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Jan 2011  
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*Suffolk Humanists & Secularists member Penny Binsted wrote the following article for the Lawshall (Suffolk) village newsletter. She says, "It has been very well received and I have had many positive comments! Maybe there are more closet Humanists than people like to admit."*

As Christmas is meant to be a celebration for Jesus's birthday it is obvious to me that I have nothing to celebrate as I am a humanist. Humanism is the conviction that we can make sense of the world using reason, experience and shared human values and that we can all lead good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. Humanists make the best of the one life we have by creating meaning and purpose for ourselves. We choose to take responsibility for our actions and work with others for the common good.

The number of people in the UK choosing non-religious humanist ceremonies for births, marriages and deaths is growing rapidly, as is the membership of the British Humanist Association, from Professor Richard Dawkins (Vice President of the British Humanists), Professor Susan Blackmore, the late Claire Rayner, Ricky Gervais, Rowan Atkinson, Woody Allen, the authors Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett, to politicians Roy Hattersley and Ken Livingstone. The journalist Polly Toynbee is the current President of the British Humanist Association and all three main parties in the House of Commons have Humanist groups.

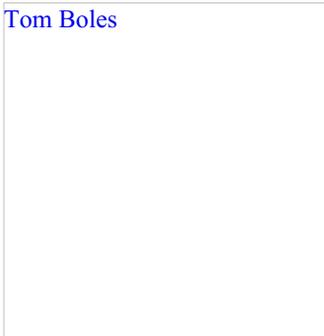
The history of Christmas celebrations is eclectic - for thousands of years in Europe, in Scandinavia communities celebrated life in midwinter, with eating and drinking, around the time of the shortest day on December 21st. It is highly unlikely that Jesus Christ was born on 25th December, and there were no Church celebrations for Christmas until the 4th century as there was disapproval of the Pagan festivities. Then Christians adopted the old Pagan festival of Midwinter, making it a joint secular and religious event - it is now a jumble of ancient customs and more recent inventions: many of our "traditions" like Santa Claus, Christmas trees, cards, gifts and turkeys are all fairly recent, mostly Victorian inventions from Prince Albert.

The actual nativity has a historical significance, especially if you are a Christian, but over the last 20 years in our society it seems to have built up into a greedy and commercial opportunity (starting in September!) with people almost bankrupting themselves to provide what is "expected" of them, as the advertisements for gifts and special food encourage spending. Our modern Christmas seems to have become a time of indulgence with a sprinkle of hope for the future, at New Year.

So I don't celebrate Christmas at all but I do have a Winter Solstice party for family and friends as a celebration for the shortest day and longest night on the 21st December as we pass over this important natural marker. This date is not really the end of our Winter but the days are becoming longer as we move into Spring so there is a promise of new growth and renewal as we move into the new calendar year.

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Suffolk Humanists & Secularists newest committee member Tom Boles was on BBC Look East yesterday, filmed at his Coddanham observatory with BBC presenter Richard Daniel. They were there to talk about the partial eclipse of the sun but there was too much cloud cover to see it, so they talked about Tom's achievements instead. [Tom set a world record last year for spotting more supernova than anyone else.](#)



You have a few hours left to see the interview, about 22 minutes into the programme, if you [click here](#).

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A presentation by Margaret Nelson, founder of Suffolk Humanists & Secularists. This may be of particular interest to newer members. How and why did Humanism develop in Britain from the 19th century? Who was involved? Where do we go from here?

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"For God's Sake, Say So" seems to have confused some

people. Apart from that...

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You may already have heard of Kiva. You may already be a Kiva lender. But if you haven't, this video explains how you can help women around the world, not with charity or gifts, but with a small loan. When it's paid back (I've been lending a while now, and none of my entrepreneurs has defaulted), you can re-lend the money to someone else. A minimum of \$25 at a time, adding more as you go on, and eventually you may have a portfolio of several \$100. It's the only way I'll ever be a financier!

Since I joined [Kiva](#), I've only loaned to women, knowing how hard they have to struggle and how unfair the odds are against them. This new campaign promotes gender equality, stimulates local economies and empowers women to become active, involved and powerful change makers. And when you join Kiva, you can be part of the [Atheists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists and the Non-Religious team](#), nearly 14,000 people, doing good without a god!

[Click here to learn more about FITE.](#)

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The first time I conducted a funeral for a biker whose hearse was a motorcycle and side-car, a long procession of his fellow bikers roared through the town behind it. The conductor (the person in charge from the Co-op) rode pillion, wearing his top hat. The chapel filled with men and women in motorcycle gear and the sound of leather creaking as they moved about. Such events are no longer unusual, and the people who provide the motorcycle hearses are kept very busy.

Today, [The Co-operative Funeralcare has released a report into changing funeral customs, The Ways We Say Goodbye](#), which shows that, among other things, "Half of today's funerals (49%) are a celebration of life and one in ten includes no religion at all." In a relatively short period of time, maybe twenty years, attitudes towards funerals have changed as most people have realised that a traditional Christian funeral isn't compulsory, and has little relevance to the lives of a majority of people.

[Click here to find out more about Humanist funerals](#)

[Click here for my Dead Interesting blog](#)

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The trouble with RE (or one of the troubles with RE - there are several) is that it attracts teachers who think religion is a good thing, and consequently are less inclined to encourage any sort of criticism. There is bias in the way that they teach the subject. You might argue that an atheist RE teacher (and yes, there are some) could show bias against religion, but any teacher who is doing the job properly should avoid personal bias. In Suffolk, the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE) stresses that RE is to learn about religion, and to learn from religion. It's the second part of this that worries me, as it depends how you interpret "learning from". It's assumed that, in general, religion is a good thing.

In Sweden, it will soon become illegal to teach any religious doctrine as if it was true. [Andrew Brown, in the Guardian, reports:](#)

The Swedish government has announced plans to clamp down hard on religious education. It will soon become illegal even for private faith schools to teach religious doctrines as if they were true. In an interesting twist on the American experience, prayer will remain legal in schools - after all, it has no truth value. But everything that takes place on the curriculum's time will have to be secular. "Pupils must be protected from every sort of fundamentalism," said the minister for schools, Jan Bj rklund.

If only this could happen here!

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**Postscript:** My thanks to someone on Twitter who pointed out that the Guardian article dates from 2007. However, [it seems that Swedes did do what they said they would](#) (pdf), though if anyone can shed any more light on this, [please let me know](#).

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In answer to my appeal for an update, I had a message by email and Twitter from [Shockwave](#), as follows:

My Swedish friend answered your question about Religion in schools.

<http://sintrenton.tumblr.com/post/3028797783/is-it-illegal-in-sweden-to-teach-religious-doctrines-as>

Hope that makes it clear(er).

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[Mourners at murdered Ugandan gay activist David Kato's funeral were shocked](#) when the presiding Anglican pastor, Thomas Musoke, called on homosexuals to repent, or "be punished by God", but maybe it's impossible to find a Ugandan pastor who isn't ignorant and prejudiced?

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Feb 2011  
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[Today's Telegraph reports that students at St. Benedict's in Colchester staged a protest after two were told off for holding hands](#). The headteacher, John O'Hara, said, "If we see students being overly familiar we always deal with it in an appropriate and tactful way." Overly familiar? Can't help wondering if this is about a fear of lesbianism? Girls have always been "familiar" with one another, with hugs and hand-holding. I remember photos of my mum as a teenager, arm in arm with her friends, or with their arms around each other's shoulders. Displaying affection is normal, Mr O'Hara.

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[The British Humanist Association reports that Â£2 million towards the cost of the Pope's visit to the UK last year came from the](#)

[Department for International Development \(DfID\)](#), justified as a recognition of "the Catholic Church's role as a major provider of health and education services in developing countries". The BHA has dismissed this as "irrational and wrong".

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If you watched BBC Four's [Storyville, Meet the Climate Sceptics](#), last week, you may have been exasperated by the arguments put forward by leading climate change deniers [Lord Christopher Monckton](#) and Telegraph columnist [James Delingpole](#). Monckton has been to the USA and Australia to talk to the climate change deniers on TV and at public meetings, where he's been received with huge enthusiasm. Delingpole has also been to the USA, where he's appeared on right-wing TV host Glenn Beck's programme, rubbishing the science behind climate change. His scientific ignorance, as displayed on another BBC Four programme recently, [Horizon - Science Under Attack](#), doesn't inhibit him. [He had the cheek to argue with Nobel prizewinner Sir Paul Nurse, President of The Royal Society, that he was wrong about climate change](#). These two ignoramuses, and others like them, attract a lot of attention in climate change sceptic circles because neither they nor their audiences understand the science of climate change, and they don't want to understand it. Unfortunately, scientific ignorance is widespread, even among those who'd like to believe that the sceptics are wrong. For many, it's just too difficult. This is why a video by US high school science teacher Greg Craven is so clever. You don't need to understand the science. Craven offers a simpler argument about acceptable risk; which is the greater risk, economic damage or global disaster? [Watch his YouTube video](#), and make up your own mind.

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[Click here for an interesting report by Rachel Maddow from msnbc.com on how American right-wing evangelists have influenced the Ugandans](#), where leading gay rights activist David Kato was murdered. She asks if foreign aid donors will make their continued help conditional on scrapping anti-gay policies.

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When will Messrs Gove and Pickles stop dismantling our state education and welfare systems, and handing them over to religious organisations? How will we ever put them back together again, when they've finished messing about with them?

A fine mess

In education, under Gove's leadership, the changes are encouraging evangelicals. [The Everyday Champions Church](#), based in Newark, wants to take advantage of Mr Gove's free schools idea, to open a new school. Pastor Gareth Morgan told the [Times Education Supplement](#) about their plans:

Creationism will be taught as the belief of the leadership of the school. It will not be taught exclusively in the sciences, for example. At the same time, evolution will be taught as a theory.

The church website carries a video that states: "If creation is true, there is a purpose to life. If evolution is true, there is no purpose to life." It adds that "if creation is true, then man is a fallen creature and we need a saviour. If evolution is true then man is an evolving creature and we don't need any saviour".

Gove says that he's set up a new due diligence committee at the the DfE:

It will be the responsibility of that committee to monitor all applications for new schools. And to monitor existing arrangements in existing schools to make sure there are no risks of extremism taking hold.

We're going to ensure that we have the resource here to help local authorities and others to deal either with a small group of governors hijacking a school or a group who are promoting a school who are inappropriate, whether they be religious extremists or political extremists.

Just how "extreme" is extremism, in Gove's terms? Will Pastor Morgan get his school?

Meanwhile, as [Alex Kennedy pointed out in the Guardian](#),

... teachers in faith schools that are almost 100% state-funded can be appointed, disciplined, paid, promoted and dismissed according to their beliefs, with fewer legal protections than would apply to the chief executive of a religious charity or business. If more proof were needed that the law as it stands is rotten, then it is significant that both the Equality and Human

Rights Commission and the joint committee on human rights think that it may contravene European law.

Mr Pickles has been just as busy. Under the Big Society banner, he's keen for councils to hand over services they can't afford (because of government cuts) to charities and voluntary organisations (who'll struggle for funding, as their grants won't suffice). Many of these will be religious organisations. At a meeting with faith leaders, Pickles said,

Some see religion as a problem that needs to be solved. The new Government sees it as part of the solution. I want to send an important signal that we value the role of religion and faith in public life. The days of the state trying to suppress Christianity and other faiths are over.

Trying to suppress Christianity? When was this? Over the last few years, the state (led by Labour and the Conservatives) has done just the opposite.

It's a fine mess.

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**Darwin Day 2011**



**Happy Darwin Day, whatever you do, wherever you are.**

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Sorry there've been no updates for a couple of weeks. Been a bit busy with [funerals](#). However, if you'd like to [submit or suggest something for the website](#), please get in touch.

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Mar 2011  
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Bubbles

Here at SHS Towers, our highly trained web monkeys have been labouring over a few changes to the site, and we're a little bit excited.

We've scrapped our entire registration and sign-in system, and replaced it with a new system designed to make it easier for you to share posts, comments and discussion on the Suffolk Humanists and Secularists site.

Now, when read any story on the SHS site, you'll see easier options for sharing it under 'Share', and easier options for adding your comments under 'Respond' - allowing you to sign in with Twitter, Facebook, Yahoo!, OpenID or Disqus, the web's most popular commenting system. All existing comments on the site have been imported into the new system, so nothing has been lost. Comments on Twitter and other sites will now even show up.

We've also updated the look and feel of the site and polished a few other knobs and buttons.

If you were registered with us before, your old account has been deleted.

We're moderating comments to begin with but the hope is that we can open things up and allow the community to moderate discussion - so please feel free to make a start!

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You may have read [in the Mirror](#) that the NHS could save £18.5 million a year, if it stopped funding hospital chaplains. [The NSS has been campaigning on this issue](#) for some time. Many people don't appear to realise that the chaplains' salaries come out of NHS funds; in other words, it's public money, not church money. They assume that the church pays for them. With all the cuts, isn't this a saving that ought to be made?

I'll be on BBC Radio Suffolk with Rob Dunger on Sunday morning, 6<sup>th</sup> March, at around 7.20am, to talk about this. If you're not an early riser on Sundays or you don't live in Suffolk, you can listen again online through the [BBC Radio Suffolk website](#).

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Mar 2011

[Holywells High School in Ipswich has become an academy](#). At one stage, it looked as though the Church of England might take over the school, which has had problems for years and was placed in "special measures" by government Ofsted inspectors from 2001-2004, but the Swedish organisation Kunskapsskolan made the successful bid. The school will now be called the Ipswich Academy.

[Students campaigned against the change of status](#) as the Holywells SOS (Save Our School) group with leaflets delivered door-to-door and a petition signed by 600, while teaching unions have been critical of the change.

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Margaret Nelson from Suffolk Humanists & Secularists will be on BBC Radio Suffolk with Rob Dunger, who's keen to talk about [the NSS's campaign to stop the NHS paying for hospital chaplains](#). There'll probably be a cleric too, but we don't know who that is yet. If you're not local, [you can listen online](#).

[Read more on the NSS website.](#)

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Mar 2011  
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Our March newsletter is out now for you to download.

Articles on the census, the BHA's groups consultation, Lord Richard Harries on Islam, and the acronyms that some of you don't understand.

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

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

March 2011 newsletter

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No religion

Most people will have received their census forms in today's post. You might think that there's a supernatural side to life, or that there is a god of some kind, but if organised religion isn't for you, how you answer the religion question is important.

Please help to ensure that the census gives an accurate and honest picture of the religious/non-religious balance of the UK. Don't ignore the question and leave it blank, or you won't count.

The 2001 census results were used to justify more faith schools and religious broadcasting, unelected religious leaders being involved in political decisions, 26 bishops in the House of Lords, public services being contracted out to religious organisations, and continuing special privileges for the church. Many people don't want these things. If that includes you, tick "No religion" - **but not before 27 March**, Census Day.

Don't write "humanist", or "atheist" or anything else at the bottom of the list - they're not religions. All you need to do is tick the "No religion" box.

[Click here for some leaflets to distribute](#) (pdf)

[Click here for an A4 poster](#) (pdf)

[Read what Winston Fletcher says about the census in New Humanist magazine](#)

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At our meeting last night we were talking about [Charles Bradlaugh, founder of the National Secular Society](#), and how he was prevented from taking up his seat in Parliament because he wouldn't swear an oath on the Bible.

In 1880, after three unsuccessful earlier attempts, Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament for Northampton. When he asked to affirm instead of taking an oath before taking his seat, a parliamentary select committee declared that the right freethinkers had to affirm in law courts didn't extend to Parliament. He then asked to take the oath, but another select committee found his known atheism prevented this but he should be allowed to affirm under pain of statute (penalties for voting without taking the prescribed oath). The battle over his being sworn in began the day he took his seat and voted, and resulted in convoluted legal arguments continuing for six years. Eventually, in 1886 after the 1885 general election he was allowed by the Speaker to take the oath at the beginning of the session, before objections could be made. While all this had been going on, his seat was vacated but he was re-elected at three by-elections (1881, 1883 and 1884).

During the discussion, it emerged that several members had been asked to swear an oath on the Bible - in court, when signing an affidavit, and when joining the police - and had said they preferred to affirm. The officers involved had made comments like, "No one's ever done that before!". We wondered why so few people exercise their right to affirm, and it seemed likely it's because they don't know that they can. When asked to swear an oath, does anyone ever offer an alternative?

The Oaths Act 1978 says,

## 5 Making of solemn affirmations.

- (1) Any person who objects to being sworn shall be permitted to make his solemn affirmation instead of taking an oath.
- (2) Subsection (1) above shall apply in relation to a person to whom it is not reasonably practicable without inconvenience or delay to administer an oath in the manner appropriate to his religious belief as it applies in relation to a person objecting to be sworn.
- (3) A person who may be permitted under subsection (2) above to make his solemn affirmation may also be required to do so.
- (4) A solemn affirmation shall be of the same force and effect as an oath.

## 6 Form of affirmation.

- (1) Subject to subsection (2) below, every affirmation shall be as follows:â€”

â€œI, do solemnly, sincerely and truly declare and affirm,â€ and then proceed with the words of the oath prescribed by law, omitting any words of imprecation or calling to witness.

- (2) Every affirmation in writing shall commence:â€”

â€œI, of , do solemnly and sincerely affirm,â€ and the form in lieu of jurat shall be â€œAffirmed at this day of 19 , Before me.â€

Did you know that you don't have to swear on the Bible? Has anyone made it difficult for you to do so, or suggested that your affirmation may be taken less seriously than an oath on the Bible?

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The Pod Delusion is a weekly news magazine podcast about interesting things. From politics, to science to culture and philosophy, it's commentary from a secular, rationalist, skeptical, somewhat lefty-liberal, sort of perspective. A bit like From Our Own Correspondent but with more jokes. This edition includes: Ex-Daily Star Rich Peppiatt Interview (1:54) by Sean Ellis; Shadow Business Secretary John Denham Interview (8:59) by James Oâ€™Malley; The New Defamation Bill (16:03) by James Thomas (ft Naomi MacAuliffe, Simon Singh and Julian Huppert MP); The BHA Census Campaign Poster Row (22:59) by Liz Lutgendorff (ft Bob Churchill); Green Party Science Policy (28:35) by James Oâ€™Malley (ft Jim Jepps); Douglas Adams Memorial Lecture 2011 (36:21) by Jon Treadway (ft Prof Brian Cox and Robin Ince).

There's stuff in this podcast about the row over the BHA's slogan for the Census Campaign - "If you're not religious, for God's sake, say so". We chose not to use it as we anticipated that it might cause problems that would distract people from the message and was likely to be misunderstood. Our leaflets have been simpler and clearer (see [the post on this site](#)).

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Of interest to the Census Campaign, a new survey from the Searchlight Educational Trust indicates that "only 54% of people in this country define themselves as Christian," [the NSS reports](#). The survey had over 5000 respondents, which is larger than most.

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Ipswich Skeptics in the Pub is now Ipswich Science in the Pub. Organiser John Benton says, "There's no real difference, but it's a title that's easier to explain to people." The next meeting is described as a "get-together".

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Never mind the poster boy of physics, Prof. Brian Cox, Suffolk's got its own super-astronomer, our member [Tom Boles](#), who has [an observatory at Coddanham](#). Tom (who is a Scot, by the way) will be one of the speakers at the [Edinburgh Science Festival](#), together with The Astronomers Royal, Lord Rees and Professor John Brown, Sheffield University's Professor Hughes, and others. The event is free. We'd like to organise an outing to Edinburgh, but we've already had a private presentation from Tom, and it is a long way. However, if you're in Edinburgh in April, why not go and hear him?

Cosmic Threats poster

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Mar 2011  
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What a silly question - of course you can. Whether or not you're religious has nothing to do with it. Some religious people are bad, some are good. Likewise with atheists. However, there are still many who imagine that if you don't believe in a god (usually a Christian or Muslim one), you're a bad person, and everyone who *does* believe is morally superior.

James Hazell has invited Margaret Nelson and a cleric (not sure who) to debate the question on his radio programme on Wednesday (times may vary). If you're not local you can listen online. Meanwhile, you might like to check [our other website](#) that tells you all about it.

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Apr 2011  
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Professor Anthony Grayling, soon to be the [President of the British Humanist Association](#), has rewritten the Bible, without all [the nasty bits](#) (there are a lot of them). [Matthew Adams from New Humanist has interviewed him about his "lifetime's work"](#). Grayling says,

A C Grayling

The way I made it was to plunder from the great traditions texts on which I had performed redaction, weaving them together, editing them, interpolating other texts and sometimes my own, just as the Bible makers worked on their texts. It was tremendous fun.

If you decide to buy it, why not use our Amazon link? That way, we get some commission.

Postscript: [The Daily Mash says the new book's "an impossible fairy story"](#).

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You're invited to bring recommended reading to the meeting. Fiction or non-fiction, prose or poetry, science or art, funny or serious - whatever you've enjoyed, come and be prepared to tell us about it. Note that if you decide to buy any of the books, there's an Amazon link on our website - we get commission if you use it.

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Apr 2011  
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A short illustrated talk by our member Andrew Sheldon on the history of the River Stour from its source to the sea. Places of interest along the way from times gone by and the present day, including important brickwork's, battle grounds and structures.

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Apr 2011  
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Prof. John Midwinter (BSc & PhD in Physics, Hon. DSc, Fellow of the Royal Society) will address the following questions:

- What is the truth about climate change? (the scientific evidence)
- What are the implications for us?
- How can we reduce our personal fossil fuel consumption?
- What are the possibilities for large scale renewable energy in the UK?
- Tipping points - the real worry behind the climate change debate.

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Apr 2011  
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Humanist Week includes [World Humanist Day](#) (21st June, the summer solstice). We're still working on our plans for this year, Watch this space.

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Apr 2011  
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Members enjoyed talking about the books they'd read at our May meeting, so they wanted to do it again. This time, we may talk about films too, maybe even films of books. Share your recommended reading or films.

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Apr 2011  
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Group members will be consulted about the BHA's proposal to change the relationship with us, signing up to a detailed agreement. We are currently affiliated but could become a partner. We'll be deciding when and how to consult members.

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Apr 2011  
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At its AGM last week, the Suffolk Humanist & Secularist group failed to elect a new chairperson, as no one wanted the job. It was agreed that a chairperson would be nominated from the attendees at each meeting, while the committee would take it in turns to chair their meetings.

The new committee consists of Denis Johnston (secretary), John Mellis (treasurer), John Palmer, Tom Boles, Colleen Nunn, Michael Imison, Tom Boles, Sue Hewlett and Peter Davidson. This is the largest committee that the group has ever had.

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Apr 2011  
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In the Independent, [Adrian Hamilton writes](#),

... this Easter week, I can't help feeling more than ever that the Church of England will not survive my children's lifetime and quite possibly not even my own.

He opines that the C of E may do better if it severs its ties with the state. We'd like disestablishment too, wouldn't we?

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Apr 2011  
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Two stories that have been in the news have attracted lots of attention; the French burqa ban and the Big Society.

Eric Pickles and Sayeeda Warsi seem to imagine that religious organisations are the best ones to provide public services in the Big Society. [In yesterday's Guardian, Rahila Gupta wrote](#),

"Faith" has increasingly become the new way of constructing racial minorities, a trend that started under Tony Blair and continues under the Tory-led government. Secularism is seen as so intrinsically western that it is unimaginable for policymakers to conceive that it might be welcome within minority communities, especially the powerless among them.

The burqa ban continues to attract a lot of debate. Many think that we should have a similar ban here. [I blogged against the idea](#) and was answered by blogger Kausik Datta in the US, who disagreed with me.

What do you think?

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Apr 2011  
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Campaigning against religion can be socially counter-productive. If teachers take the uncompromising line that God and Darwinism are irreconcilable, many young people raised in a faith-based culture will stick with their religion and be lost to science. Moreover, we need all the allies we can muster against fundamentalism - a palpable, perhaps growing concern.

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May 2011  
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Ipswich Science in the Pub people are meeting at McGinty's for a pre- [Uncaged Monkeys](#) drink.

Look for the table with a copy of New Scientist on it.

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May 2011  
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Our May newsletter is available now for you to download. [Click here](#) or on the image for your copy. For help with pdf files, [click here](#).

[SH&S Newsletter](#)

Read about our next meeting (on recommended reading), what a SACRE is, the Uncaged Monkeys in Ipswich, a good woman with green fingers, our healthy finances, what we thought about the burqa ban, the BHA's new president and his book, and plans for the next three months, which include a visit from Prof. John Midwinter.

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May 2011  
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Rapture billboard

I hope you haven't made any plans for the end of October onwards, because we're all going to fry, apparently, on the 21st October. The world will be destroyed by fire, say those who hope to be "God's elect people", but they're not expecting to be here after the 21st of this month, when [The Rapture](#) happens and they're all swept up into heaven to leave us unbelievers behind.

Our webmaster was planning to spend six months in Ghana from the beginning of next month but now he's beginning to wonder if he should change his plans. There's a signboard near the university in Kumasi, where he's going, warning people to be "saved". If he hasn't been saved, it's a waste of money buying that plane ticket.

It's good to know that between 21st May and 21st October (when the world's destroyed by fire) there are helpful atheists who are willing to care for the pets of those who've gone to live with Jesus (or wherever it is they go). [Eternal Earth-Bound Pets](#), USA, say

Our service is plain and simple; our fee structure is reasonable. For \$135.00 we will guarantee that should the Rapture occur

within ten (10) years of receipt of payment, one pet per residence will be saved. Each additional pet at your residence will be saved for an additional \$20.00 fee. A small price to pay for your peace of mind and the health and safety of your four legged and feathered friends.

I mentioned the Rapture on Facebook the other day, wondering what the fundamentalist Christians will say if it doesn't happen. What if God forgets? He, she or it may be distracted by whatever's happening in another part of the universe. A friend responded, "He'd better not forget. I'm looking forward to all of them not being here." She has a point. There'd be more room for the rest of us, until the 21st October.

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May 2011  
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[The Big Questions on BBC TV on Sunday](#) was amusing. It was supposed to be about "The future of British Islam". Nicky Campbell lost control of a bunch of Muslims all shouting at one another, while [Dame Anne Leslie](#) kept chipping in with comments prefaced with "When I was in Pakistan/Iran/Afghanistan...", etc. When she referred to the burqa as a "bin bag", that really fanned the flames of indignation.

I had to Google [Dr Taj Hargey](#), whose posture indicated his contempt for most of the opinions being expressed by sitting right back in his chair, while others leant forward as they tried to outshout one another. He's described as "the imam who took on the 'Muslim McCarthyists'".

While there are similarly diverse views about the correct version of Christianity among those who care about such things, a majority of nominal Christians neither know nor care about the theology of the religion they claim to follow, and rarely, if ever, read the Bible. You don't get the feeling that a majority of Muslims are equally casual about their religion. They all read the Qur'an, for a start.

There was no consensus about what the future of British Islam might be, though most of those who spoke were keen to distance themselves from extremists and terrorists. Judging from the diversity of opinions on the Big Questions, they're going to be so busy arguing with one another about who's right and who's wrong that their future will be fractious, which is why the Government should not consult any of their self-appointed "leaders" on matters of public policy. None of them represents anyone but themselves.

(First published on [The Answer's 42](#))

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May 2011  
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Professor Edzard Ernst, who was a guest speaker at a recent [Ipswich Science in the Pub](#) meeting, has announced his retirement as Director of the Complementary Medicine Research Group. We're hoping that he'll come and talk to us soon.

[Zeno, aka Alan Henness, has published an interview with Prof. Ernst on his blog.](#) He ended by asking what Edzard would do when he fully retires, and the professor replied:

Become really outspoken about quackery and charlatans. I look forward to that. Hopefully, UK libel law has changed by then.

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May 2011  
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[View Larger Map](#)

Our webmaster, Nathan Nelson, is flying out to Kumasi in Ghana for 6 months on the 8th June, where his other half, Harriet, is being sponsored to work with an organisation called [Millennium Villages](#), while Nathan finds some other ways to make himself useful. You

can follow their adventures on their blog, [Ghana 180](#).

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Jun 2011  
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Our website, powered by a free content management system called [Drupal](#), has been updated recently. Since then we've noticed that some punctuation marks have been replaced by odd symbols. We're fixing them when we can, but if you'd like to draw our attention to any, please [click here to contact us](#). Thanks.

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Jun 2011  
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The Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill, has been introduced into the House of Lords by [Baroness Caroline Cox](#) (independent), with the support of the [One Law for All](#) campaign. The bill doesn't aim to interfere with religious freedom, but does aim to stop the discrimination against women under the sharia law system. [Read the National Secular Society's report on their website](#). Currently, many British Muslim women suffer unequal access to divorce, domestic violence and general injustice, while their rights aren't recognised by sharia courts. The bill makes it clear that British people, regardless of their religion, must accept British law, which always takes precedence over sharia law.

Baroness Cox

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Jun 2011  
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We've been concerned that the Conservatives' '[Big Society](#)' idea offers a lot of encouragement for faith organisations to provide public services, yet [faith-based welfare](#) is fraught with problems. Now former MP [Dr Evan Harris](#) and grassroots Lib Dems are warning the Government that it shouldn't press ahead with this policy without ensuring that strict rules are in place to prevent proselytising, among other things. [Today's Guardian](#) quotes Harris as saying,

Any increased use of faith-based organisations delivering essential public services will need stricter safeguards to prevent discrimination against vulnerable and captive populations on the basis of religion or sexuality, as well as to prevent employees needing to pass 'faith tests'.

The Lib Dems have made clear that religious organisations have as much right as anyone else to provide services, but until legal loop-holes are closed we expect the Government to ensure that contracts contain non-discrimination clauses.

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Jun 2011  
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[The Pod Delusion reports that Anthony Grayling has said that he won't take up the presidency of the BHA on July 1st](#) because of [the controversy surrounding plans for his £18,000 a year New College of the Humanities](#). Current BHA President Polly Toynbee will stay on until she can be replaced.

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Jun 2011  
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For Humanist Week, this week, John Palmer and other committee members have created a Library display display in Suffolk Central Library in Northgate Street, Ipswich. June 21st, the midsummer solstice, is [World Humanist Day](#). The display lists the names of some leading humanists and shows some of the books they've written, to encourage library users to find out more. It also shows our two websites: [www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk) and [www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com](http://www.agoodlifewithoutreligion.com).

[Click here for a map to the library.](#)

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Jun 2011  
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British artist Darryl Cunningham is working on a book of Science Stories, due out next spring. It'll include a comic strip explanation of evolution. Meanwhile, [you can see the strip on his blog](#). Darryl says, "I'm sure there'll be mistakes here, so do feel free to point them out, so that I can make the necessary changes. Thank you."

Evolution comic

On the subject of evolution, have you read our page about Creationism and Intelligent Design? [Click here if you haven't.](#)

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Jun 2011  
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[Professor Edzard Ernst](#), the retiring Director of the Complimentary Medicine Research Group, said the claims of faith healers investigated on Newsnight last night are "irresponsible, even criminal". The "healers" claimed to be able to cure cancer. [Click here to see the programme.](#)

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Jun 2011  
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Successive UK governments have been mucking about with our education system for decades, but it seems to have been almost completely dismantled the previous Labour government, which introduced specialist schools, and academies, and the current government. The comprehensive system may not have been popular with everyone, but it was possible to fix it without destroying it in the process. Nowadays, the emphasis is on parental choice, which usually means that those who shout loudest get the most and their choices aren't necessarily informed.

Steiner

The Conservative's Secretary of State for Education, the [Rt Hon Michael Gove MP](#), who's never been short of an opinion or invitations to appear on the telly, has a thing about "free schools"; schools free to more or less do what they like, at taxpayers' expense. [Toby Young](#), also famous for being famous, is their champion, which ought to be enough to make most people think twice, if not several times, about the soundness of the concept. [The Free School movement originated in Sweden](#), where it hasn't been the huge success that its enthusiasts would like us to think it is. The main beneficiaries seem to be children from more privileged backgrounds, who have all the advantages anyway. In the UK, [the idea has been seized upon by religious organisations](#), so there's concern about what children will be taught and about children being segregated by religion, at public expense.

Now a group of parents and teachers want to open a free school in Suffolk based on the principles of Rudolph Steiner, the [Fullfledge Ecology School](#). There's more about the people behind the idea in the [East Anglian Daily Times](#). Steiner invented "Anthroposophy", which he defined as "a path of knowledge, to guide the Spiritual in the human being to the Spiritual in the universe." Steiner has had a cult following for years. David Colquhoun, FRS, the British pharmacologist at University College London, has a blog called "DC's Improbable Science", where he attacks pseudo-science, nonsense and general quackery. [His posts on Steiner Waldorf schools](#) explain why they shouldn't be publicly funded, and why all sensible parents should steer well clear of them.

Gove and the DfES are being lobbied to rethink their attitude to funding Steiner schools, and to tighten up their criteria for funding in general.

[Click here for David Colquhoun on Twitter.](#)

[Click here for teacher/writer Francis Gilbert's thoughts on schools founded by a "racist mystic".](#)

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Jun 2011

In 2005, our webmaster Nathan Nelson took a series of photos in Phnom Penh's [Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum](#), S-21. Some of them have been used in the new [Museum of Memory and Tolerance](#), a not-for-profit based in Mexico City.

[Cambodian Museum](#)

[Click here to see more of the photos.](#) Warning: some will find these pictures disturbing.

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Jul 2011

There is no humanist creed, no set of beliefs to which every humanist has to subscribe. Humanism is not a dogma or a sect...as human beings we can find from our own resources the shared moral values which we need in order to live together, and the means to create meaningful and fulfilling lives for ourselves.

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Jul 2011

The BHA has a new website, [The Really Simple Guide to Humanism](#), "to inform interested newcomers to humanism". We wonder if they got the idea from our simple guide, [A Good Life Without Religion](#)?

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Jul 2011

[Hygiene talk](#)

[Our man in Ghana](#) took this photo while his colleague Nicholas was talking about hygiene to school students. Nathan says, "I took the picture but I was giving the talk as well. We hope to develop an awesome double act."

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Jul 2011

It's been claimed that waiting for the outcome of a police investigation into the News of the World's phone hacking allows those involved plenty of time to "lose" a lot of the evidence. Maybe you'd like to sign a petition calling for a full public enquiry now? [Click here to sign Hacked Off's petition.](#)

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Jul 2011

Over 10 million people are at risk in East Africa due to conflict and some areas being affected by the worst drought in 60 years. The DEC East Africa Crisis Appeal will support the work of its members in affected areas of Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia and South Sudan. Your donations can help provide life saving aid such as food, water, care for malnourished children and medical treatment.

[DEC East Africa Appeal](#)

**Please click on the image to donate now to the East Africa Crisis Appeal.**

In the past, some atheists have said that they won't respond to DEC (Disasters Emergency Committee) appeals, because some of the aid organisations involved have a religious ethos.

Surely what matters is that the money goes to people who are already in the field, and who can use your money for life-saving work as fast as possible? When people are starving, they're not worried where their food is coming from. However, if you would prefer to send your money through an organisation that is entirely non-religious, look for Action Aid, Merlin, Save the Children, the Red Cross or Oxfam.

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Jul 2011  
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Have you heard of [Kiva](#)? Kiva is a non-profit organisation with a mission to connect people through lending to alleviate poverty. Using the internet and a worldwide network of microfinance institutions, Kiva lets individuals lend as little as \$25 to help create opportunity around the world. There are currently 597,615 members of Kiva, and 16,319 of them are part of the international [Atheists, Agnostics, Skeptics, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists and the Non-Religious](#) lending team, demonstrating that we're all part of one human family. All you need to do to join is loan someone \$25. When it's repaid, you can relend it to someone else. Simple, isn't it?

Kiva

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Jul 2011  
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Have just discovered [a piece that Mark Steel wrote for the Independent in January 2009](#), taking the mickey out of the Creationists and Intelligent Design, which he suggests is more like "Vindictive Design", since a god who designed some of the stuff we have to put up with can't have been very intelligent. Steel wrote:

... if all species were designed, it was hardly done by someone intelligent. If it was, how do you account for the parasitic wasp that lays eggs on its prey so they hatch and eat its victim while it's still alive?

More to the point, why are your most sensitive nerves at the end of your toe, where they're most likely to get walloped? Why are men's nuts in such a vulnerable location, ay? Bloody vindictive design that is. Why do dogs do the squashiest, most unpleasant turds that hide in the grass and spread themselves in the indentations on the bottom of your shoe, but don't start smelling until you get indoors and then render the place uninhabitable until you've left every window open for a month? Why, why, why?

All good questions. If you'd like to read more about the subject, go to our [We're All Monkeys](#) page.

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Jul 2011  
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The world is so exquisite, with so much love and moral depth, that there is no reason to deceive ourselves with pretty stories for which there's little good evidence. Far better, it seems to me, is to look Death in the eye and be grateful every day for the brief but magnificent opportunity that life provides.

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Jul 2011  
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[My] purpose is is to transform theologians into anthropologists, lovers of God into lovers of man, candidates for the next world into students of this world - I negate the fantastic hypocrisy of theology and religion only in order to affirm the true nature of man.

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Jul 2011  
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It has never mattered to me that thirty million people might think I'm wrong. The number of people who thought Hitler was right did not make him right... Why do you necessarily have to be wrong just because a few million people think you are?

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Jul 2011  
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[David and Victoria Beckham have been criticised for setting a bad example by having a fourth child](#), as the world's population is due to reach 7 billion. It's unlikely that the Beckhams have considered whether the size of their family is anyone's business but their own. Affluent parents who choose to have more than one or two children are likely to take exception to any criticism, perhaps feeling that if they can afford it, why shouldn't they have a large family? In his speech at the Royal Society of Arts in March this year, Sir David Attenborough, patron of [Population Matters](#), explains why population control should no longer be a taboo subject.

[David Attenborough Talk on Population](#)

by [populationmatters](#)

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Jul 2011  
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We take our [toilets](#) for granted. Most people think that we owe our modern flushing WC to Thomas Crapper, but it seems that Sir John Harrington first had the idea in the 16th century. Now here we are, in the 21st century, where four out of ten people worldwide don't have access to a toilet. Our webmaster, Nathan, [is rather preoccupied with them](#) as he's currently involved with a scheme to provide latrines in Ghanaian villages. He found this video. The next time you go for a poo, be grateful that you have a nice, clean flushing toilet.

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Jul 2011  
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Seven Hills Crematorium on Felixstowe Road, Nacton is holding a "Dispelling the myths" and Cream Tea Event in support of [The Treehouse Appeal](#). The crematorium will throw open its doors with access all areas for the public. Entrance will be free but Cream and High Teas will be on sale and served in the garden. Experts will be on hand to offer free advice on such subjects as wills and what is available in the way of funeral choices. There will be various interesting exhibits including a horse drawn hearse and a Scottish piper. It is an ideal opportunity for the public to come along and ask all the questions they have always wanted to ask about cremation but perhaps did not know who to ask.

7 Hills logo

Further information is available from the Crematorium Office: 01473 655614.

There will be a Suffolk Humanist Ceremonies stall at this event, and a short presentation about Humanist funerals during the day.

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Jul 2011  
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From George Broadhead of the [Pink Triangle Trust](#), news of the Queen's visit to Bletchley Park, where she praised the work of Alan Turing and those who worked with him. [The IHEU reports](#):

Humanists have warmly welcomed the Queen of England's praise for the gay atheist Alan Turing, whose work breaking German codes played a crucial role in World War II. The creator of the modern computer, Turing received little recognition for his work during his life, which ended when he committed suicide after he was convicted of a homosexual act and forced to undergo chemical castration.

On July 15, the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh unveiled a monument to commemorate the contribution made by code breakers, based at Bletchley Park in the British midlands, to the victory over Nazi Germany. In her speech the Queen said it was "impossible to overstate" the sense of gratitude to people who worked at Bletchley Park. "[It] became the centre of a world-wide web of intelligence communications, spanning the Commonwealth and further afield. This was the place of geniuses such as Alan Turing."

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Jul 2011  
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Since [our post on the proposed Fullfledge free school in Suffolk](#), our supporter and correspondent Esther Fidler has met some of the people who plan to set up this school, and [has blogged about their lack of qualifications](#) or credible objectives. On the influence of Steiner's ideas and the responses she got to her questions, Esther wrote,

I began to get the impression that knowledge, unless gained specifically from a (possibly unqualified) class teacher was not encouraged; the idea of a mystical, esoteric belief system based upon reincarnation and karma being the foundation of a school which does not encourage finding out information through books, TV or the internet was beginning to make me feel distinctly uncomfortable.

Now Francis Gilbert, author of '[I'm a Teacher, Get Me Out of Here!](#)', has recommended Esther's blog post on the [Local Schools Network](#) website, beginning:

We've already highlighted at length the problems with Steiner schools on this site; their dangerous attitudes towards vaccinations, the racist beliefs of their founder and their very strange mysticism being chief among them.

This may not be a faith school in the sense that most people understand them - it's not about an organised religion, such as Christianity or Islam - but it is about a cult in disguise, one that seems entirely reasonable at first glance, if you're into green issues. The Fullfledge people were at an event that was organised by Suffolk Quakers today in Ipswich, a [Festival of Green Ideas](#), where their speaker was Marisa Fovmicola. Unfortunately, we didn't hear about it until it was too late to attend, or we might have gone and asked some pertinent questions about Steiner and his racism, etc.

If you're interested in stopping the Fullfledge school from benefiting from Gove's free school plans and getting public money, please [get in touch](#).

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Jul 2011  
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**Touch the screen, touch the screen!**

Phil Collins & Genesis, from the album 'We can't dance',

1991.

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Aug 2011  
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The latest newsletter is here now for you to download.

Features on climate change, the Girl Guides and God, the possibility of a Steiner free school in Suffolk, plus book reviews and a book quiz, not forgetting our programme for the next three months.

Why not print a couple of copies for your friends?

[Click here to download now](#). For help with PDF files, [click here](#).

SH&SNews Aug 2011

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Aug 2011  
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[Francis Gilbert of the Local Schools Network reports that those who want to open Steiner schools at public expense through Gove's free school system are keen to "repudiate" their racist roots.](#)

They present themselves today as trendy, progressive schools who welcome parents with alternative views. However, what they keep well hidden is their loony mystical beliefs. Steiner founded a philosophy called “Anthroposophy”, a sort of mystical mish-mash of ideas which includes the concept that the human race are “evolving” through the different races, with black people being “of childhood”, Asians “degenerate” and white people, of course, being the apogee of the evolutionary tree. Many Anthroposophists teach at Steiner schools today — and certainly form the bulk of their teacher trainers — and greatly admire Steiner.

Today, the Department for Education and Skills is interviewing the people who want to open such a school in Frome. If they get the go-ahead it will give the green light to others, including the people who want a Steiner school in Suffolk. We'll be talking about this at our September meeting.

For more about this, see [our previous post](#).

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Aug 2011  
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"Deviating a little from our third Tuesday of the month, and having an event on the penultimate Tuesday of the month, in a vain attempt to avoid some summer holidays. I'll also reveal what the event photo is." John Benton.

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Aug 2011

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At last night's meeting, somehow the conversation got around to maths ("math", to our American friends) and a report that too many kids are incapable of working out fractions or percentages when they leave school, and that [maths teaching should be changed](#). One of us remembered this Tom Lehrer song, which makes maths sound like fun.

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Aug 2011  
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[The British Humanist Association](#) is sponsoring a petition on the Government's new website, calling for the teaching of evolution to be mandatory in all publicly-funded schools, and to stop the teaching of creationism and "Intelligent Design" being taught as scientific theories.

To sign the petition, [click here](#).

If the petition gets 100,000 signatures, it could be debated in the House of Commons.

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Aug 2011  
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[Gay Ugandan Robert faces being forced to leave the UK tomorrow](#) (Thursday 18 August). [Please sign this petition](#) to try to prevent this.

LGBT Asylum News reports:

Robert was imprisoned and tortured for homosexuality. On escaping prison in June 2010 he fled to the UK and applied for asylum a fortnight later. The UK Border Agency (UKBA) does not accept he is gay and a judge rejected his appeal claiming that there is no risk to gay people in Uganda.

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Aug 2011  
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Gay Ugandan Robert Segwani has been spared deportation at the last minute and returned to detention. Thank you if you signed [the petition we told you about the other day](#), but Robert isn't out of danger yet. [Joe Mirabella reports](#):

Robert Segwani

Robert was spared from deportation at the very last minute according to his friend and fellow gay Ugandan refugee John Bosco, "[Robert] is back in the detention centre waiting to hear what's next. He had 5 escorts up to the plane, and as he was about to board the plane the Home Office stopped his deportation. He is very tired and stressed since he has not been sleeping well. He is in pain."

John Bosco told me on the phone that Robert has not been eating well and that he was considering suicide, "Since last Friday, when he was given the deportation notice he stopped eating. He threatened to kill himself, because he has had enough," said Bosco.

More than 3,500 people signed [Paul Canning's Change.org petition](#) asking the Home Office to grant Robert Segwanyi asylum in the UK.

**Update, 8/9/2011:** Have received an email from LGBT Asylum News saying, "Last night Robert was released from detention. Although we (and Robert) don't yet know why he was released, those of us who work with LGBT asylum seekers know that this is a good sign, that it is extremely likely that his case will eventually be accepted."

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Aug 2011  
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Ugandan gays aren't the only ones facing persecution (see last posts). There's a climate of fear for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people across Africa. [The Pink Triangle Trust](#) released this news briefing in January:

#### **THE SITUATION FOR LGBT PEOPLE IN AFRICA "GOING FROM BAD TO WORSE" SAY GAY HUMANISTS**

Following the latest example of virulent homophobia in Ghana, the UK gay Humanist charity the Pink Triangle Trust (PTT) says that the situation for LGBT people in Africa is going from bad to worse.

A government minister in Ghana has called on the country's intelligence services to track down and arrest all gays and lesbians. The call has come from Paul Evans Aidoo, the minister for the Western Region of Ghana. Mr Aidoo, a staunch Roman Catholic, said: "All efforts are being made to get rid of these people in society." He called for the Bureau of National Investigations to round up gays and called on landlords and tenants to inform on people they suspect of being homosexual. "Once they have been arrested, they will be brought before the law."

The move by Mr Aidoo has drawn support from other politicians, including the general secretary of the People's National Convention (PNC) who declared "Homosexuality is abhorrent. Media discourse across the world is being dictated by the vulgar opinions of homosexuals. Ghana and probably Africa cannot sustain the menace of homosexuals."

This development follows months of campaigning by the Christian Council of Ghana which last week called on Ghanaians not to vote for any politician who believes in the rights of homosexuals. Both Christians and Muslims in the region have been protesting since a local media report claimed there were around 8,000 gay men and lesbians in the district. It is the latest in a series of expressions of officially condoned homophobia across the continent, notably in Malawi and Uganda.

Homosexual acts are criminalised in 38 African countries. Last year, the launch of a parliamentary bill in Uganda proposing the death penalty for same-sex encounters sparked a campaign of "outing" of a dozen lesbians and gay men by a Kampala newspaper. One of those named, gay rights activist David Kato, was beaten to death with a hammer in January. The law is still under discussion. In Malawi, two men who staged a partnership ceremony in December 2009 were jailed for 14 years. They were pardoned in April 2010 after pressure from European and American aid donors. The prime ministers of Zimbabwe and Kenya have both denounced homosexuality.

The PTT's Secretary George Broadhead commented: "The situation for LGBT people in African states seems to be going from bad to worse and, as in the rest of the world, it is clear that much of the hostility they face stems from religious teachings. Examples are the Anglican Church of Uganda's support for the Anti-Homosexual Bill and the Anglican Church of Nigeria's support for a similar bill.

"By contrast, Humanists, notably Leo Igwe of the Nigerian Humanist Movement and George Thindwa of the Association for Secular Humanism in Malawi, have spoken out bravely in support of LGBT rights.

"In 2006 Leo Igwe made an impassioned appeal to members of the Nigerian National Assembly not to pass a Bill that would not only criminalise gay marriage but also impose a five-year jail sentence on anyone who has a gay relationship or anyone who aids or supports a gay marriage or relationship. He and his family have been harassed by the authorities ever since. Not surprisingly, the Bill had the blessing of the Nigerian Anglican Church and its leader, Archbishop Peter Akinola, as well as

the then Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, who declared that homosexual practice 'is clearly unbiblical, unnatural and definitely un-African'.

"In 2010 George Thindwa and his colleagues of the Association for Secular Humanism in Malawi made a courageous public stand for LGBT identity and rights taking great risks of retaliation from homophobic politicians, religious leaders, and a hostile mass media.

"The worldwide Humanist movement, represented by the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#), deserves to be recognised as an unequivocal supporter of LGBT rights."

American fundamentalist Christians are fanning the flames of hatred across the continent, as they export their particularly nasty form of homophobia. [Val Kalende, a "Queer Ugandan woman" studying in the US, has written an interesting paper on the subject](#), in which she says,

When U.S evangelicals bring their theology of "sexual uprightness" to Africa they meet a people who are not only threatened by the "return" of colonialism through Western human-rights oriented perspectives on sexuality, but are strongly attached to continuation of family lineage through child bearing. Out of these two best kept interests sprouts adverse anti-gay attitudes that are almost difficult to eliminate because of the underlying element of religion through which they are propagated.

[Our man in Ghana](#) has commented, "Christianity is industrialised here."

[Wikipedia has some interesting statistics about social attitudes towards homosexuality](#) around the world. It shows that the Pew Global Attitudes Project asked, "Should homosexuality be accepted by society?". 41% of American respondents said no, while British and Canadian respondents were more tolerant, Scandinavians and Europeans were the most tolerant, and Africans among the least tolerant. In most cases, the more religious a country is, the more homophobic the attitudes of its citizens will be.

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Aug 2011  
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[The Times Education Supplement has an article about the applications for free school status by Steiner schools](#). It says:

The Steiner approach emphasises the importance of practical crafts such as woodwork, book-binding and knitting, while students spend less time learning ICT skills.

Such free-school proposals appear to undermine the Government's stance that schools should be teaching a more traditional "knowledge-based" curriculum.

Steiner schools are based on the teachings of Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner, who founded "anthroposophy", which promotes the belief that all humans possess an innate spirit or soul, through which a person can connect to a spirit world via "inner development".

The British Humanist Association said it had "serious concerns" over what would be taught in the Steiner schools, given that free schools have considerable freedoms over their curriculum.

For more on this, see [our previous posts](#). We'll be discussing a proposed Steiner school in Suffolk at [our next meeting](#).

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Aug 2011  
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In [our last newsletter](#), we reported on a meeting where our guest speaker, Prof. John Midwinter, had spoken about climate change. The report mentioned the arch-sceptic, [Christopher Monckton](#), who travels around the world, rubbishing the science behind climate change. Thanks to American science blogger, [P Z Myers](#), we've found a lecture online by Prof. John Abraham that exposes all the fallacies in Monckton's arguments. Please refer anyone who doubts that climate change is our responsibility to it.

[Click here for the lecture as a series of You Tube videos](#).

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Sep 2011  
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"Pastor" Michael Stahl from Florida, who doesn't actually have a church and probably assumed the title himself, is clearly a very ignorant and prejudiced man. [A year ago he wrote in his blog that he was going to start a grassroots organization to keep a database of](#)

[atheists called "The Christian National Registry of Atheists."](#) He wrote,

I mean, think about it. There are already National Registrys [sic] for convicted sex offenders, ex-convicts, terrorist cells, hate groups like the KKK, skinheads, radical Islamists, etc... This type of 'National Registry' would merely be for information purposes.

When Mr Stahl's great idea came to light a few days ago, it naturally annoyed a lot of people, mainly atheists like us, who'd never considered any similarity with sex offenders or terrorists. Mr Stahl seems to have neglected to make a list of all the Catholic sex offenders, but perhaps he thinks that the Pope's right, and we should just ignore them.

Anyhow, [the Thinking Atheist](#) thought that this was a good opportunity to point out what a great list this might be.

[Click here for Pastor Mike's blog](#), but mind the stupidity.

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Sep 2011  
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We've had an email from Sophie Wainwright, who's organising a charity event on September 16th at The Brewery Tap, Ipswich, in aid of the East Africa Crisis Appeal. Sophie wrote,



Money being raised will go to the [DEC](#) to help those affected by the famine in East Africa. I was interested to read your blog posts on your site about the DEC appeal and more recently about the situation with LGBT Africans, and thought you might be interested in this event.

I'd like to invite yourself and your colleagues/members to the event, which aside from being for a very worthwhile cause promises to be a fantastic evening of fun and enjoyment for everyone. I have attached a copy of the event poster, if you could pass this onto your contacts and members it would be very much appreciated, as it would be great to get as many people there as possible to raise as much as we can for the appeal.

The evening will include live music from local band Highly Strung, a BBQ, an auction hosted by [Nick Pandolfi from Town 102](#), a raffle and stalls. Entry is free but of course donations would be very much appreciated.

Lots of exciting prizes are up for grabs in the auction and raffle: hair and beauty treatments, clothes, a barrel of beer, a photography day, gym membership, football tickets, cinema tickets, meals and lots more! If you know of someone/a business that might like to donate a prize, please do let me know.

[The donation page for the event is available here if you are unable to attend but would still like to give.](#) I have used mydonate rather than JustGiving as this site charges less commission on donations.

It would be fantastic to see you there. :-)

Best wishes

Sophie Wainwright

If you need more information, please [get in touch](#) and we'll forward your message.

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Sep 2011  
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Here's some stuff I've found on the Internet recently.

[Stephen Howe wrote about the "reinvention of Islam" since 9/11](#) in New Humanist magazine. People have become defined by their religion, rather than their ethnicity, he says. He ends:

The caveat that all collective identities are potentially oppressive and dangerous, not just religious, and not least national, ones, surely requires little reiteration. Even so, personally, I'd quite like to see the past decade's wave of ethnic cleansing reversed. That is, I have no objection at all to Muslim neighbours, friends, fellow citizens – but given the choice, on the whole I'd prefer to get rid of them, and bring back the Sylhetis and Somalis, Turks and Tunisians I used to live with.

[Phones 4U has been banned from using an advertisement by the Advertising Standards Authority](#) because an illustration of Jesus winking and giving a thumbs up was considered "disrespectful" to the Christian faith. The BBC quoted Andrew Copson of the BHA in its report, saying that the ban was "completely ridiculous".

Click, the BBC's programme about "the world of technology" (mostly computing, the Internet, and smart phones) had [a report on the popularity of religious phone apps in Singapore](#), where app developers are creating software "to make the most out of religion". Here next?

[The BBC's Radio 5 Live](#) had an item on a report that almost two thirds of schools in England are ignoring their legal duty to provide a daily act of worship. This isn't news, as many teachers will tell you. The law on collective worship in schools has been widely flouted for years. One of the speakers was from [Accord](#).

[Christina Patterson has written an excellent piece for the Independent on keeping faith out of politics](#). She says,

The truth, if you can claim such a thing without a hotline to anyone, is that the people who are keen to bring faith groups into politics are often the ones who don't know all that much about faith.

In the wake of Hurricane Irene, with reference to politics over the Pond, [Hadley Freeman wrote in the Guardian](#),

To see British politicians adopting the Christian right's misogynistic and anti-sex attitudes is frankly terrifying; a lot scarier – funnily enough – than the thought of an earthquake sent from God.

The same article referred to [Nadine Dorries](#), who's just failed to get her amendment to the Health and Social Care bill passed in the House of Commons. If she'd succeeded, it would have prevented abortion choice charities like the [British Pregnancy Advisory Service](#) from counselling women, who'd have been offered the services of "independent" counsellors instead, some of them from religious organisations. Dorries claimed that organisations like BPAS had a financial interest in retaining their counselling service, which was nonsense - it's a charity! In his blog, Bad Science, [Dr Ben Goldacre pointed out just one of Ms Dorries' many errors](#). She's well known for them. One wonders why the good people of Mid-Bedfordshire voted for her.

Until someone posted something on Twitter about [Hypatia T-shirts from the Masters of Grok](#), I'd never heard of her. [She was a mathematician, scientist, astronomer and philosopher](#) who lived in Alexandria and was murdered by a mob, a fanatical Christian sect, in 415 AD.

Marking the death of **Robert Ettinger**, "a pioneer of the cryonics movement", the Guardian had a poll asking if you'd like to be "brought back to life after death". Amazingly, [over half the respondents said yes](#). There've been films about this. Woody Allen's [Sleeper](#) is full of slapstick, the most depressing is Denis Potters's TV drama [Cold Lazarus](#), and my favourite is Dark Star, a low budget film by John Carpenter, where the captain of a space ship is frozen after an accident involving a faulty rear seat panel. No, I wouldn't like to be frozen thanks.

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Further evidence, if any were needed, that Education Secretary Michael Gove is determined to destroy our secular (i.e. comprehensive) education system, a process that began under the last government, and favour faith schools. The Catholic Herald reports that he advises that Catholic schools can avoid "unsympathetic meddling" by secularists if they take up the Government's offer of academy status.

[Read the report by clicking here.](#)

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Seems you can't even get on a bus these days without risking some god-botherer trying to convert you. Mormons have been targetting passengers on Stagecoach buses in Lancashire. [The Guardian reports,](#)

Robert Preston, England Manchester Mission President for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, also known as the Mormon Church, said he considered the 140 young people in the north west of England actively engaged in trying to convert people as "persistent and courageous". He added: "They will sit next to someone, and they will introduce themselves and try and have a good conversation to explain a point of view that someone might never have heard before. We do encourage this, but we would not want people to feel intimidated. "If it becomes clear that someone does not want to hear that message they should move away."

Stagecoach has asked the Mormoms to stop bothering its passengers.

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September books

Have you noticed how people who believe in God are always telling us how he/she/it wants us to behave, while God (the one in the Bible, anyway) behaves rather badly? What if he isn't an old man on a cloud but is, in fact, a teenage boy? That might explain the behaviour. Mariella Frostrup interviewed author [Meg Rossof](#) on BBC Radio 4 today about her new book, 'There is no Dog', which imagines what the world would be like if God was a petulant teenage boy called Bob, who spends the majority of his time sleeping or having sexual fantasies about the human women he has created and causing floods, geological disasters and much suffering in his wake. In the first chapter ([available to download online](#)), she wrote,

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

Only it wasn't as simple as that. The preferred candidate for God withdrew at the last minute saying he wanted to spend more time with his family, though privately everyone suspected he was having second thoughts. You couldn't really blame him. Earth was badly positioned – miles off the beaten track in a lonely and somewhat rundown part of the universe. At a time of high employment, not many top-level candidates were willing to take on a tiny unproven planet, not to mention the whole creation rigmarole, which, when done properly, could be a real headache.

Great fun!

Richard Dawkins latest book was published today. He was interviewed about it on Newsnight a couple of night ago - [you have a few more days to listen on i-Player](#). 'The Magic of Reality' is a book for children that aims to replace myth with science, and make it just as exciting and magical.

Note that if you decide to buy either or both of these books, we'll get commission if you do it through the link to Amazon on our website.

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Alice N'Kom

In the last two weeks, Cameroon gay men have been thrown in jail just for being gay. The situation is approaching a crisis and Alice N'Kom, an attorney, is ready to confront the President to demand the release of those arrested and an end to laws that make being gay a crime. [Please click here to support Alice by signing a letter to the President of Cameroon](#).

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Recent research by academics from Britain and Austria has indicated that when people feel connected to others, they're more likely to act altruistically. The report showed that "Nearly half of the participants who had been reminded of their social connections donated to the Red Cross, whereas fewer than 20 percent of the other participants did." [Click here to read more](#).

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[As previously reported](#), Robert Segwanyi was about to board a plane to Uganda when there was a last minute decision to cancel his deportation. [He has now been allowed to submit a fresh claim for asylum](#). The hearing will be on 2nd October.

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The Pub people are doing experiments at their next meeting. This is what they wrote on Facebook:

Our next meeting will be at the new venue of the Brewery Tap. It has the advantage that we can use a side room so any bubbling experiments can be more easily contained ;-). We'll either be in the room immediately on the right as you go in, or upstairs.

Then, as an afterthought:

If you bring something that starts bubbling that isn't beer, the garden area outside would be more appropriate.

Maybe the fire station should be alerted?

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Otley Green

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists member Tony Barrett is chairman of Otley Green, and has sent the following urgent message (Otley Green has until 5pm today, Friday 30th September, to find more Energyshare supporters):

[OtleyGreen's Community Turbine project](#) has successfully reached Energyshare's second round. We need yet more supporters to get into the third round. If you haven't yet become a supporter we would be very grateful if you would sign up. If you are already one of our supporters, please pass this message on.

Becoming an Energyshare Supporter is an easy 5 step process:

1. Go to [www.energyshare.com/otleygreen](http://www.energyshare.com/otleygreen);
2. Press the SUPPORT THIS GROUP button on the right hand side of the screen;
3. Press the SIGN UP button in the new window;
4. Complete the form. You can ignore the profile information. You will not get emails unless you want them;
5. You will receive a confirmation email. Just click on the confirmation link. You are now a supporter.

Thank you very, very much for your support Tony Barrett, Chairman OtleyGreen.

### **Our Group and Our Project**

We are a group of people concerned about climate change and the energy crisis who are reducing Otley's carbon footprint and helping villagers save money on their energy bills. We have provided free insulation for over 60 homes, solar PV through a bulk-buy scheme and we have planted trees and a hedge row, harnessing the natural power of the wind to kick start a chain of sustainable energy initiatives in the village. It's the first step to a cleaner, greener future. We now want to install a community wind turbine and use the renewable energy payments to fund further green projects - the first being the provision of solar panels for Otley Primary School and Play Group. This shows the beauty of this project, it just carries on growing for the good of the community - the school benefits from free, green electricity and is able to share a new revenue scheme with the Play Group from the solar PV payments. If OtleyGreen is successful, Otley Village and its organisations will benefit from an income of over £6000 a year for the next 19 years. A Parish Council run survey of villagers showed overwhelming support for this project with 68% in favour and another 6% unconcerned.

**Stop Press** - We've been given an excellent site by a local farmer and we have applied for planning permission. A pre-planning proposal received a positive reaction from the local council.

[Click here for a map](#)

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An American friend has drawn my attention to the website of [the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism of Fairfield County](#). I know of no similar organisation here, though we've had high profile Jews in [the British Humanist Association](#), including its former president, the late [Claire Rayner](#), and the actor Warren Mitchell. I imagine that many people don't know that there are Jews who aren't religious.

[Wikipedia on secular Jewish culture](#).

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This is an update of news from **International Humanist and Ethical Union** (IHEU). You can find the full versions of these news stories [on their web site](#). They're also on [twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#). Visit [www.iheu.org/newsletter](http://www.iheu.org/newsletter) to subscribe.

IHEU

### **IHEU condemns Holy See for undermining democracy and human rights**

Speaking at the 18th session of the UN Human Rights Council on 23 September, IHEU representative Cathy Buchs condemned the Vatican for attempting to undermine democracy and human rights by insisting that child abuse cases be judged under the churches' own rules of canon law rather than the laws of the state.... [Read more](#)

### **National Secular Society intervention aims to protect UK equality laws from religious onslaught**

The National Secular Society (NSS), an IHEU member organization, has submitted an intervention with the European Court of Human Rights to argue that Britain's equality laws should be upheld and not compromised by religious exemptions. [Read more](#)

### **Research debunks the myth that Christians contribute more to society**

Secular people are just as likely to participate in society as religious people, suggests new research by the British government. The British Humanist Association (BHA) has welcomed the findings as further evidence against the idea – increasingly advanced by religious and government leaders – that religion increases people's contribution to society. The survey also revealed that Christians were much less likely than any other belief group to mix with people of different beliefs or ethnicities. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU attacks traditional practices leading to maternal deaths**

IHEU representative Hannah Bock raised two examples of traditional practices that are continuing to impede efforts to reduce maternal mortality: child marriage in Afghanistan and the forced feeding of young girls in Mauritania. [Read more](#)

### **IHEU calls on religious leaders to condemn violence, again and again and again...**

Speaking at the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 12 September 2011, IHEU representative Hannah Bock called on religious leaders around the world to make it clear "again and again and again that no religion justifies the taking of innocent life. It is the great tragedy of our time that, worldwide, we are confronted by those who believe it is". [Read more](#)

### **Humanist movement hits new high in membership.**

There are more godless groups in the world than ever before. The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the world union of Humanist, atheist, rationalist, freethought and ethical culture groups, now has 117 member organizations from 38 countries. At the World Humanist Congress in Oslo, five new member organizations joined the IHEU, taking it to the highest membership figure in its six decade history. [Read more](#)

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**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 worldwide. IHEU sponsors the triennial World Humanist Congress.

You can find out more about IHEU [on their web site](#).

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GALHA's annual lunch. This year's guest speaker is award-winning journalist [Patrick Strudwick](#). Patrick writes for newspapers and magazines that include The Observer, The Times, The Guardian, The Independent and Gay Times. See the link for ticket details.

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[Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#) forums are usually very polite affairs, without any confrontation, but there was one occasion a couple of years ago when a couple of people, including me, got rather angry. A Muslim man raised the subject of male circumcision. The question was out of order, since we were there to discuss Hazel Blears' document [Face to Face and Side by Side](#) with representatives of local government. The man wanted to know why Muslims can't have circumcisions on the NHS. Doctors won't do the operation on the NHS unless it's for medical reasons, rather than religious ones. The man argued that Muslims who can't afford private surgery sometimes have the procedure done by unqualified individuals who botch it, leaving the NHS to clean up the mess. He didn't get any support. You could argue that they should be prosecuted for harming a child. [The Qur'an doesn't mention circumcision](#).

Many people don't realise that Muslims circumcise; the procedure is usually associated with Judaism, which is the subject of a post on [P Z Myers' blog - Ritualised child abuse: circumcision](#). I can't bring myself to watch the video - I think you'll need a strong stomach for that. Why would anyone subject their child to this?

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Should be worth listening to, to try to understand why some women value their religion, while others suffer because of it.

['What has religion done for woman?'](#) is on Radio 2 next Tuesday, 25th October, at 10pm.

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According to James Ussher, the 17th century Anglican Bishop of Armagh, [the first day of creation began at nightfall preceding Sunday, October 23, 4004 BC](#), so it's 6015 years old today.

And according to Harold Camping, the American Pastor who's revised his predictions several times (because none of them were right), [the world should have ended on Friday](#).

Both of them got their sums wrong, the sillies.

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[The Age of Stupid](#) is an independently made film starring the late Pete Postlethwaite as a man who's left alone to ruminate on how humanity has destroyed itself.

**Please note that we will be in our new venue, the Inter-Faith Centre at University Campus Suffolk in Ipswich (see map).**

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Have you made a will? It's amazing how few people do, yet not having a will can cause your family all sorts of problems. If you haven't, make a will in November through Will Aid and you'll be helping other people at the same time.



A local solicitor writes your will, then instead of paying their fee you are invited to make a donation to Will Aid. The suggested minimum donation is £85 for a basic single will or £125 for a pair of basic mirror wills. You'll be supporting nine charities.

[Click here to find out more.](#)

[Click here to read about what can happen if you don't have a will](#) (blog post by a humanist celebrant).

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Enter the UCS car park at Long Street from the junction opposite the Waterfront Building off Fore Street, Fore Hamlet, Back Hamlet and Duke Street. The West Building is at the top right corner of the car park (see campus map). To enter, press the button marked 'SIFRE' (you might need a torch to see the buttons after dark). The Inter-Faith Centre (marked SIFRE) is on the 1st floor. Either use the stairs then go straight ahead to the far end of the corridor, then turn left, or turn left at the entrance and go along the corridor for the lift. When you come out of the lift, turn left and the centre is on the opposite side of the corridor through the doors.

[Click here for a campus map](#) (pdf).

[Click here for Sat Nav directions, etc.](#)

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From November 2011, we'll meet in [the Inter-Faith Centre in the West Building at University Campus Suffolk](#), [Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource](#)'s base. There is ample car parking. Hope to see you there.

[UCS website with directions.](#)

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Commonwealth leaders are meeting in Perth, Australia. You may have read about this in news stories about a change to the constitution that will allow the daughters of any future UK monarch to have an equal right to the throne. This was agreed unanimously. However, there is another issue that's just as important, of not more so.

Kamalesh Sharma, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, has made a courageous speech calling on each of the Commonwealth nations to finally end discrimination and criminalization of LGBT people. Meanwhile, some within the Commonwealth are working hard to silence Sharma and others. Please sign this petition (and forward it to your friends) so that we can achieve at least 30,000 signatures within 48 hours.

Almost 80 countries around the world make it a crime to be gay, lesbian, bi or transgender. In 10 of those nations, you can be sentenced to death or life behind bars. The majority of these nations share a connection - they are members of the Commonwealth.

[Click here to sign now.](#)

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There are many atheists and self-styled humanists who are so anti-religious that they don't want to know anything about it. When they talk about Islam, say, it becomes evident that they know very little about Muslims, and have probably never knowingly spoken to one. As far as they're concerned, Islam is a threat, and that's all there is to it.

When it comes to our quality of life, what matters is how people behave, not what they believe. This applies to atheists and humanists too, some of whom could do with lessons in manners. There are times when this sort of attitude leads atheists to do very silly things, like Richard Dawkins' response to the Haitian earthquake. To demonstrate that humanists are caring people, he set up a separate fund from all the well-established disaster relief funds. A lot of atheists won't donate to the Disasters Emergency Committee ([DEC](#)) because some of the organisations involved have a religious ethos and they imagine that the money might be used for proselytising, instead of food, shelter and welfare. Dawkins' fund, which was promoted by the [BHA](#), was channelled through [PayPal](#), an American money transfer system, which meant that British donors couldn't take advantage of the [Gift Aid](#) scheme, so their donations were worth less than they would have been through DEC. This was inexcusable, considering that there are [British disaster relief charities](#) without a religious ethos, and that donors could have gone direct to any of them. Humanists are supposed to be rational people, but this wasn't very rational.

I support charities that are neutral in religious terms, including Action Aid and the Red Cross; they help anyone and they employ people of all faiths and none. Religion is irrelevant, when it comes to helping people. That's what [secularism](#) is all about. I'm happy to belong to [an Inter-Faith organisation](#) that works harmoniously because everyone is on an equal footing; no preaching or proselytising is allowed. The ethos is a friendly and respectful one. It's interesting to learn about what other people believe, and why, even if I sometimes find it hard to understand a religious view of the world. Many atheists seem to imagine that religious people have all been indoctrinated as children, or that they've been bullied into believing, which isn't true.

Today I read about why "religious literacy" is important in some charitable organisations in the development sector, "even in secular organisations" like Oxfam ([see Oxfam blogs](#)). One reason is given as,

Resilience to shocks: whether it's the global financial crisis, or the first few chaotic hours and days after the Haitian earthquake, poor people turn to their churches and mosques for help in an emergency. If we are serious about promoting disaster risk reduction before catastrophe hits, we need to be talking to the institutions that are most relevant to poor people.

You can't expect to change people's beliefs to satisfy your own sense of what's right or wrong; that's as bad as religious proselytising. Religion's here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future, and while religious people may believe things that we don't, it's arrogant to think that they're inferior because of it. This is a form of snobbery. See the people, not the labels, and recognise that altruism is a human characteristic, not a religious or atheist one.

If you disagree, why not comment?

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By the end of today, [the world's population](#) is expected to reach 7 billion. It has almost doubled since the late '60s and is expected to reach 10 billion within the century. This is potentially catastrophic for several reasons; the effect on the environment of human activity; the demand for dwindling resources, including food and water, and the impossibility of ensuring a decent quality of life for everyone.

How can we prevent the population from continuing to increase, and reverse the trend? There are already more people than the Earth can support sustainably. What can we do?

The organisation [Population Matters](#) has four campaigns, on family planning, gender and social justice, UK reproductive health, and educating people to have smaller families. Their patron Sir David Attenborough's view is that there is no major problem facing our planet that would not be easier to solve if there were fewer people and no problem that does not become harder — and ultimately impossible to solve — with ever more. [Click here to see or hear his speech to the Royal Society of Arts last year.](#)

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As car ownership increases worldwide, many people might imagine that biofuels are the answer to pollution. However, many create greater greenhouse gas emissions than the oil-based fuels they're meant to replace and the companies that produce them have few scruples about taking land off poor people to produce them. See this report from Action Aid of one such land grab, and sign their petition.

[How a biofuels land grab has destroyed an African village.](#)

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Have you voted in New Humanist magazine's annual Bad Faith Award poll? This year's nominees are Michelle Bachmann, Rick Perry, Anjem Choudary, Nadine Dorries, Tom MacMaster and Melanie Phillips. [Click here to cast your vote by 28 November](#). Hard to choose, isn't it?

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[Click here for a map showing Ipswich car parks](#) (pdf).

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Ipswich Celebration

[Mayor Councillor John Le Gry](#)s (who's an agnostic) has chosen the theme of social inclusion for this year's Celebration of Community that will launch Inter-Faith Week 2011. He's being helped by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource (SIFRE).

It will take place in the Council Chamber at the Town Hall, where humanist celebrant Margaret Nelson will act as MC and one of our members will sing with the multi-faith choir. Everyone is welcome.

You are invited to bring small tins of food as gifts to the [Umbrella Trust](#) for distribution to needy people.

[Click here for a poster](#) (A4 pdf).

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Here's our latest newsletter - [click here to download it](#) (pdf).

It contains detailed maps and directions to our new meetings venue at University Campus Suffolk, so keep it for future reference if you're planning to come.

There's also a blog post from Ghana, details of the Mayor of Ipswich's Celebration of Community, and our programme for the next few months.

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It's **Operation Christmas Child** time again, when well-meaning people are encouraging their children to fill shoe boxes with gifts for needy children overseas. But Operation Christmas Child, run by the evangelical American organisation [Samaritan's Purse](#), has a destructive agenda. Please don't support them. [Click here to read about "Mad Missionaries and Toxic Gifts"](#).

The BHA has some suggestions for alternatives to Samaritan's Purse - [click here to see their website](#).

There is a [Campaign against Operation Christmas Child](#), that describes OCC as "Racist & Poisonous":

What most people don't know is that the organisation behind it - Samaritans Purse - is run by that well known islamophobe Franklin Graham - who calls Islam "a very wicked and evil religion". It's the same group that rode with Israeli army convoys

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OCC logo

into Lebanon during Israel 's 1982 invasion, and again followed US troops in to Iraq to claim Muslims for Christ.

In 1990 they sent 30,000 arabic bibles for US troops to hand out to the defeated Iraqis - literally at gun point. In Afghanistan their 2003 report proudly declared that with help from the Canadian military; they got "MUSLIM children in the capital city of Kabul to celebrate Christmas for the first time".

Their stated aim is the "advancement of the Christian faith through... the relief of poverty". Christian leaders in the UK have condemned this version of Christianity as "racist" and "poisonous".

Their poison isn't just directed at Muslims, they refer to Hindus as being "bound by Satan's power" and were caught preying on Catholic earthquake victims in El Salvador in 2001- refusing them temporary homes provided by US AID unless they first attend a half hour evangelising "prayer" session. Afterwards Frankilin Graham gloated that in one village they converted 150 Catholics.

You can be sure that Samaritan's Purse has an equally bigoted view of atheists.

[Click here for an example of Samaritan's Purse literature that's delivered to children.](#)

**Continued >>>**

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### **Update, 10/11/2011**

Posting several anti-OCC tweets on Twitter has drawn two kinds of responses; some from Christians, who seem to think that I'm against OCC just because I'm an atheist, and some from parents who've discovered that the shoe boxes aren't such a great idea, and won't be sending any.

This is one of the tweets from a keen supporter of OCC:

Tweet from OCC supporter



Well, at least he's honest!

Another tweeter replied with [a link to her blog, Salt and Caramel](#), where she made some very good points about the waste of money involved with sending shoe boxes around the world. She wrote,

According to the website, there are 8 million shoe boxes distributed every year. 8m x €5 makes €40m . . . An estimated 2 million children die every year from illnesses that could be prevented by an set of vaccines that cost £2.50. The same £2.50 that it costs to send a box around the world.

Thinking about this today, and the claim made that some children had "celebrated Christmas for the first time" after receiving their shoe box, it struck me that in many parts of the world, no one celebrates Christmas, which is the Christians' name for a Northern Hemisphere winter solstice festival that dates back thousands of years, and which they only adopted about 1600 years ago. The "tradition" of giving

presents is much later; it started in Queen Victoria's reign. So all the kids who've never celebrated Christmas won't miss what they've never known, and would probably much prefer something useful, like a mosquito net, a set of schoolbooks (without Bible stories), or a flock of chickens.

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Today is Armistice Day. This is an extract from a recent humanist funeral ceremony; a poem chosen by a daughter for her father, who'd served in North Africa and Italy.

Poppy

George Fraser Gallie wrote a number of poems whilst serving in Italy and North Africa with the Royal Engineers around 1943, when he was twenty-one. They've recently been discovered amongst his papers by his son. This is one –

### **Rocca San Giovanni**

It is quiet here now, the valley is silent.  
Only the birds and the stream have their noise,  
The twittering, bubbling sweet sounds of nature.  
Apart from this – silence which nothing destroys.

The smell is a faint one of morning and pine trees,  
Of bracken and water, of woodland and stream,  
The sight is of rushes, of mill house and lime trees.  
The feel is of peacefulness sweet as a dream.

But at one time this valley, this valley of heaven,  
Became a most torturous valley of hell.  
For the fighting was bitter, the Hun held on grimly,  
Regardless of losses, and many men fell.

For the British came north and the silence was shattered,  
By rifle – machine gun – trench mortar – grenade.  
The Messerschmitt diving brought sickening terror,  
The valley vibrated with Death's serenade.

But the British advanced and the valley was taken,  
The fighting moved northward as Gerry moved back,  
And the only remains to give proof of the fighting,  
Are freshly dug graves at the side of the track.

Again it is peaceful, the valley is silent,  
Only the birds and the stream have their noise,  
The twittering, bubbling sounds of nature.  
Apart from this – silence which nothing destroys.

Most people are unaware that there is a UK Armed Forces Humanist Association. [Click here for their website.](#)

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Dead Interesting

From comments that have been made recently in online discussions and at meetings, it seems that some members and supporters don't fully understand how the ceremonies that we provide relate to humanism in general. Someone wrote, "They're just about making money". This is my blog about death and funerals. It might help anyone who doesn't understand why we do what we do, and it isn't about making money; our fees have to cover all our expenses, as we're not salaried like clergy.

[Click here to read Dead Interesting.](#)

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Recommend watching full screen.

[Earth | Time Lapse View from Space. Fly Over | NASA, ISS](#) from [Michael König](#) on [Vimeo](#).

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Did you know that New Humanist magazine has an online newsletter? [Click here to sign up](#). The latest edition features articles about 'Atheist' still being a dirty word in US politics, an atheist soldier's thoughts on attending religious memorials to the fallen, the myth of Christian Europe, and a podcast. You can follow them on Twitter at [@NewHumanist](#).

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We've had emails from parents whose children want to join the Guides or Scouts, but have been shocked to find that they're expected to make a promise to "love God". Letters and emails to the association have failed, so far, to achieve any sort of compromise. Now, after persistent campaigning by the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, [Girl Guides](#) may no longer have to pledge to "love God" as part of their Guide promise. Presumably, this would apply to Scouts too. An increasing number of parents have complained that the current pledge discriminates against children who don't have a religious faith. If they make the promise, they have to lie. Some have opted for the alternative organization, the [Woodcraft Folk](#) (which ignores religion) if there's a branch in their area.

[Today's Telegraph](#) reports,

... the association is considering reviewing the wording of its affirmation for new members, to remove religious references.

The move comes after parents complained it was unfair to exclude children who had not received a Christian upbringing.

The Telegraph has quoted [The Christian Institute](#), which typically sees nothing wrong in foisting religion on children, whether they believe or not:

"It would be terribly sad," said Mike Judge, spokesman for The Christian Institute.

"The Girl Guides has always embraced all people but has its roots in Christian values, which is what has made it so popular and successful.

"It will be very difficult for it to maintain its values if it removes the ethics from where those ideas spring from. It would change the character of the Guides for the worse.

"Sadly, I think this is symptomatic of a much wider problem in Britain, which stems from a culture of embarrassment about being Christian."

It's not about "embarrassment", Mr Judge, it's about respecting a child's right to his or her own opinions and beliefs, and about respecting their family's values when they owe nothing to Christianity. Even in 2011, there are still ignorant people who imagine that non-believers are amoral.

[Click here to read about the NSS & BHA campaign](#).

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Nov 2011  
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This is a letter in this week's [National Secular Society](#) e-news:

We have a 4 year old son who has just started attending our local non-denominational community School. Last week, along with the rest of his year-group he was presented with an illustrated children's Bible.

We were given the option to opt-out of this but did not exercise this because we didn't want our son to feel excluded and trusted the school that the book would be age-appropriate. It was not and our son ended up in tears over the violent illustrations of the crucifixion.

Many other parents were unhappy and we personally are complaining to the school. We have subsequently found out that the Bible's distribution and funding was carried out by a Charity – [Bibles for Children](#). According to their website they are active in hundreds of primary schools across the country (there is a list in their annual report). We would like to warn other members with children who may be targeted by these people and who might want to take action against these people either on principle or in order to prevent their kids being exposed to images of graphic violence.

Children's colouring book crucifixion

This is an illustration of the crucifixion that can be downloaded from an American site on the Internet, for children to colour in. As it's in cartoon form, some young children may not be deeply affected by it. But is it appropriate to give children pictures of people being tortured to colour? Or to give them illustrations of the same subject?

We don't have any examples of the illustrations from The Children's Bible, but if your children are given one of these Bibles, please let us know. We'd like to see one.

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Dec 2011

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Some of the stuff you could have found for yourselves, if you'd wanted to (that's what Google is for), but I saved you the bother, OK?

Sam Scott Perry was on Channel 4's [4thought.tv](#), where he opined that men and dinosaurs were alive at the same time, and that Creationism should be taught in schools. Whoever taught Sam didn't do a very good job. His science isn't up to much.

[Distrust is the central motivating factor behind why religious people dislike atheists](#), according to a new study led by University of British Columbia psychologists. They must imagine that all atheists are up to no good. There *are* untrustworthy atheists and there are religious people I'd trust no further than I could throw them (if it wasn't for my bad back), but there's no more reason to mistrust one than the other.

Comedian Kate Smurthwaite would probably confirm all the religionists' suspicions. She was on the BBC's Sunday morning programme, The Big Questions, a while ago, where she upset the religious members of the audience by suggesting that they were idiots.

[On Twitter, Kate says she's now known as "that atheist bitchslap woman"](#).

The National Secular Society agreed [a Secular Charter](#) at its recent AGM that sets out some campaigning principles. They begin, "There shall be no established state religion".

When Gene Roddenberry, creator of Star Trek, was asked to write the opening monologue to the new series in 1966, it took several goes to get it right. Eventually, he came up with "[Space: the final frontier...](#)" Roddenberry was a Humanist - to find out more, use the search box (right).

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This week's [National Secular Society e-newsletter](#) quotes Irish writer Jennifer Johnston saying, "Personally I think that religion should be abolished and I think when you look around we're doing not too bad a job of it in this country at the moment. It's all just moving and about time, too." This was in [an interview with the Irish Independent](#). Johnston's attitude is understandable, when you read about her own and her family's experience of Catholicism, but abolishing religion isn't the answer. I remember being shocked when, some time ago, I heard one of the [British Humanist Association's](#) leading activists say more or less the same thing - and he was serious. It's an attitude that persists in online atheist forums. Calling for the abolishment or banning of religion isn't a rational response to the problems that it causes. It was tried by the Soviets and by the Chinese during the Cultural Revolution, but they only succeeded in driving it underground. There have always been extremists, religious and atheist, and they've always caused destruction.

The answer is [secularism](#), or an end to religion in civil affairs and no religious instruction in schools. Children might learn *about* religion but not to *be* religious. Teach children to think, not to believe. Most organised monotheistic religion is about power. Remove that power, and you remove most of the damage it causes.

["A good teacher makes you think, even when you don't want to."](#) (Tom, aged 10)

Teach people to think, and maybe they won't make foolish statements like, "Ban religion!"

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We've been visited by a creationist. Feel free to join the debate on whether there were dinosaurs in Noah's Ark, and if scientists made up the theory of evolution.

See the comments on [Jesus and a baby dinosaur](#).

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With reference to our discussion about the ark (see previous post), and thanks to [Tony Sidaway](#).

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Every year the local UN Association organises an inter-faith Celebration of the [Universal Charter of Human Rights](#). This year's theme is the family, based on Article 16:

- (1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.
- (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
- (3) **The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.**

Representatives of various organisations that are members of Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource will make a contribution, and all are

welcome. There will be a speaker from a humanist perspective.

We will be in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 42 Sidegate Lane (opposite Northgate School), Ipswich, IP4 4HX. Don't let the venue put you off – it's not catching!

The celebration last about an hour and is followed by refreshments.

As the theme for this year's celebration is the family it has been decided to include the local charity 'Families in Need' known also as FIND. FIND helps anyone living within 25 miles radius of Ipswich who is deprived of a minimum standard of living, be they single, families, lone parents, children, elderly, sick or disabled. Referrals may come from: Social Services; General and Psychiatric Hospitals; The Homeless Family Unit; Victim Support; Salvation Army; Asylum & Refugee Support Agencies; Women's Aid; The Probation Service; YMCA & YWCA; Ipswich Community Resource Centre; Family Centres; Health Centres; and other charities. For more information please see [FIND](#). To help FIND please will you consider bringing a gift for FIND to the Human Rights Celebration on Saturday.

The items they most need are toilet rolls, washing powder/liquid (not washing up liquid), baby food and powdered milk.

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The popular format where everyone comes with suggestions for topics for discussion, then write them on bits of paper, and the pieces of paper go in a hat, is back. Is there something you want to talk about? As usual, guests are welcome and there'll be refreshments. Note that we'll be in our new venue at University Campus Suffolk.

[Click here for printable maps and directions \(pdf\).](#)

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We'll be playing Diversity, a non-competitive educational game devised by Suffolk Inter-Faith Resource that teaches you about the different faiths and beliefs practiced in the county, including humanism. Long term members may remember playing it a few years ago, but you can always learn more. The game tends to prompt lots of discussion, so no one ever seems to finish it.

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

[Click here to see it being played by a group of 6th form students.](#)

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The local [United Nations Association](#) group organises an annual inter-faith Celebration of Human Rights in Ipswich. This year the event was on the 10 December and the theme was 'The Family', based on Article 16:3 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#): "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State." This was my contribution (MN).



What do we mean by "the family"? I imagine that when the UN declaration was drafted immediately after the Second World War, it might have been generally assumed that a family consisted of two heterosexual parents, some children, and grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. British families have been described as having 2.4 children, because that was supposed to be the average number of children in nuclear families. Many families aren't like this.

A few days ago, [research from The Centre for the Modern Family](#) was released. They'd interviewed 3,000 people. Fewer than a fifth of them thought they were part of a traditional family. Eight in ten said their families didn't conform to the stereotype of two married parents with two or more children. The report indicates that family structures have become more diverse. A quarter of couples are childless and a fifth of the population lives alone, and more of us are likely to view families with single parents, same-sex parents or unmarried parents as "proper" families. Some families include people who aren't related to one another, such as step-families or adopted families.

So ideas about what is "natural and fundamental" have changed, though not everyone will like this. Some families are treated more favourably than others by the state, depending on where they live. We're fortunate to live in a developed country with welfare benefits and resources to care for children who don't have families, though the system is far from perfect. In many developing countries, things are different. Many children orphaned by AIDS in Africa, for example, are

raised by ageing grandparents or older siblings, and in many parts of the world, groups of orphans could be described as families, since they care for each other without parents.

Protecting a family may not necessarily be the best way to protect the members of a family. Most child abuse occurs within families, perpetrated by older relatives or close family friends, and domestic violence is far too common. Families can be dangerous and dysfunctional, and even if they aren't, you may not like your relatives very much. Some are best kept for weddings and funerals and otherwise ignored, and some are tolerated with ambivalence. In Dodie Smith's play 'Dear Octopus', a family is defined as "That dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor in our innermost hearts never quite wish to." I doubt that she was aware that octopus mothers are devoted mothers who sacrifice themselves to ensure the survival of their offspring.

So, families can be useful, in that they provide a convenient way to identify social and economic units, but do they all deserve protection? I wonder if Article 16 should be revised.

The UN Declaration doesn't cover two most fundamental human needs, besides food, shelter, freedom from want and persecution, and all the other things listed in the articles. Humans need love, if they are to thrive and grow into useful members of society, and they need laughter. Families where love and laughter are a normal part of day to day life are the best sort of families. The UN can't do anything about love and laughter, but maybe it might encourage a more pragmatic attitude towards families among political and religious leaders, recognising that there are many that don't conform to old stereotypes. If a family is good for the people in it, it's good for all of us.

The event was attended by the Mayor of Ipswich, Councillor John Le Grys, and the Mayoress.

The contributors:

The welcome was from Bishop Paulo Pereira of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the closing words were from Charles Croydon from the United Nations Association, Ipswich and District branch.

The other speakers were a Hindu follower of Sri Chinmoy, someone from [the Lucis Trust](#), a Seventh-Day Adventist, a Soka Gakkai Buddhist, a Pagan, a Bahá'í, a Unitarian Christian, a member of the local Amnesty group and Maureen Reynel (Chair of FIND).

Music was by the Pentreath family string trio and Filipe Esteves on the piano.

There was a collection of household items for [FIND \(Families in Need\)](#), to be distributed in the local area.

One of our hosts (the Mormons) gave me a copy of '[A Proclamation to the World](#)' on the family. No comment!

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[Interesting piece in the New York Times by Eric Weiner, on Americans and organised religion.](#)

For a nation of talkers and self-confessors, we are terrible when it comes to talking about God. The discourse has been co-opted by the True Believers, on one hand, and Angry Atheists on the other. What about the rest of us?

The rest of us, it turns out, constitute the nation's fastest-growing religious demographic. We are the Nones, the roughly 12 percent of people who say they have no religious affiliation at all. The percentage is even higher among young people; at least a quarter are Nones.

In my experience, even more British people are Nones too, and can you blame them? Angry atheism is as off-putting to many people as in your face religion. What's wrong with keeping your beliefs private? It would make a change.

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If you haven't seen these sites, they're worth exploring:

[The Secular Web](#) has pages and pages of food for thought. They say:

The Secular Web is owned and operated by Internet Infidels, Inc., a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to defending and promoting a naturalistic worldview on the Internet. Naturalism is the "hypothesis that the natural world is a closed system" in the sense that "nothing that is not a part of the natural world affects it." As such, "naturalism implies that there are no supernatural entities," such as gods, angels, demons, ghosts, or other spirits, "or at least none that actually exercises its power to affect the natural world." And without miraculous interventions into nature from a spiritual realm, neither prayer nor magick are more effective than a placebo.

[Butterflies and Wheels](#) is edited by Ophelia Benson.

Butterflies and Wheels was established in 2002 and has (not surprisingly) evolved since then. At the beginning it focused mainly on various kinds of pseudoscience and epistemic relativism, aka postmodernism. The latter prompted an increasing focus on moral or cultural relativism and a defense of universalism and human rights. This in turn led to concern with the chief opponent of universalism and human rights, which is religion. This then led to interest in the backlash against overt atheism.

Keep thinking. If nothing else, it'll help to keep Alzheimer's at bay.

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The Internet has been flooded with obituaries to Christopher Hitchens today, since the news of his death. One of the so-called 'New Atheists', his book, [God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything](#), upset lots of religious people and delighted many fellow atheists. True, he was exceptionally gifted with the written and spoken word (there are [some examples in the Guardian](#)), and wrote lots of thought-provoking copy for [Vanity Fair](#), among other publications, but I wasn't a fan, especially because he thought that invading Iraq was a good idea, regardless of the [consequences - who were mostly civilian](#).

If an easy target like Christianity could be destroyed solely with words, Christopher could have done it. However, the main effect of his witty attacks on religion was to delight other atheists, not to persuade believers of the error of their ways. It's untrue that "religion poisons everything". That's far too simplistic and ignores the many examples of good things that religious people have done. Philanthropists like [Elizabeth Fry](#), a Quaker, achieved social reform long before the introduction of the Welfare State, for example, and religious people still do good without evangelising or proselytising.

[Mary Warnock, interviewed by Laurie Taylor in New Humanist](#), said,

I find Dawkins' simple-minded view of religion very difficult to take. It pays no proper attention to the history and tradition of religion. It says that religions have done nothing but harm but that is manifestly not true. He omits all the good things, the education, the cathedrals, the music. All that's disregarded.

Maybe Hitchens wasn't simple-minded, but he was guilty of the same error. Babies and bathwater?

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Last week, during [a celebration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible](#) in Oxford, David Cameron said "the Bible has helped to give Britain a set of values and morals which make Britain what it is today," and that a "return to Christian values" could counter the country's "moral collapse". Admitting that he's a "committed but vaguely practising Church of England Christian" might explain Cameron's ignorance of what the Bible actually says. For example:

When the LORD thy God shall bring thee into the land whither thou goest to possess it, and hath cast out many nations before thee, the Hittites, and the Girgashites, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than thou;

And when the LORD thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, *and* utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them:

Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.

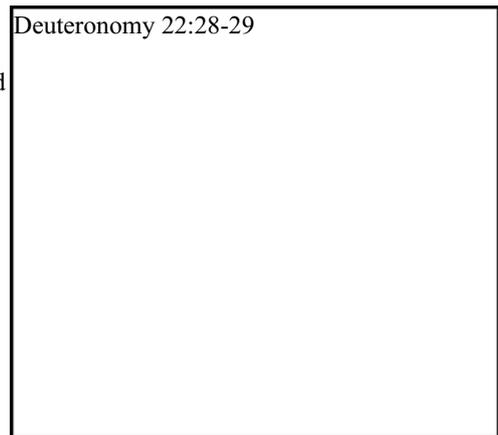
For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.

(Deuteronomy 7:1-4)

As for Christian values:

But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.



For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law.

And a man's foes *shall be* they of his own household.

He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

(Matthew 10:33-37)

How does that relate to any "moral collapse", unless it's to illustrate one? [The Bible's full of stuff like that](#), in the old and new testaments. Most Christians ignore all the nasty bits, unless it's to justify their prejudices, such as quoting [Leviticus on homosexuality](#).

Richard Dawkins has responded by saying that the Bible provides "[an appalling moral compass](#)", and [the BHA has described Cameron's remarks as "bizarre and deeply concerning"](#).

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[It only takes a girl](#)