From [P Z Myers' blog](#):

... there is no one absolute make-or-break piece of evidence for evolution — evolution is a conclusion from the totality of the evidence. There are thousands of [cases that demonstrate that the principles of evolution work and are useful for understanding the natural world](#); there are no cases where creationism has improved our understanding.

Tags: [P+Z+Myers](#), [Pharyngula](#), [Evolution](#)

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Aug 2008
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Do you believe a religious leader who fights to save Section 28 and says gay people spread disease is a fulminating bigot? Do you believe a "leading cleric" who advocates stoning gay people to death should be denounced? Do you believe sharia law – which requires gay people to be lashed or stoned – is always and forever unacceptable? Then, according to an energetic and aggressive group of white straight boys who surreally consider themselves to be on the left, you are an "Islamophobe" and "objectively pro-Nazi".

[Read more here](#)

[Islamophobia Watch – read it and judge for yourself](#)

Tags: [Extremism](#), [Islamophobia](#), [Islamophobia+Watch](#), [Johann+Hari](#), [Peter+Tatchell](#)

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Aug 2008
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[The Artic meltdown is speeding up](#), satellite images show. Do something now, for our children's sake, says Thomas Friedman:

Most people assume that the effects of climate change are going to be felt through another big disaster, like Hurricane Katrina. Not necessarily, says Minik Thorleif Rosing, a top geologist at Denmark's National History Museum and one of my travelling companions. 'Most people will actually feel climate change delivered to them by the postman,' he explains. It will come in the form of higher water bills, because of increased droughts in some areas; higher energy bills, because the use of fossil fuels becomes prohibitive; and higher insurance and mortgage rates, because of much more violently unpredictable weather. Remember: climate change means 'global weirding' not just global warming.



[Commentary: Global warming has its own language | Environment | The Observer.](#)

Tags: [Environment](#), [Climate+Change](#), [Global+Warming](#), [The+Observer](#)

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Aug 2008
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Each year in Britain around two and a half thousand people are buried alone. No one claims them, and no one attends their funeral. Others have lain dead and undiscovered for weeks, or even years, before they are found and relatives traced.

Driven by a desire to find out more about these lonely individuals from the people who knew and loved them, Lucy Cohen's bittersweet, first film pieces together two peoples' lives, and asks how - in crowded, hectic, connected, modern Britain - it is possible for anyone to simply slip through the cracks and disappear.

[Generation Next - Channel 4.](#)

Tags: [Channel+4](#), [Death](#), [Funerals](#), [Loneliness](#)

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Aug 2008
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You know what organised religion needs? More power and influence. Thank God, then, that Channel 4 are on hand to give it the helping hand it so desperately requires in the form of Make Me A Christian (Sun, 7pm, C4), a spiritual makeover show in which four hardcore Goddites attempt to convert a rag-tag band of sinners into full-blown Jesus freaks in just three weeks.

[Charlie Brooker's screen burn: Make Me A Christian | Culture | The Guardian.](#)

Glad I didn't watch it.

Tags: [Charlie+Brooker](#), [Channel+4](#), [Christians](#)

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Aug 2008
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As part of their community cohesion work, the Government has proposed in its White Paper 'Face to Face and Side by Side: A Framework for Partnership in our Multi Faith Society' to champion the role of 'faith groups' and 'inter faith' work in local social dialogue and action.

We [The British Humanist Association] believe that the paper gives disproportionate support to 'faith groups' and overplays the importance of 'inter faith' work in social cohesion. It fails to recognise work done by organisations which are not based on religion or belief, or by organisations which are based on non-religious beliefs.

[To find out more and join the campaign, click here to go to the BHA Campaign website](#)

Tags: [BHA](#), [Community+cohesion](#), [Campaign](#)

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Aug 2008
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This is just from the 'A' section – go to [the Butterflies and Wheels website](#) for more.

Acceptance

Nice, warm, cooperative way of evaluating ideas, much better than argument.

Accuracy

Exploded concept. Foolish, Platonic notion that we can get our facts straight.

Alphabet

The opposite of the Goddess. "But one pernicious effect of literacy has gone largely unnoticed: writing subliminally fosters a patriarchal outlook. Writing of any kind, but especially its alphabetic form, diminishes feminine values and with them, women's power in the culture." [Leonard Shlain, *The Goddess and the Alphabet*]

Alternative

A wonderful thing. Because it's the opposite of everything. You have the regular, normal, boring thing, like medicine, or scholarship, or education, and then you have the alternative kind, which does whatever the opposite is. Normal medicine relies on testing, so dear alternative medicine relies on guesswork and hunches and an inner voice. So much more spiritual.

Argument

Unpleasant, testosterone-driven method of supporting one's assertions, to be avoided in favour of acceptance.

Aristotle

A famous thief. Stole all his ideas from the library at Alexandria, built after his death, which just goes to show how sneaky he was.

Armchair

All-purpose adjective meaning: lazy, unhealthy, indoor, cowardly ("armchair general"), bookish, abstract, arbitrary, invented, and different from what I think, as in "armchair philosopher," "armchair anthropologist," etc.

Assertion

1. Essential technique, replacing the need for argument and evidence.
2. To be greeted with acceptance, rather than argument.

Assumption

Something to be examined when it is our opponent's and taken for granted when it is our own.

The Dictionary of Fashionable Nonsense: A Guide for Edgy People (Hardcover) by [Ophelia Benson](#) (Author), [Jeremy Stangroom](#) (Author) is available now. Order it using our Amazon link and you'll earn us some commission.

Tags: [dictionary](#), [humour](#), [Amazon](#)

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Aug 2008
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Tags: [YouTube](#), [Sam+Harris](#), [Conversation](#)

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Aug 2008
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"We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to reprimand MP Iris Robinson on her recent comments about Homosexuality."

Details of Petition:

"MP for Strangford has recently suggested that all homosexuals should receive psychiatric treatment to help 'cure' them. These comments are not fitting of a MLA let alone an MP. They show narrow minded views and the belief that in Northern Ireland that bigotry is acceptable."

[Number10.gov.uk » Robinson-Gay - petition response.](#)

Their response won't make any difference to that [bigotted and prejudiced old bat, Mrs Robinson](#). She's clearly not worried about attracting the gay vote.

Tags: [Iris+Robinson](#), [Homophobia](#), [Strangford](#), [MP](#)



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Aug 2008
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Battered by rising petrol prices and despairing of the ability of politicians to ease their pain, Americans are turning to the one figure they think can help - God.

Campaigners are holding religious vigils at petrol stations throughout the US, harnessing the power of prayer to ask a higher power for lower pump prices.

[Prayer at the pump for lower petrol prices - Telegraph.](#)

Tags: [Prayer](#), [US](#), [America](#), [Petrol+pumps](#)

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Aug 2008
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NASA has a gallery of amazing images – sign up for their "[image of the day](#)".

Click on the image to see more.

Tags: [NASA](#), [Space](#), [Astronomy](#)



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Aug 2008
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These proverbs from Slovakia show the other side of "family values". This is the name of a whole system of control which can prevent a woman from leaving an abusive marriage and further cement her in place by burdening her with unplanned children. The control imposed by the Vatican disproportionately affects women. That's because the hierarchy of obedience which goes from the pope to the parish priest doesn't stop there: it continues on, from the head of the household down to his wife.

Women must be kept at home and bearing children for the Church. Ordaining them as priests would give them dangerous authority. On 29 May 2008 the Vatican issued a decree "Regarding the crime of attempting sacred ordination of a woman". This is such a grave offence that it incurs automatic excommunication, on a par with heresy, schism, and laying violent hands on the Pope.

[Concordat Watch - Women need secularism.](#)

Tags: [Concordat+Watch](#), [Muriel+Fraser](#), [Sexism](#), [Woman](#), [Church](#)



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Aug 2008
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Tags: [ABBA](#), [Atheism](#), [You+Tube](#)

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Aug 2008
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SUFFOLK'S new university is successfully stemming the brain drain of talent from the county - with nearly 5,000 students set to study there from September. Many of those signed up on courses for the next academic year are from Suffolk, as well as Norfolk and Essex, and student numbers have grown by an estimated 500 since it opened last year. Education chiefs and business leaders had previously voiced concerns at figures which showed that many young people left the county for higher education and never returned. This, they feared, was draining Suffolk of some of its most talented and skilled young people.

[EADT - University is stemming the 'brain drain'](#) .

I'm not sure if we'll be at the Freshers' Fair this year – we've had one volunteer to man a stall – but hope that the increase in numbers may eventually result in [a student secular society](#), which we'd be happy to support.

Tags: [University](#), [UCS](#), [University+Campus+Suffolk](#), [East+Anglian+Daily+Times](#)

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Aug 2008
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First of all, let me tell you what this isn't. It's not some "I-was-lost-and-now-I'm-found" sob story. These days, many people reach out to faith "to find peace". I had too much peace in my life already. In faith, I was looking to be troubled – on behalf of other people. Every film and pop starlet, trawling after a reason to exist, says, "I'm not religious – but I am spiritual". I don't have a spiritual bone in my body; but what I am, is religious. I believe, literally, in the God of the Old Testament, whom I understand as the Lord of the Jews and the Protestants. I'm a Christian Zionist, as well as a Christian feminist and a Christian socialist. But over the past two decades, almost without me knowing it, the Christian part has become the most important.



[Julie Burchill: I'm a teen atheist turned Christian tryer | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#)

Read about [Julie in Spike magazine](#) – I always thought she was bonkers.

Tags: [Julie+Birchill](#), [Christianity](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Aug 2008
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We get some strange spam here at S H & S HQ. Mostly it's the usual – porn, viagra, Nigerians with millions ready to transfer into our bank account, and wristwatches – but once in a while there's something more unusual. The latest offers us free tickets...

We are looking for good quality partners in a range of relevant sectors including entertainment, travel, theme parks, events, sports and other advisory and guide sites.

Good quality? We think so. Partners? No thanks.

How did they find us? Through a search engine. Must've been [this page](#) that did it. However, [if you want a really interesting theme park experience, go to Orlando Florida](#). It might put you off your ice cream though.

Tags: [Spam](#), [Tickets](#), [Theme+Parks](#)

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Aug 2008
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Billed as the first joint appearance by both presidential hopefuls, it was tightly controlled to avoid clashes. John McCain and Barack Obama hug each other. This was not a debate. It was a "civil forum" organised by Saddleback Church, a huge and hugely influential ministry run by Pastor Rick Warren, a multi-million selling author. He arrived on stage with smiles and to great applause. He joked with the crowd, fully aware of the banks of cameras lined along the back wall, the two tents full of journalists watching on screens outside and the millions of people watching live on TV.

[BBC NEWS | World | Americas | US rivals shine at church forum .](#)

Tags: [US+election](#), [John+McCain](#), [Barak+Obama](#), [Christians](#), [America](#)

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Aug 2008
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Stretches of Britain's coastline are doomed and plans will soon have to be drawn up to evacuate people from the most threatened areas, the new head of the Environment Agency warns today [18/8/08].

In his first interview since taking office, Lord Smith of Finsbury says Britain faces hard choices over which areas of our coast to defend and which to allow the sea to reclaim. He said detailed work was already far advanced on identifying areas of the east and south coasts which were most vulnerable to erosion, and called on ministers to give emergency help to families whose homes will be lost.

In a wide-ranging interview, Lord Smith, a former cabinet minister, also warns that the Government is not taking the environment seriously in a series of key projects.

[Stark warning on Britain's shrinking coast - Home News, UK - The Independent .](#)

[Read about the disappearing East Anglian coastline .](#)

Tags: [The+Independent](#), [Coastline](#), [East+Anglia](#)

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Aug 2008
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Julie Coombes teaches locally. She'll talk about her experience of RE in the primary school. There's a group member on Suffolk's [SACRE](#) who helped devise the new RE syllabus (including Humanism and secular world views) that was introduced in 2007, so we'll be especially interested in what Julie has to tell us. We'll be in The Hall at Castle Hill Community Centre, Highfield Road, Ipswich - through the front door, turn left, then right. If the front door is shut, press the buzzer to be admitted. To offer or request a lift, email us.

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Aug 2008
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Tags: [Pope](#), [Sci-fi](#), [You+Tube](#)

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Aug 2008
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She was an outspoken agnostic, with a leaning towards atheism, but she believed as strongly as I do that our traditional

rites of passage are important, if only for the survivors. So, having scarcely ever darkened the doors of our parish church, three minutes from our house, she is now buried in its churchyard.

[I'm not religious, but there's something about funerals | Minette Marrin - Times Online](#) .

[Someone else](#) who seems confused about whether or not she's religious?

The constraints of tradition are important. A woman friend recently buried her long-term companion in a simple wicker basket in a West Country wood and that doesn't seem very final, somehow.

What's not final about it?

This is like all those people who never go to church, except for weddings and christenings.

Tags: [Ceremonies](#), [Funerals](#), [Confusion](#)

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Aug 2008
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[FaithNetEast](#) is an information and learning hub for faith communities in the East of England region. Funded by the [Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund](#) in the Home Office, it is hosted by [the East of England Faiths Council](#) (EEFC) and is an initiative run in partnership with Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge.

Its purpose is to bring together people and organisations from all faiths in the region in a network for sharing information, learning from one another, developing skills and activities and working together.

The primary tool for this is the 'Faiths Base', a database of thousands of faith communities across the region which can be searched from this website. It has been compiled and is maintained by Anglia Ruskin University with funding from the Regional Equalities Forum through the Change Up initiative. It contains contact details and summary information about activities (where available). Faiths Base can be searched by location, by organisation or by faith tradition.

The East of England Faiths Council...

... has been formed to facilitate the faiths of the region in making input to regional strategy and issues, and to act as a contact point for regional governance and other public bodies. It is the nominating body for the faiths representative on [the East of England Regional Assembly](#).

A "faiths representative"? [Presumably, s/he comes under the "culture" heading](#) ?

The money for the "capacity building fund" comes from the public purse. There's no equivalent 'Non-faith communities Capacity Building Fund', which makes it blatantly discriminatory.

The Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund is being used to support a variety of religious organisations across the UK. For example; last month, the Government was asked, "Which Muslim organisations have received funding from the Faith Communities Capacity Building Fund since January 2006?" The answer was [a long list](#). It would take some time to discover what the money was used for, and what activities these organisations offer.

If this sort of thing makes you angry, why not [join us](#) and one or both of the national organisations that campaign against privileges for faith communities?

[The British Humanist Association](#)

[The National Secular Society](#)

Tags: [East+of+England+Faiths+Council](#), [East+Anglia](#), [Religious+privilege](#)

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Aug 2008
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[The August edition is available for download from the International Humanist & Ethical Union website as a PDF](#) . There are articles on The World Congress, Humanism in Europe, Julius Nyerere's secular legacy in Tanzania, and Non-Believers in the Pope's Backyard.

It's a special double issue, 3MB in size, so it may take a while to download. Alternatively, you could [join the IHEU](#) and get a copy through the post.

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

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Aug 2008
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When Labour cabinet members were asked about their religious allegiances last December, following Tony Blair's official conversion to Roman Catholicism, it turned out that more than half of them are not believers. The least equivocal about their atheism were the health secretary, Alan Johnson, and foreign secretary David Miliband.



The fact that Miliband is an atheist is a matter of special interest given the likelihood that he may one day, and perhaps soon, occupy No 10. In our present uncomfortable climate of quarrels between pushy religionists and resisting secularists - or attack-dog secularists and defensive religionists: which side you are on determines how you see it - there are many reasons why it would be a great advantage to everyone to have an atheist prime minister.

[AC Grayling: The rise of Miliband brings at last the prospect of an atheist prime minister | Comment is free | The Guardian](#) .

Maybe...

Tags: [A+C+Grayling](#), [Atheism](#), [David+Miliband](#), [Comment+is+Free](#)

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Aug 2008
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... it's a waste of time responding to creationist claptrap like this letter from Mr George Gardner. He wrote to the local paper in reply to a letter I'd written about something or other related to religion, and when the paper closed the correspondence, he wrote to me. I threw that letter away after I'd replied to it, hoping I wouldn't hear from Mr G again. A vain hope. He'd told me that he's in his eighties, and that he "comes alive" when debating issues like this. Good for him. Now I'm therapy for geriatrics, but it still doesn't endear me to the old fool.

[Click here for more on The Answer's 42](#)

Tags: [Blog](#), [Creationist](#), [Letter](#)

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Aug 2008
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Christianity is and always has been antithetical to women's freedom and equality, but it's certainly not alone in this. Whether it's one of the world's major faiths or an off-the-wall cult, religion means one thing and one thing only for those women unfortunate enough to get caught up in it: oppression. It's the patriarchy made manifest, male-dominated, set up by men to protect and perpetuate their power.



[Cath Elliott: Julie Burchill is wrong: religion is anti-feminist | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#) .

Tags: [Feminism](#), [Cath+Elliott](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Aug 2008
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As the Channel 4 series The Genius of Charles Darwin drew to an end on Monday, the usual chorus of insults reined down on the head of its star, Richard Dawkins. Despite the fact that Dawkins went out of his way to avoid bad-tempered arguments or overt proselytising on atheism, his critics saw only what they wanted to see - and often that was not what appeared on the screen.

[National Secular Society - Why Dawkins is right and his critics are wrong](#) .

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

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Aug 2008
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Primary school children should have compulsory sex education lessons, MPs said today [26/8/08]. A cross-party group of MPs is calling on the government to make advice on sexual health and relationships mandatory in all schools. The group, led by Chris Bryant, a parliamentary aide to Harriet Harman, the Labour deputy leader, says that giving children more information would help reduce teenage pregnancy rates, abortion and sexually transmitted diseases.

[Teach primary school pupils about sex, say MPs | Education | guardian.co.uk](#) .

There'll be a predictable outcry from some, mainly religious, quarters, but if children learn about sex and relationships in stages from an early age, they're less likely to get into trouble. Ignorance doesn't protect them.

[Read the letter in the Telegraph](#)

[Read more about teenage pregnancy](#)

[The BHA has welcomed the MPs appeal](#)

Tags: [Sex](#), [Sex+education](#), [The+Telegraph](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Aug 2008
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A Muslim has been found guilty of child cruelty after forcing two boys to beat themselves during a religious ceremony. The practice has caused controversy in Britain, but this is the first case of its kind to be brought before a UK court.

[BBC NEWS | UK | How a Shia ritual ended in court.](#)

Tags: [Shia+Muslims](#), [Child+abuse](#), [BBC+News](#)

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Aug 2008
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The Church is cock-a-hoop over the news that there has been a "4.7% increase in the number of students taking Religious Education GCSEs". The Church of England's Head of School Improvement, Nick McKemey, believes the rise is a sign that students "appreciate the important role that religion plays in modern society". "This further increase is evidence that more and more young people are fascinated by what they and others believe, and that they can see that the world is more fully understood by seeing past the various secularist claims that religion is mad, bad or extinct," he said. "Overall this year's GCSE results strongly suggest that schools – particularly church schools – that work hard to raise the attainment of pupils of all abilities and backgrounds are achieving the greatest success at GCSE."

[National Secular Society - The truth behind the upsurge in GCSEs in Religious Studies .](#)

The assumption made by Mr McKemey and others in the church is that studying religion, or learning *about* religion, makes you more likely to be religious. If you follow that sort of reasoning, you might assume that studying maths is more likely to make you a maths specialist, or that studying French will make you a linguist. Not so. The courses include other religions besides Christianity and should include Humanism and secular world views. Why assume that young people will be more interested in Christianity than other religions? This is just wishful thinking.

In my experience, few young people in secondary schools describe themselves as religious – various research studies have confirmed this. Teaching young people about religion seems to have the effect of making them more skeptical when it's taught impartially, as it should be. It's not a teacher's job to convert anyone.

Tags: [RE](#), [GCSEs](#), [C+of+E](#), [Church](#), [NSS](#)

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Aug 2008
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The Rt Rev. Patrick O'Donoghue, the Bishop of Lancaster, claimed casual recourse to abortion had cheapened the value of human life in the eyes of the public over the last four decades. He said he was convinced that the 1967 Abortion Act was a major cause of widespread violence among young people.

[Bishop Patrick Donoghue says abortion is to blame for violent Britain - Telegraph .](#)

What a crackpot!

Tags: [Catholic](#), [Bishop+O'Donoghue](#), [Abortion](#)

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Aug 2008
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A baby died after his parents denied him conventional medical treatment. Just one example of "a lack of critical thinking", according to the website [What's the harm?](#)

[An inquest in London on Tuesday recorded a verdict of death by natural causes on six-month-old Cameron](#), who died of a treatable disease after his parents refused to allow him to be given conventional medicine. Increasingly, with the rise in popularity of complementary medicine these situations are going to arise. The coroner expressed concern at the baby's treatment by the parents - one of whom was a homeopathic practitioner.

If you kill yourself through your own stupidity, maybe the world's better off without you, but when you kill someone else, shouldn't that be manslaughter?

Tags: [Stupidity](#), [What's+the+harm?](#), [Critical+thinking](#)

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Aug 2008
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[Accord](#) is a new coalition calling for inclusive schools and an end to special arrangements for state funded religious schools. Its members include the [ATL](#), the [BHA](#) and [Ekklesia](#). Its supporters include Baroness Blackstone, Prof. Bernard Crick, Rabbi David Goldberg and Prof. A C Grayling.

Accord is a wide coalition of organisations which includes religious groups, humanists, trade unions and human rights campaigners. The campaign launched on 1 September 2008 and aims to promote inclusive schools through local and national campaigns.

For us, campaigning means:

1. Working with allies in parliament to oppose legislation which gives religious schools special exemption from human rights legislation.
2. Speaking to the media to ensure that the voices of those who wish for a non-polarised, forward-looking and community-concerned debate on faith schools get a fair hearing.
3. Working with our supporters across the country to resist the expansion of state-funded religious schools which operate restrictive and discriminatory admissions and employment practices.
4. Using the courts, where necessary, to challenge discrimination in schools.
5. Working to recruit more members and more supporters to make the campaign for reform impossible to ignore.

Tags: [Accord](#), [Inclusive+schools](#), [Faith+schools](#), [ATL](#), [Ekklesia](#)

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Aug 2008
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Republican vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin wants creationism taught in science classes. In a 2006 gubernatorial debate, the soon-to-be governor of Alaska said of evolution and creation education, "Teach both. You know, don't be afraid of education. Healthy debate is so important, and it's so valuable in our schools. I am a proponent of teaching both."

[McCain's VP Wants Creationism Taught in School | Wired Science from Wired.com](#) .

Tags: [America](#), [US+Election](#), [Sarah+Palin](#)

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Aug 2008
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SO CARDINAL Sean Brady still expects us to believe that the Catholic Church has no desire to interfere in the political process. The Church's often-repeated mantra to that effect is about as objective and accurate as the mendacious and misleading statement that secularism is hostile to religion. It can be argued that secularism and relativism, the Cardinal told the Humbert School last Sunday, "enjoy an uncritical acceptance which would never be accorded religious faith".

[Secularists have a right to maintain their ethos - Analysis, Opinion - Independent.ie](#) .

Tags: [Catholicism](#), [Cardinal+Sean+Brady](#)

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Sep 2008
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Three teenage girls have been buried alive by their tribe in a remote part of Pakistan to punish them for attempting to choose their own husbands, in an "honour" killing case. After news of the deaths emerged, male politicians from their province, Baluchistan, defended the killings in parliament, claiming the practice was part of "our tribal custom". The girls, thought to have been aged between 16 and 18, were kidnapped by a group of men from their Umrani tribe. They were driven to a rural area and then injured by being shot. Then, while still alive, they were dragged bleeding to a pit, where they were covered with earth and stones, according to the findings of Human Rights Watch, the international campaigning group. Officials, speaking off the record, confirmed the killings.

[Pakistan: Three teenage girls buried alive in tribal 'honour' killing | World news | The Guardian](#) .

It's "customary" to victimise women in cases involving male "honour".

[Read about "honour" killings in Pakistan on the Amnesty website](#)

Tags: [Honour+killings](#), [Pakistan](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Sep 2008
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Children start their new schools this week for the 12th year under Labour. Who could have predicted that more pupils than ever will be going to religious schools this term, as the churches boasted gleefully? Pews empty but faith schools multiply. There are about 14,000 non-religious schools, and nearly 7,000 faith schools. This year the figure has risen again as new academies open: a third are faith-run - and religions have taken over some community schools. Next year 13 more new faith schools open, mostly Christian with three Muslim. This risks being among the most indelibly damaging of Tony Blair's social legacies, his permanent bequest to his own beliefs.

[Polly Toynbee: Faith schools may be Blair's most damaging legacy | Comment is free | The Guardian](#) .

Polly Toynbee is President of the [British Humanist Association](#)

Tags: [Polly+Toynbee](#), [Faith+schools](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Sep 2008
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Americans have an unhealthy desire to see average people promoted to positions of great authority. No one wants an average neurosurgeon or even an average carpenter, but when it comes time to vest a man or woman with more power and responsibility than any person has held in human history, Americans say they want a regular guy, someone just like themselves. President Bush kept his edge on the "Who would you like to have a beer with?" poll question in 2004, and won reelection.

This is one of the many points at which narcissism becomes indistinguishable from masochism. Let me put it plainly: If you want someone just like you to be president of the United States, or even vice president, you deserve whatever dysfunctional society you get. You deserve to be poor, to see the environment despoiled, to watch your children receive a fourth-rate education and to suffer as this country wages -- and loses -- both necessary and unnecessary wars.

[Palin: average isn't good enough - Los Angeles Times](#) .

[For more about Sarah Palin's religious views, see Richard Dawkins' site](#)

[Go to Sam Harris's site](#)

Would the world be a safer place with McCain & Palin in power? No, it would be a lot scarier.

Tags: [Sarah+Palin](#), [Sam+Harris](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#), [L+A+Times](#), [US+election](#)

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Sep 2008
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A statue by Terence Koh of a tumescent Christ in Gateshead has led to predictable howls of outrage, followed by the now familiar scratchy noise of lines being drawn in the sand. "Enough gratuitous offence to believers!" says one side; "enough kowtowing to religious sensitivities!" say the other.

I suspect a lot of people on both sides actually like a good blasphemy row. It gives both the opportunity to express that most satisfying of moral emotions: righteous indignation. But I'm getting bored of them. Whenever one blows up, there is an unsightly rush to "inviolable principles", when the dull truth, as usual, is that it depends.

[Julian Baggini: Christ reveals limits of free speech | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#) .

Tags: [Free+speech](#), [offence](#), [Julian+Baggini](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Sep 2008
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Radio 4 joins [CERN](#) on 10 September 2008 as scientists attempt to discover more about the origins of the Universe by recreating the aftermath of the Big Bang. The experiment is one of the most complex and significant of modern times - and one that raises a lot of questions!

[BBC - Radio 4 - Big Bang Day](#) .

BTW, no need to panic; [the world will not end, as some silly people seem to think](#) .

Tags: [BBC](#), [Radio+4](#), [Big+Bang](#)

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Sep 2008
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Tags: [Atheism](#), [US](#), [You+Tube](#)

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Sep 2008
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On 8th August 2008 a young Swazi man, Musa Gamedze, was hunted down and executed in broad daylight at his home, in full view of his children. According to eyewitness reports the man who fired the fatal shot was the General Manager of a local private game reserve, Mkhaya, accompanied by three police officers. Musa was shot in the back. He was unarmed and not posing a threat or danger to himself or others. After delivering the fatal shot and believing Musa to be dead, the killers fled the scene. In fact Musa was still alive but due to the serious nature of his injuries he died on the way to hospital.

[Send an email to the Prime Minister of Swaziland.](#)

Tags: [FOE](#), [Friends+of+the+Earth](#), [Swaziland](#), [Murder](#), [Execution](#)

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Sep 2008
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The National Secular Society, together with the International Humanist and Ethical Union, has been working over the past year to try to raise the alarm about the concerted efforts by Islamic groups to write blasphemy laws into international human rights legislation. Our efforts seem to be paying off, as other countries and organisations begin to appreciate the profound dangers to free speech posed by proposals from the 57-member [Organisation of Islamic Conference \(OIC\)](#).

[National Secular Society - Attempts to shut down criticism of Islam are still on the table at the UN .](#)

Tags: [UN](#), [Blasphemy](#), [NSS](#), [OIC](#), [Islamists](#), [Islam](#)

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Sep 2008
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Following the leaking of the now infamous [Tom Cruise video](#) earlier this year, the internet saw the emergence of [Anonymous](#), a protest movement dedicated to bringing down the Church of Scientology. On 10 February Anonymous burst from the internet onto the streets, with large numbers of masked teenagers and students picketing Scientology centres worldwide.

They've been doing it every month since, and New Humanist's Paul Sims and stand-up comedian Christina Martin paid a visit to one of their London protests to see what Anonymous are all about. They produced a 12-minute podcast – our first ever – looking at whether the group, with their masks and silly music, can really be taken seriously. Are they genuinely concerned about the issues surrounding Scientology, or are they just in it for a laugh?

Podcasting's a brave new venture for the magazine – you can ensure you don't miss out on future installments by subscribing to our RSS podcast feed.

[New Humanist Magazine \(Rationalist Association\).](#)

To hear the podcast you need an audio player. [Download the free Quicktime player here.](#)

Tags: [Protest](#), [Anonymous](#), [New+Humanist](#), [Podcast](#)

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Sep 2008
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The recent debate in the UK about organ donation was surprisingly heated. People complained about a “nanny state” infringing on their post-mortem rights; some threatened to tear up their donor cards if the proposed change to an “opt-out” system went ahead. “Opt-out” means presumed consent, or a legal system in which people no longer have to actively join the organ donor register in order to become donors. Everyone is automatically treated as a potential donor, unless they actively opt out. Supporters of presumed consent propose this system as a means of increasing the number of organs available for transplantation. Opponents say it violates their right to their body after their death. The British government has recently appointed a taskforce to examine the proposed change to a presumed consent system, triggering a public debate about the pros and cons of presumed versus informed consent.

[Read more...](#)

Since we Humanists don't expect an afterlife, so aren't bothered about post-mortem dismemberment – unlike 19th century Christians who feared the [Resurrectionists](#) – maybe more of us might consider [body donation](#)? Medical schools need cadavers. Squeamish people won't donate their bodies but doctors have to learn anatomy. If they'll have it (it's not in good shape), my body's been bequeathed to the nearest University Anatomy Department. Saves my family having to arrange a funeral too.

Tags: [Organ+donation](#), [Body+donation](#), [Medicine](#), [Resurrection](#), [The+Philosophers'+Magazine](#)

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Sep 2008
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I've been tipped off that a nasty atheist has been making trouble locally. My source informs me,

A self-confessed atheist took issue with a Christian neighbour who had placed a metal fish on the rear of her car. He went on to subject her to months of harassment and intimidating behaviour.

The anti-social atheist was in court today.

In anticipation of any “There, you see! Atheists are all nasty people!” stories in the local media, with indignant Christians queuing up to say they told us so, here are a few points you might raise, if necessary:

- An atheist (from the Greek “a” *without* – “theos” *god*) is someone who doesn't believe in a god or gods. That's it. It doesn't mean “bad person” or “good person”. Atheists are no more or less likely to be anti-social than anyone else in the UK, though research done in the US shows that 8–16% of the population there is atheist but only 0.21% of the prison population is atheist.
- There are crazy Christians, mad Muslims, wicked Wiccans, horrible Jews (couldn't think of a “j” to go with Jew, apart from jealous) – you get my drift. It would be crazy to lump everyone together in one category, and say they're all equally good or bad.
- The local atheist clearly has a bee in his bonnet. So do lots of people.

If you'd like to drive any obsessive religious neighbours mad with an atheist fish symbol in the back of your car, you can buy one [here](#).

My sympathies to the Christian with the fish on the back of her car. I've had nasty neighbours too (they were Christians, incidentally).

Postscript: [See the story in the East Anglian Daily Times](#).

Tags: [Anti-social+behaviour](#), [Atheism](#), [Fish](#), [Court+case](#)

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Sep 2008
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Meet like-minded people for lunch in Sproughton. Let us know if you're coming by 20th October, so we can grab a space - you can't book at The Beagle. We'll be discussing whether or not you'd say you're anti-religious.

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Sep 2008
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Creationism and intelligent design should be taught in school science lessons, according to a leading expert in science education. The Rev Prof Michael Reiss, director of education at the Royal Society, said that excluding alternatives to scientific explanations for the origin of life and the universe from science lessons was counterproductive and would alienate some children from science altogether. He said that around one in 10 children comes from a family with creationist beliefs. “My experience after having tried to teach biology for 20 years is if one simply gives the impression that such children are wrong, then they are not likely to learn much about the science,” he said.

[Teachers should tackle creationism, says science education expert | Science | guardian.co.uk](#) .

Tags: [Teaching](#), [Royal+Society](#), [Creationism](#)

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Sep 2008
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Discrimination on the grounds of faith, race, gender, sexual orientation and disability is outlawed under UK and European human rights law. There would be an outcry if any school overtly refused entry to a black child, or turned down an Asian teacher on the grounds of race, yet schools can routinely refuse entry to children on the grounds of their religious adherence, or lack of it, because faith schools are exempt from the equalities legislation. In a recent radio debate on this subject, the Catholic writer Cristina Odone, now championing the cause of faith schools, suggested that this form of discrimination remains vital to allow faith schools to continue their role as protectors of minority groups.

[Fiona Millar: Faith discrimination is a sin | Education | The Guardian](#) .

Tags: [Discrimination](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Fiona+Millar](#), [The+Guardian](#)

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Sep 2008
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Two Nobel prize winners - Sir Harry Kroto and Sir Richard Roberts - have demanded that the Royal Society sack its education director, Professor Michael Reiss. The call, backed by other senior Royal Society fellows, follows Reiss's controversial claim last week that creationism be taught in schools' science classes. Reiss, an ordained Church of England minister, has since alleged he was misquoted. Nevertheless, several Royal Society fellows say his religious views make him an inappropriate choice for the post.

'I warned the president of the Royal Society that his [Reiss] was a dangerous appointment a year ago. I did not realise just how dangerous it would turn out to be,' said Kroto, a Royal Society fellow, and winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize for Chemistry.

[Creationism call divides Royal Society | Science | The Observer](#) .

Tags: [The+Royal+Society](#), [Michael+Reiss](#)

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Sep 2008
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The OCR exam board planned to become the first to include the subject alongside six major religions in its draft GCSE syllabus. But its proposal was rejected by Ofqual, the exams regulator, which ruled that humanism was a "body of belief" and not a religion. The British Humanist Association (BHA) described the decision as a "kick in the teeth" and is seeking a judicial review.

[Legal row over humanism in religious studies at school - Telegraph](#) .

Tags: [Exams](#), [RE](#), [GCSE](#), [OCR+exam+board](#)

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Sep 2008
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With reference to [an earlier post](#); Mr Brown is nothing to do with us and is clearly in need of psychiatric help.

AN ATHEIST subjected a devout Christian woman to a "relentless" campaign of harassment in which he smeared dog faeces on her car and urinated on her doorstep. Timothy Brown, of Edwin Avenue, Woodbridge, may seek medical help after a year-long bid to change Helen Watson's religious beliefs.

[EADT - Atheist's bizarre bid to convert Christian](#) .

Tags: [Court+case](#), [Atheist](#), [Harrassment](#), [EADT](#)

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Sep 2008
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Europe's first state-funded school for Hindus, which receives its spiritual guidance from [the Hare Krishna movement](#), opens today in London amid continued concern about the divisive nature of faith schools. Krishna-Avanti primary school, in the north-west borough of Harrow, home to about a quarter of the UK's Hindu population, is welcoming 30 children to its temporary base at Little Stanmore primary school. The school will gradually increase in size until 2014, when it will have filled places for 236 pupils, including a nursery.

[Faith schools: Europe's first state-funded Hindu school opens in London | Education | The Guardian](#) .

Not all Hindus support state-funding for faith schools. [The Hindu Academy](#) is one of the organisations (with [the BHA](#)) that supports [the Accord Coalition](#), "Working with our supporters across the country to resist the expansion of state-funded religious schools which operate restrictive and discriminatory admissions and employment practices."

Tags: [Hare+Krishna](#), [Hinduism](#), [Faith+schools](#)

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Sep 2008

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The Church of England will concede in a statement that it was over-defensive and over-emotional in dismissing Darwin's ideas. It will call "anti-evolutionary fervour" an "indictment" on the Church". The bold move is certain to dismay sections of the Church that believe in creationism and regard Darwin's views as directly opposed to traditional Christian teaching. The apology, which has been written by the Rev Dr Malcolm Brown, the Church's director of mission and public affairs, says that Christians, in their response to Darwin's theory of natural selection, repeated the mistakes they made in doubting Galileo's astronomy in the 17th century.

[Charles Darwin to receive apology from the Church of England for rejecting evolution - Telegraph](#) .

Tags: [Charles+Darwin](#), [Church+of+England](#), [Telegraph](#)

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Sep 2008

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Biofuels are a false solution to climate change and are doing much more harm than good. The EU is proposing a binding target to increase biofuels use to 10% of road fuels by 2020. This massive increase in Europe's demand for biofuels will have a devastating impact on the world's poorest countries by:

- * Destroying communities.
- * Damaging wildlife.
- * Pushing up food prices.

In recent months, report after report from esteemed organisations like the UN and the Royal Society have warned of the dangers of biofuels expansion.

[Friends of the Earth: Campaigns: Biodiversity: Press for change: Stop the biofuels targets](#) .

Tags: [Climate+change](#), [Biofuels](#), [Friends+of+the+Earth](#)

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Sep 2008

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Sheikh Muhammad Munajid claimed the mouse is "one of Satan's soldiers" and makes everything it touches impure. But he warned that depictions of the creature in cartoons such as Tom and Jerry, and Disney's Mickey Mouse, had taught children that it was in fact loveable. The cleric, a former diplomat at the Saudi embassy in Washington DC, said that under Sharia, both household mice and their cartoon counterparts must be killed

[Mickey Mouse must die, says Saudi Arabian cleric - Telegraph](#) .

Tags: [cartoon](#), [Mickey+Mouse](#), [Sharia](#)

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Sep 2008

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The Reverend Michael Reiss, the Royal Society's Director of Education, is in trouble because of his views on the teaching of creationism. Although I disagree with him, what he actually said at the British Association is not obviously silly like creationism itself, nor is it a self-evidently inappropriate stance for the Royal Society to take. Scientists divide into two camps over this issue: the accommodationists, who 'respect' creationists while disagreeing with them; and the rest of us, who see no reason to respect ignorance or stupidity.

[Letter: Richard Dawkins on the Royal Society row - opinion - 16 September 2008 - New Scientist](#) .

Where do you stand? I'm with Dawkins.

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [New+Scientist](#), [The+Royal+Society](#)

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Sep 2008

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Turkish internet users have been blocked via a court order from accessing the site of prominent British biologist Richard Dawkins after complaints from lawyers for Islamic creationist author Adnan Oktar, the website of Turkish television station NTV reported on Wednesday. A court in Istanbul ordered that Turk Telekom block access to the site and since the weekend Turkish internet users seeking the site have been redirected to a page that says in Turkish 'access to this site has been suspended in accordance with a court decision'. NTV reported that Oktar complained he and his creationist book 'Atlas of Creation' had been defamed by comments made by Dawkins on the site.

[Turkey bans biologist Richard Dawkins' website' by Monsters and Critics - RichardDawkins.net](#) .

Tags: [Richard+Dawkins](#), [Turkey](#), [Adnan+Oktar](#)

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Sep 2008
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On first appearances 12-year-old Caitlin McNabb is very much like any other schoolgirl. Sitting on the sofa with her parents, Wes and Jane, at their home in Greenwich, south-east London, Caitlin talks excitedly about her friends, her favourite subjects and the new school year. But there is one difference between Caitlin and the other pupils at Plumstead Manor: she is reluctant to believe everything she is told. "I was in a geography lesson and there was a lot of talk about 'this is how old the Earth is'," she says. "So I just said, 'there are different sides to it if you look at it in a religious way'. And the teacher said, 'Oh yes, yes that's true'."

[Creationist Britain \(would you Adam and Eve it?\) - Home News, UK - The Independent](#) .

Tags: [Creationism](#), [Genesis](#), [Adam+&+Eve](#)

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Sep 2008
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The British Humanist Association has issued legal proceedings against the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) over their decision not to allow the study of Humanism in a Religious Studies GCSE in the same way as religions are studied. The exam board OCR had included Humanism alongside religions in its proposed GCSE in Religious Studies, announced in April 2008, but a decision by the QCA has meant that it could not be included.

[British Humanist Association](#) .

Tags: [BHA](#), [QCA](#), [GCSE](#), [Legal+action](#)

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Sep 2008
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Religious believers, when mentioning heaven, have traditionally cast their eyes skywards, but the possibility of an afterlife may now be proved by looking down towards the ground. Doctors at Southampton University are placing pictures in resuscitation areas that can only be seen from the ceiling. These will test the stories of defibrillated patients, who claim they have looked down on the crash teams attending to their lifeless bodies. The theory is that any of the chest-thumped who successfully play this posthumous game of Where's Wally? must have had an out-of-body experience, rather than the final flashing fantasy of a dying brain.

[Mark Lawson: Scientists are trying to engage with believers but it won't resolve the big questions | Comment is free | The Guardian](#) .

Just a small point – Lawson repeats a mistake made by many others; he refers to the "British Humanist Society" – there's no such organisation. It's the [BHA](#).

Tags: [Mark+Lawson](#), [Life+after+death](#), [Royal+Society](#)

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Sep 2008
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The Police should be as enthusiastic about protecting free speech as they are about protecting the sensitivities of religious minorities, the National Secular Society told a conference of police officers and the Crown Prosecution Service in London yesterday (18 September). The NSS's Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood, told the conference — which was examining the implications of the Racial and Religious Hatred Act — that as well as the Human Rights aspects and powerful arguments in principle, protecting freedom of expression is also justified on pragmatic grounds. Forbidding potentially offensive speech risks driving it underground to fester, whereas not doing so exposes it to the oxygen of public criticism.

[National Secular Society - Don't be careless with free speech, NSS tells police conference](#) .

Tags: [Free+speech](#), [Police](#), [NSS](#), [Keith+Porteous+Wood](#)

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Sep 2008
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Sixty years ago, the UN composed a document setting out a [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). It lists a set of basic principles, such as that everyone should be treated equally, torture and slavery are forbidden, and everyone has the right to life, liberty and security. It's a lovely set of ideals, but it also has a set of enemies. To name just one: fundamentalists hate it. And, unfortunately, fundamentalists, especially Islamic fundamentalists, are quietly working behind the scenes to undermine it.

[Pharyngula: An Islamic assault on human rights](#) .

Tags: [Islam](#), [UN](#), [P+Z+Myers](#)

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Sep 2008
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A video has emerged showing Sarah Palin playing a central role in a church service in Alaska in which witchcraft is denounced. Thomas Muthee, a Kenyan who is a regular preacher at Palin's local Pentecostal church in Wasilla, made a passionate plea to defeat witchcraft and other supposed enemies of Palin during a sermon three years ago. The role of the witchfinder in the life of the vice-presidential candidate running mate raises new questions about how much his team investigated her background before naming her as John McCain's running mate.

[Video shows Palin in anti-witchcraft prayer | World news | The Guardian](#) .

This is the woman who could get her hands on the nuclear (or nuke-u-lar, as George W Bush calls it) button if McCain's elected. Very scary!

Tags: [Sarah+Palin](#), [Witchcraft](#), [US+election](#)

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Sep 2008
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It has a "personality"?

Here's a new spin on the usual do-you—believe-in-God survey. The Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion has questioned nearly 1,700 Americans on God's personality, as part of their religion poll. "A lot of surveys ask do you believe in God. But surveys have not asked: Who is God? Is God angry? Is God judgmental? Is God friendly? Is God forgiving? Is He engaged with the world?" explains Chris Bader, an associate professor of sociology at Baylor. "We actually had people do a personality profile of God in the survey, so we can tell you not only if that person believes in God, which almost any survey can tell you, but what they think about God, what is God like and how does that characterization influence other parts of their lives. The idea was to take every question you usually see on a religion survey and try to push it several levels"

[Faith Central - Times Online - WBLG: What's God's Personality type?](#) .

Tags: [God](#), [The+Times](#), [Baylor+Institute+for+Studies+of+Religion](#)

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Sep 2008
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The London home of the publisher of a controversial new novel that gives a fictionalised account of the Prophet Muhammad's relationship with his child bride, Aisha, was firebombed yesterday, hours after police had warned the man that he could be a target for fanatics. A petrol bomb is believed to have been thrown through the door of Martin Rynja's £2.5m town house in Islington's Lonsdale Square, which also doubles as the headquarters of his publishing company, Gibson Square. Three men have been arrested on terrorism charges.

[Terrorism: Firebomb attack on London book publisher | UK news | The Observer](#) .

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Sep 2008
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State schools are increasingly "embarrassed" to talk about God, leaving a moral vacuum which has been filled by celebrity culture and the X Factor, a leading independent school head said yesterday. Tim Hastie-Smith, chairman of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC) which represents 250 private schools, said: "The retreat of God from education has left a moral and spiritual vacuum and the breakdown of any shared value system. In our schools we have the freedom, if we choose, to fight that malaise. Not by retreating from society but engaging with the big questions in a mature and reasoned way, offering possible answers and challenges rather than the passing fads of an X-Factor culture."

[X Factor fills vacuum left by God in schools, says head | Education | The Guardian](#) .

Tags: [HMC](#), [God](#), [Faith+schools](#)

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Sep 2008
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Millions of children in the UK are living in, or on the brink of, poverty, a report claims. The Campaign to End Child Poverty says some 5,500,000 children are in families that are classed as "struggling". The parliamentary constituency with the highest number of children in, or close to, poverty is Birmingham Ladywood, with 81% (28,420 individuals). The campaign classes households in poverty if they are living on just under £10 per person per day.

[BBC NEWS | UK | 'Millions' of UK young in poverty .](#)

Tags: [Poverty](#), [BBC+News](#), [Child+poverty](#)

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Sep 2008
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The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain presents its first international conference – Political Islam, Sharia Law, And Civil Society – on Friday 10th October 2008 (International day against the Death Penalty). From 10am to 6pm (registration begins at 9am) at Conway Hall, London.

[For more information, go to their website.](#)

Tags: [Council+of+Ex-Muslims+of+Britain](#), [Conference](#)

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Oct 2008
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Our October newsletter is ready for download. Articles on the BHA's Local Development Project, SIFRE's Forum of Faiths, and the facts about refugees. Did you know that many people think that the UK accepts about 23% of the world's refugees, while the true figure is about 2 to 3%? There's also a full diary of events from now until February 2009.

[Suffolk Humanist & Secularist News, October 2008 \(PDF\)](#)

[Fishing analogy leaflet \(PDF\)](#)

To open a PDF file, you need the [free Adobe Acrobat reader](#).

If you'd rather have a print version by post, join us and you'll get one (though not in glorious colour, like the PDF version).

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[Pat Condell](#)'s latest video, expressing his outrage on behalf of those Muslim women who will suffer because they are forced to have their marital problems solved in a male-dominated Sharia court, was banned by [YouTube](#) for "violating the YouTube Community Guidelines".

The British Government, in the interests of "tolerance", appears to approve the use of Sharia courts in this country, just so long as they don't sentence anyone to be stoned to death (one hopes), or have their hands amputated, or any of the other punishments meted out by Sharia courts in Saudi Arabia, where human rights are ignored.

Postscript: Since writing the above, You Tube have reinstated the video after many people complained.

[Sign the No. 10 petition against Sharia Law in Britain](#) that reads: We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister to Stop Sharia Law from being binding in law under arbitration tribunals rules.

Tags: [Pat+Condell](#), [You+Tube](#), [Sharia+law](#), [Sharia+courts](#)

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Reading the comments after this Telegraph blog post was heartening. I'm glad to learn that Telegraph readers don't subscribe to such nonsense.

The turning point in Britain's relations with its Muslim population came on January 14, 1989, when Salman Rushdie's

novel *The Satanic Verses* was burnt in public in Bradford. Now, Salman Rushdie has declared that he has nothing against true believers until their faith spills over into the public sphere and becomes "my business". That, he must know is a fallacious distinction. It is like saying that one has nothing against a novelist as long as he does not publish his novels.

[Salman Rushdie taught liberals to hate Islam :: Christopher Howse](#).

Tags: [Christopher+Howse](#), [The+Telegraph](#), [Salman+Rushdie](#), [Islam](#)

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In today's Observer, Catherine Bennett wrote about Debbie Purdy, an MS sufferer who'd like to be able to die at a time she chooses but will need help to do so. She doesn't want her husband to be prosecuted for helping her, which could happen, as the law stands. Mrs Purdy isn't the first to have fought this battle. Diane Pretty is just one high profile case. She died in May 2002, having lost a legal challenge that would have allowed her husband Brian to help her commit suicide when she deteriorated.

[Dead Interesting](#).

Tags: [Blog](#), [Death](#), [Euthanasia](#), [Assisted+suicide](#)

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This is a monthly update of news from **International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)**. You can find the full versions of these news stories [on the IHEU web site](#). [To receive the monthly news update, sign up here](#).

HUMAN RIGHTS SPECIAL

This issue includes reports from IHEU's delegation to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, where real progress has been made, particularly on issues of freedom of expression and separation of religion and state. *For other news, please scroll down.*

Human Rights Council: The fight-back begins

In what was probably a first for the United Nations, delegates to the Human Rights Council heard two Muslims describe Islamism as "Racism" and tell their listeners that the OIC does not speak for the majority of the world's Muslims. Danish MP and leader of the Liberal Alliance Naser Khader, and Tarek Fatah, founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress were eloquent in their denunciation of the OIC, its Saudi paymasters, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. The conference was widely reported, including in the Pakistan Daily Times. [Read more](#)

Egypt accuses IHEU of inciting hatred

An Egyptian delegate to the Human Rights Council has accused IHEU of inciting and promoting hatred. "Every statement is incitement to hatred. Every statement is promoting hatred" he said. The accusation was made during a point of order by Egypt's Amr Roshdy Hassan, who objected to the statement being made by IHEU representative Roy Brown on the subject of Islamophobia. We have a transcript of the Egyptian intervention in full (below). Readers can decide for themselves whether the accusation was justified. We now have video of this intervention. [Read more](#)

Growing opposition to the concept of "defamation of religion"

The tide really does seem to be turning in the debate on combating defamation of religion -- even to the point where there are hopes among some delegates that the concept will soon be buried, at least in the Human Rights Council. Following attacks by France and Belgium last week on the notion of defamation of religion, several NGOs joined the attack on Thursday with several strong statements. The Cairo Center for Human Rights Studies with Article 19, the European Center for Law and Justice, and Center for Inquiry in a joint statement with IHEU were among those who weighed in. [Read more](#)

Criticism of religion is not blasphemy

The IHEU position on defamation of religion was strongly supported on 23 September 2008 in a statement to the Human Rights Council prepared by Rabbi Francois Garai of the World Union of Progressive Judaism. Egypt tried to have the statement ruled out of order on the grounds that "Nobody can discuss the basic tenets of any religion in this Council." In other words, a Jewish Rabbi (unlike the Holy See) was not qualified to discuss the basic tenets of Judaism! [Read more](#)

IHEU attacks concept of "Islamophobia"

IHEU has told the UN Human Rights Council that the concept of "Islamophobia" is unhelpful and misleading, wrongly implying that any criticism of Islam is based on "irrational fear" and must lead automatically to hatred of Muslims. [Read more](#)

New team attacks religious privilege at the UN

After ploughing our lonely furrow at the Human Rights Council for the past five years, often with only the colourful veteran Human Rights advocate David Littman for company, it was a pleasure to welcome three new additions to the team for the 9th session of the Human Rights Council: Austin Dacey and Hugo Estrella from CFI and our new intern Xavier Cornut. [Read more](#)

IHEU speaks out (cautiously) against OIC censorship at UN

Following the successful attempts by the Islamic States at the 7th and 8th sessions of the Human Rights Council in March and June to silence any criticism of Sharia Law and the linking of certain abuses of human rights, such as the stoning of women, to Islam, IHEU main representative, Roy Brown, struck back at the 9th session on 19 September with a statement on the human rights of women. He argued that "No State should be permitted to hide behind tradition, culture or religion in order to justify any abuse of women's human rights," adding "It must be possible here to freely exercise the right to freedom of expression in order to defend the human rights of all, including women, and to expose abuse, whatever the attempted justification." [Read more](#)

IHEU defends rights of women and attacks censorship at the UN

In a joint statement with Center for Inquiry, IHEU has condemned abuses of women's human rights, including child marriage and "honour" killings, especially in Pakistan and Iran. IHEU also attacked the culture of censorship that now prevails in the Human Rights Council. [Read more](#)

AWE addresses human rights violations experienced by women

In an oral statement to the UN Human Rights Council, the Association for World Education has supported IHEU in calling for concerted action to prevent female genital mutilation, "honour" killings, stoning, facial maiming with acid and child marriage. [Read more](#)

CFI supports humanity, equality and human rights for women

Center for Inquiry has delivered an oral statement at the UN Human Rights Council supporting IHEU in defending the rights of women. [Read more](#)

USA speaks out strongly against OIC manoeuvring on "defamation of religion"

The US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom, John V. Hanford III, has strongly supported freedom of religion and freedom of expression, and opposed the OIC's promotion of the concept of "defamation of religions" at the UN as incompatible with international human rights law. [Read more](#)

Defamation of religion is not a human rights concept - Belgium

In a statement to the UN Human Rights Council, Belgium has come out firmly on the side of individual human rights. [Read more](#)

IHEU calls on UN Human Rights Council to condemn Sudan

In a statement to the Human Rights Council, IHEU has called for Sudan to be condemned for its failure to safeguard the human rights of vast numbers of its citizens. [Read more](#)

Spinoza and secularism at the UN

Quoting Spinoza in a statement to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva delivered jointly with the Association for World Education, IHEU has urged the Council to prioritize freedom of expression over demands for laws of the state to yield to the laws of God. [Read more](#)

IHEU stands up for the primacy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In a written statement to the UN Human Rights Council, *Sixty years after the UDHR: threats to the universality of human rights*, IHEU has highlighted the overriding, universal status of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the wide divergence between the UDHR and the 1990 Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. [Read more](#)

OTHER NEWS

Recognition for the Ainu

Japan's parliament has adopted a resolution that, for the first time, formally recognises the Ainu as "an indigenous people with a distinct language, religion and culture". In a nation that has always preferred to perceive itself as ethnically homogenous, it is a highly significant move. Traditionally the Ainu lived off the land, worshipping natural landmarks and [Read more](#)

Celebrating Darwin - February 2009

In February 2009, we shall be marking the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of his great, seminal work, *On the Origin of Species*. Just as Copernicus and the many great scientists who followed him had upset the view that the Earth was the centre of the Universe, so Darwin upset the view that humans were privileged beings, specially created by divine will and totally distinct from the rest of life. It is no exaggeration to say that Darwin's discoveries have provided a basis for modern Humanism. [Read more](#)

HSS conference - Humanism in Scotland - North Queensferry, 25 October 2008

IHEU member organization Humanist Society Scotland will hold its annual conference in North Queensferry on 25 October 2008. The theme will be The impact of Humanism on Scotland in the 21st century. [Read more](#)

Humanist events for Europride 2008

On 30 July, as part of the programme of Europride 2008, the Swedish Humanist Association organised two very successful events. The first was a panel discussion, 'Religion: the hotbed of homophobia?' for which the 120-person auditorium in the main Pride Hall of Stockholm was packed to capacity, with many more would-be listeners turned away at the door. The second was a more informal pub evening allowing humanists from different countries to discuss the issues of the day over drinks and food. [Read more](#)

Continuum of Humanist Education

IHEU member organization the Institute for Humanist Studies has made its online e-learning materials on Humanism freely available to all. Starting now, anyone with an Internet connection anywhere in the world can learn about Humanism for free. [Read more](#)

National conference on Osu caste system and untouchability - 21-22 October, 2008

Join Humanists, Freethinkers, human rights activists, intellectuals from Nigeria and Overseas to discuss and debate on how to eradicate caste discrimination and untouchability in the world. Sponsorships are available for victims of caste discrimination and untouchability in Nigeria. [Read more](#)

International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) is the world umbrella organisation for Humanist, ethical culture, rationalist, secularist and freethought groups. Based in London, it is an international NGO with Special Consultative Status with the UN (New York, Geneva, Vienna), General Consultative Status at UNICEF (New York) and the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), and it maintains operational relations with UNESCO (Paris).

Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote Humanist values world-wide. IHEU sponsors the triennial World Humanist Congress.

You can find out more about IHEU [on the web site](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [UN](#)

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A Muslim cleric in Saudi Arabia has called on women to wear a full veil, or niqab, that reveals only one eye. Sheikh Muhammad al-Habdan said showing both eyes encouraged women to use eye make-up to look seductive.

[BBC NEWS | World | Middle East | Saudi cleric favours one-eye veil](#) .

It would be much better if Saudi men wore blindfolds and let women wear what they like. Maybe castration would cure them of their lustful thoughts?

For more about the way women are treated in the Middle East, [see Human Rights Watch](#) .

Tags: [Saudi+Arabia](#), [Niqab](#), [Women's+rights](#)

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The Committee on Climate Change (CCC) today published its interim advice to Government on what the long-term target should be to tackle climate change. The CCC recommended that emissions from harmful Greenhouse Gases be reduced by at least 80% by 2050. In a letter to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, Ed Miliband, the CCC said that the 80% target should apply on average across all sectors of the UK economy and is achievable at affordable cost of between 1-2% of GDP in 2050

[CCC - Committee on Climate Change](#) .

Tags: [CCC](#), [Committee+on+Climate+Change](#), [Greenhouse+gas](#)

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Rev Peter Mullen, who writes for the Northern Echo and the Telegraph, has been on the [receiving end of some criticism lately](#) for comments he made on his blog, including:

Let us make it obligatory for homosexuals to have their backsides tattooed with the slogan SODOMY CAN SERIOUSLY DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH and their chins with FELLATIO KILLS.

In his defence, he says he was joking. This is not a surprise, as religion is a rich vein of humour - think talking snakes, women created from ribs, huge boats filled with animals, zombies who come back to life after three days and fly away, and Rowan Williams.

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[The Washington Post reports](#) :

The nation's largest group of atheists and agnostics is suing President Bush, the governor of Wisconsin and other officials over the federal law designating a National Day of Prayer. The Freedom From Religion Foundation sued Friday in U.S. district court, arguing that the president's mandated proclamations calling on Americans to pray violates a constitutional ban on government officials endorsing religion.

I read about this in [Libby Purves's Times Online column](#) , where she wrote,

The Washington Post reports that a group of atheists in Wisconsin are suing President Bush for having a National Prayer Day. Its going to happen on the first Thursday in May and they tearfully say it will create 'a "hostile environment for nonbelievers, who are made to feel as if they are political outsiders" .

Tearfully? Purves gets snottier about the non-religious by the week. There's no mention of any tears in the article and, by using the term, Purves suggests that American atheists are a bunch of weepy wimps. The fact is that the US is supposed to be a secular state, that Bush has no business endorsing religion, and that US atheists are subjected to all sorts of abuse, even death threats. Since Richard Dawkins started his "Out" campaign, many more have bravely asserted their atheism, but the extent of the poisonous vilification they experience is probably something that Purves wouldn't understand or accept. After all, she's so nice to non-believers, isn't she?

Tags: [Libby+Purves](#), [George+Bush](#), [US+Prayer+Day](#), [American+atheists](#)

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Pity the poor faith schools. According to a pamphlet published today by the Centre for Policy Studies, penned by Cristina Odone, they are under threat as never before from "a government ... aligning itself with a stridently secularist lobby". Few apart from than Odone can have noticed this dangerous development. Under Labour governments since 1997 more new state-funded faith schools have opened than under any other government, and there is no sign that

this increase is being stemmed or about to be. Certainly no evidence for such a change of direction is presented in today's pamphlet, a mish-mash of anecdote, selective factoids and non-sequiturs ("The schools are not divisive. Not one of the 72 British citizens convicted under the Terrorism Act of 2000 attended a faith school.").

[Andrew Copson: The government is too soft on faith schools | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#).

Tags: [Andrew+Copson](#), [BHA](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Cristina+Odone](#)

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The creation of religion-based groups like YMAG [Young Muslim Advisory Group] is divisive because it approaches the subject of community cohesion from the standpoint of an assumption of difference. I am tired of the politics of "the other". It's about time we embraced the language of "we". We, the British people – irrespective of background – must stand on a united platform on issues such as social cohesion and extremism. Let us try and forge a collective, not a divided response to the problems we face in Britain.

[Zehra Zaidi: The Young Muslim Advisory Group is divisive as well as unnecessary | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#).

Hear hear!

Tags: [Hazel+Blears](#), [Young+Muslims](#), [Government](#), [Waste+of+time](#)

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Tags: [You+Tube](#), [US+Election](#), [Political+prayer](#)

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[Zehra Zaidi's piece in the Guardian](#) about the latest daft idea from Hazel Blears & Co is spot on. The constant harping on about "community cohesion", which really means trying to get Muslims and others to all get along, is ridiculous. Can't they see that the proliferation of faith schools is an obstacle to social harmony?

There've been many "consultations" that were ostensibly about achieving harmony and understanding, but all they do is exaggerate the differences between people, rather than encourage them to discover what they have in common. Pixie-Dust for Brains Blears is behind the Government's "[Face-to-Face and Side-by-Side: A framework for inter faith dialogue and social action consultation](#)" - another waste of time. In the foreword, she writes:

We have in recent years seen an increase in dialogue between different faith communities which is breaking down barriers, building understanding and strengthening relationships. We have also seen the positive changes that collaborative social action has brought about within our local communities. This growth in 'active faith' has seen faith communities putting into practice their values and teachings to enrich and benefit wider society.

The consultation document is full of erroneous assumptions, one being that there is something special about the values of people in religious "communities". Not true. Some of those "values" do not benefit the wider society, while any positive values are little different from those that many socially responsible atheists have.

One of the questions in the document is,

How can the lessons learned and experience gained from inter-faith dialogue and social action help to build relationships with people from different communities more widely?

A leaflet being circulated in Humanist circles by BHA member Richard Hogg points out,

The question is based on a false premise. Consider the fishing analogy:

I'm a member of a fly-fishing community. We don't live in the same street, but are scattered about our town. We regularly meet with fly-fishers from nearby towns to share our interest but we rarely engage with groups who enjoy different types of fishing, and there's been a long history of animosity between the different types of fishing groups, so an Inter-Fishing Network is set up. This common interest in fishing in general enables the different fishing groups to work out ways to understand each others type of fishing, and whilst someone that loves deep sea fishing may never want to go fly-fishing, they can see why someone would want to, and thereby they gain a level of respect for other types of fishing even if they would never engage in other types of fishing themselves. With the success of the Inter Fishing Network bringing people of different fishing interests together they decide to use this knowledge to engage with the wider community. However, this fails miserably. Why?

Whilst people in the wider society may respect an individual's choice to engage in fishing, the wider society has no interest in fishing – it is irrelevant to them. They do not need to understand or appreciate fishing to carry out their employment activities, to do their weekly shopping, to socialise with friends, to carry out their voluntary activities for a local charity, etc. Fishing is a personal thing for people who like fishing and want to meet up with others to discuss fish or fishing.

Bringing people together who have an interest in something, albeit with differing views, can be done as they're all interested in the same thing. However, the thing that brings those people together, that common interest, cannot be used as a means to engage with the wider society, if that wider society doesn't have the same level of interest in whatever it is. It's better to engage people of all faiths and none in matters that concern us all, other than religion or beliefs that separate us, rather than unite us.

On 22nd October, [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource's](#) Forum of Faiths meets in Ipswich. We're informed:

It is intended that the Forum of Faiths becomes a channel of communication between the statutory bodies and the faith communities as well as providing an ongoing link between the faith communities. This is a natural development for inter-faith work in Suffolk and is also totally in line with the vision of a recent document published by the Department for Communities and Local Government...

Yes, you've guessed it. It's "Face to Face" again.

We've been involved with SIFRE from the beginning, mainly because it provided opportunities for Humanist speakers to visit schools and other organisations with an alternative point of view, but (speaking for myself) the relationship is getting rather strained.

For one thing, we're not a "faith"; "faith" is anathema to us. We'd prefer the correct legal term, as a description of the various groups involved with this sort of education and dialogue, of "religion and beliefs".

For another thing, we can't condone the trend towards treating religious organisations as special groups, given special status. The people who represent these groups are unelected and unaccountable. Why should they be given privileged access to government at all levels? We all have the same right to lobby our elected representatives and vote them in or out of office, as individuals. That's how secular government works. There are all sorts of special interest groups that lobby for a variety of changes, but none are given special status, except the "faiths". We need less of this nonsense, not more.

Just one example of the way it works is that SIFRE has been invited to send one (only one!) representative to our Local Strategic Partnership, to represent all the faiths in the area. How crazy is that? One person can't represent all the faiths, which differ widely in their beliefs and practices, and even if he or she could, why should religious organisations have a say in secular affairs?

So, where do we go from here? Ideally, we should scrap all the inter-faith community cohesion nonsense, and start from somewhere else.

Tags: [SIFRE](#), [Hazel+Blears](#), [Face+to+Face+&+Side+by+Side](#), [Government](#), [Community+cohesion](#)

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Rashin Soodmand is an Iranian Christian. Her father was hanged for apostasy – he converted to Christianity when he was thirteen. Now her brother, also a Christian, risks the same fate. Rashin says, "They assume that if you are Iranian, you must be Muslim."

It's not surprising that it appears there are no atheists in Iran. Declaring your non-belief would risk death or life imprisonment.

[Read more in The Telegraph.](#)

Tags: [Iran](#), [Islamists](#), [Execution](#), [Apostasy](#)

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Although the headlines majored on the BBC's fearful relationship with Islam, there was another point hidden in the BBC director general's speech to the Theos Christian thinktank this week, and it is just as disturbing.

Those of us who have wondered why there is such a ridiculous excess of religion on the BBC now have the answer. It is because Mark Thompson, an enthusiastic Catholic, wants it. Thompson is a great proselytiser for his faith in the mould of Lord Reith, who thought the BBC was "the nation's church". And, of course, the BBC gives him a very big pulpit to preach

from – one that reaches into just about every home in the country, and which we all have to pay for.

[Terry Sanderson: The BBC's director-general holds non-believers in contempt | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#) .

Tags: [NSS](#), [Terry+Sanderson](#), [BBC](#), [Theos](#), [Mark+Thompson](#)

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[The Ipswich Advertiser reports:](#)

A BITTER tug-of- war has broken out today [17 October 2008] over the future of one of Ipswich's most high-profile schools.

Despite improving GCSE rates and opposition from staff, Holywells High School could become a church-sponsored academy.

Although no final decision has been made and a full consultation is yet to take place, sources at multicultural Holywells High have hit out at a proposal to convert the school into an academy, saying they have been put under pressure by Suffolk County Council to become a faith school.

We will do whatever we can to support those who oppose the take-over of Holywells School by the Church. If you have any information, please [get in touch](#).

Tags: [Faith+schools](#), [Holywells+High+School](#), [Ipswich](#), [Church+of+England](#), [Suffolk](#)

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Hundreds of Christians in the Indian state of Orissa have been forced to renounce their religion and become Hindus after lynch mobs issued them with a stark ultimatum: convert or die.

The wave of forced conversions marks a dramatic escalation in a two-month orgy of sectarian violence which has left at least 59 people dead, 50,000 homeless and thousands of houses and churches burnt to the ground. As neighbour has turned on neighbour, thousands more Christians have sought sanctuary in refugee camps, unable to return to the wreckage of their homes unless they, too, agree to abandon their faith.

[Convert or we will kill you, Hindu lynch mobs tell fleeing Christians | World news | The Observer](#) .

Tags: [Hinduism](#), [Christians](#), [India](#), [Lynch+mobs](#)

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"We don't have the answers to everything, just the answers to everything that matters" - learn from The elders from the First Church of the DC Comictician and Latter Day Citizens of the United Federation of Planets.

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[Sony has delayed the launch of a new video game](#) because of fears that the background music may offend Muslims. The music, by Muslim [musician Toumani Diabaté](#) from Mali, contains a couple of phrases from the Qur'an. When their attention was drawn to this, Sony decided not to risk offending anyone. Whatever you do, if it's anything to do with religion, you're bound to offend someone.

On the BBC news, Muslim journalist [Yasmin Alibhai-Brown](#) said more or less the same thing. She was quoted as speaking for [British Muslims for a Secular Democracy](#), which was founded in May this year. Alibhai-Brown was scornful about easily-offended Muslims. The bmsd (they use lower case) aims to:

Raise awareness within British Muslims and the wider public, of democracy, particularly 'secular democracy', helping to contribute to a shared vision of citizenship (the separation of faith and state, so faiths exert no undue influence on policies and there is a shared public space).

That's good, isn't it?

Tags: [bmsd](#), [Muslims](#), [Islam](#), [Sony](#)

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Bendy-buses with the slogan "There's probably no God" could soon be running on the streets of London. The atheist posters are the idea of the British Humanist Association (BHA) and have been supported by prominent atheist Professor Richard Dawkins.

[BBC NEWS | England | London | 'No God' slogans for city's buses](#) .

You can donate online at [Just Giving](#).

[Across the Pond, P Z Myers has noticed the campaign, and comments](#) :

Urban England seems like a strange place to start such a campaign; rural America needs it more, although the costs would be significantly greater, as they'd have to cover the replacement cost of all the buses that were set on fire.

Tags: [BHA](#), [Buses](#), [London](#), [P+Z+Myers](#)

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Gay & Lesbian Humanist, the magazine that suspended publication amid controversy in 2005, is to return online.

The new web version takes over from the print version, which had been publishing quarterly since 1981.

In a statement today, the magazine's editors say: "Many people will remember G&LH. Some may remember why it suspended publication following a protracted dispute about content."

"After a period of change and restructuring within the Pink Triangle Trust, the trustees decided to resume publication. In order to optimise the trust's work and cost-effectiveness, and to reach a wider audience, it was decided to make G&LH an online publication."

[Read more at Gaydar Nation](#)

Tags: [Gay+&+Lesbian+magazine](#), [Gaydar+Nation](#), [Pink+Triangle+Trust](#)

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The huge success of the [Atheist Bus Campaign](#) has amazed [the people who run the Just Giving website](#) . They write:

... this page is remarkable for the sheer speed that it's raising money - we've been noticing that there are new donations every time we refresh the page. Whatever you believe, it certainly shows the power of online fundraising. The campaign has not only smashed its target for the [British Humanist Association](#) but it's gone from trebling the target to quadrupling it in the time spent writing this blog post...

The aim was to raise £5,500, which [Richard Dawkins](#) said he would match. It began yesterday (21 October). By noon today the figure was over £58,000.

A fellow blogger in London commented this morning:

Did you hear the debate on the Richard Bacon show tonight? If that wasn't hilarious enough it was followed by an hour of homeopaths talking b*****s.

You can [listen again on the BBC website](#) - go for the Tuesday night (21 October) show. Besides the [BHA's](#) Andrew Copson, they wheeled out [Stephen Green of Christian Voice](#), the evangelicals who created so many problems for the producers of ' [Jerry Springer the Opera](#) '.

[The Guardian's Comment is Free post about the bus campaign by originator Ariane Sherine has attracted a record 1,200+ comments](#) .

Some have said they want posters on buses in the provinces too. It seems that atheists everywhere are starting to assert themselves, reacting to the way that religion is thrust in our faces in politics and education and whenever an ethical issue is raised.

If you'd like to donate, go to [the Just Giving page](#) .

Tags: [Atheist+Bus+Campaign](#), [Just+Giving](#), [Comment+is+Free](#), [Ariane+Sherine](#), [Richard+Dawkins](#)

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Thank you so much to everyone who has donated to the atheist bus campaign. As I write this, the total has just broken £83,000 (without Gift Aid) - a truly amazing amount to raise in just two days (even the donation website, JustGiving, told us they've never experienced this much support for a campaign before!). You've helped us hit the national news headlines, give atheists more of a voice, and generate debate on TV, radio and newspapers throughout the world. It couldn't have happened without you, and we're extremely grateful for all your support.

[Ariane Sherine: 'Probably' the best atheist bus campaign ever | Comment is free | guardian.co.uk](#) .

By 11.25 pm on Wednesday 23 October, the total had reached £90,974.84. It'll soon be over £100,000! [See the Just Giving website](#) .

Tags: [Ariane+Sherine](#), [Atheist+bus](#), [Atheist+campaign](#), [Buses](#), [Adverts](#)

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Our society is, I hope, moving slowly towards the point where religiosity is not the default starting point, where atheists are not regarded as 'outside' the moral arena, where lack of a belief in a god of any kind may not be interpreted as a character flaw or symptom of some kind of nihilist abandonment of all ideas of truth and beauty. Nevertheless we are still in a situation where public events are marked by some kind of religious activity, where Thought for the Day on Radio 4 is still a religious broadcast, where priests and rabbis are still sought and consulted on matters of ethics often to the exclusion of anyone with a reasonable opinion, and where insulting and threatening language issued forth from religious fundamentalists is still seen as tolerable where direct criticism of religion is intolerable.

This is taken from Nathan's blog, "Quite Random". [Go there to read more.](#)

Tags: [Blog](#), [Opinion](#), [Atheism](#)

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6th-formers at Holywells High School, which is threatened by a Church take-over, have vowed to campaign against the plans. Good for them! [Read more in the Evening Star.](#)

Tags: [Holywells+High+School](#), [Education](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Evening+Star](#)

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I tuned in to tonight's BBC Panorama programme [27 October] late, just in time to hear reporter Simon Boazman explain how the government plans to collect information on children. He asked his own daughter some of the questions that are included in a questionnaire to test something or other. Did she go to church? What religion was she? Did she believe in God? I'll watch the programme again to check ([you can see it online for the next week using the BBC's i-player.](#)), but my mind was boggling.

[This is from the Panorama website :](#)

... from January the government will start rolling out a huge database called Contact Point containing a file on each of England's eleven million children.

Every file in this compulsory national database will hold a child's name, address, date of birth, unique ID number, parents' address, school, doctor and any other services that are working with the child.

Potentially over 300,000 people who work with children will have access to Contact Point and, as Ross Anderson, professor of security engineering at Cambridge University, tells the programme, "you only need one of the hundreds of thousands of users to be careless or corrupt or downright criminal and bad things can start to go wrong".

[The Contact Point website](#)

[Last year, The Association of Directors of Children's Services \(ACDS\) expressed fears that the database could actually put children at risk.](#)

Tags: [Government](#), [Children](#), [Database](#)

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Oct 2008
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You may have donated to [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#). [The BHA](#) needs help with its anti-faith schools campaign too. [Donate via the Just Giving website.](#)

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

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Oct 2008
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Can't say what time, but there'll be something about [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#) during Ian Wyatt's Sunday Breakfast programme (the God slot) on BBC Radio Essex, including a short interview with me. You can listen on 103.5 or 95.3 fm, or online at [www.bbc.co.uk/essex](#). MN

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Oct 2008
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[In Slate Magazine](#), Christopher Hitchens (author of 'God is Not Great') attacks the Vice-Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, for her ignorance, which she regards as a virtue, and her religious fanaticism.

Note: GOP means 'Grand Old Party', or the Republican Party.

If you order 'God is Not Great' via the Amazon link on this website, we get commission.

Tags: [Christopher+Hitchens](#), [Sarah+Palin](#), [US+election](#), [Ignorance](#)

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Oct 2008
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[Staff pay and conditions could be under threat at an Ipswich school if a decision is finalised to turn it into a church-run academy.](#)

As revealed in The Evening Star, [students at Holywells High spoke out against the possibility of the running of their school being handed over to the Church of England](#) in September.

The students' concerns are now shared by trade unions, who today revealed their opposition to academies' abilities to operate outside the parliamentary approved School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document.

If Holywells becomes an academy, staff contracts will be automatically renewed under transfer of undertaking regulations, unless their employment is terminated for an economic, technical or organisational reason.

I was quoted in this story. If you go to [the Star's website](#), there is a readers' poll that asks "Do you back the controversial idea to turn Holywells School into a church-run academy?" So far (1pm on 29 October), the results are; Yes - 38.38%, No - 61.62%. *MN*

Tags: [Holywells](#), [Ipswich](#), [Faith+schools](#), [Church+of+England](#)

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Nov 2008
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[Evolutionists Flock To Darwin-Shaped Wall Stain | The Onion - America's Finest News Source](#)

DAYTON, TN—A steady stream of devoted evolutionists continued to gather in this small Tennessee town today to witness what many believe is an image of Charles Darwin—author of The Origin Of Species and founder of the modern evolutionary movement—made manifest on a concrete wall in downtown Dayton.

This is exciting news. We will naturally be organising a pilgrimage to see the stain. Stay tuned.

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Nov 2008
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The Atheist Bus was briefly mentioned on Ian Wyatt's Sunday Breakfast programme on [BBC Essex](#) today (2 November), with comment from me and Francis Goodwin of the Church's Advertising Network. A listener phoned in to say he was "offended", apparently at the mere suggestion that there is no god. You can listen again by [clicking this link](#), but you'll need broadband and Real Player - [click here to install it](#). The bus bit is in the last 15 minutes of the programme.

Tags: [Atheist+Bus](#), [BBC+Essex](#)

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Nov 2008
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Tomorrow (4 November 2008), the voters of the United States of America will help to steer the direction of their country for the next four, probably eight years. It's their choice but it is a choice that will affect us all.

In the rest of the world, polls have shown quite clearly that Barack Obama is the overwhelming choice to be the next US President.

Most Humanists would agree, especially as the Republican Party of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, and now John McCain and Sarah Palin, represents what we would describe as an entirely illogical philosophy of religious fundamentalism. It rejects scientific evidence on the nature of our physical and living earth in favour of a literal belief in the Old Testament of the Bible, especially the Book of Genesis.

The worrying thing is that polls show that at least half of Americans believe that God created the world and populated it with us and all living creatures as described in Genesis, that the world is less than 10,000 years old and that evolution is a myth.

I recently returned from my first ever visit to America, visiting volcanic sites in Oregon and Washington, where the scientific view of the earth's geological history was strictly adhered to in the displays and literature of the US National Parks Service and the US Geological Survey.

I'm afraid all that evidence wasn't quite good enough for one visitor to Mount Rainier National Park though.

About halfway up the road leading to Mount Rainier is a beautiful waterfall, the Narada Falls, alongside which is a steep track taking you to the bottom. Halfway down is a plaque explaining the geology of the spot.

As you can see from the photograph, someone has taken a sharp implement and tried to obliterate the reference to 10 million years, presumably because the statement does not equate to their view of the age of the world.

Sarah Palin is a regular worshipper at a church expounding these extraordinary views that fly against all the evidence. If she were to become Vice-President, a heartbeat away from the top job, the baleful effect she could have on scientific progress and rationality is incalculable.

We can only hope that she and those that pull her strings don't get within sniffing distance of the Oval Office.

Tags: [Evolution](#), [US](#), [America](#), [US+election](#)

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Nov 2008
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The kids started a new (non-denominational) school today. And my first fight with the school is this afternoon. The school is supporting the Samaritan's Purse shoebox operation, where children fill shoeboxes with toys etc for children in eastern Europe and Africa...and then the evangelical literature is added before they're distributed.

Am very cross indeed. I've sourced an alternative - another Christian organisation but one which doesn't put anything into the boxes and doesn't send out propaganda. I'm currently compiling a dossier for the Headteacher, with whom I expect to have an interesting discussion real soon.

[Read what the Rev. Fraser wrote about their "toxic agenda" in The Guardian](#) If you hear of any more schools being taken in, please let us know.

Tags: [Samaritan's+Purse](#), [Evangelism](#)

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Nov 2008
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This year we get a choice between religious or non-religious Xmas stamps. [The Royal Mail offers the Madonna and Child or some pantomime characters](#). I love the irony in the Royal Mail selecting various made-up characters as an alternative to the religious stamps!

Tags: [Xmas+stamps](#), [Royal+Mail](#)

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Nov 2008
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Obama will be President of the US. Although he's a Christian (an essential qualification, as things stand - no chance of an atheist President, yet), he's a liberal Christian. Maybe his attitude might be more like that of former President Jimmy Carter, who said, "I was very meticulous in completely separating my religious faith from any element of politics or governance in the White House. I believed in what Thomas Jefferson, one of our founding fathers, said that we should build a wall between Church and state. I worship a prince of peace, not a prince of pre-emptive war."

Religion plays a huge role in US politics. If you didn't watch Channel 4's 'True Stories: Jesus Politics' on 28 October, you have 22 days left to [view it online on the Channel 4 website](#). (you'll need broadband and Windows Media Player). The Republican Right has the strongest links to evangelical Christianity - you'd be forgiven for thinking that, as far as George Bush is concerned, God is an American and votes Republican.

After I'd emailed group members along these lines, one replied, " This reminds me of a TV documentary I saw ages ago, looking at how few people in the US learn languages other than their own English or Spanish. I recall one of the evangelical people interviewed saying to camera that 'since the English used by Jesus in the bible was good enough for him, it's good enough for me'."

Obama may seem less hawkish than his predecessor, and more inclined to regard the environment as a crucial issue, so maybe the world will be a safer place with him in office, but what do US Humanists and atheists feel about him? The Institute for Humanist Studies quotes Ronald Aronson, professor at Wayne State University and author of *Living without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided*. He says, "Life will be better for secularists (and almost everyone else) under an Obama presidency, but piety will still prevail in America and we secularists will largely remain a fragmented, unorganized non-community..." Meanwhile, [The American Humanist Association claims that Obama was "raised as a Humanist."](#)

The bad news is that, despite the fact that many gay and lesbian voters supported Obama, [California voters have adopted a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, known as Proposition 8](#). Thousands of gay marriages have taken place in the state. Gay marriage is unpopular with the Black Churches that Obama needed votes from, so he was unlikely to openly support gay rights. In Obama's US, some people will still be more equal than others.

Tags: [US](#), [US+election](#), [Obama](#), [California](#), [Gay+&+lesbian+marriage](#)

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Nov 2008
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From my early teens (pre 1960) I have found no sense in theism. I was content with no religion for 30 years but then some experiences made me realise that there might be more things to take account of in my philosophy but it would take too long to describe all that now. It opened me to the possibility that something of me might survive death in some form. If this occurs I see this as a natural not supernatural occurrence. It does not require a god or gods. If rebirth occurs in some form then that would be as natural as a caterpillar turning into chrysalis into a butterfly into eggs into caterpillars and so on. An interest in meditation (which I

stress does not need a religion to support it) lead me to Buddhism in 1994. If you know little about this in a nutshell: there is no god; the law of cause and effect is fundamental; things are impermanent; ethical living, meditation and the acquisition of wisdom are the way forward. Two things troubled me at the outset and the same things caused me to stop attending my local group this year. Dawkins book *The God Delusion* caused me to rethink. My first difficulty was with ritual. Any rituals can put us into a useful mindset (consider the All Blacks pre match ritual). I felt that ritual was a device to trick the brain albeit in a direction I might want to go. That was not good enough. The second difficulty was where Buddhism requires faith. I doubt many people would find my nutshell description an unreasonable position to take but to believe that there is a cycle of rebirth and this cycle can be brought to an end by a particular knowledge called enlightenment is a huge leap of faith. I find that latter bit as difficult to accept as offering wisdom to a butterfly in the hope that it will no longer have the need to give rise to a caterpillar again. What I am left with which may keep us apart is an acceptance of the possibility that some part of us survives death but without the aid of the supernatural. I would welcome any views about my thought processes and about how close I am to being a humanist.

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Nov 2008
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[Read the latest International Humanist & Ethical Union News on their website](#) . It includes plans for an East African Humanist Convention in Kampala next February, the appointment of Matt Cherry (who used to be with [the BHA](#)) as the IHEU's international representative, and more on the Islamic States attempts to limit Freedom of Expression after their victory in the Human Rights Council.

[Sign up for a regular IHEU newsletter here](#) .

Tags: [IHEU](#), [Newsletter](#)

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Nov 2008
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[Mosey on over to the New Humanist site for their latest news update](#) , including the nominees for the 2008 Bad Faith Award. They are: Tony Blair, Stephen Green, Sarah Palin, Rowan Williams, St Monica's Governors, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, Bishop of Durham, Ann Coulter, and Adnan Oktar aka Harun Yahya. Vote for your favourite. Hard to choose, isn't it?

There's more about the Atheist Bus Campaign, with a podcast from Ariane Sherine, and highlights from the latest issue of the magazine.

Tags: [New+Humanist](#), [Bad+Faith+Award](#), [Atheist+Bus](#)

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Nov 2008
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'They'

The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back
They will not be the same; for they'll have fought
In a just cause: they lead the last attack
On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought
New right to breed an honourable race,
They have challenged Death and dared him face to face.'

'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;
Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;
And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find
A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.'
And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'

Siegfried Sassoon, 1916

Tags: [Armistice+Day](#), [Remembrance](#), [Sassoon](#), [God](#), [WW1](#)

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Nov 2008
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If you click on the link on this web site to shop at Amazon, we'll get some commission to add to our funds.

You could begin with a copy of Jim Herrick's book, 'Humanism: an introduction', for £14.50 (free delivery). Jim will be our guest speaker next month.

Tags: [Books](#), [Shopping](#), [Amazon](#)

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Nov 2008

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[The November edition of International Humanist News is now available on the IHEU website](#) . It includes features on Barack Obama; Humanism and Islam; and Caste and Untouchability. Both text and PDF versions are available.

Tags: [IHEU](#)

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Nov 2008

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Since [the Atheist Bus Campaign](#) has made the headlines around the world, Christian organisations have been responding to its "There probably is no god" message. The Rev. Evan Cockshaw of the Evangelism and Outreach Team of Lichfield Diocese set up a new website, [There Probably is a God](#), inviting believers to contribute their "stories of normal everyday people who aren't stupid, and haven't been brainwashed, but will talk honestly and openly about their experiences of the true and living God!"

Among others, P Z Myers, the biologist and associate professor at the University of Minnesota, whose popular [Pharyngula](#) science blog frequently mocks religious nonsense of one sort or another, prompted hoots of derision by [pointing out the silliness of these stories](#). It isn't difficult. For example, the "evidence" includes such gems as "I believe in God because god is real, god makes a difference, god changes lives," and "I believe in God because ... He's answered my prayers to the specifics countless number of times. I talked with Him this morning! God is an incredible promise keeper. He has kept all His promises to me." (I wonder what they were?)

The Reverend's site is a response to the Atheist Bus Campaign. Now there's a response to his site – a parody called [There Probably isn't a God](#), where atheists are invited to submit their reasons for not believing – "stories of normal everyday people who aren't stupid, and haven't been brainwashed into believing in supernatural beings." Like the bus campaign website, it's quickly attracted lots of contributions. Why not add yours?

The symbol above is widely used to signify atheism in the US. [Chosen by American Atheists, it has the letter A surrounded by an atomic whirl](#) .

Tags: [Atheism](#), [God](#), [Websites](#), [Atheist+Bus+Campaign](#)

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Nov 2008

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It's a sign of growing older (and grumpier), but I despair of people's lack of common sense sometimes. For weeks, the media has been full of stories about the economic situation. Now the retail trade is in a state, anticipating that most people will spend less this Christmas. Meanwhile, [the Consumer Credit Counselling Service reports a high number of callers with worries about the strain of Christmas on family budgets](#). It's as well it's not me answering the phones. I'd tell them that Christmas isn't compulsory, nor is spending money you can't afford, so get a grip! You can still have a good time with your family, without getting into debt. [Read what some Humanists have done](#). And if your kids expect lots of very expensive presents, maybe you haven't trained them well? My advice to parents of very young children? Start as you mean to go on, and don't assume that you'll always be able to put everything on a credit card. Get them used to a modest midwinter celebration, where family activities, games and good food can be enjoyed, without worrying about how you're going to clear your debts in time for next Christmas.

This is what one of our members (the mother of two young children) wrote about Christmas last year:

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 my eldest was one, but as she turned two, I couldn't hold out any longer. Once my youngest 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.

I do various things to keep consumerism down in my household, and to try and limit the number of toys the children have. Don't get me wrong ... they have unlimited craft materials and access to creative toys like puppets and Lego. It's the nasty plastic rubbish I try to keep under control. My avoidance tactics are pretty stern; the children are allowed some TV, but it's almost always one of the BBC channels. On the rare occasions we watch commercial TV together they know I mute the adverts. My daughter has even started muting them for me. Nevertheless, she knows exactly which brand of dolly she would like from Santa, after a brief exposure to TV ads elsewhere! One thing we never do is go shopping as a leisure activity; partly because I can't see the point, but also because children can't help but ask for almost every toy they see, even if they know the answer will be "No". There's no point in showing them all the things I won't let them buy for themselves or other people.

We spend the festive season having fun. We eat every meal together round the table (often food we've all helped prepare). We sing carols and Christmas songs loudly and at every opportunity, sometimes with my daughter playing them on the piano. We drive around in the dark with a flask of hot chocolate, looking for the most outrageous Christmas lights. Most of all we spend time together (and remarkably little money). It's during that time together that I talk about why Christmas is celebrated, and what it means to some people, while making it clear that it's not what I believe. We talk about which traditions pre-date Christianity, and why our friends are having a celebration on the shortest day. I stop short of explaining Santa wears red because of an highly effective Coca-Cola advertising campaign ... that one, I'm keeping for when they're older.

Tags: [Christmas](#), [Credit+crunch](#), [Common+sense](#), [Families](#)

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Nov 2008
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What's this about, d'you think?

Critics say it is wrong for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to give taxpayers' money to a controversial organisation whose stance would be found objectionable by many members of the public. Neil Addison, a Roman Catholic barrister who specialises in religious discrimination, said: "It's a bit like paying the Taliban to lecture on women's rights."

[This is from The Telegraph](#). I can imagine Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells, encouraged by Martin Beckford, Religious Affairs Correspondent for The Telegraph, hopping up and down, incandescent with rage, at the news that [the BHA](#) will get a grant from the Equality and Human Rights Commission for a series of four events about the place of religion in public life. Good grief! What'll these uppity atheists want next? Complete equality? A totally secular society?

Can you imagine what would happen if a journalist produced such an incendiary article about Christians? You'd have questions in the House, Archbishop Williams praying non-stop for peace and reconciliation, Stephen Green suing the BHA ([Oh sorry – he can't – he's got no money left](#)). And if it was about Muslims! It'd be the Danish cartoons all over again. But write this junk about atheists, and silly Christian Telegraph readers will applaud. Oughtn't to be allowed. [Can't we sue someone for non-religious hatred](#), or something?

Tags: [Telegraph](#), [Equality](#), [BHA](#), [Insults](#), [defamatory](#)

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Nov 2008
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Hello, I went to the "There Probably Is" website because Pharyngula said there was a poll on which the atheists were (slightly) winning. Sadly, they've pulled it. They've also redirected all the testimonies to email, so that they can be vetted before publication. So any slyly Swiftian ones will have to be very subtle to get through. Probably so subtle that the average evangelist will take it at face value.

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Nov 2008
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From Suffolk Humanists & Secularists Chairman David Mitchell:

On this morning's [Andrew Marr Show](#), Carol Vorderman reviewed the papers and made a comment that I for one am pretty fed up with hearing.

She described the young parents of the [recently born conjoined twins](#), who decided to take the pregnancy to full term despite knowing the children were conjoined, as "devout Christians".

Below is a comment I sent to the show via the BBC website. As yet it hasn't made it amongst the criticisms of Jackie Smith's dire performance and given there's far more evidence of the BBC being a Christian conspiracy than a Liberal one I doubt it'll get aired.

Carol Vorderman's description on today's show of the young parents of the newly born conjoined twins who decided to take the pregnancy to full term as 'devout Christians' cannot go unchallenged. The clear implication of her throw away comment is that atheist or Humanist parents would have chosen to terminate the pregnancy. Moral decisions, difficult decisions, 'doing the right thing' and generally being 'good' are human characteristics and nothing to do with medieval religious superstition. Tens of millions of people know you don't need God to be Good so please stop equating good with Christianity. It's rubbish.

Tags: [BBC](#), [Christians](#), [Andrew+Marr+Show](#), [Carol+Vorderman](#)

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Nov 2008
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Last year, I persuaded one of my local churches to withdraw their support for [Operation Christmas Child](#), run by the Samaritan's Purse charity, by explaining that its agenda is destructive. We still hear of local schools and organisations that are taken in by its ostensibly charitable purpose, encouraging children to fill shoes boxes with gifts for needy children overseas, unaware that they'll arrive with a toxic message. [The BHA offers suggestions for alternative ways to involve children in charitable giving](#) during the festive season.

Read more about Samaritan's Purse, "The evangelicals who like to giftwrap Islamophobia", [here](#).

Tags: [Samaritan's+Purse](#), [Charity](#), [Evangelicals](#)

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Nov 2008
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From Gay & Lesbian Humanist Magazine:

It's been a significant time for poetry and politics - and much else of course. And this is reflected in the second online issue of the newly relaunched Gay & Lesbian Humanist magazine, [available now online](#).

Politics doesn't come much bigger or brasher than when it's USA politics, of course, and President-elect Barack Obama was soon in the sights of Catholic bishops, who warned him that "the unity desired by President-elect Obama and all Americans at this moment of crisis" would be impossible to achieve, if the administration's policies increase abortions.

As for poetry, you'll probably have heard of the row over the UK bookstore chain Waterstone's, who reneged on a signing-and-reading evening in November for a Welsh poet, because Christian Voice was on the warpath. The irony is that, as usual with these protests, the "offending" material stands to reach a far wider audience than might have been the case.

Both of these stories are to be found in our pages this month. Indeed, the case of the poet - Patrick Jones, brother of the Manic Street Preachers bassist Nicky Wire - is brought to you in a full feature article, complete with the "offending" poem.

As well as some of the stories concerning religion and lack of it that have caught our eyes over the past few weeks - with or without a lesbian/gay theme - we bring you a varied menu of articles - some regulars, some not. This month an ordained Anglican priest, Neil Richardson, gives us his view of the atheist-bus campaign in London (the one that will see a number of bendy-buses with ads on them telling us there's probably no God, so we may as well get on with life).

In our "Out of Print" feature (articles from the archives of the print editions of G&LH), Cherry Bennet looks at sex workers, and their fight for recognition.

Two noted campaigners, Peter Tatchell and Maryam Namazie, bring us their views this month: on "murder music" and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain respectively.

What has upset Peter Tatchell is that the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, allowed a concert by the noted homophobic rapper Bounty Killer to go ahead in November, in spite of the fact that, if his lyrics concerned racial rather than sexual issues, he most certainly would not be allowed to perform - whether he'd given an undertaking to steer clear of that subject or not.

And Mariam Namazie writes about the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, who held their first international conference in October. Titled "Political Islam, Sharia Law and Civil Society", it was held at Conway Hall Humanist Centre in London and was hailed a resounding success.

The International Gay Association was formed 30 years ago in Coventry, UK. It's now called the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA for short) and has had a number of successes since that historic meeting on the fringe of a Campaign for Homosexual Equality conference in 1978. We profile ILGA and speak to one of its joint secretary-generals, Renato Sabbadini.

As readers may know by now, [we run a blog](#) as a sister publication to G&LH. In "On the Blog" we sample some of the highlights of recent posts, and of course urge you to get involved in debate by contributing to the comment areas there. You don't even have to agree with us!

George Broadhead remembers the film legend Paul Newman who, though not gay, seems to have been Humanist in outlook, while, in "Gossip from Across the Pond", Warren Allen Smith notes the passing of two prominent non-believers, the author Michael Crichton (1942-2008) and the writer, actor and broadcaster (Louis) Studs Terkel (1912-2008).

With a look on the lighter side with Steven Dean and Stephen Blake, and an examination of why members of a certain religion find it hard to keep their peckers in their pants, we hope we've got something to interest all.

[Feedback is very welcome](#).

Tags: [Gay+&+Lesbian+Humanists](#), [Magazine](#)

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Dec 2008
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The One Law for All campaign against Sharia law in Britain is to be launched at the House of Lords on [International Human Rights Day](#), December 10, 2008 from 4:00 to 5:00pm.

According to campaign organiser, Maryam Namazie, 'Even in civil matters, Sharia law is discriminatory, unfair and unjust, particularly against women and children. Moreover, its voluntary nature is a sham; many women will be pressured into going to these courts and abiding by their decisions. These courts are a quick and cheap route to injustice and do nothing to promote minority rights and social cohesion. Public interest, particularly with regard to women and children, requires an end to Sharia and all other faith-based courts and tribunals.'

The campaign has already received widespread support including from AC Grayling; Ayaan Hirsi Ali; Bahram Soroush; Baroness Caroline Cox; Caspar Melville; Deeyah; Fariborz Pooya; Gina Khan; Houzan Mahmoud; Homa Arjomand; Ibn Warraq; Joan Smith; Johann Hari; Keith Porteous Wood; Mina Ahadi; Naser Khader; Nick Cohen; Richard Dawkins; Shakeb Isaar; Sonja Eggerickx; Stephen Law; Tarek Fatah; Tauriq Moosa; Taslima Nasrin and others. It has also received the support of organisations such as Children First Now; Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Equal Rights Now – Organisation against Women's Discrimination in Iran; European Humanist Federation; International Committee against Stoning; International Humanist and Ethical Union; Iranian Secular Society; Lawyers Secular Society; the National Secular Society; and the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan.

The campaign calls on the UK government to recognise that Sharia law is arbitrary and discriminatory and for an end to Sharia courts and all religious tribunals on the basis that they work against and not for equality and human rights.

The campaign also calls for the Arbitration Act 1996 to be amended so that all religious tribunals are banned from operating within and outside of the legal system.

In the words of the Campaign Declaration: 'Rights, justice, inclusion, equality and respect are for people, not beliefs. In a civil society, people must have full citizenship rights and equality under the law. Clearly, Sharia law contravenes fundamental human rights. In order to safeguard the rights and freedoms of all those living in Britain, there must be one secular law for all and no Sharia.'

Roy Brown, immediate past president of the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#) said, "IHEU is lending its full support to this campaign. It is intolerable that the very values on which UK society is based - human rights, equality and the rule of law - are being undermined by the quiet and insidious application of systems of law that have no basis in equality or justice."

Terry Sanderson, president of the [National Secular Society](#), which is also supporting the One Law for All campaign, said: "It is a grave error for the authorities in this country to give credence to Sharia in any form – whether legally or in terms of informal arbitration. When women are being subjected to violence in their marriages, it is not acceptable for religious authorities – which are, by definition, misogynistic – to arbitrate. A two-tier legal system, with women's rights being always secondary to religious demands, is unnecessary, undesirable and ultimately unjust."

To RSVP to attend the launch or for more information, please contact [Maryam Namazie](#), telephone: 07719 166731. [The campaign's website](#) will be available on the day of the launch.

Tags: [Sharia+law](#), [Campaign](#), [Islam](#)

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Dec 2008
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The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

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Dec 2008
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Ariane Sherine (of Atheist Bus Campaign fame) was on BBC Breakfast this morning (3rd December). She was discussing the Church's new Christmas Ad campaign (Nativity in a bus shelter) and the Christian representative made the most glorious defence of faith in God by saying, "I don't understand how TV works, but I believe it does."

As the kids say nowadays, I "LOL'D" all around the living room ☐

Tags: [Atheist+bus](#), [Belief](#), [TV](#)

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Dec 2008
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Read the latest newsletter from the International Humanist & Ethical Union here. If you'd like the newsletter to arrive in your inbox every month, [sign up on the IHEU site](#).

The **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU) is the world umbrella organisation for Humanist, ethical culture, rationalist, secularist and freethought groups. Based in London, it is an international NGO with Special Consultative Status with the UN (New York, Geneva, Vienna), General Consultative Status at UNICEF (New York) and the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), and it maintains operational relations with UNESCO (Paris). Its mission is to build and represent the global Humanist movement, to defend human rights and to promote Humanist values world-wide. IHEU sponsors the triennial World Humanist Congress.

IHEU representative on EU Fundamental Rights Agency interim panel

Keith Porteous Wood, representing IHEU, is one of the interim panel of nine to serve as a sounding board when the Fundamental Rights Agency is planning the next steps and the structures of the Fundamental Rights Platform (including the next meeting and consultations). IHEU, represented by Keith, had attended the first meeting of the Agency in Vienna on 7/8 October 2008. The FRA's main objective is providing assistance and expertise relating to fundamental rights. The primary objective of the October meeting was to discuss suggestions for the FRA Work Programme 2009 and to provide feedback and suggestions for follow up on the FRA Annual Report 2008. The Agency had formerly been focussed on racism but is expanding its remit to include all fundamental rights. [Read more](#)

November 2008 IHN published

The November 2008 issue of *International Humanist News* has been published. This edition includes features on Barack Obama; Humanism and Islam; and Caste and Untouchability. We have: the [full text](#); a [PDF version](#) with full layout and pictures; and [back numbers](#) from the last 15 years available on the web site. [Read more](#)

Islamic states ban secular and Human Rights websites

The Arabic Network for Human Rights reports that the website of Arab Secularists <http://www.3almani.org> is facing a campaign to block it in Arab states. Five states have already blocked the site, making it the most-blocked website, surpassing even the Alhewar website <http://www.ahewar.org> which has been blocked in four Arab countries. [Read more](#)

Prof. A. C. Grayling joins IHEU at the Human Rights Council in Geneva

[A. C. Grayling, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College London](#), is one of Britain's leading technical philosophers with a gift for making philosophy intelligible to the layman. A Fellow of the World Economic Forum, the Royal Society of Arts and the Royal Society of Literature, Anthony Grayling is also an honorary associate of the National Secular Society and a distinguished supporter of the British Humanist Association. He has written widely on contemporary issues from war crimes to secularism and euthanasia and is one

of the leading defenders of Enlightenment values in the English-speaking world. He now joins Roy Brown and the IHEU team at the Human Rights Council where his incisiveness and clarity of exposition will add welcome strength to IHEU's work in defence of Human Rights. [Read more](#)

Druids seek to bury prehistoric museum exhibit: respond to consultation now!

A group of druids has asked English Heritage and the National Trust to rebury prehistoric human remains from archaeological excavations in the Avebury area. The exhibits in question are currently in the Alexander Keiller Museum at Avebury. EH and the NT have published a draft report and have now started an [online public consultation](#) process; the deadline for receipt of comments is 31 January 2009. [Read more](#)

Gay and Lesbian Humanist magazine reappears

After several years' absence, [Gay and Lesbian Humanist magazine](#) has resumed publication, in an online version. [Read more](#)

Informations Humanistes Internationales published

The third issue of the annual French language version of International Humanist News has been published. The magazine addresses the growing need for Humanist literature in francophone countries and aims to build a direct bridge between Humanists in those countries and the IHEU. The magazine is available to download from our web site. *Le troisième numéro des Informations Humanistes Internationales vient de paraître. Le revue satisfera le besoin croissant pour la littérature humaniste dans de divers pays francophones et établira un lien direct entre les humanistes et libre penseurs dans ces pays et l'IHEU. Le revue est disponible pour télécharger depuis notre site internet.* [Read more](#)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights flies into space

60 years after its adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948, the Declaration is ready to take a journey into space: specifically the International Space Station. [Read more](#)

Tags: [IHEU](#), [Newsletter](#)

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Hello Friends,

Yes another cheap and pointless Xmas update email.

Can it be 12 months since we last sat down and wrote? YES it's in the diary every year for heaven's sake!

Well what a strange year; Betty is now 47 and Frank died in a hideous boating accident in Holland. It's not easy getting a waterlogged body through customs at Heathrow.

Julie was shot dead at point blank range and we had to buy a new fridge freezer in August ... After the terrible news of losing the freezer we felt we should take a break ... The long shop museum in Leiston is not what we expected as Betty would have preferred somewhere in the sun. But they have a lovely offer on tea towels and the loo is to die for.

I decided to leave the bank this year after 39 years, things have changed and banking is more a case of begging than screwing the customers as we recall in our yonder years. 39 years and £25 worth of M&S vouchers ... great! I had a port and sherry with Bill and got a cab home.

The grandchildren had nits in September and Janice has IBS on her mind. No word from the Police about the shoplifting charge for Barry and we just pray the scumbag gets sent down.

One low point was the Autumn Fayre in Woodbridge opened by some ponce from the Radio called Nicola Randolphi - a very odd affair with squint but we did manage to pick up some pickled onions from Rev Paul Pitt.

Anyway we have social services calling to check out the rash in the back bedroom and I have barely cleaned up after the police visit, looking into Julie's mishap.

I must fly as we have to iron the cat and feed the washing.

Merry Xmas. Please no presents this year. We are only supporting a Panda in Botswana ... £15 a month and a signed picture.

Loves x

[Nick Pandolfi, weekdays 1-4 "The heart of Suffolk - SGR FM"](#)

Tags: [Xmas+letter](#), [Humour](#), [Round+robin](#)

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On 25 December a very special person was born, says New Humanist, offering thanks and praise to ... Isaac Newton, born on 25th December 1642, and to many other scientists and thinkers in the NH daily series of Advent Podcasts. For a "daily blast of reason", [sign up for their email alerts](#).

(Before anyone emails to complain, [the date of Newton's birth](#) is disputed - some say he was born on 4th January. To heck with that - [buy a Newton birthday card](#)).

Tags: [New+Humanist](#), [Isaac+Newton](#), [25th+December](#)

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With Christmas fast approaching, I couldn't resist sharing this from the BBC website. It's moments like this I'm glad I don't "do" Christmas ;-)
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_pictures/7767113.stm Enjoy!

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A Humanist contribution to a Celebration of the 60th anniversary of the [Declaration of Human Rights](#), at the Unitarian Meeting House, Ipswich, 10th December 2008, organised by the [local UN Association](#).

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Sometimes, when talking to young people about ethical or political issues, I've invited them to consider them from a different point of view – that of an interested, intelligent being from another part of the universe. Suppose there were alien anthropologists, or the equivalent, since they wouldn't restrict themselves to studying one species – ours. What if they came and simply observed human behaviour. What if they came from a planet where there were no wars, where they'd restricted their population and the damage it might do, where they'd established some sort of harmonious relationship with their environment, where everyone regarded him or herself as part of one society, based on their planet, rather than having national or ethnic boundaries. I think they'd probably regard us as a primitive species.

Of course, there are plenty of imaginary aliens in fiction. Creative people – authors, story-tellers, film-makers – have begun by asking themselves, "What if?" One of the most well-known was a Humanist, the American creator of [Star Trek](#), a highly successful television series that began in 1966, [Gene Roddenberry](#). Most people have heard of Star Trek. Many people will have watched it, and the later sequels.

Before Star Trek, science fiction B movies tended to feature hostile aliens who were invariably intent on invading our planet and destroying us, so there was a lot of hysterical screaming and blasting with nasty weapons. Heroic earthlings usually managed to defeat these monsters with a mixture of cunning and imaginative use of their limited fire-power.

Star Trek was different. The Captain and crew of the spaceship Enterprise boldly went where no one had gone before, to do just what I suggested my imaginary alien would do; to observe other races and to learn, without aggression. In the stories, by the 22nd century, the people of Earth were influenced by the Vulcans, a superior race, to reject the pursuit of wealth and power in favour of the pursuit of knowledge and harmonious living. All the stories were morality tales, though the studio bosses at the time didn't seem to appreciate this. Roddenberry said that by creating "... a new world with new rules, I could make statements about sex, religion, Vietnam, politics, and intercontinental missiles."

The shaky sets and polystyrene rocks of the original series, together with catchphrases like, "Beam me up Scottie", might make Star Trek seem like a joke to some, but the ideas behind it were, and are, very serious. Here we are, at the beginning of the 21st century – will we last until the 22nd?

It's sixty years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was written, as people all over the world reflected on the horrors of war and said, "Never again." Gene Roddenberry was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions in the Pacific during World War Two; it was one of the things that inspired his fictional brave new world. If you think about it, the way that the crew of the Enterprise regard each other and the alien races they meet is "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

What does that matter, you might think; it's fiction. This is true, but it's inspirational fiction. If Star Trek encourages people to think about how the characters relate to one another, and about how we do things in real life, they might, just might, begin to use their imagination to resolve some of the problems we face as a race; the human race.

Gene Roddenberry died in 1991. He's reported to have said, "I believe in humanity. We are an incredible species. We're still just a child creature; we're still being nasty to each other. And all children go through those phases. We're growing up, we're moving into adolescence now. When we grow up – man, we're going to be something!" I hope he's right.

The event was led by Umesh Patel from the Ipswich Hindu Samaj. The other contributors were Revd Cliff Reed (Unitarian Christian), Shirley Smith (Christian Scientist), Vinaya Kulkarni (Hindu), Dr. Atul K. Shah (Jain), Bishop Paulo A. Pereira (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints), Robin Herne (Pagan), Eric Walker (Quaker), Martin Spettigue (Sri Chinmoy), Charles Croydon (United Nations Association), and Anil Khoste (Hindu).

Margaret Nelson

Tags: [Speaking](#), [UN](#), [Gene+Roddenberry](#), [Star+Trek](#)

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This is from Terry Sanderson's editorial on the [MSS's Newslines](#), the weekly e-news from the National Secular Society. To [read more](#)

This is from Terry Sanderson's editorial on the [NSS's](#) newswire, the weekly e-news from the National Secular Society. To [read more](#), go to the [NSS website](#). To get Newswire in your inbox, [sign up on the NSS site](#).

Every person in Britain who values the secular nature of our society will be alarmed and, indeed, frightened, by a publication this week from the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR). Entitled Faith in the Nation, it is a collection of essays by "senior faith leaders" which begins with a foreword by the Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Mr Brown, like most of the other contributors, invokes the census figures as his starting point, which enables him to assert: "One message comes across clearly and consistently: that religious belief will continue to be an important component of our shared British identity as it evolves, and that British society can and does draw strength from its diverse faith communities." This is the first of many lies and dissemblings in this book.

For more on secularism, see the tab above or put "secularism" in the search box (above right).

Tags: [NSS](#), [Terry+Sanderson](#), [IPPR](#)

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If you have children aged between eight and seventeen, you may be interested in the first UK residential summer camp for the children of atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and all those who embrace a naturalistic rather than supernatural world view. The camp will be at Bath for the week 27th July - 31st July 2009, for an all inclusive £275. They are looking for volunteers to help. To find out more, go to [the Camp Quest website](#). Speaking from experience, I can tell you that the kids will come home exhausted.

Tags: [Camp+Quest](#), [Holiday](#), [Children](#)

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[The seasons are determined by the time it takes for the Earth to orbit the Sun – just over 365 days](#) – and the way the Earth tilts on its axis. The Summer Solstice is the longest day (Midsummer Day in June), and the two equinoxes (Spring and Autumn) are when night and day are the same length. The Winter Solstice is the shortest day (tomorrow, 21st December 2008), when the North Pole is furthest from the Sun because of the Earth's orbit and its tilt.

The Spring Solstice has been celebrated through the ages as a festival of new life. The Church introduced a religious festival called [Easter](#) (a name derived from an Anglo-Saxon goddess's name) at about the time of the Spring Equinox; the date isn't fixed in the ecclesiastical calendar, as Christmas is. The date that Christmas Day falls on has changed because the calendar has been changed. The most commonly used calendar today is the [Gregorian Calendar](#), decreed by Pope Gregory XIII in February 1582. It replaced Julius Caesar's Julian Calendar, which was introduced in 46 BC, and that replaced a series of Roman calendars that were essentially lunar. The Greeks had other calendars.

Consequently, the year began and ended at different times in different eras, and the midwinter festival that had previously been based on the solstice was claimed as a [Christian festival](#) and fixed at 25th December in 237 AD. That's 25th December in the Gregorian Calendar. In the Julian Calendar it falls on 7th January; Christmas is still celebrated in January by some Orthodox Christians.

Only those who are ignorant of the facts (a substantial number of Christians) will insist that Christ was born on 25th December. No one really knows, but the Church decided to claim the midwinter solstice festival because it was when the Romans celebrated "The Birth of the Unconquered Sun". Christ was probably born sometime between 7 and 4 BC, and almost certainly not in the winter.

It's this sort of thing that tends to make some atheists (including me) rather irritable whenever a priest mentions "the real meaning of Christmas". This "meaning" is only "real" for Christians. Most of the story of Jesus, not just the date of his birth, is a myth. [He wasn't even an original divine figure](#).

And as for the calendar; it has to be adjusted to allow for earthly wobbles, so [an extra second will be added to the world's clocks just before midnight on 31st January 2008*](#), a "leap second". Happy New Year and a bit!

[*The photo used to illustrate this article © Nathan Nelson, our webmaster.](#)

Tags: [Xmas](#), [Calendar](#), [Christmas](#), [Time](#)

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A Traditional Country Pub in the Coastal Town of Woodbridge. Parking, wheelchair access.

On the corner of Old Barrack Road and Ipswich Road, Woodbridge. Entry to car park in Old Barrack Road.

The Duke of York used to be The Seal, and has been given a make-over. It will be familiar to those who've been to previous pub lunches in Woodbridge.

The Seal

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If you're interested in joining us, please email by 14 January at the latest, so we know how many to expect. We can't book at The Seal, so need to get there early and grab a table or tables. Varied menu includes vegetarian options.

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Charles Darwin was born on 12 February 1809 in Shrewsbury, England. He set sail on the Beagle on December 31, 1831 and published The Origin of Species in 1859. He died on 19 April 1882. This will be the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, a particularly special Darwin Day - Suffolk Humanists and Secularists are planning activities to commemorate this bicentenary... watch this space for more info as we have it.