

SOUTH WEST LONDON HUMANISTS NEWSLETTER

August 2011

Mon 29 Aug: Group discussion: "Should drugs be legalised?"

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Diary

Date	Time	Place	Event
Aug			
11	11.00	5 Degrees Cafe, 8 High St, Kingston, KT1 1EY	Coffee morning
29	19.00 20.00	Old Ship, King St, Richmond TW9 1ND	Pre-meeting get-together* Main meeting
Sep			
8	11.00	Rose Theatre Café, Kingston	Coffee morning
26	19.00 20.00	Old Ship, King St, Richmond TW9 1ND	Pre-meeting get-together* Main meeting
Oct			
13	11.00	Rose Theatre Café, Kingston	Coffee morning
31	19.30	Market House, Market Place, Kingston KT1 1JS	Public 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 29 Aug** – Group discussion: "**Should drugs be legalised?**" - Humanist angles explored via a debate on the proposal that: "*Governments should not proscribe the use of narcotic drugs but legalise them and regulate their supply.*"
- **Mon 26 Sep** - Group discussion: "**The Death Taboo**" – an opportunity for everyone to talk about a topic that is so often avoided. The discussion will involve humanist Celebrants and others with relevant experience.
- **Mon 31 Oct** – Public meeting: "**Are religious people happier people?**" - **different venue/time: 19.30 at Market House, Market Place, Kingston KT1**

1JS - our contribution to the *Think in Kingston* festival, which has the theme of "Happiness". Mark Williamson, Director of Action for Happiness, will review the evidence. Religious and non-religious people will then explore why that might be and what we can all learn. So far, apart from a lot of humanists, a Buddhist monk, a Unitarian minister and a Kingston "street pastor" say they will come.

- **Mon 28 Nov – Keith Porteous-Wood**, Executive Director National Secular Society. (*Back at the Old Ship, normal time – 7.00 for 8.00 start.*)

Look back: AGM, "What is Humanism?" & Summer Party

The AGM saw two of our most valued committee members standing down from their formal roles: Rosemary Taylorson, our Secretary and joint founder of the group, and Marilyn Mason, who as the former Education Officer of the British Humanist Association (BHA), is a fount of knowledge about all aspects of humanism. Both will stay closely connected to the group, with Marilyn continuing in her role on Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education in both Kingston and Richmond, and as our focal point in Kingston, and Rosemary remaining prominent on the social side of the group, including coordinating the coffee mornings, as well as acting as our link into the Celebrants network.

But we also welcomed to the committee: James Heather, Grant Lewison and Jon Fayle. They join Tony Charlesworth (who has taken the Secretary role), Ian Bruce (Treasurer & Membership Secretary), Tina Bruce (who will be the committee focal point for social and "people" issues, linking to Rosemary), Geraldine Mitchell (who retains her Charities focal point role) and Jeremy Rodell (Chair).

The AGM was followed by our annual "What is Humanism?" topic. Every time we do this it's different and this year was perhaps the most lively and interesting, with some insightful personal stories and discussions. The slides shown included items copied from the excellent new *Really Simple Guide to Humanism*, recently launched by the BHA.

The Summer Party too was a big success, with a great turnout, excellent food and minimal showers, despite it being rather a grey day. And we raised enough on the raffle to pay for a child to attend one of the Uganda Schools for another year. Many thanks to Geraldine for the use of her garden and all the work that entailed, and to everyone on the team for their help.

Coffee Mornings

Coffee mornings are on the **2nd Thursday** of each month (**11 August, 8 September, 13 October**) at 11.00am. The normal venue is the café at the Rose Theatre, 24-26 High Street Kingston KT1 1HL. But the Rose is closed in August so on **11 Aug we will be meeting at the nearby 5 Degrees Cafe, 8 High St, Kingston, KT1 1EY**. It's very close to the Rose, on the same side of the road on the left, between the Rose and the Market Square. Look for the "Happy Human" sign on the table.

Vineyard Lunches

On 10 July members of the group joined a team from Richmond Unitarian Church to host a "Vineyard Lunch". The Vineyard Project in Richmond is run in the crypt of Richmond's Vineyard church by Richmond Borough Mind. It lost its Council funding earlier in the year, but we understand that local churches are now stepping into the breach. Among its 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 participate in a rota of local churches to fill the gap. We have taken up their invitation to join in covering their three sessions this year, of which the two remaining are **4 September** and **13 November** – a good opportunity for humanists to play a positive role in the wider community. **If you're interested**, please contact Tina on tina@swlhumanists.org.uk or call Jeremy on 020 8892 5077.

For those of us without prior experience of homeless people, it was quite an eye-opener, especially given the contrast with one of the most prosperous boroughs in the country.

School campaigns & request for action

Catholic school for Richmond – sign petition

We are leading supporters of the Richmond Inclusive Schools Campaign, which was set up in reaction to the borough council's plan for a new Catholic secondary school, against the backdrop of a growing shortage of secondary school places overall. In July the Council announced that they were purchasing a school site – the adult college building in Twickenham, itself in fact an old school – and planned to offer it to the church as a Voluntary Aided school. So they are not only going for the most exclusive type of faith school (Voluntary Aided), but despite the shortages of sites and money, giving it first priority over a new inclusive school, which they say is also planned. The campaign reacted by launching a petition: "*We, the undersigned, petition the council to ensure that every state-funded school opening in the borough from now on is inclusive, so that no child can be denied a place in a good local school because of the religion or belief of their parents.*" 1000 signatures from borough residents will automatically trigger a debate at a full Council meeting. Here's the press coverage: [*Richmond & Twickenham Times*](#).

If you live in the London Borough of Richmond, please make sure you sign it, preferably using the Council's e-petition site here: <http://tinyurl.com/riscpetition1> or using the paper form available at our meetings.

If you support the campaign and want to be kept informed about what is happening, then sign up at: www.richmondinclusiveschools.org.uk.

Kingston primary conversion to church school?

Meanwhile in Kingston, there is the case of King Athelstan's Primary School. The school received a poor Ofsted report and the Council have decided to bring in some expertise to help turn it round by forming a "soft federation" with a nearby Church of England primary. As this was put in place by the (atheist) councillor who is head of education, we're assuming it's the best way to tackle the problem. But the deal includes a plan to consult on converting the school from a Community to a Voluntary Controlled church school. That would make all the primaries in south Kingston faith schools. We have expressed our concern and will monitor the situation to ensure the proper processes are followed, and to support local people who want to retain the school's Community status.

Government consultation on school admissions

Another opportunity for action: there's a government consultation running until 19 Aug on changes to the schools Admissions Framework. Much of it is a tidy-up of the regulations, but Question 9 asks: "*Do you agree that anyone should be able to raise an objection about the admission arrangements they consider unfair or unlawful, of any school?*" It's a great opportunity to highlight the unfairness that often arises as a result of faith-based admissions criteria and the need for a means to object. Here's the link: <http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations>. And you can see the BHA's response here: [*BHA response*](#) . [Thanks to Fiona for flagging.]

Council commissioning

Richmond Council has decided to move to a "commissioning model" for its services, and plans to reduce its direct employees from 3000 to 500. The Council itself is bound to follow a comprehensive "Equality Duty", which includes "religion and belief (where belief includes lack of belief)", in terms of service provision and employment. But its current procurement policy does not extend this fully to the services it commissions. So a religious charity – which will have exemptions from this aspect of equality regulations – could discriminate against, or seek to proselytise, non-religious people or people with different religious beliefs. That could apply to its services or in its treatment of the people it employs. (Although all sorts of assurances have been provided, the decision to give a contract for counselling of school-aged children to the Catholic Children's Society does

not bode well.) We have taken this up with the Council and proposed full extension of the Equality Duty to commissioning. And we have raised it through our membership of Richmond Inter Faith Forum, as it has implications for both religious and non-religious people.

Another worrying development is that the new Localism Bill gives 'community organisations' – widely defined and including religious groups of all sizes and denominations – a new 'right' to bid to run public services in local areas on behalf of the state. It's too early to say how that will work out in practice.

Links & Info

Schools are a hot issue nationally as well as locally. Six of the thirteen new "Free Schools" now approved are faith schools, which will be allowed to select up to 50% of their pupils on the basis of religion [*at least it's not 100%*] and can apply a religious test in appointing, promoting and remunerating teachers and some non-teaching staff. They are not required to follow the national curriculum, can set their own RE syllabus and sideline Sex and Relationships Education if they wish.

And despite several assurances given by the government to the BHA that Creationism will not be taught as science in state schools, the "Everyday Champions Church" in Newark has got to an advanced stage in its bid to set up a Free School. Their line on evolution is clear: "*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 BHA is taking this up with the Department for Education. More details here: www.humanism.org.uk/

Most people know about the Indian caste system, which locks people in India into rigid social strata, and as a result of which "Untouchables" suffer extreme forms of discrimination and are kept at the bottom of the pile. But not everyone is aware that it's alive and well in the UK too. You would think that the Equality and Human Rights Commission would be on to the case. But apparently they have so far done nothing: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>. Meanwhile the EHRC's leader, Trevor Philips, has been attacked from all sides after he ventured into the faith/discrimination debate in a recent interview <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion>, in which he stated "Our business is defending the believer".

Ipsos/Mori have released a fascinating global survey of over 18,000 people across 24 countries asking about their attitudes to religion. You can download it here: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/>. Anyone who thinks that religion is fading in importance will be disappointed: 71% said that their faith or religion was very important or fairly important in their lives. On the other hand, 28% said it wasn't. But this masks huge differences, with 100% of Saudis and 99% of Indonesians saying it was important, 52% of Brits, and 41% of French at the bottom.

In answer to the question: "*What, if any, is your faith or religion even if you are not currently practising?*" 47% said Christian, 11% Islam and 25% "no religion at all". For the UK, 37% said "no religion at all" (lower than the 50% figure from the – larger – British Social Attitudes Survey), with 53% Christian and 2% Muslim. The country with the largest share of non-religious people was Japan (67%).

Globally, 48% agreed that "*religion provides the common values and ethical foundations that diverse societies need to thrive in the 21st century*", but that ranged from 92% in Saudi Arabia to 19% in Sweden, with the UK on 29%.

In case that gives the impression that Europe is largely secular, a piece in [Christian Century](#) paints a different picture. It reports the director of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches (CEC) speaking after a meeting in Brussels between 20 religious leaders and the Portuguese president of the European Commission, Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Council's Belgian president, Herman van Rompuy, and the Polish President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek. He reports that "*Our latest meeting was triggered by the Arab uprisings and European response, and*

by Europe's financial and economic crisis, and in both areas the institution presidents were very clear. What's needed is a new value-based, community approach in Europe, rather than just an economic system. [Sounds OK] They're turning to the churches for this". [Hmmm] Apparently religious leaders now have regular "institutionalised meetings" with senior European officials, including the EU's rotating presidency, and "dialogue seminars" on issues of common concern, in line with Article 17 of the EU's 2008 Lisbon Treaty, which guarantees churches an "open, transparent and regular dialogue" with EU institutions. And church leaders hope to strengthen the structural contacts with a "deeper culture of dialogue."

Baroness Cox is a committed Christian who lost the Tory whip in the House of Lords for being too close to UKIP, and was criticized for inviting the far right Dutch politician Geert Wilders to show his anti-Muslim film "Fitna". But she was supported by the "One Law for All" campaign against Sharia Law and the National Secular Society when she introduced the "Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill" in the House of Lords. Its proposals include: a new criminal offence of 'falsely claiming legal jurisdiction' for anyone who adjudicates upon issues which ought to be decided by criminal or family courts (maximum penalty five years); explicitly stating in legislation that sex discrimination law applies to arbitration tribunal proceedings, so discriminatory rulings can be struck down; requiring public bodies to inform women that they have fewer legal rights if their marriage is not recognised by English law; making explicit that arbitration tribunals may not deal with matters of family law (such as legally recognised divorce or custody of children) or criminal law (such as domestic violence); making it easier for a civil court to set aside a mediation agreement if it was reached under duress, and making clear that a victim of domestic abuse is a witness to an offence and therefore should be protected from witness intimidation. Like most Private Members' bills, it is unlikely to become law, but serves to push the issue and possible solutions up the agenda.

Islamophobia Watch seemed unable to separate their feelings about Baroness Cox's other activities from the moderate nature of the proposals, which do not even mention Sharia and are largely a re-emphasis of existing rules.

Rick Perry, the gun-toting Governor of Texas - and potential Presidential contender - announced last month that he was inviting people from across the country to join him in a day of prayer and fasting at a sports stadium in Houston to "seek God's guidance and wisdom in addressing the challenges that face our communities, states and nation." This was a bit much even for Texas, and the governor's event has drawn criticism from both Republicans and Democrats, as well as Jewish groups and civil liberties organizations. But a lawsuit brought by the "Freedom From Religion Foundation" aimed at stopping him taking part was thrown out by a Federal judge: <http://www.nytimes.com/> [Thanks to Grant for this one.]

If you attended our meeting with Simon Singh earlier in the year, you'll be aware of the issues associated with the main types of alternative medicine. They pale into insignificance compared to the activities of "ThetaHealers", a group of faith healers practising in various parts of the UK who claim, among other things, that they can cure cancer - £100 a session. More details here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>.

Events & courses

- **Fri 16 Sep – 6.30 for 7pm – Islam in a Secular Europe** – Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. BHA, Central London Humanists in association with Conway Hall present a panel discussion bringing together key speakers to explore the effect of secular democracy in Europe. £5 for BHA members, £10 for non-members. Expect to see more details at: www.humanism.org.uk/meet-up/events/view/152?page=1
- **Sat 17 Sep – 11.30 - March for a Secular Europe**, an annual event organised by the *Secular Europe Campaign*. This year the focus is on the unhealthy influence that the Vatican has over European political institutions. The march will meet at 10.30 at Temple Place on Victoria Embankment and leave at 11:30 am to proceed

through central London to the rallying point, Richmond Terrace, opposite Downing Street.

- **Sun 25 Sep – 10.30-16.10 – “Conspiracy Theories”** - Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Why are people drawn to conspiracy theories? What are the warning signs of a dodgy conspiracy theory and which are actually credible? An entertaining and informative day with some of the world's leading experts including David Aaronovitch, and Chris French. £5 for BHA members, £10 for non-members. Book [here](#) or phone the BHA 020 7079 3580.

Course: Richmond & Putney Unitarians are running a course on "*Practising Compassion: Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*" based on Karen Armstrong's book of the same name. This was the result of her winning a "TED" prize a couple of years ago for her "Charter for Compassion" idea, which aims to promote practical compassion and reduce conflict between people of different religions and beliefs by focusing on the "Golden Rule" ("Do unto others" and its variants since ancient Greek times), which is common to virtually all of them. Of course, it's just about the only thing that most humanists agree on too! There will be 13 sessions held over the course of a year on the third Saturday of each month from 10 to 11:30, starting 17 September. Contact Jeremy if you're interested.

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 SW London Humanist Celebrants via Rosemary Taylorson (020 8943 2941).

Committee: Jeremy Rodell – Chair/Newsletter Editor (chair@swlhumanists.org.uk, 07798 935569); Tony Charlesworth – Secretary (info@swlhumanists.org.uk); Ian Bruce – Treasurer & Membership Secretary (treasurer@swlhumanists.org.uk); Tina Bruce; Jon Fayle; James Heather; Grant Lewison; Geraldine Mitchell.

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