

## SOUTH WEST LONDON HUMANISTS NEWSLETTER

**June 2011**

**Mon 27 Jun: AGM at 7pm followed at 8pm by "What is Humanism?" discussion**

### Contents

In the electronic version, click on the links below to jump to the section you want.

[Diary](#)

[Main Meetings Coming Up](#)

[Summer Party & Plan for the Rest of the Year](#)

[Annual General Meeting](#)

[Charity Selection](#)

[Pub Lunches & Coffee Mornings](#)

[Unitarian link](#)

[Look Back: "Sum", the afterlife and David Eagleman](#)

[Links & Info: assisted suicide, Catholic counselling, Muslim creationism and...](#)

[Events & courses: BHA Conference, RI short courses, Camp Quest, Other events](#)

[Membership, Ceremonies & Committee](#)

### Diary

| Date  | Time           | Place                          | Event                                     |
|---|----------------|--------------------------------|---|
| June  |                |                                |   |
| 9   | 11.00          | Rose Theatre Café, Kingston    | Coffee morning                            |
| 19  | 12.30          | William Webb Ellis, Twickenham | Pub lunch                                 |
| 27  | 19.00<br>20.00 | Old Ship, Richmond             | Annual General Meeting<br>Main meeting    |
| July  |                |                                |   |
| 14  | 11.00          | Rose Theatre Café, Kingston    | Coffee morning                            |
| 17  | 14.00          | Geraldine's garden, Twickenham | Summer Party                              |
| <b>NO PUB LUNCH OR MAIN MEETING IN JULY</b> |                |                                |   |
| Aug   |                |                                |   |
| 11  | 11.00          | Rose Theatre Café, Kingston    | Coffee morning                            |
| 21  | 12.30          | William Webb Ellis, Twickenham | Pub lunch                                 |
| 29  | 19.00<br>20.00 | Old Ship, Richmond             | Pre-meeting get-together*<br>Main meeting |

\*At 7.00pm, before the main meeting, some of us will be upstairs at The Ship for a drink and a chat. Do come along if you can.

### Main Meetings Coming Up

Our main meetings are normally on the last Monday of each month in the upstairs room at The Old Ship, King Street, Richmond at 8pm. Anyone who is a humanist (or thinks they might be a humanist) is welcome.

**Mon 27 Jun – "What is Humanism?"** – our annual exploration of what Humanism is and how some members of the group arrived at the conclusion that they're humanists. The main meeting will be preceded by our **Annual General Meeting** (see below).

**No main meeting in July** – instead we have the Summer Party.

**Mon 29 Aug** – Group discussion (topic to be decided).

## Summer Party & Plan for the Rest of the Year

This year's **Summer Party** will be on **Sunday 17 July** in Geraldine's garden in Twickenham from 2 to 6pm. Tickets are £7 for Group members/£10 for non-members to cover a buffet meal and drinks. Proceeds from the raffle, and any profit on the event overall, will go to Uganda Humanist Schools Trust. Get your ticket at the June meeting or direct from Geraldine on [charities@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:charities@swlhumanists.org.uk) (email preferred, failing that, call 07973 359287).

Plan for the rest of the year:

**29 Aug** – Group discussion (topic to be advised)

**26 Sep** – Group discussion: "Overcoming the death taboo".

**31 Oct** – public meeting as part of the Think in Kingston festival (*theme = Happiness*): "Are religious people happier people?"

**28 Nov** – Keith Porteus-Wood, Executive Director, National Secular Society  
Dec (date to be decided) – Christmas Party

## Annual General Meeting

Our AGM will take place at the Old Ship at 7.00pm on 27 June, before the main meeting. Anyone can attend, but only paid-up members of the Group can vote. Rosemary and Marilyn are standing down from the committee, though will both continue to be involved with the group. Although it now looks like we have nominations for all the places on the committee, they are all open to election if there is more than one candidate. So if you would like to stand for any of them, including the Chair, Secretary or Treasurer, or the other four committee places, then please provide your (seconded) nominations to Rosemary Taylorson ([info@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@swlhumanists.org.uk), or phone 07946 465 701) **by 20 June**. Please also let Rosemary know by 20 June if you wish to propose a motion for consideration at the AGM. If you'd like to discuss any of this, please contact Rosemary or Jeremy ([chair@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:chair@swlhumanists.org.uk)).

## Charity Selection

One of the items we'll need to agree at the AGM is whether to retain or change the charities we support.

Currently we raise money for Practical Action at external events, such as the Richmond May Fair, and for the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust at internal events such as the Summer Party. We raised £200 for Practical Action at the Richmond May Fair this year – enough to pay for another donkey cart (complete with donkey) to reduce the time women and children villagers have to spend fetching and carrying water. And through the Ugandan Humanist Schools Trust we're currently sponsoring Haalima Nabwami, a 13 year old Ugandan student whose father is bedridden with AIDS and cannot pay school fees.

**If you have a view on whether to maintain our support for these charities, or change to something else, please email** Geraldine on [charities@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:charities@swlhumanists.org.uk) (email preferred, failing that, call 07973 359287). That will help the committee in deciding what to recommend to the AGM.

## Pub Lunches & Coffee Mornings

- **Pub lunches** are normally on the **3rd Sunday** of the month at 12.30pm at the William Webb Ellis, London Road, Twickenham (between Twickenham railway station and the centre of the town). Look for the "Happy Human" sign on the table – we'll aim to sit near the front or back windows. The next one will be on **19 June**, but there will be **no pub lunch in July** - it's Summer Party day.

- **Coffee mornings** are on the **2nd Thursday** of each month (**9 June, 14 July**) at 11.00am at the café at the Rose Theatre, 24-26 High Street Kingston KT1 1HL. Look for the "Happy Human" sign on the table.

### Unitarian link – Inclusive Schools & Vineyard Lunches

We have made a link with Rev Linda Hart, from the Richmond & Putney Unitarian Church (which is located not far from the Old Ship in Richmond). The initial purpose was to seek support for the Richmond Inclusive Schools campaign

[www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk](http://www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk), which is campaigning for the much-needed new secondary school in Richmond borough to be an inclusive school, and not a Catholic school as the Council currently intend. (*Do sign up on the website if you'd like to see detailed updates.*) At a national level, the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches is among the members of the Accord Coalition, which is backing the campaign. That led to a wider discussion revealing a lot of common ground between humanists and Unitarians who, locally at least, range in belief from atheists to liberal Christians. The principle differences between us seemed to be that they have church buildings and hold services, are less engaged in challenging religious privilege, and have a stronger emphasis on activity than belief.

In that context, Linda Hart asked if we would be interested in helping with Vineyard Lunches. The Vineyard Project in Richmond is run in the crypt of Richmond's Vineyard church by Richmond Borough Mind. Among their services is to provide lunch for homeless and other needy people. The one day when this is not available is Sunday, and the local Unitarians now participate in a rota of local churches to fill the gap. We were therefore invited to join in covering their three sessions this year, on **10 July, 4 September** and **13 November** – a good opportunity for humanists to play a positive role in the wider community. Following a request at our last meeting, quite a few people volunteered to participate, and we have confirmed that we will be please to help on all three dates. **If you're interested**, please contact Tina on [tina@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:tina@swlhumanists.org.uk) or call Jeremy on 020 8892 5077.

### Look Back: "Sum", the afterlife and David Eagleman

The last meeting was a "first" as we started the discussion with a reading by Rosemary of two of the thought-provoking (and funny) stories about imagined afterlives from David Eagleman's book "Sum". That led to a lively discussion on the merits or otherwise of the idea of afterlives. An interview with the author, a neuroscientist who describes himself as a "possibilian", led to a wider debate on the degree to which we can and should remain open-minded. Once again, the discussions highlighted both the wide diversity of views among local humanists and the common ground – and made us all think.

### Links & Info

While we're on the subject of the afterlife, Stephen Hawking has concluded that there isn't one: *"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark"*. [www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven](http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven).

When we had a meeting a couple of years ago with a speaker from "Dignity in Dying", there was unanimous support for their campaign for a change in the law on assisted suicide. It remains illegal under all circumstance in England and Wales, no matter how much the person asking for assistance is suffering or how hopeless their condition. The only real change has been clarification of the circumstance under which a prosecution will be unlikely to be pursued. But pressure for a change continues to be applied. Dignity in Dying have recently published what they bill as "*our strongest evidence-based publication to date*", which has gone to all MPs and Peers and which you can download here: [A Matter of Facts](#). Its forward is by Professor Raymond Tallis, in which he says that,

had he know the contents at the time he was chairing a medical ethics committee on the issue a few years ago, he would have changed his view from being opposed to being for a change in the law.

A lot of the debate about evolution, Creationism - and its more recent alter-ego Intelligent Design - focuses on the US and attempts by fundamentalist Christians to import American ideas into the UK. In fact the mainstream western churches, including Catholics and Anglicans, have no problem with evolution. On the other hand, Creationism is the default position in Islam. And the position in the UK is worrying. Usama Hasan is a senior lecturer in business information systems at Middlesex University and an imam at al-Tawhid mosque in Leyton, east London (which also houses one of the UK's biggest Sharia courts). Three years ago, he wrote a [\*piece on the Guardian website\*](#) saying that modern Muslims needed to move beyond the literal interpretation of the Koran, which says that God created Adam from clay and then breathed life into him. He concluded that there were valid alternative interpretations of the creation story which were compatible with evolution, and pointed out that Islamic scholars in the medieval period would probably have had no problem with the issue, quoting the philosopher Ibn Khaldun as saying: "One should then look at the world of creation. It started out from the minerals and progressed, in an ingenious, gradual manner, to plants and animals." But as he explains in this interview, [www.newscientist.com](http://www.newscientist.com), the result of his attempt at Muslim enlightenment has been death threats from extremists, in part prompted by a visiting Saudi cleric. He has recently retreated from his position as he is afraid for his family. To get a flavour for what he's up against from apparently non-violent mainstream Sunni Muslims, take a look here: [www.sunniforum.com](http://www.sunniforum.com). He claims that other Muslim scientists share his views but are too frightened to say anything.

However, in the US things seem a little better. According to <http://muslims.net>, Islamic teachers and imams there have begun signing an open letter declaring that there is no clash between their religious faith and the theory of biological evolution. Since 2006, almost 13,000 US Christian clergy have signed a similar letter.

Another worrying example of UK extremists using violence to make their point was the recently-reported case of four Muslim men jailed for seriously assaulting an East End RE teacher simply because they did not approve of him teaching RE - including Islam - to Muslim girls [www.bbc.co.uk/news](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news). Maybe the government's redefinition of "extremism" will help: [\*Updated extremism strategy published\*](#).

A concern highlighted by the BHA some time ago is that public services farmed out to religious charities could be subject to discrimination in access and employment, and/or used as a platform for evangelism. According to the National Secular Society, similar concern was expressed by the Unitarian Church in a recent submission to the Parliamentary Public Administration Select Committee, which is looking at the Big Society agenda: [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk). And this article in The Guardian, [www.guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk), reports that the issue has now been picked up by grassroots Lib Dems, led by Dr Evan Harris (who's also a Vice President of the BHA): "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."

The article gives as an example the award by Richmond Council of contracts for counselling services for school-aged children to the Catholic Children's Society. In fact good answers have been given to the many challenges local humanists and others have raised about this: the counsellors are bound by professional codes of practice that should prevent them from giving religiously-biased advice, many of them will be the same people as before (who will transfer to the new provider), the contracts include the Council's equality policy, children should not be put off as the service will not be branded as coming from the CCS, and sexual advice services will continue to be provided by other providers.

That all looks good - though perhaps not to those who recently sent letters to the local

paper saying what a good thing it is that the service will now be based on Catholic ethics! But many concerned people will continue to wonder whether there was no better alternative to awarding contracts in such a sensitive area to a Catholic charity. Their concerns will have been heightened by a [recent speech by Cardinal Robert Sarah](#), who heads the Vatican department dealing with the church's charitable institutions, in which he stressed that the main mission of all Church groups, charitable groups included, was to bring people to Christ: *"Today, dear Friends, the tragedy of modern mankind is not lacking clothing and housing. The most tragic hunger and the most terrible anguish is not lack of food, it's much more about the absence of God and the lack of true love, the love that was revealed to us on the Cross."* He went on to say that *"...The Church cannot be considered as a partner of Catholic organisations. They are the organisations that take part in her mission."*

Click [here](#) for a link to a National Geographic article about Gobekli Tepe, a remarkable temple/religious site discovered in southern Turkey that is overturning previous ideas about the move of early people from being hunter-gatherers to living in settlements and the role of religion in the process. Despite the fact that it contains well-executed carvings, some in bas-relief, it's so ancient that it was already falling into disuse several thousand years before the pyramids were built [*Thanks to James for this one.*]

In the unlikely event that you missed it, a lot of fun was had at the expense of Harold Camping, the US preacher who persuaded large numbers of people to believe that the world was going to end on 21<sup>st</sup> May. Unless something very strange is happening, it didn't, and Mr Camping has gone to ground. Here's the BBC's take on it: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada). The incident once again highlighted the enormous variety of his American co-religionists, ranging from those whose admirably compassionate response was to offer support to people who were shocked to find that they were still here, to alternative end-timers who simply think that their view is the right one. "Bible expert and author of 25 books" Steven Wohlberg is a good example. He's quoted as saying: *"To be blunt, Harold Camping is a false teacher."* On his [White Horse Media](#) website he says: *"While many supposed "signs" appear daily on the covers of America's sensational tabloids, here are eight true biblical signs worth listing."* Here they are: *great earthquakes; out-of-control violence; out-of-control sex; global environmental crisis; increasing stress, confusion and heart disease; increasing knowledge; false teaching and global religious confusion; and the global preaching of the Gospel.* A big benefit of the Bible's considerable length seems to be that almost any point of view can be supported by judicious selection of quotes.

## Events & courses

### BHA Annual Conference

This year's BHA Annual Conference, at the Hilton Deansgate, Manchester from **17-19 June**, has a stellar cast of speakers including Peter Atkins, Julian Baggini, Natalie Haynes, Stephen Law, Mark Vernon, Chris French, Richard Norman, outgoing BHA President Polly Toynbee, incoming President AC Grayling and author Phillip Pullman. Tickets are £156 including all the sessions, lunch and a gala dinner. Click [here](#) to buy a ticket on line, or call 020 7079 3580 to pay with a credit or debit card. Or you can buy tickets in instalments - call 020 7079 3580 from 9am-5pm Mon-Fri and ask to pay in three monthly instalments. More details at: <http://bhaconference.org.uk/>

### Royal Institution short courses

The Royal Institution is offering two short (6 session) courses that look interesting:

- **Mon 20 Jun – 25 Jul** – 2.00-3.30pm – **"Christianity and the creation of modern science"** - Prof Frank James, covering Hellenistic pre-Christian ideas up to Intelligent Design and New Atheism. £200
- **Thurs 30 Jun - 4 Aug** – 7.00-9.30pm – **"Particle Physics"** - Dr Eram Rizvi (Queen Mary College, University of London) - particle physics from the origins of quantum theory to cutting-edge research at the Large Hadron Collider.

Royal Institution, 21 Albemarle Street, London W1S 4BS. £200 for each course (£180 for RI members). For details and booking click [here](#) or call 020 7409 2992

### For kids: Camp Quest

Anyone with kids between 9 and 15 might be interested in this. According to the blurb: "*Camp Quest is a new residential summer camp where free-thinking kids come together to enjoy a range of challenging mental and physical activities designed to encourage curiosity, questioning, and critical thinking.*" 16-20 August 2011 at Essex Outdoors, Danbury. Price £250 per child. More details and booking form at [www.camp-quest.org.uk/](http://www.camp-quest.org.uk/). Camp Quest is sponsored by the BHA and the National Secular Society.

### Other upcoming events

- **Sat 11 June** – doors open 7pm for 7.30pm start - debate **"Is a secular society a more tolerant society?"** with Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, and Rev. David Robertson Minister of St. Peter's Free Church in Dundee, author of 'The Dawkins Letters', a Christian response to 'The God Delusion'. Gunnersbury Baptist Church, Wellesley Road, Chiswick, W4 4BE. Admission free.
- **Wed 15 June** – doors open 6.30pm for 7pm start – **"Religion in education: towards division or inspiration?"** - debate to mark 140 years of the University Tests Act (1871) organised jointly by the Accord Coalition and University College London. Speakers include: Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari (Sec Gen of the Muslim Council of Britain, 2006-2010), Charles Clarke (former Sec of State for Education, Visiting Prof of Politics and Faith at Lancaster University), Prof A.C. Grayling (Prof of Philosophy at Birkbeck and BHA President-Elect), Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE (Chair, Accord Coalition). Venue: Theatre 1 at UCL's Cruciform Building, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT. Admission free. To book your ticket(s) at the event visit <http://uclreligionineducation.eventbrite.com/> by Mon 13 June.
- **Sat 16 July** – 10.00am – 4.00pm – **"The Place of Religion in Public Life"** A Humanist Philosophers' Day Conference, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL, including Andrew Copson (BHA Chief Executive), Peter Cave (Chair, Humanist Philosophers), Prof Richard Norman (University of Kent), Nasreen Rehman (British Muslims for Secular Democracy), Dilwar Hussain (Policy Research Centre, Islamic Foundation), Simon Barrow (Ekklesia), Nick Spencer (Theos). More information and tickets (£5) available [here](#).

### Membership, Ceremonies & Committee

Anyone who's vaguely humanist is welcome to our meetings and events. But if you're a "regular", please join the majority of us in paying a small annual sub to help fund our activities and campaigns. Ask Ian or Jeremy (see below) for a membership form. Although we're affiliated to the British Humanist Association (BHA), the two organisations have separate membership. The BHA is the largest and most powerful voice promoting Humanism nationally. To join the BHA click here: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/support-us/join-us> or call 020 7079 3580.

For information about **Naming, Wedding or Funeral ceremonies**, contact local Humanist Celebrants Rosemary Taylorson (020 8943 2941) or Jim Trimmer (020 8974 5929).

The current Committee is: [Jeremy Rodell](#) – Chair/Newsletter Editor ([chair@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:chair@swlhumanists.org.uk), [newsletter@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:newsletter@swlhumanists.org.uk) 020 8892 5077); [Rosemary Taylorson](#) – Secretary & Social Network Focal Point ([info@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@swlhumanists.org.uk) 07946 465 701); [Ian Bruce](#) – Treasurer & Membership Secretary ([treasurer@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:treasurer@swlhumanists.org.uk)); [Marilyn Mason](#) – Education Focal Point ([education@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:education@swlhumanists.org.uk)); [Geraldine Mitchell](#) – Charities ([charities@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:charities@swlhumanists.org.uk)); [Tina Bruce](#) – Committee Member ([tina@swlhumanists.org.uk](mailto:tina@swlhumanists.org.uk)); [Tony Charlesworth](#) – Committee Member

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