



Chiltern Humanists

Newsletter No. 94

October/November 2009

*This life is all we have -
make it good to be alive*

Humanist Ceremonies by Simon Allen

At **The Wendover Library** on **Tuesday, 10th November (7.45 for 8pm)**, a founder member of Chiltern Humanists, Simon Allen, will give a talk about his experiences of officiating at Humanist ceremonies, *writes Tony Blake-Pauley*. Simon began taking funerals in 1991, after training with the BHA. He has been officiating at secular wedding ceremonies, namings and funerals since that time, firstly part-time and latterly working full-time.

In 1992, Simon was one of the three people in the BHA who devised a new training scheme for funeral Officiants, an updated version of which is still in use today. He has trained more than 100 Officiants in England, Wales, Scotland and the Isle of Man. He served on the Ceremonies sub-committee of the BHA for five years and has participated in Humanist conferences about ceremonies in four European cities. In January 2005, Simon left the BHA to work independently as an Officiant.

Simon has taken ceremonies throughout the Chilterns area, centred on West Herts, but also South Bucks and North London.

For over 18 years he has officiated at many crematoria, and at both conventional and the new "Green" cemeteries, as well as conducting ceremonies held in sports pavilions, hotels, and village halls. One of his more interesting experiences was his involvement in weddings 'live' on ITV's "Good Morning".

Given Simon's extensive background in a field where the very serious, the uplifting and sometimes the humorous exist side by side this promises to be an unusual, informative and entertaining evening.

An evening not to be missed.

New Committee Member

Following the appeal for two volunteers to fill vacancies on the committee, we are delighted to announce that Pam Crawford has agreed to join us. We are confident that Pam will make a valuable contribution to the development of the Group.

This leaves one further vacancy . . .

Carry on Screening?

The vogue for screening tests, including blood tests and scans, is having an increasingly malign influence on public health, *writes Dr. Michael Fitzpatrick*. The popular appeal of screening tests results from the inflation to mythical status of the commonsensical notion that early detection leads to a more favourable outcome. But this is only true if early treatment is effective: this has not been demonstrated, for example, in relation to prostate cancer or in the case of atheromatous carotid arteries. There is a related presumption that late presentation is a common factor resulting in a rapid demise, particularly from cancer, but again, this has to be substantiated, especially when it may be the case that delays and inadequacies in treatment are a more important problem. Screening tests may result in the diagnosis of conditions which would never have caused illness, but may lead to treatments (including surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy) which may impair the quality of life.

At our meeting at **8pm on Tuesday, 15th December**, at **The Court House, Berkhamsted**, *adds the Editor*, Dr. Fitzpatrick will discuss such questions as: What is the evidence for the value of screening tests? Are patients adequately informed of the potential risks as well as the benefits of screening? Should resources be concentrated instead on improving treatment services?

Michael Fitzpatrick is a GP in Hackney, and the author of *The Tyranny of Health: Doctors and the Regulation of Lifestyle*, Routledge 2000; and *Defeating Autism: A Damaging Delusion*, Routledge 2009.

It is sure to be a challenging and thought-provoking evening. Do come along!

New Year Lunch

Saturday 9, January 2010, 12.30 for 1pm. The committee has decided to hold our New Year Lunch at the Full Moon Pub, nr Cholesbury, Bucks, as last year. The pub is on the A416 N of Chesham (take the left fork on leaving Chesham). We shall be contacting members with details of the menu choices, costs, methods of payments, etc. in the next few weeks.

Arrogant Atheists - Is there a case to answer?

In the "courtroom" at the Library in **Wendover** on **8th September** the charge was "Atheists are Arrogant!". The charge relates to the alleged atheist arrogance in attacking both the evidence for the claim that god(s) exist and the beliefs that flow from that claim. Tony Blake-Pauley, was the Prosecuting Counsel (on temporary loan from Chiltern Humanists).

He immediately split the defendants into two camps: passive atheists and arrogant atheists. The former, misguided but usually reasonable and moderate; the latter - his targets - pulpit pounders such as Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris.

People of faith, he asserted, should not have to explain why they believe in god(s) existence, and atheists should accept this. The church has played a pivotal role in the protection of the defenceless – why won't atheists acknowledge this? A redeeming god(s) is a source of comfort to individuals in distress, and also promotes social cohesion, which atheists wilfully undervalue or dismiss. Particularly offensive is the arrogant assertion that people with supernatural beliefs are stupid, which, the prosecution claimed, was Dawkins' view.

Liberal religious leaders do want to engage in debate with non-believers, but are frustrated because atheists insist that any debate must be rational and any claims evidence-based. But atheists' arrogance stems not only from opposition to what they see as irrational religious beliefs, the prosecution suggested. Anger at the world's imperfections, childhood memories of compulsory religious observance, Biblical contradictions, etc., all inflame atheist attitudes. And why is atheist vitriol targeted mostly at Christianity, less at Islam and Judaism? Even agnostics are not spared from atheist ridicule. The prosecution acknowledged that historically, religion has blood on its hands. But so do some allegedly atheist states.

There was a spirited reply from many of the defendants which I have tried to encompass in the questions set out in the following summary. **Summing up:** Before **reaching your verdict** some questions might usefully be asked. Is any debate/argument about god(s) existence to be subject to the normal rules of engagement obtaining in serious discussion, or is the question uniquely sensitive, and thus entitled to special treatment? Even if normal rules do apply, is there, nevertheless, a boundary beyond which atheists should not trespass without meriting the charge of arrogance? Finally, in challenging the belief in god(s) existence, do not atheists sometimes claim to know more than can possibly be known (a charge *they* routinely level at the religious)?

Ugandan Humanist Schools

Over the past two years Chiltern Humanists have donated about £1800 to Humanist schools in Uganda, but we have had very little information about the progress of the schools and the conditions in which they work. On the **20th October at Berkhamsted** about twenty members took the opportunity to learn more about them from Steve Hurd, *reports Peter Norman*. Steve, who is currently a Senior Lecturer in Education at the Open University, began his teaching career in Uganda in the 1970s and now chairs the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust.

He explained that Uganda has some excellent schools in the main towns, but these are accessible only to the elite few. Most of the country's burgeoning population live in grinding poverty, and only 62% of children receive even primary education. In the secondary schools, whether provided by the state, religious bodies or others, pupils have to pay fees as well as buy their own books, so access to secondary education is not possible for children whose families have no cash income. Class sizes of 200 are not unusual, and many schools have no electricity or water laid on.

Against this background three young men, all leading members of the Uganda Humanist Association, have struggled to establish three schools – Isaac Newton School and the Mustard Seed School, both set up in 2006, and the Humanist Academy, which began in 2008. The schools all aim to teach the Ugandan curriculum, but with a Humanist approach. Unlike other schools in Uganda, they are open to all without regard to religious faith, and strive to protect pupils from any form of indoctrination. Close collaboration with the local community is seen as fundamental to their success.

At first funding for the schools was haphazard, although recently they have come together in an umbrella organisation and donations are now channelled through the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust. Mustard Seed was established following an appeal in the *New Humanist*, and the Academy was originally sponsored by the International Humanist and Ethical Union. But in the early days the founders of the three schools had to build walls with no certainty about where the money for a roof would come from and then, when the roof was on, had to set about raising funds for doors, let alone tables, chairs, books, a generator and a water supply. Steve's talk brought home to us their astonishing tenacity, vision and self-belief (I almost wrote 'faith').

For more information visit www.ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org.

Richard Dawkins at Fringe Event at the Lib-Dem Party Conference

BHA Vice President Professor Richard Dawkins spoke in September at the joint British Humanist Association (BHA) and Humanist and Secularist Liberal Democrats' (HSLD) fringe event at the Liberal Democrat annual conference in Bournemouth.

The meeting was chaired by Arnie Gibbons, chair of the HSLD, and also addressed by Andrew Copson, BHA Director of Education and Public Affairs. The auditorium was packed beyond its 300 person capacity and described by many delegates as the most popular fringe event during the conference.

Professor Dawkins read extracts from his latest bestseller, 'The Greatest Show on Earth' to the audience of delegates, MPs, peers and members of the BHA, HSLD and Dorset Humanists. He emphasised the importance of his new work, which presents the evidence for evolution and its significance in depth and in typically engaging and accessible language. Describing the richness of natural life on earth, and the infinite and awe-inspiring variation which we can observe, he asked rhetorically, 'Why would anyone want to write a book about anything else?'

Professor Dawkins spoke on the issue of creationism and in particular the need for better education in schools and wider in order that creationist claims against evolution can be refuted and exposed for the myths that they are. 'Evolution is a fact', he explained, the fossil evidence for evolution is 'wonderfully strong'.

In the question and answer session that followed the lecture, Professor Dawkins answered questions on subjects as wide-ranging as requests for advice for how to improve Religious Education (RE) in schools and the origins of life.

In response to questions on RE, Professor Dawkins explained the need for a balanced RE to be taught in all schools, and expressed his support for RE when RE is teaching about religions and not instruction in religion and includes the teaching of Humanism and non-religious philosophies. The alternatives – either ignorance of religion and culture through not teaching RE in schools, or the indoctrination of children in religion – should not be supported.

Speaking on the origins of life, he said, 'We may have grounds to consider the origins of life as implausible' given the 'incredibly improbable' chance of life existing and being sustained but that, through scientific advance and endeavour, we can seek to develop increasingly sophisticated theories that explain how life began on this planet, and probably on others of the billions of planets in the universe.

Humanist Insights Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)

Education to Reality

And so I disagree with you when you go on to argue that man cannot in general do without the consolation of the religious illusion, that without it he would not endure the troubles of life, the cruelty of reality. Certainly this is true of the man into whom you have instilled the sweet - or bittersweet - poison from childhood on. But what of the other, who has been brought up soberly? Perhaps he, not suffering from neurosis, will need no intoxicant to deaden it.

True, man will then find himself in a difficult situation. He will have to confess his utter helplessness and his insignificant part in the working of the universe; he will have to confess that he is no longer the centre of creation, no longer the object of the tender care of a benevolent providence. He will be in the same position as the child who has left the home where he was so warm and comfortable. But, after all, is it not the destiny of childishness to be overcome? Man cannot remain a child forever; he must venture at last into the hostile world. This may be called 'education to reality'; need I tell you that it is the sole aim of my book to draw attention to the necessity for this advance?

News from the Parish

A CH member sent me the following which we are assured appeared in Parish Magazines in the recent past. With sympathy and understanding to fellow vulnerable editors . . .

Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It's a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.

At the evening service tonight, the sermon topic will be 'What Is Hell?'. Come early and listen to our choir practice.

Potluck supper Sunday at 5.00pm – prayer and medication to follow.

The ladies of the Church have cast off clothing of every kind. They may be seen in the basement on Friday afternoon.

The church will host an evening of fine dining, super entertainment and gracious hostility.

This evening at 7pm there will be hymn singing in the park across from the church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.

Weight Watchers will meet at 7pm at the First Presbyterian Church. Please use the large double doors at the side entrance.

Forthcoming Events from November, 2009

*Bring a friend to the next meeting.
All events are open to anyone interested.*

Tuesday, 10 November, 2009, Wendover. Simon Allen will speak about Humanist Ceremonies – see page 1.

Tuesday, 15 December, 2009, Berkhamsted. Dr. Fitzpatrick on Screening Tests – see page 1

Saturday, 9 January, 2010. New Year Lunch at the Full Moon, Hawridge Common. More details on page 1.

Tuesday, 9 February, 2010, Wendover. Rachel Fryer of the Green Party will talk about her party's policy on Faith Schools.

Tuesday, 16 March, 2010, Berkhamsted. Richard Rawlins of the Secular Medical Forum. Details to follow.

VISIT THE WEBSITE

Our website is at www.chilternhumanists.org.uk

Ideas for it, and actual articles, whether original or copied from elsewhere, should be sent to the Webmaster Tony Blake-Pauley at martonbly@googlemail.com

Photos of Chiltern scenes, perhaps of daffodils or bluebells, would be particularly welcome.

We invite suggestions for themes and speakers for future events.

Our meetings are at 7.45 for 8 pm start unless otherwise stated.

Our venues, unless otherwise stated will be:

The Wendover Public Library in the High Street in Wendover (opposite the Rossini Restaurant). It is the room on the left as you approach the Library entrance.

There is ample free parking.

The Court House in Berkhamsted, just off the High Street, next to St. Peter's church. It is a beautiful half-timbered building on the corner of Church Lane, which is down an alleyway next to the church, and parallel to the High Street. There is a small car park alongside the Court House accessed from the High Street by the slip road immediately in front of the church. Otherwise, there is a public car park next to Tesco accessed via a fairly narrow entrance some 200 yards nearer to the centre of the town. This car park is free after 6 pm.

Contributions for Newsletter No. 95 by January 10, to the Editor: Adrian Wilde, 15 Girton Way, Croxley Green, Herts, WD3 3QW (01923 235055) or email on adrian28@talktalk.net.

If you have any queries about Chiltern Humanists or Humanism generally, or would like a lift to a meeting, please phone the Chairman, Adrian Wilde on (01923 235055) or email on adrian28@talktalk.net.

Chiltern Humanists is affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society.