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# Dorset Humanists

*Atheists and agnostics for a better world*

■ **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2.00pm** Moordown  
Community Centre, Coronation Avenue,  
BH9 1TW

## Is theism or atheism the best explanation for everything?

A debate with Greg Atkins and Keith Fox

Defenders of Christian belief argue that theism is the best explanation for everything and is complementary, but not opposed, to a scientific understanding of the material world. Their opponents argue that theism is unnecessary and irrelevant for explaining the existence and nature of the cosmos, which should be based on science alone, and not involve the supernatural.

Greg Atkins is a member of Dorset Humanists. He was a Professor of Science (Virology) at Trinity College Dublin until he retired and a founder member of the Humanist Association of Ireland. Keith Fox is Associate Director of The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion in Cambridge, and Professor of Biochemistry at the University of Southampton. He is a former trustee and chairman of Christians in Science.

### 3.50-4.30pm Dorset Humanists Choir

After the debate on 12<sup>th</sup> May there will be an inaugural meeting for members interested in forming a choir. See inside for more details.

■ **Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 7.30pm**  
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX



## Brexit, the Media, and the Future of Democracy

Jonathan MS Pearce and David Warden

The EU referendum raised profound questions about democracy. Was it a victory for democracy or a travesty? Were the campaigns based on lies, spin, and fake news and, if so, how can we maintain any faith in democracy? Is contemporary journalism on the side of the people or financial interests? Is it time to hand over government to 'independent experts'?

Jonathan MS Pearce and David Warden voted on opposite sides in the EU referendum but they share a passion for democracy. They will share their reflections on Brexit and then lead an open discussion about the state of our democracy.

Send bulletin updates to [chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk](mailto:chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk)

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Dorset Humanists



[meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists](https://www.meetup.com/Dorset-Humanists)

■ **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 7.30pm** and every first Thursday evening of the month at Moon in the Square, Exeter Rd, BH2 5AQ



## Pub socials

Enjoy stimulating conversation over a drink or two at our pub social evening. Look out for the Dorset Humanists signs on the table. We warmly welcome regulars and newcomers.

☎ Dean 07713 858773



## Sunday Walks

**Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> May** – Roydon Woods Nature Reserve. A lovely spring walk. It should be the right time for a good display of bluebells. About 5 miles on well-prepared tracks and some small tarmac roads. Some mild gradients but mostly flat.

**Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May** – Hill Forts in the Stour Valley. A fairly hilly 7 mile walk near Blandford, taking in Hod Hill and Hambledon Hill. Magnificent views of the Dorset countryside, as seen by our ancient ancestors while fending off invaders. Short cuts are possible.

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> June** – a walk in celebration of World Humanist Day, Southampton. Details to follow.

All walks are between about 6 and 9 miles and usually have an optional short cut. Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any last minute cancellations due to weather conditions. Phil ☎ 07817 260498



## Short Talks

■ **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm**  
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX. £2.00-3.00 donation requested.

## Improving the World One Garden at a Time

Lucy Jenkins was a winner in the Dorset Wildlife Trust's Wildlife-Friendly Garden

Awards 2017. Her talk title is 'The Wisdom of Wildlife Gardening: what I've learnt about love, life and Purple Loosestrife'. This talk is a light-hearted celebration of gardening for wildlife, the pleasure it brings and the life lessons it can teach along the way.

Theresa McManus will talk about the Slades Farm Community Garden, established in 2012 by Transition Bournemouth. This is a long-term community-led project to develop an organic and sustainable garden in an urban area. The aim is to support wildlife as well as people, increasing the biodiversity of the site, operating inclusively and accessible to all.

Each talk is around 20 minutes followed by questions and discussion. See [Meetup](#) for further details.

**Calling budding speakers!** Do you have a short talk up your sleeve? Contact Phil Butcher if you would like to discuss your idea for a short talk.

✉ [ph.butcher@gmail.com](mailto:ph.butcher@gmail.com)

### **Future dates for your diary...**

■ **Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2.00pm Moordown**  
It's Good to Talk: Pastoral Care for the Non-Religious. Teddy Prout, Director of Community Services at Humanists UK.

■ **Weds 27<sup>th</sup> June 7.30pm Green House**  
Is There Anybody Out There?  
Astronomer Bob Mizon MBE FRAS will tackle the question of life on other planets.

### **Other events of interest...**

■ **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 7.30pm**  
Sandford Heritage Hall, Sandford Rd, Nr Wareham, BH20 7AJ (Next to Pine Martin Grange Care Home) 'Out of the Box' Humanist/Christian dialogue group presents

## Lost Gospels

A presentation and discussion led by David Warden. To what extent does the existence of the New Testament Apocrypha, a body of works composed largely in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century and widely recognised as legend, fable, and fabrication cast doubt on the reliability of the New Testament itself?



■ **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm**

Colliton Club, Colliton Park, Dorchester DT1 1XJ Donation of £2-3 appreciated. West Dorset Humanists present:

## The Case For and Against Believing in God

A debate between David Warden and Dave Pegg. David and Dave regularly present their contrasting humanist and religious views to students at Avonbourne School.

■ **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 7.30pm**

Skeptics in the Pub at Brunswick Pub, 199 Malmesbury Park Rd, BH8 8PX. £3

## How to be Reasonable: By Someone Who Tried Everything Else

Drawing on her experience as a sceptical educator and comic book artist Rebecca Fox will present some ideas that will help you improve your critical thinking skills and the way you think about how you think.

## Dorset Humanists Choir



We hope to be able to start a Dorset Humanists Choir which will meet for about eight rehearsals in the autumn. The aim will be to stage a mid-winter concert in December consisting

of secular carols. We have found a potential choirmaster, Bob Burke, who would like to meet us as soon as possible so that we can agree the programme of rehearsals and the types and difficulties of the pieces we will sing. Bob will be present to meet potential members of the choir straight after the next Saturday meeting of Dorset Humanists at Moordown on 12<sup>th</sup> May at around 3.30 – 4.30. Please make sure to be present if you are interested. You do not need to be an accomplished singer to join the choir: all are

welcome. If you are interested in taking part but are unable to attend on 12<sup>th</sup> May then please let Simon Whipple know you are interested by e-mailing him on [simon.whipple@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:simon.whipple@hotmail.co.uk)

## Humanist pastoral care

Dorset Humanists has a pastoral support service. Please contact Susan Bryson on 07980 276234 or Cathy Silman on 07817 695615 if you ever need help with a small task, or help with transport, or just someone to talk to. If Susan or Cathy are unable to help they will try to find someone who can.

## Dorset Humanists mark Fampoux Centenary

*Report by humanist celebrant Simon Bull*



*Photo by Simon Claridge*

I was pleased to be asked to take part in an event to mark the centenary of the Battle of Fampoux and to provide a humanist reflection. The Battle of Fampoux is named after a village near Arras in northern France. On 28<sup>th</sup> March 1918 the German Army sought to retake control of Fampoux. Heavy losses were sustained including soldiers of the Hampshire Regiment. Their sacrifice is memorialised by the Fampoux Gardens in Green Road, Winton (near the Five Ways Pub). I laid a wreath on behalf of Dorset Humanists to join those of Bournemouth Council, the Royal Hampshire Regiment, Royal British Legion, The Rifles, and the Western Front Association. The event was well attended by ex-servicemen, local residents, school children, council

officers and councillors who, despite the weather, all appreciated the importance of the centenary.

## Humanist reflection

We have gathered here to reflect and remember those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in the war that was meant to end all wars. An ambitious aim...as yet, some way off from being achieved by humanity.

When needed we will fight for kindness. For humanity. For a world in which the values we cherish can thrive.

As a humanist, I want to think about the totality of conflict, why it happens, how we are involved and the tragedies it brings across the spectrum of human experience.

The older I get, the more I've come to believe that the greater part of anyone's legacy is intangible; that one of the ways in which we can matter, is if in the manner of our living, and dying, we can highlight important things, to those who follow us.

In the end, losses in war affect our whole society, from families to friends and colleagues, to our national character. Remembering is one way we can understand that effect.

The value and meaning in life consists of living it and living it well, to take joy in every day, to value the natural world and, above all, to cherish and nurture our relationships with others. This is a true and proper tribute to those whose lives were cut short in defence of our freedom.

## Mysticism & Spirituality

*Personal impressions of our April 'Out of the Box' dialogue meeting by Jonathan Crozier. Jonathan is a member of Dorset Humanists.*

*Mysticism may refer to any kind of ecstasy or altered state of consciousness. Our speaker Eric Austen spoke about his lifelong conviction that there is 'something beyond' rationality and logic.*

'Mysticism and Spirituality', led by Eric Austen, was a splendid meeting which far

surpassed my expectations. We were given a sheet of quotations which continue to invite more thinking, reflection, and meditation. One quotation, not on the sheet but highly relevant to the theme of the meeting, was Blaise Pascal's famous '*The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of*'. This, for me, encapsulates the meeting's theme.

When the time came for us to divide up into our subgroups for discussion, a natural leader in my group soon emerged. He deftly encouraged us all to contribute and none of us was left feeling that we had been unheard. I found the freedom of thought orchestrated under his direction exhilarating. It took me back to my university days.

I write from the position of being an agnostic. By this I mean that I do not know if God exists or not. For me, the evidence for the existence/non-existence of God is equal and this precludes me from settling the question one way or the other.

Because I am a refugee from homophobic religion, not surprisingly, I have a love-hate relationship with my religious past. I am still haunted by memories of the beauty of the music, art, architecture and liturgy of my religious past. This is where *spirituality* and *mysticism* become realities in my own world and life.

Allegrì's *Miserere* is the one piece of music which I name as exuding, as no other, a sense of overwhelming numinousness and transcendence. Nobody will ever convince me that what happens to me when I hear it is nothing more than a bundle of chemical reactions. It has a *je ne sais quoi*, or, as expressed by Eric Austen a 'something beyond'. I cannot explain what happens to me when I hear that music; I can only report it to you. Anthony Grayling, whom I greatly respect and admire as a humanist philosopher, himself uses the adjective 'spiritual' for such experiences. He used to frequent Anglican Evensong when he was a student at Oxford because of the music.

I came away from the meeting with an overwhelming impression of positivity and convergence of ideas. To my mind, the same psychological realities were being



discussed by both believers and unbelievers. It was the language used to convey them that differed. We were so lucky to have had David Warden and Eric Austen leading the meeting. Things could have been so negatively different. Just imagine the ghastly evening it would have been if we had had Ian Paisley and Richard Dawkins instead!

■ Eric is a member of the Third Order of St. Francis. In Western Christianity (but not Eastern) religious orders developed. First orders were for men (usually referred to as monks), second orders were for women (nuns), and third orders were developed for lay people living outside an order's monasteries.

■ Further reading: Eric mentioned 'Eternal Echoes: Exploring Our Hunger To Belong' by mystic John O'Donohue.



*Miserere* is a setting of Psalm 51 by Italian composer Gregorio Allegri. It was composed in the 1630s for use in the Sistine Chapel.

Listen [here](#)

## Face to Faith: Christians and Humanists in Conversation

*At our April meeting at the Elstead Hotel, Dean Robertson interviewed Christian Minister John Macdiarmid and Chair of Dorset Humanists David Warden about their contrasting worldviews and beliefs. John was brought up as a Catholic and after a brief phase as an atheist he became an evangelical Christian. David became an evangelical Christian around the age of eleven and then, after studying theology for three years, he became an atheist. John and David are friends and they like to have a beer together.*

**What does Christianity bring to the world?** John's answer to this was

'forgiveness'. Evangelical Christians believe that God is ready to forgive sinners who put their trust in Jesus and believe that his death on the cross paid the penalty for their sin. David struggled to think of good things to say about Christianity but did mention cathedrals including Winchester and Canterbury. He also paid tribute to the work that John's church does to help people struggling with debt.

**What does Humanism bring to the world?** John's answer was that 'Humanism is the acceptable face of atheism'. When John attended David's 'One Life' course he found himself agreeing with the majority of humanist values. He drew attention to the humanist desire to 'build a better world'.

David answered this question by outlining a contrast between the Christian and Humanist stories. The Christian story imagines that we live in a domesticated universe governed by a Chief Executive Officer. It tells a story about Creation, Fall, and Redemption. The Fall was caused by humans disobediently acquiring moral knowledge by eating from the tree of knowledge. The Humanist story can be summarised with three E's: Evolution, Enlightenment, and Emancipation.

Evolution tells us that human beings are a tiny twig on the tree of life. There is no CEO governing the universe so we have to work things out for ourselves. Three hundred years ago we were still very ignorant about most things. Then Isaac Newton came along and started to explain the world scientifically. The Enlightenment was an explosion of knowledge and this has been given a massive boost in the last twenty years with the invention of the internet. Emancipation has been taking place over the last hundred years. We are gradually freeing ourselves of patriarchy, sexism, racism, and homophobia. We are also freeing ourselves of extreme poverty. In 1800 90% of humans lived in extreme poverty. That proportion is now down to 10% and it's still falling.

**Where do Humanists get their moral compass from?** John said that evolution was full of violence and 'survival of the fittest' so how can we base our morality on evolution? David, citing the work of Frans



de Waal, argued that moral behaviour can be observed in other mammals. We have simply refined that natural impulse so that we can live together in families and communities. Morality is anchored in conceptions of the good. John countered that some countries are totally corrupt. David agreed but argued that no-one is arguing that corrupt countries are a vision of the good. Conceptions of the good change over time and between cultures but all cultures have prohibitions against rape, lying and stealing for example.

**John argued that atheism is a massive leap of faith.** David's response to this was that it's only a massive leap of faith if you have a pre-Darwinian, prescientific worldview. He said that talking to John is like talking to a time traveller from the 1820s. He claimed that John is an atheist most of the time. When he boards a plane he doesn't think you have to pray to get it airborne. John countered that this means we have 'faith in science'.

**John argued that atheism, ultimately, is based on moral rebellion against God rather than the conclusion of a rational process.** David argued that John has to believe this otherwise he is put in the difficult position of thinking that God condemns people for exercising intellectual integrity. It's an absurd argument, like saying that if you dislike the laws of the land you try to convince yourself that Parliament doesn't exist.



## Letters & Emails

*It's your column...*

*From Yuta Nakahashi, Brighton*

I'm sorry to leave Dorset Humanists as I am moving to Brighton. Your group was the most interesting one on Bournemouth Meetup.

*From Dave Haith*

With his splendid talk on Mysticism and Spirituality (Out of the Box, April) Eric Austen appeared to achieve a measure of harmony if not agreement twixt the Humanists and the rest, which was quite a breakthrough in my opinion.

I think possibly it was Eric's humble and non-dogmatic approach which appealed. What it all comes down to in my view is Eric's firmly held intuitive belief that there is 'more than' out there than science generally has yet discovered, against the Atheist and Humanist view that it's impossible or very unlikely there's 'more than', so let's not spend time thinking about it.

That's probably a vast over simplification but all credit to David Warden and his counterpart on the Christian side for arranging these meetings for people to mull over the differences and the commonalities we all share.

I thought David also did a great job at 'Face to Faith' (Elstead Hotel, May). He was fair and amazingly patient with evangelical minister John MacDiarmid who came across to me as totally deluded. Well perhaps not totally because I have some sympathy with the Intelligent Design crowd but New Earth Creationism is in my view plain crackers and anti all the evidence. For me the high point of the evening was when David pointed out that John is far more compassionate (or words to that effect) than this sadistic God! John was justifying genocide on a massive scale such as God wiping out whole generations of people, in fact, as John almost boasted, the whole world with Noah and the flood.

*From Colette Robson*

I attended your discussion last night with John Macdiarmid. It was a fascinating and very thought provoking evening and I feel that I now have at least some insight into why/how someone might choose to believe in God. Something that completely baffled me before, but also reaffirmed my belief in the humanist approach.



*From Dean Robertson*

John MacDiarmid is a decent guy despite his Christianity. We were pretty easy on him but when Christians start talking and you take away the charity, cup of tea with the vicar stuff, it's just bloody awful. We are all born full of sin (new born babies at birth, John confirmed this to me in the bar) because a woman took a bit a fruit. We all deserve eternal damnation and can only be saved by being really, really grateful for a temporary human sacrifice that we didn't ask for. And when you get talking to Christians they are only a few steps away from justifying genocides. Not nice. Anyway, luckily it's all BS.

*From Jonathan Crozier*

For me, 'Face to Faith' was a very worthwhile evening. I always enjoy it when people share something of their life's stories with me, and I benefitted from hearing more of David's and John's – I have heard both speak before – and comparing them with my own.

I had gone to the meeting with the intention of asking John about what happened when people came to him for pastoral guidance about modern moral dilemmas. I wanted to know if, when he gave his black and white evangelical answers, he never had second thoughts, misgivings, doubts about what he told people. The more John spoke, however, the more I realized that I would only have been wasting the meeting's time!

It was the first time since I started attending DH meetings (in September 2016) that I have felt outraged and personally insulted by what a speaker has said. He suggested that it is convenient for doubters in religion to disbelieve in God because it leaves them free to explore what, in certain circles, are known as the "the paths of unrighteousness". I found this highly offensive. Although I disagree with John's religious beliefs, I have never once doubted his intellectual honesty in holding them. I am completely taken aback that he does not allow me the same reasonable presumption of intellectual honesty.

I entered and left the room an agnostic insofar as the existence of God is

concerned. My scales registered a sharp movement in the weight of the evidence, however, accumulated against belief in religion in general and many of the claims it implies.

*From Carol-Mary Fraser, Norfolk*

Although I have not lived in Dorset for nearly five years I still read the Dorset Humanist news each month as I am a great admirer of your very active and enterprising group. I was, however, somewhat alarmed to read the Chairman's View this month. It is indicative of just how cocksure we humans are of ourselves when we see no cause to be overly worried about the planet's future. Why? Well because, of course, we will be able to eventually 'fix' any harms occasioned by global warming. This belief that humankind is so smart it will be possible to perfect the technological expertise necessary to combat all obstacles from nits to nuclear war appears uncomfortably akin to the hubris displayed by the flawed heroes of Greek tragedy.

Of course it is good that the rationality of humanism continues to challenge beliefs that the intervention of some supernatural deity will sort things for us, but let's not get too carried away with our own 'god-like' capabilities. Anthropogenic climate change has already begun to take its toll on this long-suffering planet, but there is still much we can do to put the brakes on future devastation. With the necessary political will, investment and commitment, it should be possible to bring about change in social attitudes and behaviour and develop and refine sufficient renewable and nuclear energy resources to replace deforestation and the extractive industries. The Precautionary Principle must be adopted and applied rigorously; time and again, humans have demonstrated their capacity for misjudging the future turn of events.

We each have one life; we all have one planet. Let's look after it now before we reach the point of resorting to geo-engineering. Humanity must recognise the need for action now and set about being more responsible Earth-dwellers.





## Dorset Humanists **Chairman's View**

May 2018

**A**fter our 'Face to Faith' encounter, John MacDiarmid wrote to me and said: "One of the things I like about Dorset Humanists is that whilst my views are often held in contempt, I do feel affirmed as a person." I think that's a great compliment to our members and our ethos of respect for people despite their views. In the Q&A session I think John revealed the morally unacceptable face of evangelical Christianity by apparently defending God's sovereign right to drown all life on Earth except for those who made it aboard Noah's Ark. Even if we believe, as we should, that Noah's Ark is just a story this hardly excuses the moral offence of this position. Original sin, in John's scheme of belief, entered humanity when the first human couple disobeyed God by acquiring moral knowledge because this would make them like God. Religion thinks that fallen humans are unfit to exercise autonomous moral judgement. Instead, it wants them to submit to divine judgment even when this flies in the face of human compassion. Failure to submit to the Christian scheme of redemption means that the whole of humanity, except evangelical Christians, will languish forever in 'eternal condemnation' according to John's church's website. Beliefs like this demonstrate the danger of outsourcing your moral sentiments to an unaccountable deity who can do and command as he pleases. Religion claims that it is a repository of objective morality and it condemns alternative approaches as 'relativism'. The true position is this: humanist morality is anchored in reasonable and defensible conceptions of the good society whereas religious morality serves an ethos of absolute power and dominance. I know where my preference lies and I'm proud that we have a team of people going into schools to tell children about Humanism.

**P**eter Connolly gave us an excellent primer on truth at our 'Short Talks' meeting in April. He argued that truth is 'fundamentally adjectival', a property of statements and propositions rather than something 'out there' to be discovered. He referred to this as the 'correspondence' theory of truth. In other words, instead of talking about 'Truth' as if it has some kind of separate existence (sometimes referred to as Platonism), we should talk about statements and propositions as being either true or untrue (or not yet assigned to either category). Understood in this way, statements can be tested against evidence and assigned to 'opinion' or 'truth' and this is how we can build up a solid bedrock of reliable knowledge.

*David Warden*

