



Atheists and Agnostics for a Better World

Dorset Humanists

October 2013

A PARTNER OF THE
BRITISH HUMANIST
ASSOCIATION

■ **Saturday 12th October 2.00pm**
Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue, BH9 1TW

Rules of Engagement

**Can atheists and faith groups work
together constructively?**

*Rory Fenton – Dialogue Officer for the
British Humanist Association and President
of the National Federation of Atheist,
Humanist and Secular Student Societies*

Interfaith initiatives are rising in popularity as religious groups and their leaders realise the benefits of working together despite their conflicting beliefs and values.

However, the non-religious are rarely invited and often view such partnerships with considerable scepticism, especially as attempting to reverse the rise in atheist beliefs and secularism is usually an aim of interfaith accords. In this talk, Rory Fenton will explain why he believes Humanists should constructively engage with their local religious groups, and will outline how we can overcome our differences and work together to achieve positive results. Rory recently won the Charity Staff and Volunteers Award for 'Charity Innovator of the Year'.

★ **Part Two Meeting 3.50-4.30pm**

Dorset Humanists 'Mission and Vision' revisited. Come along and influence our decision-making process.



"There is nothing more liberating than simply being yourself." See Rory Fenton's apostasy story inside.

■ **Wednesday 23rd October 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, Grove Road,
Bournemouth BH1 3AX (also Thurs 24th Oct
at Wessex Royal Hotel, Dorchester)

An Atheist on the Alpha Course

David Warden

The 'Alpha Course' aims to recruit non-believers and lapsed Christians and convert them to evangelical Christianity. Promotional materials for the course claim that it is 'an opportunity to explore the meaning of life' but critics have suggested it targets the lonely and easily-influenced with a combination of group-bonding and mild

Send bulletin updates to chairman @dorsethumanists.co.uk or phone 07910 886629

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brainwashing. Atheist and Chair of Dorset Humanists, David Warden was keen to discover what really goes on and so he stepped into the 'lion's den' in Poundbury, Dorchester to find out for himself. He reports that the gluten-free puddings were fantastic but did the Christians manage to influence his brain via his stomach? Find out more in this entertaining account of David's experiences, which will also be of considerable interest to anyone considering attending the Alpha Course.

■ **Thursday 10th October 7.30pm**
Barnes Lecture Theatre, Talbot Campus,
Bournemouth University BH12 5BB

God on Trial : The Case for God Examined

In a retitled repeat of his entertaining and thought-provoking 'Unholy Questions' talk for Dorset Humanists, author, blogger and 'tippling philosopher' **Jonathan Pearce** examines a range of arguments for the existence of God. He will also offer some novel arguments that suggest the standard omniscient, omnipotent, omni-benevolent God is highly unlikely to exist. Jonathan has dedicated many years of his life to all manner of things philosophical and theological and is the author of several popular books including 'Free Will', 'The Little Book of Unholy Questions', and 'The Nativity: A Critical Examination'.

■ **14th -18th October 9.30am-3.30pm**
**World Development Movement and
Chery Tree Nursery present**

One World Week

Films, presentations and discussions about alternative energy, fracking, GMOs, pesticides, gold mining, and more. Stalls and information about organisations including Traidcraft and Quaker Bolivia Link. Free admission. For full programme visit:

<http://www.cherrytreenursery.org.uk/charity-events.htm>

☎ Carl on 01202 533247

Remembrance Service



Dorset Humanists to be included



Report by Richard Scutt

It all began when the fledgling United Kingdom Armed Forces Humanist Association asked the British Humanist Association, though its local groups, to

campaign for those of no religion to be included in Remembrance Day Services across the country and to lay wreaths on its behalf. Dorset Humanists decided to approach the organisers of the Bournemouth service and having worked for about two and a half years for inclusion, it has been agreed by the Council and participants in the service (and parade) that Dorset Humanists will make a contribution as do local religious leaders.

The service is led by a Church of England clergyman along national guidelines formulated by Churches Together in England and Ireland and the Royal British Legion. The guidelines are flexible according to local preferences. In Bournemouth the service has been modified over the years to permit leaders of other religions to make short addresses and our aim was to persuade them to let the Chair of Dorset Humanists to do the same.

A meeting was called at which David Warden and Richard Scutt were able to present our case to Council officials, Rev.Dr. Ian Terry (who leads the service) and around 15 representatives of groups including Veterans associations, War Widows, Cadets, Guides and Royal British Legion. We were given a fair hearing and all present were given the chance to question us. After an hour or so of lively discussion and with considerable support from Rev. Terry in particular, the meeting decided that our proposal was accepted in principle. It now remains for the details of the address and the entry in the printed Order of Service

(hundreds of which are handed out to attendees) to be agreed.

We are, at the time of writing, one of two groups (the other is Oxford Humanists) who have achieved this seemingly small but very significant concession. BHA and UKAFHA are delighted and will encourage other local groups to do the same. BHA is campaigning to get inclusion in the national ceremony at the Cenotaph though to date, Government ministers have stubbornly refused.


 <http://armedforceshumanists.org.uk/about/>

Committee changes

Geoff Jones and Richard Scutt have recently retired from the committee. They have both been stalwart supporters of Dorset Humanists in so many ways including education work, publicity, debates, talks, and Summer Festivals. We thank both of them for their enormous contributions over many years including the wisdom and experience they brought to committee deliberations. We look forward to seeing them at our future meetings and we wish them – and their partners – well-earned rest, relaxation and happiness.

We currently have three vacancies on the committee. Do you have skills that could be put to good use for the benefit of Dorset Humanists? We are looking for someone with excellent admin skills and people with a passion to develop other aspects of our work. Please ask David Warden for details of what's involved.

 chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

 07910 886629

Chris French replay

Eighty people turned up to our September meeting to hear Professor Chris French. If you missed his highly entertaining presentation catch it here on Dorset Humanists You Tube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AvRJ7GeYOJc>

Jane Bannister Winter Appeal




We are proud to launch our Jane Bannister Fund with a winter appeal in support of local homeless people and a women's refuge. An anonymous donor has already pledged £400 if other members match this sum. Jane Bannister (1944-2013) was a former Chair of Dorset Humanists and a keen supporter of similar charities. Cheques made payable to Dorset Humanists (Winter Appeal) can be passed to David Warden or our treasurer Dariusz Andersen.

 chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

 07910 886629

Local firm of IFAs pledges support for our Winter Appeal

A local firm of independent financial advisers have indicated their willingness to contribute to the **Jane Bannister Fund Winter Appeal** if any Dorset Humanists choose to engage them. Strategic Solutions is a Chartered firm of independent financial advisers covering the South of England including Bournemouth and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority and chartered by the Chartered Insurance Institute. Chartered status is only given to those that can demonstrate a commitment to knowledge, capability and ethical practice. Please contact Dean for further information.

 01202 527274 / 07713858773

 dean.robertson@ssfs.co.uk

 <http://www.ssfs.co/>



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Young Humanists

Cathy Silman explains her passion for setting up a humanist group for young people

Dorset Humanists is planning to deliver introductory talks on Humanism to as many local schools as possible. This is in line with the British Humanist Association's long-term goal to have a humanist volunteer attached to every school to provide information, training and inspiration – presumably as an addition/alternative to religious leaders who regularly work with schools.


Terry Milton had an encouraging encounter recently which set me thinking. He ran a session on Humanism for the older children at Baden Powell Primary School in July. A few days later he was on a beach when a girl of about 10 years of age, with her mother, came up to Terry and told him she had heard his talk to the pupils two weeks before. She said that afterwards she and four or five of her friends at the school had “decided to become humanists. So what do we have to do?”.

As a humanist I find it very life-affirming to meet fairly regularly with a group of people with whose outlook on moral and philosophical matters is broadly in keeping with my own and the chance to attend stimulating lectures and discussions which encourage further thought. I suggest we consider setting up a group for children of roughly 9-15 years, starting with an introductory meeting and hopefully continuing with three or four sessions a year. Whilst in the long term I envisage the programme being devised by the young people themselves, my ideas for initial sessions include: The Big Bang, Philosophy for Kids, a debate, a question and answer session, Darwin and Wallace, plus visits to the Winchester Planetarium and INTEC

centre and the Bournemouth Natural Science Museum. Some of the sessions planned on our existing programme would be very accessible to young people and perhaps could be highlighted as such in handouts.

I am currently investigating the legal regulations if any. We would have to be CRB-checked specifically for this activity. I would be very happy to organise these sessions initially and would love some other people to help. Anyone else interested either with organising or leading an inspiring lecture or activity? Advertising could be done through visits to schools and perhaps a link on our website. I would welcome any ideas or suggestions for activities or legalities of setting up such a group.

 catherinesilman311@btinternet.com

 01202 740550 or 07817 695615

My Apostasy Story

Former Catholic Rory Fenton, our October speaker, explains how he struggled free from the faith

There is nothing more liberating than simply being yourself. There is probably also nothing harder. For many across the UK struggling to leave their family's religion, this is exactly the challenge they face everyday. I know – I was one of them.

Raised Catholic in Northern Ireland, religion was never sold to me as a matter of conscience, it was a matter of identity. To lose my faith would be to lose a part of myself. So when I started to doubt my faith as a teenager and later again as a student, I tried to sweep my doubts under the carpet, embarrassed that someone might see what seemed to me a failure to believe. All I had ever known was Catholicism and I had learnt to view atheism through Catholic eyes. To be atheist, I believed, was to lose hope, to lose morality and to lose purpose. At first the realisation that I did not believe the religion of my parents was far from liberating, it felt like an illness.

So I sought a cure for my atheism. I became heavily involved in Catholic groups, attending mass twice a week and going

abroad on pilgrimage. I focussed on the parts of my religion I did believe in, such as charity, and told myself that belief in the rest would surely come. I remember being on retreat, aged 19, with the intention of finally deciding that I believed in God. Looking back, it does seem incredible that I would head to the countryside with a religious group with the intention of believing in a God I wasn't sure existed. I spent the weekend reading non-stop through Catholic apologetics but yet again I could only agree with the call to be a moral person and even then felt things weren't as black and white as they were presented to me. Eventually I realised that to believe would require not a book but a leap of faith. To simply, blindly, accept what the Church said to be true. I had to believe.

But I couldn't. I couldn't because I didn't. Catholicism went against my beliefs, it went against who I was and in truth I wasn't a Catholic. This realisation was not the liberation it is for some, it was a grim acceptance. But through chance, I heard of humanism. Actually, I heard about it through a priest who was criticising it. "They arrogantly wish to live good lives without God". That sounded perfect.

It has taken three years from then to get to the stage now where I feel truly comfortable and free in not just my atheism but more importantly in my humanism, my belief in good without God. This is why I am so excited by the Apostasy Project. I know how difficult it can be to accept a loss of faith but I also know what it's like on the other side, to be "out" and fully yourself. I wish I could have had access to something like this as a teenager and my hope for readers is that they might be spared some of the struggle I went through. Whatever happens, I hope I can help.



This article is part of a series produced for The Apostasy Project – a new initiative which aims to provide information and support for those thinking of leaving their religion.
apostasy.org.uk

■ Reproduced from the Rationalist Association website.



Letters & Emails

Write to Dorset Humanists, 58a R L Stevenson Avenue Bournemouth BH4 8EG or email chairman @dorsethumanists.co.uk

From Tony Tiffany

What a wonderful presentation by Chris French at our meeting yesterday, he encapsulated what I had often thought but was unable to put into words... and so much fun too. If you could get him to give a talk on his studies as regards religion then that would be some fun too I imagine. One of the best talks so far.

From Ray Thorogood, Swanage

Thank you for bringing this talk [Chris French] to our attention. The five of us from Swanage all found it very worthwhile to make the journey. There was much to agree with and some not to and the journey back was entirely taken up with discussion about it. Do please pass on our thanks to Chris for his fascinating account of the research he and his team are carrying out.

From Carol Mary-Fraser, Norfolk

I was both surprised and saddened to read of the death of Jane Bannister. I did not know her at all well, and only had a few conversations with her around the time of Dennis's illness and death. However, those few made it clear to me she was a good person with admirable qualities. I am sure she will be missed greatly, of course by her family, and also her friends within the humanist community. All good wishes to you all of the enlightened sector in Dorset.

From Fay, Kuwait

It was a real pleasure to meet people such as yourself and all whom I met the other day [at the You Tube evening]. I was absolutely happy just being there surrounded by people of different ages and different backgrounds all grouped together in the name of humanity, no religion, no god, no belief, but in each other. I felt proud.



Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
October 2013



Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief..." *Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18*. The appalling massacre of eighty Christians in Pakistan is one demonstration of the folly of setting up monolithic religious states. The official name of Pakistan is "the Islamic Republic of Pakistan" and more than 96% of Pakistan's 167 million citizens are Muslims. Most religions are totalitarian and intolerant by nature because they make universal truth claims based on ancient scraps of papyrus. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are among the most severe in the world and anti-blasphemy advocates are regularly assassinated. Pakistan even seeks to export its religious intolerance through bodies such as the United Nations by calling for defamation of religion laws worldwide. Meanwhile, urbane theologians like Professor Keith Ward continue to publish books which argue that religion is not intrinsically dangerous (*Is Religion Dangerous?* 2011).

It's only five years since the UK abolished its own blasphemy laws, after a campaign by humanists and secularists that lasted 150 years. Trying to leave the religion in which you were raised, however, can still be incredibly difficult for people in this country. This is why Dorset Humanists is, among other things, a home for 'religious refugees'. We welcome apostates, lapsed Catholics, ex-Muslims and everyone whose family life has been affected by extreme religious belief. One of the cruellest practices of religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses is to 'shun' people who leave the faith as if they were already dead. Some Christians also inflict emotional suffering on themselves by thinking that their unconverted loved ones will be lost for eternity. The Apostasy Project is a new initiative sponsored by the Rationalist Association which aims to support people who have left, or want to leave, their family religion. It needs to raise £20,000 to build resources and a network of advisors. You can donate by text by dialling 70070 and keying **apos66 £5** to donate £5 or **apos66 £10** to donate £10.

The Prime Minister blames the Labour Party for creating a 'casino economy'. Coming from the party which deregulated the banks in the first place this stinks of hypocrisy. In the run-up to the next election we should not tolerate politicians or newspapers which demonstrate scant regard for basic integrity and decency.

David Warden