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BRITISH HUMANIST
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national
secular
society

IHEU
International
Humanist and
Ethical Union

May 2015

Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ Saturday 9th May 2.00pm

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue, BH9 1TW

Science & Religion in the Classroom

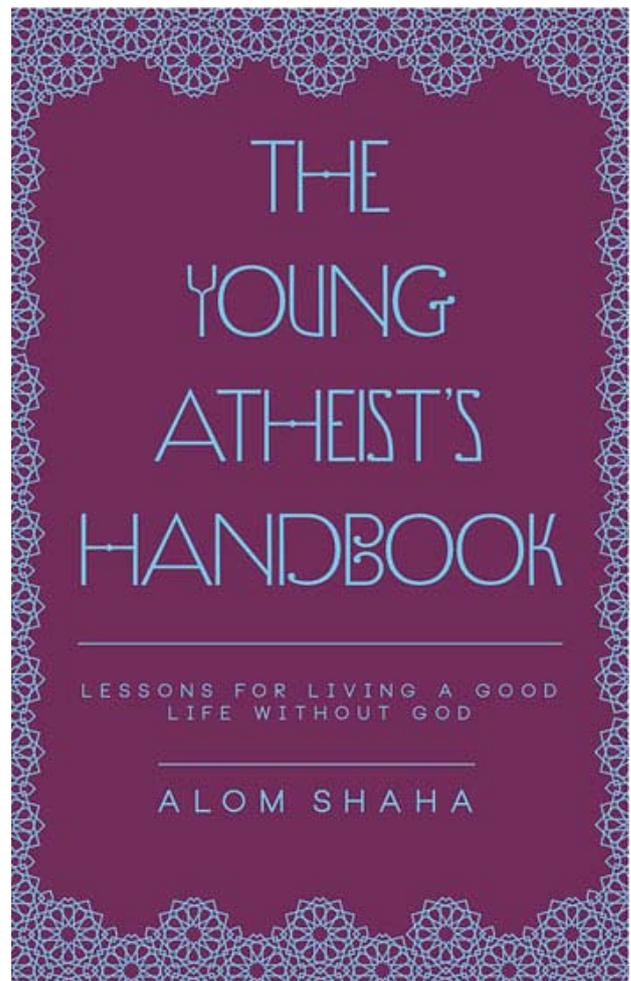


A talk by Alom
Shaha – author
of *The Young
Atheist's
Handbook*.

How can
children
brought up in
religious
families
reconcile the

different 'truths' they are told about the world? And to what extent should we discuss these issues in schools? What exactly should science teachers say when asked about the 'truth' of science by religious students? In this talk, Alom Shaha will describe his personal experiences growing up in a Bangladeshi Muslim community in London, what role his science education played in his journey towards atheism and how, as a physics teacher, he responds to the apparent conflict between science and religion in the classroom.

Alom Shaha was born in Bangladesh but grew up in London. A teacher, science writer, and filmmaker, he has spent most of his professional life sharing his passion for science and education with the public. Alom has produced, directed, and appeared in a number of television programmes for broadcasters such as the BBC, and has



Alom Shaha's book *The Young Atheist's Handbook* has been distributed to every secondary school library.

received fellowships from the National Endowment for Science, Technology, and the Arts (NESTA) and the Nuffield Foundation. Alom has represented his community as an elected politician. He teaches at a comprehensive school in London. He currently produces the Royal Institution's video series 'ExpeRimental'.

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■ **Thursday 7th May 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 27th May 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, 4 Grove Road
Bournemouth BH1 3AX

Making Good Medical Choices: Do We Need God?

A talk by Professor Roger Higgs

"A really wonderful speaker exemplifying the best values of humanism. Highly recommended" Jo Adams, West Dorset Humanists

When it comes to those difficult decisions with doctors, about assisted dying, abortion, or what to tell and who decides, does religion have a part to play? Should clinicians give serious consideration to requests for "inappropriate" treatment when those requests are based on religious beliefs? Medical ethics as a respected discipline is 40 years old now, and in this presentation, Roger will be looking at practice and policy, and the aches and the arguments when patients and their doctors get stuck. Roger Higgs was Head of the Department of General Practice studies at Kings College London as well as a practicing GP. He has held a lifelong interest in the moral issues of practising medicine and is an eloquent and thought-provoking speaker. He is a leading member of the Institute of Medical Ethics and a founder of the Journal of Medical Ethics.

■ **Sunday 17th May 10.30am**
From Tuckton Bridge

Christchurch Walk

Meet outside Harvester on Tuckton Bridge (BH6 3BA) for a pleasant circular walk. This walk will take us around the enclosed Harbour, the various rivers, a brief boat trip (bring a few pounds) ending with the views over the same harbour and out to sea from Hengistbury head (photo opportunities) before a final waterside walk back to the bridge. Aaron will also lead a **cycle ride** on Sunday 24th May.

Disclaimer: Walks and rides are led by Aaron for and on behalf of Dorset Humanists. No liability can be accepted. All persons attend at their own judgement. Full details of the nature of the walk/ride are available so that individuals can assess their own abilities. Walks often have 'escape' points where you can join for part of the walk, and then leave via bus or other public transport. All walks/rides are for adults.

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

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

The Improbability Principle

A talk by Professor David J. Hand OBE FBA. Why is it that incredibly unlikely coincidences and 'miracles', actually happen quite regularly, and why should we, in fact, expect such things to happen in our lives? Eminent statistician David J. Hand will be arguing that extraordinarily rare events are commonplace, and we should all expect to experience 'a miracle' roughly once every month! This talk will appeal to all those who love stories about startling coincidences and extraordinarily rare events, and also to everyone who is interested in how a single bold idea links areas as diverse as gambling, the weather, airline disasters and creative writing; as well as potentially helping to explain the origins

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of life and even 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 does strike the same place (and hit the same person!) twice. David will also 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*.

■ **Sunday 14th June 11.00am**

High Corner Inn, New Forest. 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. Add your details on the sign-up sheet at meetings to organise car share or speak to Lyn Glass.

Other local events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 13th May 7.30pm**

Bournemouth Skeptics in the Pub at The Brunswick, Charminster, BH8 8PX
Free entry (donations appreciated)

The Knowledge: How To Rebuild Our World From Scratch

A talk by Dr Lewis Dartnell. Maybe it was an asteroid impact, a nuclear war, or a viral pandemic. Whatever the cause, the world as we know it is over and humanity must start again. What would you need to know to not only survive in the immediate aftermath, but avert another Dark Ages and accelerate the rebooting of civilisation from scratch? The Knowledge is a grand thought experiment on the behind-the-scenes fundamentals of how our world works, and what drove the progression of civilisation over the centuries. Lewis Dartnell is a research fellow at the University of Leicester, working in the field of astrobiology and the search for life beyond

Earth. His books are: *Life in the Universe: A Beginner's Guide*, *My Tourist Guide to the Solar System* and *The Knowledge: How to Rebuild our World from Scratch*.

📧 bournemouth.skepticsinthepub.org
☎ Chris Street 01425 673477

■ **Thursday 28th May 2015 – 7.30pm**

West Dorset Humanists at the Wessex Royale Hotel 32 High West Street
Dorchester DT1 1UP £3.00

Protest: Religious and Secular

A talk by Dr Heather Meacock. Is there a right to protest? Who are the protesters, and what characteristics do they share? Is absolute commitment to an ultimate concern, ethical, human rights, religion, the key? What propels protesters to set aside their personal interests and risk or sometimes to sacrifice their lives? Dr Meacock's views are in part informed by involvement with the Greenpeace and Occupy movements.

☎ 07810 360700 or 07411 077058
westdorsethumanists@hotmail.com
www.westdorsethumanists.org

■ **Weekend of 19-21st June 2015**

BHA Annual Conference

The 2015 British Humanist Association Annual Conference will be held in the historic city of Bristol. Tickets on sale NOW and they're expected to sell quickly. The BHA Annual Conference is the can't-miss humanist calendar event of the year. The beautiful city of Bristol will play host to 300 happy humanists over a busy weekend of lectures, plenaries, debates, interviews, an awards show, live entertainment, and a gala dinner featuring big names. We would urge anyone interested in going to purchase their tickets as soon as possible.

📧 humanism.org ☎ 020 7324 3060

Please let David Warden know if you are going.

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Why Secularism Matters



An edited report of a talk by Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, at our 11th April meeting. With thanks to Chris Holmes of West Dorset Humanists and Annabel Eastwood.

Keith Porteous Wood has been at the helm of the National Secular Society (NSS) for nearly twenty years. Terry Sanderson, NSS President, was also present. Dorset Humanists is affiliated to the NSS and about 50-60 people attended the meeting.

Keith weighed in immediately against “the always-smiling Pope Francis”. Our planet is experiencing unsustainable population growth but the Vatican is still against contraception which would be the best single contribution towards minimising climate change, reducing the incidence of AIDS, and reducing female mortality at birth and childhood poverty. At the UN, the Vatican blocks aid deals unless this particular dogma is implemented which is pretty grim.

Keith feels passionately that after global terrorism and global warming, secularism is the next most important issue and everything that goes with it including freedom of expression. NSS makes the point that religious individuals can also be secularists; it is the religious leaders (Roman Catholic and Anglican, certainly) who are often too far away from their own congregations.

According to Pew Research, China is predicted to be the “most Christian nation” within 15 years [one projection suggests 67% by 2050 - see Pew report below]. Proportion of Muslims in UK going up to 11% by 2050 [Pew Center Research ¹] and Christians are heading for minority status. By 2030, Roman Catholic/Anglican numerical dominance will have disappeared. At present, institutional power is largely with the Anglican Church (and RC to a lesser extent).

¹http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf

NSS annual £5,000 Secularist of the Year prize was given to Charlie Hebdo in recognition of their courage in continuing to publish.

Other campaigns include “Chancel repair liability” which is a pre-Reformation legal obligation on some property owners in England and Wales to pay for the maintenance of their local parish church. NSS is currently supporting Lord Avebury’s attempt to abolish this.

The Easter Act 1928 provides for Easter Sunday to fall on a fixed day every year. No government has yet had the courage to implement this legislation. Would make planning school holidays etc. easier.

The issue affecting most “people in the street” is the lack of secularism in schools. Daily religious observances in all maintained schools; there is barely a country in the world that insists on this. In Buckinghamshire a Sikh school was opened and non-Sikh pupils were allocated as there was nowhere else. A Jewish school redacted questions it didn’t like (eg on reproduction) from national examinations. The NSS complaint to the Cabinet Minister was airily dismissed, but Ofqual’s Chief Executive accepted it. It does raise the wider question about how the kids are being educated and don’t get education in areas such as reproduction and probably evolution. Also male-only science teachers in Muslim schools – with public money - how dare they?

Also working on getting some alternatives to RE. How much time do you really need to just familiarise people with the various faiths? Do you really need an hour a week for ten years? Of course you don’t, that is indoctrination by repetition. NSS would like to see more work on citizenship, thinking skills and a broader philosophical perspective. But it is the churches who are trying to obstruct that. They think it is reasonable to ‘challenge those who have no faith’. What right have they to do that?

NSS proud to have been involved in the abolition of the blasphemy law in this country. But there are very sinister laws being brought in that are almost worse than the blasphemy law. For example the ‘religiously aggravated’ provisions of the

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Public Order Act. Maximum penalty is seven years imprisonment. Neither Labour nor Conservatives would take the word “insulting” out of the Act. The police loved it – they just say ‘you are wrong’ and you get a criminal record. The police and the CPS are not always even-handed – pro-Muslim bias. But the NSS has been to the national police training college and they do ‘get it’ on freedom of expression.

NSS works well with the Christian Institute and are sometimes in close agreement – both are well informed, good tacticians and strategists.

The Catholic Church is a signatory to the UN convention to The Rights of The Child. This was going on amid the horror of abuse being covered up and the perpetrators being kept away from the judicial system. NSS wondered if the RC Church could be policed under the Convention over the child abuse scandal. We put pressure on the Vatican representative at the UN to publish its delayed report. The UN criticised the church and this caused headlines around the world. When it was finally published only one paragraph out of 110 dealt with the issue and was somewhat glossed over. Mentioned *The Case of the Pope* – a 2010 book by Geoffrey Robinson QC. Pope Francis has done quite a bit on money-laundering but hasn’t gone very far on child abuse – trying to pretend that the Holy See is only responsible for the 110 acres of the Vatican State.

NSS current interests:

- Women’s reproductive rights – non-discrimination on matters of belief and sexuality in adoption agencies.
- Sharia – trying to achieve equality for women. The House of Commons is afraid of making a stand. Halal is becoming the default meat – people who wouldn’t choose it are being given no choice.
- Eric Pickles says the NSS is “intolerant and bigoted” – he has deliberately and repeatedly misrepresented the NSS view on prayers at council meetings.
- Some signs of optimism – the gradual secularisation of society is to our common advantage. The growth of

Islam highlights a future problem if Christian privileges are transferred to Islam. We must press for greater separation of Church and State.

- Problem with a succession of religious Prime Ministers from Thatcher onwards. Currently, only Cameron is in any way religious.



Questions from the floor answered principally by NSS President Terry Sanderson (left):

The NSS has been going for 150 years and we are still not a secular society. Do you think we will

become a secular society? It depends what you consider to be a secular society, that people have abandoned religion or that we are constitutionally secular. The only kind of secularism that can work is to keep state and religion separate but they are having problems in France. Secularism is being challenged by Islam. We have to make a convincing case that it is the best way for our constitutional arrangements.

What is your view of the succession to the Queen? The monarchy keeps reinventing itself and is still very popular. It is possible to have a secular monarchy with ritual and ceremony. If it was a secular monarchy it might just be justifiable. The Coronation is an Anglican service including anointing with oil and other medieval mumbo-jumbo. The fact that it is done in a religious service that is not subscribed to by any significant majority of the population is scandalous. Charles is saying he will be defender of *faith*, not *the* faith. I would prefer it to be of no faith. Charles will be agitating for multifaith establishments which is terrifying. We must try to dismantle it before it gets to that stage.

I am on the Dorset local SACRE [statutory committees which regulate local provision of religious education]. What is the NSS view on converting the RE syllabus into being part of the history syllabus? If we are going to have RE I agree it could be incorporated into history. Or popular fiction. SACREs tend to be there to pump religion into children. Humanists want to be on the

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syllabus along with religion, allowing religions to say “Look, we’re all inclusive”, which has a falsely legitimising effect. NSS would rather not encourage SACREs and Humanism in schools.

Two out of the three main Party leaders have declared themselves non-religious – a good thing? No, both have spoken on a religious platform, and Clegg has said he is sorry he didn’t have a religion and Miliband was trying to make out that religion brings wonderful morality to public life. Until they can say out loud that they would prefer a secular society, forget it! Cameron was also interviewed and he said ‘I don’t believe a word of it but isn’t it wonderful’.

Is there potential for BHA and NSS to work more closely together? The NSS is a political pressure group – we are not there to promote an alternative life stance. There is a crossover but the BHA involves itself in multifaith initiatives. The archbishop said they are nice people talking about nice things. But the people you need to calm down are not those who are already of good will. This is the kind of area where we part company a bit with the BHA. This ‘inclusive secularism’ is not the kind of secularism which works for the NSS. We don’t want to undermine religion – the NSS in recent years is neutral – but we don’t want to help them maintain their power. We don’t want to be seen as a sub-group of the BHA. We believe the two will be more effective as separate organisations with separate agendas.

One of the reasons I joined the BHA and not the NSS is that I think you are a fighting organisation. Humanists use picks and tackle things a bit at a time whereas you use gunpowder. I could not disagree more on a point of principle. We don’t say religion is rubbish or that belief is stupid but the BHA do talk about the irrationality of religion so I am afraid you have backed the wrong horse.

I’m very supportive of your aims and achievements but for whom do you speak, and for how many? We speak on behalf of those who have joined us, our members, our subscribers, and we don’t take public money or grants. We are a democratic organisation with about 7,000

members. We have an annual general meeting and we require 75% approval for any constitutional change.

■ Read about the NSS’s first 100 years [here](#) and more recent history [here](#).



Dorset Humanists on Youtube

Just type ‘Dorset Humanists’ into the YouTube search for our growing library of talks including [Keith Porteous Wood](#) and [Professor Greg Claeys](#) who spoke to us in January 2015 on Humanism and Politics.



LGBT Humanists

David and Aaron attended the AGM of the LGBT section of the British Humanist Association at Conway Hall in London on 24th April. Aaron addressed the meeting to invite all LGBT Humanists (and their straight allies) to support Dorset Humanists’ presence at this year’s Bourne Free festival on Saturday 11th July. LGBT Humanists has 1,500 members nationally so we are hoping a good number will come down to enjoy Bournemouth for the weekend.

The focus of LGBT Humanists for the coming year will be tackling homophobia in schools and education. It has also shown solidarity with the LGBT community in Russia.

If you support the LGBT community please consider joining us on 11th July. You don’t have to be LGB or T! We will even give you a free Dorset Humanists t-shirt if you promise to wear it.

Read Aaron’s full report [here](#)
Bourne Free flyer [here](#)

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

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Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Ramon Casha, Chairman of Malta Humanist Association

Once again, political lethargy, indifference and NIMBYism has led to an avoidable human tragedy, as hundreds of migrants fleeing from war and human rights abuses that many of us can't even imagine end up in floating death-traps operated by criminals who have less regard for these human lives than for material cargo.

One hopes that the expressions of sadness from the political leaders of Europe does not stop at words but translates into action that addresses the problems that these people are facing, and not merely by pushing it out of sight. Making it more difficult for them to depart without addressing the reasons they are doing so does little to alleviate their suffering.

We make gestures by donating flowers for the funerals of those who did not make it, while incarcerating those who do for inordinate amounts of time. European countries express solidarity while resisting the idea of sharing in the responsibility of hosting these immigrants. In the meantime, dangerous undercurrents of fascism are raising their heads, each new voice encouraging others with messages of hate and barely hidden glee at these stories of suffering.

Humanity has to come before colour or culture, nationality or religion, before citizenship or proper documentation. Europe must put into place a comprehensive plan, encompassing the immediate requirement to save lives, the short-term goals of addressing migration, and long term goals of promoting peace and respect for human rights throughout the region.

From Roger Smith, West Dorset Humanists on the National Secular Society

I do find it odd that we have two national organisations that, on the surface, appear to champion identical aims. No doubt the emphasis is different. The NSS was formed, I discover from their website, in 1866. It involved the coming together of a number of separate organisations under one umbrella movement. One of the oldest of these is the Leicester Secular Society and I have had a conducted tour around their building, Secular Hall, in the centre of Leicester. It was founded in 1851! It does not appear at present to be as thriving an organisation as I would expect. Their website looks impressive enough but the building is old and evokes the 1930s. It all looks as if it has seen better days. Indeed nationally secularism appears to have seen better days. We seem to have reached a point where the BHA is taking off, thanks to its leadership, Andrew Copson, Jim Al-Khalili, AC Grayling, whereas the NSS appears to be languishing. The question which I feel needs to be asked of the NSS is why, after 150 years or more, it has been so unsuccessful? So if the BHA and the NSS are not at odds, why do we need two national organisations? Each reduces, to some extent, the impact of the other.

From Dave Elleman

I'm pleased that we have had many enjoyable and well attended events over the last year or so, and this is a credit to Lyn and David who organise our guest speakers for us. However, we are less successful at gaining the paid up members we need to maintain our group's finances, and I'm concerned that our recent membership fee increase may reduce the number of people opting to join us.

I would prefer us to focus our attention on increasing our membership rather than simply raising fees, and I hope that people who are not currently members and are reading this will consider joining us to help ensure we have the financial resources to be able to continue to offer stimulating events and promote ethical secular values in our area.

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Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
May 2015



By the time you read this the election will be upon us. Judging by what we've seen in the last few weeks is democracy dysfunctional in the UK? Leading politicians seem almost constipated in their refusal to answer questions but it's been refreshing to have minority parties, women leaders in particular, robustly challenging the Westminster consensus. My hope is that the outcome will be a government, coalition or otherwise, which genuinely pursues a politics of 'the common good'. We need a government and an electorate which is economically literate and not wedded to a neoliberal doctrine which has failed in so many respects. We don't want to end up a broken state like the US. I'm proud of the fact that Dorset Humanists has brought high-quality economic and political debate to our community in recent months and I hope you've enjoyed our events. We'll continue to include great talks and discussions in our future programme.

Dorset Humanists supports the campaigns of the National Secular Society but secularism tries to deal with the symptoms of religion spilling out into the public domain without dealing with underlying causes. Humanism is a comprehensive worldview which includes secularism as well as a rationalist tradition which argues that belief in God is unwarranted. It also includes an ethical tradition which gives us the ability to recognise common ground with some religious people in areas such as the desire to build a good society based on human values and not just commercial ones. Because secularism is a 'one-issue' pressure group it can be more focused but the downside is that it can sometimes appear to lose a sense of balance. There is little chance of the National Secular Society merging with the British Humanist Association because both have deep historical roots of which they are rightly proud. Let's work with the NSS but keep the bigger picture in mind.

It's shocking to hear reports of Christians being slaughtered in Libya, Syria, Pakistan and elsewhere. Humanists stand in solidarity with people everywhere who are being persecuted and killed on account of their beliefs. It's also shocking that hundreds or thousands of migrants are drowning in the Mediterranean. Amnesty International has a good analysis of the situation. Please read it here online if you can: [7 questions you might have about refugees and migrants drowning in the Mediterranean](#).

David Warden

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