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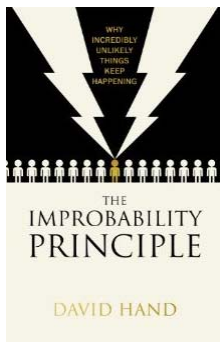
June 2015

Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 13th June 2.00pm**
Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue, BH9 1TW

The Improbability Principle



A talk by Professor David Hand OBE FBA. Why is it that unlikely coincidences and 'miracles' actually happen quite regularly? Eminent statistician David Hand will argue that rare events are in fact commonplace and that we should all expect to experience 'a miracle'

roughly once a month. This talk will appeal to everyone who is interested in how a single bold idea can link areas as diverse as gambling, the weather, airline disasters, the origins of life and the universe itself. The *Improbability Principle* explains why we should not be surprised to bump into a friend in a foreign country, as well as answering seemingly less explicable questions such as why financial crashes are par for the course, and why lightning really does strike twice. David will demonstrate how to use the improbability principle in our own lives, including how to cash in at a casino, and how to recognize when a medicine is truly effective. David Hand is Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Imperial College, London and is the author of the bestselling book *The Improbability Principle*.

■ **Wednesday 24th June 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, 4 Grove Road
Bournemouth BH1 3AX

Understanding Islam: The Qur'an

A joint talk by Jonathan MS Pearce and David Warden. In the aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks, President George W. Bush characterised Islam as a religion of peace, and politicians have continued to publicly maintain the benign nature of the religion following other more recent atrocities by Islamists. Many people agree with this belief, noting that the vast majority of Muslims live peaceful lives, but others counter that the roots of Islam include violent leaders, teachings and scripture. So what is 'the real Islam'? Is true Islam a force for good, and if so, how did it give rise to the revolutionary ideology of Islamism? Author and blogger Jonathan MS Pearce and Chair of Dorset Humanists David Warden will each present a paper exploring 'the real Islam' and consider the prospects for more liberal interpretations of the religion with particular reference to the text of the Qur'an.

Humanists Out & About

This year Dorset Humanists will have information stands at the Bourne Free Pride Festival on 11th July and at the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival on 18th - 19th July. Please contact us to volunteer!

☎ Bourne Free - Aaron 07851 239787
☎ Tolpuddle - Simon 07786 318863

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■ **Sunday 14th June 11.00am**
High Corner Inn, New Forest

New Forest Walk

A chance to rub shoulders with our August speaker, Emeritus Professor of Genetics Norman Maclean. Joint walk and lunch with South Hants Humanists. Please swell our numbers so that we are well-represented on this joint event with a neighbouring humanist group. ☎ Lyn 01202 558763

■ **Saturday 4th July 12.30pm**

Chinese Buffet Lunch

Day's Buffet Restaurant, St Peter's Quarter (Arcade), 68 Old Christchurch Rd,



Bournemouth BH1 2AD (by TK Maxx) accessible via the Arcade or from St Peter's Road. Enjoy a Chinese Buffet Lunch in the company of friendly, like-minded

people. Please phone Lyn if possible but you can just turn up on the day.

☎ Lyn 01202 558763

Please note there is no Moordown meeting on 4th July. This is to free up resources for Bourne Free on 11th July and Tolpuddle on 18th July.

■ **Sunday 28th June 10.30am**

Meet in car park at top of the hill in New Ground Road. Register on Meetup to tell us you're coming.

Portland Walk

An extremely scenic and varied walk around the isle of Portland. Mostly following the renown south west coast path, we will hug the cliffs whilst experiencing breathtaking views out to sea.

☎ Aaron – Message via Meet-Up or phone 07851 239787

■ **Thursday 2nd July 7.30pm** and every first Thursday evening of the month at Moon in the Square, Exeter Rd, BH2 5AQ



Social Evening

Enjoy stimulating conversation over a drink or two at our latest pub social

evening. There is no fixed agenda so if you have any interesting topics or ideas you want to share and chat about in a friendly atmosphere then this meetup is for you.

☎ Dean 07713 858773

■ **Wednesday 22nd July 7.30pm**

Green House Hotel, 4 Grove Road
Bournemouth BH1 3AX

Global problems - why bother?

A talk by Marilyn Mason – Chair of Humanists for a Better World. Marilyn Mason taught for 20 years before becoming the British Humanist Association's first ever Education Officer in 1998. Since her retirement in 2006, she has become heavily involved in community and environmental concerns in her home town of Kingston upon Thames. She founded a (secular) community choir and Kingston Philosophy Café, and is on the steering group of Transition Town Kingston and chair of the environmental forum that liaises with the local council. In this talk Marilyn will say that although so many global problems – war, human rights, global poverty, hunger and exploitation of the poor – are complex and appear insoluble, humanists are the exactly the people who should get involved. There are things we can all do – individually, communally and politically – and this will be a focus of the discussion.

Other local events of interest...

■ **Sunday 12th July 11.00 – 12.30pm**
Bournemouth Festival of Learning at Talbot Campus

The Relationship between Philosophy and Learning

A talk by Estelle Goldie. Estelle is representing U3A and she is a member of Dorset Humanists. Open to everyone not just U3A members. The whole Festival runs from Saturday 11th July to Friday 17th July. 150 free events but you must register.

www.bournemouth.ac.uk/fof

☎ 01202 962362

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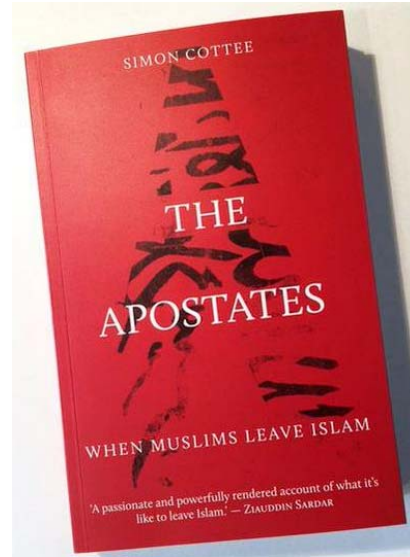
Alom Shaha

Author, science teacher, BHA board member and ex-Muslim Alom Shaha spoke passionately and controversially at our May 9th meeting.

Alom related some of his experiences as a teacher. When he comes into contact with Muslim children they assume he is Muslim and are friendly. But when they find out he is an atheist they become less friendly. He explained that before 9/11 many Muslims could have been described as 'Church of England Muslims' – in other words, their Muslim identity was based on a loose, cultural affiliation to Islam rather than serious religious belief. He said this has changed in recent years and that there is now a greater feeling of 'us and them'. The majority of Muslims are not Islamists. Islamism is 'one facet of Islam that is causing trouble' which is funded by Saudi Arabia. But 'anti-Muslim bigotry' makes the mainstream more likely to identify with fundamentalists.

He proposed that 'religion can't last in the form it does - it's just too hard to believe literally in the Bible and Quran'. He recommended two books: *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy* (2009) by Kenan Malik and *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (2015) by Simon Cottee which contains heartbreaking stories of people who have to pretend to believe. Alom said 'I want to live in a world where no one has to pretend'. He is open about being an atheist ex-Muslim so that this can be normalised. He calls for atheists in Parliament to 'come out' because 'we are a majority atheist country'. He wants people to read his book and not feel alone. He wants religious people to be less troubled by the disbelief of others and not to take it so personally and take offence but people react badly. Maybe this is because they are unsure and the disbelief of others makes them feel uncomfortable. It challenges people's identity.

Multiculturalism is a troubling word - it can just mean coriander and jerk chicken. But as implemented by government it puts people into a ghetto and it results in identity



politics. Alom doesn't try to persuade people not to believe in God. Not believing in God is the smallest bit. He thinks it's much more important to try to persuade people to behave morally. He wants us to strive for greater equality, to take care of the poor and the NHS - belief and disbelief is irrelevant. He resists getting into futile arguments about the existence of God. We know why people believe and we shouldn't waste our time having those debates. 'Love is the best thing which arises from all this chemistry' but 'think how fucking amazing it is to be loved by God and his hippy son Jesus'. Alom said he identifies very strongly as a humanist rather than as an atheist and if he could rewind the clock he would choose a different title for his book '*The Young Atheist's Handbook*'.

Most publishers were too scared to publish his book yet he has had no attacks. Publishers are self-censoring because a negative view of Muslims has taken hold. We assume that all Muslims are potential terrorists. 'I am living evidence that this is not the case. We must be careful about vilifying all Muslims. No one has burnt down my house. I have had no threats.'

Straying into politics, Alom said he feels much angrier about the Tories than about religion. 'We live in a truly messed-up world. The enemy are the rich and powerful.' He said that the government is dismantling the welfare state and that the Tories are destroying education and the NHS. Alom lives in the Elephant and Castle where 'lives are getting worse'.

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The Pound in your Pocket

Steve Laughton

At our Green House meeting in April Dorset Humanist and member of the Labour Economic Policy Group Steve Laughton revived Keynes's idea that in order to achieve economic growth of 4-5% and reduce inequality we need to adjust the value of our currency and invest in new technology and manufacturing. He pointed to the insidious influence of the Mont Pelerin Society as a kind of priesthood of austerity. These are some edited extracts of his talk. A fuller transcript is available.

We have been making the same economic mistake for about 300 years and the West is in denial about the mess. We will look at some evidence and see if neo-liberalism [a belief in unfettered markets and a small state] is grounded in fact or if it is more like faith.

If you or I get into debt we have to make savings. If we are a business, we might have to lay people off. But if everyone does that then there is less demand and less money to buy someone else's product. So another business will be left without enough buyers so it in turn will lay off workers causing a further knock on effect. This can suck a whole economy into recession. Economist John Maynard Keynes believed that the economy as a whole behaved differently from individual companies and that the government is the only economic agent that can intervene to stop that. Keynes believed if an economy becomes uncompetitive it needs to adjust its currency.

Why is it so easy for the interest of finance to trump industry? There is a conflict of interest between those who want a strong currency and the interests of industry and the productive economy. [Finance wants high interest rates to make more profit when they lend. This leads to an appreciation in the currency because high interest rates increase foreign demand for sterling.]

The Keynesian era was the 1940s onwards - until about 1970. But in 1947 a group of

economists who didn't accept Keynes and wanted to go back to the orthodoxy of totally free markets and a very small role for government met in Mont Pelerin, Switzerland. The most famous ones were Friedrich Hayek (Margaret Thatcher used to wave around a copy of his book *The Road to Serfdom*), Ludwig von Mises and Milton Friedman. These guys have really influenced the way the economy is run today. They realised that they needed to do more than just have academic discussions. Over time they got a load of corporate cash from the US and Germany and they set up independent right-wing think tanks such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies which was set up in 1965 to attack Callaghan's corporation tax. You may have heard of these: The Adam Smith Institute, Institute for Economic Affairs, Tax Payers' Alliance, Institute for Fiscal Studies – all founded by Conservatives, bankers, stockbrokers or combinations thereof. All united by right-wing free-market beliefs. The Mont Pelerin economists had seen the repression in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany when government gets too strong. Some say, especially von Mises, that governments should get the hell out of the way, markets are democratic, so they had a very simple view of the way the world works. Until 1970 they were in the wilderness but now they represent conventional wisdom [often referred to as neo-liberalism]. The neo-liberals say it doesn't matter if we don't have manufacturing because we are service economy. The neo-libs say if you are uncompetitive in world markets you should reduce the cost of labour and cut back government involvement to increase confidence and make the economy more efficient. They say you should not lower your currency to make your exports cheaper. And even if you tried to you couldn't because they believe market forces not governments control the exchange rates.

Does manufacturing matter? I would say it does. A waitress only has one pair of arms, but with technology and manufacturing you can increase outputs. This is the driver that increases living standards. A computer would have cost me a lot more ten years ago but precisely because you can get more out for any given level of input the

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goods get cheaper because they are produced more efficiently. So in money terms manufacturing will get smaller as a proportion of total output as countries advance, but you can't abandon it to the extent that we have in the UK. In Germany it is 21%. In emerging economies it can be as high as 60%. Despite the fact that manufacturing sank in 1997-2012 over a third of our economic growth came from manufacturing. This means that our standard of living is dependent on manufacturing. It's the increased efficiency of manufacturing that frees up resources for the more labour-intensive service industries. You have to subsidise services from manufacturing.

Our manufacturing goods are not competitive because the value of sterling was increased making our exports uncompetitive but relying on services to balance the books has not worked. During the Thatcher government sky-high interest rates designed to reduce the money supply caused sterling to appreciate by 60%. This wiped out huge swathes of industry because they became uncompetitive. The money from North Sea oil was used to finance the consequent rise in the welfare bill and also to go on a shopping spree.

How do you balance the books if you are always consuming more than you are growing or producing? Under monetarist economics it doesn't matter as long as people are willing to lend you the money to do it and offset the loss. So we balance the books by borrowing or flogging off the family silver as MacMillan put it. Between 2000 and 2010 we sold off to foreigners £6bn worth of UK assets. When they buy our assets they pay in sterling. This inflates the demand for sterling which puts its price up which perpetuates the cycle. This means that as sterling rises our industry and services become less competitive and our trade deficit increases and then more foreign lending has to plug the gap. 30% of our debt now is foreign owned, so it is foreigners lending us money who are balancing the books.

If you are living in a house and lose your job and you can't pay the mortgage and you could sell some furniture or family heirlooms to pay the mortgage. But you can't keep

doing that for ever. When you run out of stuff to sell the bank takes back the house. That will happen if we can't pay. In reality what will happen when lenders think we might not be able to service the debt they will first demand higher interest rates. That will slow the economy more. Eventually this will cause a run on sterling as foreign investor sentiment changes and they all start taking their money out. So sterling will decline. The markets will see to that eventually but not before years of overvaluation have caused unnecessarily slow growth, unnecessary and ultimately ineffective austerity, and lower than necessary overall living standards.

There are four or five counter-inflationary effects to offset the inflationary effects of devaluation. In 1992 [when we were ejected from the Exchange Rate Mechanism and sterling fell in value] we were told that inflation would go up but it went down. Argentina devalued by 72% and growth started again. Devaluation usually does not cause inflation as all the examples show.

The next false claim about devaluation is that it is no use lowering our exchange rate to make us competitive because everyone would do it but countries with a surplus don't need to devalue.

We are in the hands of an economic priesthood. The Mont Pelerin Society has captured the media and political class in the UK including to some extent the Labour Party which feels obliged to preach austerity, albeit of a milder variety than that of the Conservatives. There are some anti-monetarist anti-austerity economists such as Ann Pettifor of the New Economic Foundations. But he who pays the piper calls the tune.

The irony of all this is that if you try to resist putting your currency at a competitive rate you will lose the battle eventually. So there is no alternative – we will devalue sooner or later because the East will stop lending to us. So we can be on the front foot, or on the back foot resisting devaluation and then doing too little too late.

■ Steve highly recommended the book *Call to Action* (2015) by Bryan Gould and John Mills and the pound campaign website: Poundcampaign.org.uk

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Dorset Humanists Educational Outreach

Report by Terry Milton

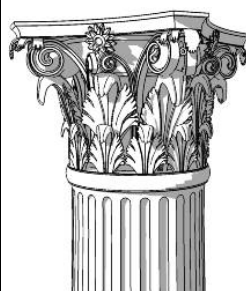
As usual I received a warm welcome from Nuala Power, head of Religious Studies at Bishop Wordsworth School, Salisbury, for their annual Multi Faith Day on 20th May. There were four sessions of 75 minutes with Year 10 boys, average age 15 years. Of course that is not enough time to cover all the aspects of Humanism adequately so I focused on the concept of scepticism which generated some lively debates.

At one point I was asked the question to which I always find perhaps hardest to give a fully satisfactory answer: 'If there's no afterlife isn't it sad to think you will never see your loved ones again when they, or you, die?' After explaining how we can live on in the memory of loved ones, in the things we have achieved and in our descendants, I mentioned my personal experience of losing a family member recently. During the funeral service it would have been so comforting to know we would be together again somehow, somewhere, and I allowed my mind to drift momentarily into that seductive realm. However my brief reverie passed when I remembered that the whole concept is of course too incredible and that I had to face reality without myths or pretence or false comfort. Basically I had to be honest with myself.

When children eventually give up the idea of Father Christmas delivering their presents, I explained, Christmas itself is no less wondrous. In fact they then give more input since, for example, they now need to think about what presents to get for others. Similarly with life and discarding religious beliefs. Once that bold step has been taken there is paradoxically a positive, uplifting feeling which can make us stronger in coping with life's problems, including death. Such, I told the class, has been my personal experience as a humanist. This broadly fitted in with the theme of scepticism and hopefully gave the pupils at better insight into the ideas behind humanism.

Dorset Humanists raise money for Nepal

Dorset Humanists have so far given £219.50 for the Nepal Earthquake Appeal being organised by the International Humanist Organisation on behalf of the Society for Humanism (SOCH) Nepal. They are supporting needy people for shelter and food by mobilizing more than a thousand volunteers throughout the nation.



Letters & Emails

It's your column...

*From Colin Divens, Administrator,
International Humanist and Ethical Union*

I am writing to say thank you at all at Dorset Humanists for your very kind donation of £219.50 on 12 May. Thank you so much for your donation to help us help our friends at SOCH Nepal to support those most in need of shelter and food. This fund all goes directly and in its entirety to SOCH Nepal, for distribution nationwide. Thank you for supporting SOCH Nepal! Uttam Niraula this morning responded to my latest email stating that the last earthquake was a serious hit, but that all at SOCH Nepal were fortunately OK.

*From Andrew Copson, Chief Executive
British Humanist Association*

Ananta Bijoy Das has become the third humanist blogger in Bangladesh to be hacked to death in 2015, following the murders of Avijit Roy in February and of Washiqur Rahman in March. These brave bloggers, writers, and activists are no strangers to us at the BHA. Their friend and colleague Asif Mohiuddin was a speaker at the World Humanist Congress in Oxford last year, and he told of his time in prison, his persecution, and the increasingly

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dangerous situation for humanists in Bangladesh. Those of us who were lucky enough to be there will never forget his story and the pride we all felt in seeing him accept the International Humanist Award on behalf of all his colleagues.

I'm emailing now to encourage you to come along to meet and hear from one of the very bravest of these Bangladeshi humanists, Bonya Ahmed, who will be giving our Voltaire Lecture on 2 July. Her talk to us could not be more timely. Bonya Ahmed and her husband Avijit Roy were travelling through Dhaka in February when they were snatched from their rickshaw by a gang armed with machetes. They sought to end the lives of these two courageous humanist writers and activists, and so silence their voices, voices used to spread reason and Humanism in Bangladesh. Avijit Roy was indeed killed in the incident, and last week al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent claimed responsibility for the murder. Bonya Ahmed survived the attack, and the terrorists have failed to silence her. She has become more vocal since the attack, declaring, 'I will go back to being vocal and expressing what we believe in: the cause that Avijit died for. I will not be quiet.' On 2 July in London Bonya Ahmed is giving the 2015 Voltaire Lecture, her first public lecture since the attack on Avijit, chaired by our President Jim Al-Khalili. Book your ticket today and help ensure her message is heard.

Click this link: [Voltaire Lecture](#)

From Aaron Darkwood

Growth Strategy – Annual Theme – The Mission – The Fun

I have felt a great warmth and welcome feeling since being embraced by Dorset Humanists, coming in from the cold as it were. I feel that a sense of purpose has re-established itself in my life. In reading the bulletin this month and every month, I feel that a "duty" or "role" lies beneath the surface of the Humanist organisation, something I also felt when visiting Galha (LGBT Humanists) in London last month, and I wonder if the time has come to clarify this a little more. Let me expand the above headings.

Is our role as an organisation to just exist, or to grow? As I have stepped into a sort of Marketing role, I am wishing to gain a feeling for what people view in their own eyes. Some have stated we have no need to expand, others say we should?

As part of our addressing good causes and helping organisations, would it be helpful to have an Annual Theme, a subject matter that we look at throughout the year, interspersed with our regular talks and events?

As for our Mission, I know how much I get from being a Humanist, and wish I had known about it sooner, to that end, wonder what we could be doing to spread the word as it were? Would we benefit from the merits of a 1500 membership rather than 150?

Then we have the fun side. The socials, the walks, the meals, they all attract around 10% of what the talks gain, is there a social activity we are not doing that many would enjoy should we expand into other areas?

From Ken Fagg

Chairman's View (May) contains the throwaway line 'a broken state like the US'. Most US citizens think that the US is still top dog. It has a veto on the Security Council and is looked up to by most people. If not US, who is top? Russia? EU with Greek and other problems? Or who?

DW reply: The US may be top dog in terms of global power. I was thinking more about extremes of inequality and the fact that US democracy is a virtual plutocracy. They spend \$1bn on each election and even the Democrats are in the pockets of Wall Street. The US is a first world country and a third world country at one and the same time. So much poverty and deprivation alongside billionaires in jets.

Did you know? Based on estimates from the Office of National Statistics, there are 24.7 million non-religious people in the UK. The next single-highest group is Anglicans on 8.6 million. The Muslim population is around 3.2 million. *National Centre for Social Research reported by National Secular Society.*

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Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
June 2015



Atom Shah in his recent talk to us expressed the view that debating the existence of God with believers is futile. Humanism is heir to a long tradition of rationalism which has always seen the value in such debate. Shifting humanity from belief to unbelief is a glacially-slow business but the fact that so many of us are now free of religious belief is due in no small part to the thinkers and writers who have been having those debates for centuries. We should, at least, be able to give a good account of the reasons for our unbelief. Our Christian friend John MacDiamid has extended a warm invitation to his now-running Alpha Course so here is an opportunity to do that in a courteous manner. A number of Dorset Humanists are going along to have those friendly debates. I have increasingly come to the view that belief in the literal existence of God is a type of false consciousness. When after some natural disaster believers say, for example, that God is to be found in the ruins of an earthquake what they are really doing is expressing confidence in the human spirit. God as poetic metaphor expresses the depth of human tragedy and human resilience. But God as a really existing superperson always on hand to assist the believer is an egotistical belief. The mystics had it right when they said that 'God has no hands or feet on earth but yours' and that 'yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world'. In other words, theism needs to resolve itself into atheism and humanism.

My holiday reading included *Milestones* by Sayyid Qutb. Those of you who well-informed about Islamism may recognise this book as an influential Islamist tract written in the 1960s. I was astonished to discover some clear references to humanist principle in this book. Qutb wrote about 'That real and complete freedom which is the focus of human civilization... a society in which man's dignity is respected to the highest degree and no one is a slave to another... A society which places the highest value on the humanity of man and honours the noble human characteristics is truly civilized... [man] cannot be called human if he is devoid of spirit *and reason*' (my emphasis). The idea expressed in the first few pages is that Islamic society would be better than either communism or capitalism in terms of securing social justice for all. The book as a whole, however, diagnoses the root problem as *jahiliyyah* which means that the whole world is steeped in 'filth' and 'ignorance of divine guidance'. Qutb refers to the West 'a rubbish heap'. At our next Green House meeting, Jonathan MS Pearce and I will debate the nature of Islam and prospects for reform. *David Warden*

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