



Atheists and Agnostics for a Better World

Dorset Humanists

July 2014

A PARTNER OF THE
BRITISH HUMANIST
ASSOCIATION

■ **Saturday 12th July 2.00pm**

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Avenue, BH9 1TW

Organised Religion: The Biggest Global Threat to Human Rights?

Peter Tatchell

Turn up early to secure your seat!

Described as 'a national hero' by the Sunday Times, and 'a modern-day prophet' by former bishop Richard Holloway, Peter Tatchell has been campaigning for human rights, democracy, LGBT freedom and global justice for nearly half a century. He believes that 'all human beings everywhere have human rights and that no political system or faith should be allowed to undermine them'. Organised religion almost invariably promotes sexist and homophobic discrimination in law, and religious fundamentalism seeks to thwart equality and human rights around the world. Our own Anglican, Catholic and Muslim leaders tried to block same-sex marriage, and most faiths exclude women from senior leadership roles, with some also seeking to deny them contraception, abortion and fertility treatment. While acknowledging some religious groups' positive contributions to social justice, Peter will be presenting the case that organised religion is currently 'the greatest global threat to human rights; especially to the human rights of women and gay people'. He will also highlight the sectarian violence many religions have caused by provoking religious hatred and persecuting minority



faiths in the Central African Republic, Nigeria, Pakistan, Burma, Somalia, and previously in Northern Ireland. Join us for a thought-provoking examination of the religious threat to human rights by respected veteran campaigner Peter Tatchell.

■ **Every first Thursday of the month**
Moon in the Square, Exeter Rd, BH2 5AQ

Dorset Humanists Social Evening

Our next social evening will be at Moon in the Square on Thursday 7th August. Join us for an interesting chat over a drink or two and get to know other like-minded people. See you there!

☎ Dean 07713 858773

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

Website: dorsethumanists.co.uk Twitter: @dorsethumanists Facebook: Dorset Humanists

■ **Thursday 17th July 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, 4 Grove Road
Bournemouth BH1 3AX

Science and Pseudoscience

**A discussion with science journalist
Peter Hadfield**

In these times of almost unlimited information and disinformation, media hype, and chequebook journalism, how do reasonably intelligent people ensure we are accurately informed about science? What sources are trustworthy and what are the relative merits of newspapers, books, websites, scientific journals and government committees? With a particular focus on the topical issue of climate change, science journalist Peter Hadfield and Chair of Dorset Humanists David Warden will be discussing how credible information is gathered, how to spot bogus information, and how to debunk mythmakers who are constantly telling us the experts have got it all wrong. Peter regularly debunks pseudoscience and conspiracy theories on his YouTube channel, Potholer54, which now has approaching 90,000 subscribers.

■ **Wednesday 23rd July 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, 4 Grove Road
Bournemouth BH1 3AX

Life on Mars then and now

James Fradgley FRAS. Serious searches for evidence of life on Mars began in the 19th century and for many years it was believed there were canals on the planet's surface. Astronomer Percival Lowell, even suggested they were built by an intelligent civilisation, but famed British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace severely criticised his claims and concluded that complex life on the planet was impossible. However, the search for life on Mars is far from over and continues today via astronomical observation and exploratory space missions. Distinguished astronomer James Fradgley will recount the fascinating history of the search for life on our planetary neighbour, and explain our current knowledge of, and future plans to increase our understanding of this most intriguing red planet.

■ **Wednesday 9th July 7.30pm**
Bournemouth Skeptics in the Pub at The
Brunswick, Charminster, BH8 8PX
£3 entry cost

Do We Really Have Free Will?

Another chance to hear this entertaining introduction to the age-old philosophical debate on whether we have free will or whether we live predetermined lives. Presenter Jonathan Pearce is a teacher and author from South Hampshire who has dedicated many years of his life to all manner of things philosophical and theological. He is currently studying for a Masters in Philosophy.

bournemouth.skepticsinthepub.org

☎ Chris 01425 673477

■ **Sunday 20th July 10.00-11.30am**
Flirt Café Bar, 21 The Triangle, BH2 5RG

Sunday Assembly

An opportunity to find out more about Sunday Assembly in Bournemouth and how you can get involved. Sunday Assembly is a godless congregation that celebrates life. Our motto is live better, help often, wonder more. Sunday Assembly is all about building up a sense of community, thinking about how we live our lives and helping those around us. Come along to our open meeting to find out more.

<https://www.facebook.com/events/648944418522285/>

<http://sundayassembly.com/about/>

■ **Saturday and Sunday 19th & 20th July**

Tolpuddle Festival

The Dorset Humanists tent will be staffed by a crew of happy humanists busily raising the profile of humanism and Dorset Humanists at this iconic festival. Please come along and support us, and enjoy some great musical entertainment too.

<http://www.tolpuddlemartyrs.org.uk/index.php?page=2012-festival-and-rally>

☎ Simon 07786 318863

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

Website: dorsethumanists.co.uk Twitter: [@dorsethumanists](https://twitter.com/dorsethumanists) Facebook: Dorset Humanists

Positive arguments for agnosticism



Kate Holden (left) provided us with a very stimulating talk on agnosticism at our evening meeting in June. Kate, a philosophy graduate and trainee RE teacher, considers herself to be a 'philosophical

agnostic'. She believes that 'real' agnosticism is about honesty and humility in the face of what can often seem an insurmountable puzzle: the God question. Here are some key extracts from her talk:

'Agnostics claim that we cannot know whether deities of any kind exist or not. I strongly disagree with the claim that agnostics 'haven't yet decided'. True agnostics are people who have considered the evidence as fully as they are able and who have reached the conclusion that the truth claims made by both the theist and the atheist are, in fact, not knowable in the traditional sense of the word. I think a form of neutral epistemic humility is the best we can honestly hope for if we lack religious faith and have not had a religious experience.

I think the arguments for God's existence simply don't work. Let's face it, if they worked, we wouldn't be here. However, arguments to disprove the existence of God likewise fail. Richard Dawkins rightly criticises various forms of religious practice. He has cleverly ensured that the God debate has now 'passed the dinner party test'. However, where he falls short, and he does so quite remarkably, is with his grasp of the philosophical arguments he wishes to refute. Dawkins regularly fails to give adequate respect to the philosophical ideas which are being presented by theists. [His comparison of God and Santa Claus] misses the point. I [have not] heard of a single individual who is willing to stake their life on the existence of Santa Claus, nor who calls themselves agnostic on the matter! I understand that Dawkins is drawing an analogy here but I think the

analogy is incredibly weak when you fully consider the truth claims that are involved. Dawkins' clumsiness in not fully understanding the philosophical ideas that he thinks he disproves is tiresome in the extreme. He has presented nothing but straw man arguments and often rather rudely. In this example, he claims that all religious people are daft because they haven't realised that God isn't real – in just the same way as Santa Claus isn't real. Even more remarkably, his half-baked arguments have resulted in him admitting publicly that he is, in fact, an agnostic. In February 2012 he told then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams that he prefers to call himself an agnostic rather than an atheist.

There are other atheists out there who argue far more convincingly for their position and who manage to do so without causing offence [such as] philosopher J. L. Schellenberg. He denies the personal God of theism but remains open to what he calls 'sceptical religion'. His book is called *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Sceptical Religion*. He presents an argument whereby members of faith traditions who start to doubt the existence of God might opt to live out a what he calls a 'tribute of faith' whereby they effectively live within their faith tradition and maintain the benefits of it. What impressed me about Schellenberg was how refreshing it was to hear a contemporary atheist engaging in debate with philosophers of religion in a way that was actually constructive.

I often find [that atheists have] the inaccurate idea that all religious people are dogmatic about their beliefs. They assume that theists are certain about things. But having studied philosophy of religion rather than practising a religion I have found many examples of theistic belief which I think make clear the true ambiguity of faith for many people. For example, Stewart Sutherland in his book *The Ambiguity of Faith* highlights a range of the thinkers who "...have in common...a willingness to explore the borderlands between belief and unbelief and to review their own position in the light of what those coming from the opposite direction may have to teach them."

Youtube recording: <http://goo.gl/YmuwHg>

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

Website: dorsethumanists.co.uk Twitter: [@dorsethumanists](https://twitter.com/dorsethumanists) Facebook: [Dorset Humanists](https://www.facebook.com/DorsetHumanists)

Buddhism & Humanism



Sally Bannister (left) and Claire (Lekchog) Bannister presented very personal accounts of their 'take' on Buddhism at our Saturday meeting in May. These extracts are mainly from Claire's talk.

I'm going to talk about Buddhism and how it relates to our 'humanness'. It's quite difficult to find a definitive explanation of Buddhism – there are as many different types of Buddhism as there are of Humanism – there are lots of different perspectives.

I've recently been on a three-month silent retreat which had a huge impact on me. I went with a group and we didn't speak to each other for three months. It was completely life-changing.

Meditation is a huge part of Buddhism. A common misconception is that it's about cutting yourself off from other people or trying to escape our humanness. Quite the opposite is the case. We spend so much of our life trying to escape what's going on around us by using intoxicants or the internet. We feel that we're living life to the full but actually we're missing life as it happens because we're always thinking what's next, what's next. We're missing what's going on in the moment and we're not present to all the joys and beauties. Meditation is like a way of reconnecting with what it is to be human and allowing some of these very natural responses to arise and to be aware of them. If you think of a young child often they'll find the smallest little thing extremely exciting like a cow in a field or a flower or a seashell and look at it and be fascinated. But as we get older we tend to get more caught up in relating to things and routines.

With meditation one of the things we do is value the importance of stepping back and having these pockets of time where we just remove ourselves for a bit. It might just be fifteen minutes a day just to take time to reconnect with ourselves and be present to

ourselves. If you do this day after day it starts to have an impact and you find that you become more aware of these things, of life as it's happening, and more accepting as well.

We can consider illness now as a kind of training ground. We can start accepting pain and discomfort when things aren't so severe to prepare for end of life pain and suffering. I did get very ill on retreat but it was the most blissful experience of my life because I really surrendered to that experience.

Another myth is that in developing our own mind we're disconnecting from those around us, that we're dehumanising ourselves. However by chasing external sources of happiness we are disconnecting from ourselves. We get into routines with people we love and habitual ways of interacting with them and we can almost be blind to who that person is after a while and over the years we can become quite disconnected.

Buddhists identify three root delusions - attachment (wanting/holding on to things), aversion (pushing things away) and self-grasping. In meditation we take time to watch things like attachment or any unpleasant feelings as they arise and they tend to subside.

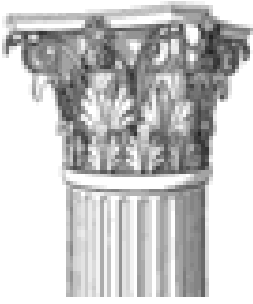
Buddhism is a science of our experience. For example, if someone else is having good fortune don't respond with jealousy (wanting/attachment) but rejoice in their good fortune in order to feel good. Karma is a form of mental energy. Holding onto anger is like drinking poison – anger harms us. If you want to feel good put loving mental energy out there – just have loving thoughts towards other people and see how it makes you feel. We have that on tap. We can tap into this for a source of great happiness.

Buddhism provides us with techniques to develop compassion and love for others. We do experiments with ourselves and see if it works. We can improve our interactions with others, developing patience and becoming more peaceful and happy.

■ A private YouTube recording of this talk is available on request to members of Dorset Humanists.

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

Website: dorsethumanists.co.uk Twitter: [@dorsethumanists](https://twitter.com/dorsethumanists) Facebook: [Dorset Humanists](https://www.facebook.com/DorsetHumanists)



Letters & Emails

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

From Sally Bannister and Claire Bannister after their talk on Buddhism. Their parents, Jane and Dennis Bannister, were leading members of Dorset Humanists.

Sally: I can see why mum and dad were so enlivened by the group! I found the experience totally fascinating and, had I been situated down there I'd definitely be popping along to the occasional meeting. Being with you all is the most connected I have felt with mum and dad since they both died. That meant a huge amount to me. I couldn't help wondering what questions they'd've asked if they'd been there! Please thank everyone again for having us and for contributing such an amazingly diverse range of views and intelligent questions to the discussion. I look forward to seeing you all again in the future.

Claire (ordained name Lekchog): Thank you so much for inviting us. It was very moving to have so many nice comments about mum and dad, and for people to remember them so vividly. It kind of felt like they were there in heart. I learnt so much from the experience and from the people there. It meant a lot just being there. I think we all feel so happy that mum and dad had found a group of people they could share views with, express themselves and do meaningful work with too, and have fun! I forgot to mention our school did a day looking at Humanism. The head is very keen on the children being exposed to the many differing views of the world. I think the children themselves saw many parallels between Buddhism and Humanism.

From Fiona Hamilton

There is absolutely no problem with being an atheist and an agnostic at the same time. Atheism is about belief and agnosticism is about saying you have no knowledge about something. (Anything not

just the God question). Even Richard Dawkins when pushed on the subject admits to being an Agnostic Atheist. He has a scale in *The God Delusion* where people can score their level of belief and knowledge and he admits to being an Agnostic Atheist at about 7 out of 10. A negative cannot be proven so I do not know how anyone can say that they "know" there is no God. The most they can really say is that based on the evidence they do not believe there is a God.

From Simon Whitlock

To be a theist, you need to have a belief in a god. If you don't currently have that belief, then you are an atheist; someone who doesn't believe in any gods.

There is no claim to knowledge when saying "I am an atheist" as it simply describes what I don't believe. Some atheists do claim that "there is definitely no god" but for me this is an unnecessary step and an acceptance of the burden of proof, which should be on the theist. It seems to me that atheism and agnosticism are not mutually exclusive, but either way, I still prefer to call myself a humanist.

From John Glazer

Subscribing to the cause of atheism without any evidence or proof of the existence of a deity is surely as blinkered an outlook as believing that God exists. Neither statement stands up to rational thought. Therefore the only position is agnosticism. Thanks to Kate for an interesting and challenging talk.

From Phil James

It was interesting to see a philosophical argument for theism from a theist perspective. Like Dawkins, I'm an agnostic as to the existence of any supernatural entities, especially God, The Gods, L. Ron Hubbard, etc. but choose to live my life as a de facto atheist unencumbered by worshipping something which exists only in the minds of believers and for which there is zero evidence.

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

Website: dorsethumanists.co.uk Twitter: [@dorsethumanists](https://twitter.com/dorsethumanists) Facebook: Dorset Humanists



Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
July 2014



I like Kate Holden's suggestion (Agnosticism talk, 25th June) that we should be willing to 'explore the borderlands between belief and unbelief' and to 'review [our] own position in the light of what those coming from the opposite direction may have to teach [us]'. This came across in Sally and Claire Bannister's talk about Buddhism as a collection of techniques to help us 'reconnect with our humanness' and develop qualities of patience and compassion. Sally said that 'chasing external sources of happiness' disconnects us from ourselves. A way to reconnect is the daily practice of calm observation and acceptance of our inner states which will subside of their own accord. Sally also recommends a three-month silent retreat for a life-changing experience!

It seems that many people think atheism is dogmatic and agnosticism more open-minded. This is probably because philosophical atheism usually goes hand-in-hand with justified opposition to the harm done by some forms of religion. I agree with Kate Holden that arguments for the existence of God should be taken more seriously than arguments for the existence of Santa Claus. Philosophers like Alister McGrath can make a reasoned case for theism as a possible explanatory hypothesis for the reality in which we find ourselves. But for many Christians God is simply an auto-validating belief. If you believe that God is guiding you through life you will have no difficulty in pointing to many instances of his guidance. In a similar way, it is very easy to maintain belief in Santa Claus despite countervailing evidence. If a philosophical child witnessed one of his parents dragging a heavy sack of presents into his bedroom on Christmas morning he could easily have defended his belief in Santa by arguing that he is really a spirit being who *inspired* his parents to deliver just what he had asked for. His belief in Santa would thus be rendered unfalsifiable. Philosophical atheism is merely the belief that this kind of reasoning is empirically invalid.

Kate also expressed her belief in an objective, trans-human moral order. She worries that 'if you don't have an ultimate "no", then you can make the case for every "yes"'. Well yes of course, that's the human world in which we live and there is no way we can jump right out of it into a world of moral objectivity. If we wish to argue, for instance, that stoning adulterers is wrong we have to persuade and legislate. There are no metaphysical short cuts.

David Warden