



A partner of
Humanists UK

national
secular
society

IHEU
International
Humanist and
Ethical Union



Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 14th October 1.30 for 2.00pm**
Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue, BH9 1TW

faith to faithless



A talk by Imtiaz Shams
from Humanists UK.

Although non-religious people account for around one-fifth of the world's population, those of us who do not believe are treated poorly in many communities. Discrimination and ill treatment can occur in many areas of life including within families, institutions, societies, and states. For those who are minorities within minorities, such as apostates or those having different faiths within majority faith communities, such discrimination is often much worse and can include rejection, victimisation and even violence. 'Faith to faithless' was founded in 2015 by Aliyah Saleem and Imtiaz Shams to support people facing religious discrimination and to draw attention in particular to the discrimination faced by minorities within minorities, and give a platform to the faithless to come out in public and speak out against this discrimination. Faith to Faithless is now a section within Humanists UK.

■ **Saturday 14th October 4.00-4.30pm**
Moordown Community Centre

Part Two in the Café

Why not continue the conversation in the Moordown Centre café? Our informal 'Part Two' meeting this month will include a discussion about our annual Jane Bannister Winter Appeal. We hope you will join us.

■ **Wednesday 25th October 7.30pm**
Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

Astounding Science and Our Genetic Legacy



A talk by Graham Marshall. The ancestor we share with chimpanzees lived around six million years ago, and we have lived as 'modern' humans for

just a few hundred thousand years. For a fraction of that time we have learned to use science to gain an understanding of our history and a true knowledge of the very large and the very small. This talk demonstrates the stunning achievements of the explosion in scientific advances in the last 70 years. Graham studied physics at Birmingham and Nottingham universities. His career in science included developing electronic devices at the Royal Signals and Radar Establishment in Malvern and he held a scientific post at the British Embassy in Japan.

Send bulletin updates to chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

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■ **Thursday 2nd November 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

22nd October – New Forest. 8 miles fairly flat. This is a repeat of a favourite walk from last autumn and includes the magnificent Rhinefield drive and arboretum with giant redwoods, some quiet heathland with a chance of seeing deer herds, and the reptile sanctuary.

19th November – Portland Bill. 9 miles with some hills.

Please check [Meetup](#) for further details and any last minute cancellations due to weather conditions.

Phil ☎ 07817 260498



Short Talks

■ **Tuesday 17th October 7.30pm** Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX. £2.00-3.00 donation requested.

Humanists making a difference around the world

Our Short Talks event this month features two of our members who have been involved in interesting work making a difference to people's lives around the world.

Anne Sieve will talk about her work with Non-Governmental Organisations which have had a consultation role with the United Nations, particularly dealing with women's

rights and agricultural issues. This was mainly during the Cold War when Anne remembers that the Soviets used to infiltrate the NGOs to have more influence at the UN.

Chris Smith will talk about her time teaching children and adults in Uganda with VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas). Chris is a trustee of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust.

We will be aiming for each talk to be about 20 minutes long followed by plenty of time for questions and discussion.

See [Meetup](#) for further details.

Future dates for your diary:

Wednesday 18th October 7.30pm Colliton Club Dorchester DT1 1XJ

Understanding Islam. A talk by David Warden for West Dorset Humanists.

Saturday 11th November 2.00pm

Moordown 'Finding a Path' a talk by former BBC Nature documentary producer Jane Atkins.

Sunday 12th November 10.57am

Please support David Warden at the Bournemouth Remembrance Service.

Wednesday 22nd November 7.30pm

Tivoli Theatre Wimborne. "Tamed" with Professor Alice Roberts. £17.50 - contact Lyn Glass for tickets. ☎ 01202 767323

📧 lyn.glass@btinternet.com

Saturday 25th November 1.30pm

Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London. National Secular Society AGM. Only paid-up members and representatives of affiliated groups can attend.

Other events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 11th October 7.30pm**

Skeptics in the Pub at The Brunswick Pub 199 Malmesbury Park Road, Bournemouth, BH8 8PX £3 suggested donation

Thinking Fast and Slow: How to Think More Effectively

A talk by Phil James exploring the best-selling book 'Thinking Fast and Slow' by Daniel Kahneman.



Macmillan Caring Locally

We raised £74.81 for Macmillan Caring Locally at our Green House event in September. Neal Williams, Trust Secretary of Macmillan Caring Locally, wrote "We are deeply grateful for your support. We are a local, independent charity; not connected in any way to the national organisation Macmillan Cancer Support. The donations we receive fund the care of our patients in the Macmillan Unit at Christchurch Hospital". See *talk report in this Bulletin*.

Dorset Humanists volunteering

Dorset Humanists is currently run by a small committee and several hard-working volunteers who manage all of our events, edit this Bulletin, liaise with other local Humanist groups, attend national meetings, stage our festival appearances, manage our marketing, publicity and online presence, build relationships with other like-minded groups, and speak in schools about Humanism. Would you like to volunteer your skills, time, and creativity to help us? Please email David Warden.

✉ chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

Membership Development

We are sorry to announce that Aaron Darkwood has decided to step down from the Membership Development role. Aaron has made an enormous contribution to Dorset Humanists, culminating in a well-deserved 'Humanist of the Year' award earlier this year. He is planning to continue supporting other Humanist groups in the Southern region.

Isle of Wight Humanists

David Warden gave his Bertrand Russell talk to a gathering of Isle of Wight Humanists in Newport on 10th October. A member of the audience had met Russell's second wife Dora Russell at Greenham Common.

Moordown meetings

Some humanist groups now start their meetings a little earlier to encourage social interaction before the main meeting. We could try this or extend the finish time of our meetings. We'd like to hear your views at our Part Two meeting this Saturday.

BU Freshers Fair

David Warden and Aaron Darkwood assisted third year student Toby at the Bournemouth Universities Freshers Fair to gain interest in a student humanist and atheist group. Dozens of students expressed an interest and provided their email addresses.

Humanists UK GRAM

Lyn Glass (pictured below) and David Warden attended the Group Representatives Annual Meeting in London on Saturday 30th September. A full report will follow in next month's bulletin.

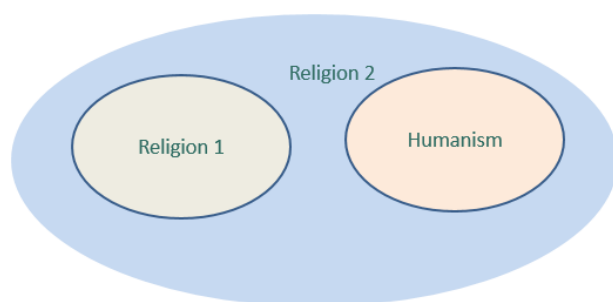


Is Humanism a Religion?



At our Green House meeting in August, former Secretary of Greater Manchester Humanists John Coss gave us an erudite and thought-provoking talk on this question.

Religion is a toxic word for many if not most humanists and those who have been subjected to religious indoctrination are often the most hostile and best informed critics of religion. We may distinguish, however, between 'Religion 1' and 'Religion 2'.



A conceptual model indicating that 'Religion 2' may be broad enough to encompass Humanism.

Religion 1 is basically the standard dictionary definition of religion: "The belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods" (Oxford). Religion 1 refers, classically, to the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) although there are questions about its application to most of the other 10,000 or so religions which reflected the arrogance of Europeans in relating concepts from their own culture to their perceptions of other cultures. There is no single definition of 'Religion 2' but this term refers to a range of approaches. A key point is that a supernatural element is not required and some Christians such as Bishop Jack Spong, in *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, argue that it should be abandoned. Examples from further back in history include Thomas Paine who famously declared "My country is the world, and my religion is to do good" while St Augustine is

said to have believed that religion was not a quest for private salvation but 'the search for right living with each other'.

Anthropologist David Sloan Wilson has suggested that a religion is 'a unified system of beliefs and practices that unites members into one single moral community'. An Ontario-based religious tolerance website defines religion as 'Any specific system of belief about one or more deities, often involving rituals, a code of ethics, a philosophy of life, and a world view'. Humanism is included because it contains 'a belief about a deity!' John presented a number of other definitions of religion from various websites:

- A system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggle with the ultimate problem of human life
- An explanation of the meaning of life and how to live accordingly
- Our human response to being alive and having to die
- Outward practice of a spiritual system of beliefs, values, codes of conduct, and rituals

John argued that Humanism can be regarded as a religion but only in terms of Religion 2. He cautioned, however, that in view of the prevailing connotations of the word it is best not to call Humanism a religion at the present time especially as this word is toxic to many Humanists. This is likely to remain the case unless and until there is more general recognition of the wider meanings of the word 'religion', less focus on the supernatural and dogma in mainstream religions, and also perhaps, unless and until Humanism takes on more of the attributes of religion in the sense of 'Religion 2'.

What are these attributes? John quoted an Anglican priest, Sam Norton, who attended a North West Humanists conference in 2011: 'Why I enjoy engaging with sophisticated atheists so much is that they recognise that Christianity and other religions engage in certain *humanly essential pursuits* which need to be addressed by anything purporting to replace it' (emphasis added). The subsequent breakout group suggested that these



'humanly essential pursuits' include supporting people through difficult times, helping people to cope with bereavement, care of the elderly, morality without authority, a forum for philosophical discussion and debate, fellowship and community, and possibly 'spirituality' (depending on what is meant by that word). Responding to Sam Norton, BHA Trustee Michael Imison said: "There are BHA members who are quite opposed to the idea of Humanism 'purporting to replace' religion. They protest if the BHA seems to be trying to put Humanism on an equal footing with religions and simply want Humanists to have the right to go off and do their own things. This is, to my mind, a blind alley. You can't say that all religions are false (and often damaging) without offering something to replace them, as Sam Norton implies. I think it is essentially true that Humanism, in exposing the superstitious basis of current religions, has to provide an alternative, because religious activity clearly meets a human need. Otherwise the churches would not have survived when their intellectual basis has been destroyed. Without 'humanly essential pursuits' Humanism is not widely attractive.'

It may be argued that both religion *and* Humanism are about:

- Beliefs about matters of ultimate importance
- Community/fellowship
- Coping with our mortality
- Ethics
- Making sense of the universe, life and everything
- Ritual/practices/ ceremonies/rites of passage
- Spirituality
- The meaning of life

John also cited Peter Derkx's idea that both Humanism and religion are examples of a 'meaning frame' which provide their adherents with a sense of direction and identity, and criteria to evaluate your life situation and life course (Peter Derkx 'What Kind of Thing is Humanism?' in *The Wiley Handbook of Humanism* (2015)). Derkx also made a distinction between 'little fights' and

'great fights'. 'Little fights' are for the legitimate interests of humanists themselves which are still of the utmost importance in countries where humanists are repressed. 'Great fights' are for presenting the Humanist view and its take on the public interest, for the good of all humanity and the world. When 'little fights' predominate, Humanism is likely to be defined in mainly negative terms, as non-theist or non-religious but where humanists give priority to the great fights for human rights, for peace and for a sustainable economy and environment, development, against poverty, discrimination, injustice and corruption, Humanism should no longer be defined as necessarily non-religious or even anti-religious. Hence there is scope for working together for the common good with like-minded religious groups such as Quakers, Unitarians, Reform Judaism and Liberal Islam. John thought we should be promoting Humanism as an ethical approach to life on issues such as euthanasia, abortion, sex and relationships, and that we should aim to counter the perception that atheists are less moral than religious believers and the entrenched religious view that without God there is no secure basis for morality.

John argued that ethics is a key area where humanist perspectives should be vigorously advocated. He suggested that humanist groups could inform themselves and others with talks on a wide variety of topics in a more systematic way. We should ask where we are failing not individually but collectively as a moral community. We can imagine a better world and in so doing we can help to make it real. For example, we need to reduce inequalities both within and between countries, consider the interests of future generations when making moral decisions, and consider our attitudes to and treatment of animals. Citing *Collapse* (2011) by Jared Diamond, John said that the issue of climate change in particular has made us all aware of the global dimension to many problems facing the world.

■ See *Chairman's View* for further comment.



Volunteer Companions at the End of Life

"An excellent talk. I didn't expect it to be in the least bit uplifting but Mandy's warmth, compassion and enthusiasm for her volunteering role at Macmillan Caring Locally was quite inspirational." Kaye

"Inspiring and remarkably upbeat." Dave

"If only we had such a thing as an 'Honorary Humanist Award' for guest speakers. Mandy was truly deserving of one." Aaron



Mandy Preece spoke at our September Green House meeting about her role as a specialist palliative volunteer. She teaches end of life companion skills and listening skills to NHS and hospice

volunteers, care home staff and therapists and she is an ambassador for Macmillan Caring Locally - the charitable trust which funds the palliative care unit in Christchurch hospital (the 'Mac Unit'). It's not connected in any way to the national charity Macmillan Cancer Support.

Mac Unit is an amazing place – full of wonderful volunteers who do the teas and coffees, maintain the beautiful garden, fund raise and drive patients to appointments. I have learnt never to underestimate the gift of a cup of tea offered with a kind smile or the gift of a lift when someone has just lost a relative and is driven home by an understanding volunteer rather than calling a taxi.

My role is fairly new and something that developed from me sitting with people in the evenings and being on-call to sit with someone who was dying. I am a specialist palliative volunteer and I train other volunteers to sit with people who are anxious, who are dying alone or to support families at the bedside. We now have a team of these specialist volunteers working in the Unit every evening.

Tonight I would like to share with you my work and some of the amazing and inspiring things I have learnt sitting at the bedside.

My dream is that:

- No-one should die alone without the opportunity of a loving presence beside them
- That everyone should, as far as possible, be supported to achieve the death they want
- That carers are given the love, support and acknowledgement they need
- That a dying person is not just viewed as a person in a bed but a whole collection of wonders, life experiences and wisdom to be honoured and assisted on their final journey
- That volunteers trained in end of life companion skills, should be available in every hospital, hospice and care home in the country to support patients and families

Specialist palliative volunteers aim to support patients and their families at the end of life by offering companionship, comfort, empathy and time. We sit, listen, and hold a hand. We give our time and our presence. We support people who are religious and non-religious, while never sharing our own beliefs. And, at the very end, we sit. We can be a steady caring presence beside the person dying.

Traditionally, we have always known how to sit with the dying and soften the final hours. It is only in the last 60 years or so that we have lost touch with these skills as dying people have been taken away to die in hospitals, hospices and care homes. People always used to die at home in their own beds. Volunteers can help bring that sense of companionship back to the bedside, even if the bed happens to be in a busy hospital ward.

Families are considerably more fragmented and the population is far more mobile than it used to be. A good number of people these days are facing chronic illness and death in isolation; which is why organisations, such as Macmillan, have massive campaigns like the current "no-one should face cancer



alone". Statistics show 23% of people diagnosed with cancer will face their illness with little or no support from family or friends. Volunteers can provide support.

We have become less and less familiar with death - and increasingly reluctant to talk about it. For the majority of people death is regarded as something to be feared rather than accepted as an inevitable part of life. When we are faced with the prospect of death we are ill-equipped to prepare for and deal with it. That is why support at the end of life has never been more needed than now. I encourage families to talk about death so that everyone feels more equipped and less afraid when it might be their turn to care for someone.

Death is a process involving the body and the mind. We expect pain, fear and sadness at the end of life but there are also small miracles, beauty, joy and laughter. Death can bring out the extraordinary in people. I have witnessed profound love, care and tenderness from families and wisdom, strength and insight from those who are dying. I sat with a lady once who told me that she had 'everything she could need' and that 'life was wonderful'. She taught me something very profound, that her life and even her illness had brought her to a point of both acceptance and joy. People often say my job must be depressing, but while there is sadness there is also inspiration. It was an honour to sit with that lady when she died and I am so very grateful to have had the experience of her wisdom and love of life.

In the role of a specialist volunteer we are in a unique position. Our neutrality enables people to talk to us without an agenda. They may discuss things with us that they feel would be too much trouble for the medical staff, or not appropriate in front of their family or the chaplaincy such as euthanasia. Sometimes it will be their carers who need us most, especially during the final days: it is impossibly hard to watch someone you love die and carers really appreciate support.

We are in a very special role as volunteers – a 'being' role rather than a 'doing' role. I never introduce myself as a specialist

palliative volunteer. I am Mandy, a volunteer. I don't want the patient worrying about what they should talk to me about or what I am visiting them for. By not defining my role I can let them define the support they need: their glasses cleaned, the curtains drawn because the sun is in their eyes, listening to their life story or the humbling experience of being alongside why they share their deepest fears and concerns.

Being with people at the end of life changes your life and changes you. I have had the most remarkable experiences. I have listened in rapt attention to some amazing life stories. I have held a hand while a patient just cried out all her frustrations. I have shed a tear watching the love between family members at the end.

We are not there to 'fix' – that is the job of the medical staff – we are there to support instead. We don't visit with the view that you can make things better – we visit with the view that we can sit alongside someone even when things are terrible. Sometimes, especially when people cannot communicate well, personal presence alone has a big impact.

As someone nears the end of their life we can sit with them. Everyone's death is unique to them. The purpose of the vigil is to honour the dying one's experience and nurture it by giving them all our attention, kindness and love. I try to leave behind my own expectations and become a heart-filled presence in order to create a calm and loving atmosphere. Thus the vigil provides a space for the person to peacefully take their last breaths. Vigiling (be it with readings, poetry, music or stillness) creates an ambience of peace in which someone can journey out of life.

For palliative volunteers, sitting in presence with someone who is dying and bearing witness is one of the most profound acts of loving care we can provide. We are often the steady presence in the dying room.

■ On the night we raised £74.81 for Macmillan Caring Locally

■ How you can help: [Macmillan Caring Locally](#)





Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
October 2017



Humanism today is an umbrella coalition of rationalists, atheists, secularists, and humanists. Humanism in the narrower sense is the inheritor of the ethical movement which started in the late nineteenth century and which was originally conceived as a secular religion or a 'religion of humanity'. It was Harold Blackham, a young minister of the Ethical Church in Bayswater in the 1930s, who eventually moved UK humanism away from its churchiness to a more secular model. He became the first Executive Director of the British Humanist Association in the 1960s. So it could be seen as a retrograde step for humanists today still to be asking the question whether Humanism is a religion. It's still an interesting question, however, not least because the Amsterdam Declaration 2002 explicitly states that 'Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion'. Unfortunately, the 'demand' for an alternative to dogmatic religion seems to be fairly muted and we have to work hard to gain members. Most people, it seems, are indifferent or hostile to religion and perhaps suspicious of any alternative which they may view initially as a 'cult'. And yet when people discover Humanism they often say they have been a humanist all their lives and they find support in a group of like-minded people.

One of the principles of Humanism is that people can work out for themselves how to live a good life but maybe this puts too much onus on the individual and not enough on our shared search for knowledge, wisdom, meaning, and purpose. We are not just a group of rational individualists. Humanists are the inheritors of a tradition of wisdom about how to live and how to make good societies that goes back two-and-a-half thousand years. One of our aims is to make that tradition relevant and fresh for many more people today. John Coss invited us to think about how well we are doing as a group which seeks to respond to 'humanly essential pursuits' such as the need for connectedness, for a meaning frame, and for wisdom to cope with our human frailties including our mortality. John suggested we should promote humanist ethics more vigorously, in part to counter the view that atheists are less moral than Christians, but also to address the pressing ethical issues that we face as a global community both now and into the future. He also questioned whether humanist talk programmes could be more systematic and less *ad hoc*. Our newly launched *Life School* is in part a response to that idea. John's talk provided much food for thought.

