



A partner of
Humanists UK

national
secular
society

IHEU
International
Humanist and
Ethical Union



Dorset Humanists

Atheists and agnostics for a better world

■ **Saturday 8th September 2.00pm**

Moordown Community Centre, Coronation
Avenue BH9 1TW

Democracy, Devolution and Discrimination: Has Northern Ireland been left behind?



A talk by Northern Ireland
Humanists Development
Officer Boyd Sleator.

Boyd will be discussing
how part of the UK has
been left behind when it
comes to human rights
and equality. For the last
50 years, women in the

rest of the UK have had access to abortion
health care, yet today in Northern Ireland,
women are still being prosecuted for
obtaining abortion pills. Scotland, England,
Wales and the Republic of Ireland have all
allowed for same-sex couples to marry, yet
in Northern Ireland, where the vast majority
of people and most Members of the
Northern Ireland Assembly are in favour of
same-sex marriage, the conservative
Christian politicians block it. Boyd will talk
about what Northern Ireland Humanists,
with the help of Humanists UK, are doing to
drag this small part of the UK into the 21st
century.

See page 7 for a profile of Boyd's work in
Northern Ireland.

♪ Dorset Humanists Choir

There will be an opportunity for potential
choir members to meet our choirmistress
Claire Atkinson after our main meeting
on Saturday 8th September at 3.30pm. This
year the choir will meet for rehearsals on
Monday evenings, commencing on 1st
October, working towards performing a
secular 'Nine Lessons and Carols'
concert at our Moordown meeting on
8th December. If you have any queries
or are unable to attend on 8th September
please contact Simon on 01425 674844 or
email simon.whipple@hotmail.co.uk.

■ **Wednesday 26th September 7.30pm**

Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX

Evolution and Ethics



A talk by Greg Atkins.

Where does morality
come from? *Homo
sapiens* has existed for
about 200,000 years,
but only for about
10,000 years in civilised
society. The rest of the

time we existed as hunter gatherers, and
the species from which we evolved were
also hunter gatherers. Evolutionary
characteristics, including ethics, are likely to
have been formed long before the rise of
civilisation. Some patterns of behaviour are
inherited in societies but a large amount of
experimental data has now shown that
perhaps more than 80 per cent of our basic
behaviour patterns are controlled by our

Send bulletin updates to chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk

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genes. Greg Atkins was a Professor of Science (Virology) at Trinity College Dublin until he retired and a founder member of the Humanist Association of Ireland.

■ **Thursday 6th September 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 16th September** – Holt Heath. This walk explores this important lowland heath, which is one of the largest areas of its type in Dorset. Birds include large populations of Dartford warbler, stonechat, curlew and nightjar. All six of Britain's reptile species are found here.

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 18th September 7.30pm** Green House Hotel, Grove Road, BH1 3AX. £2.00-3.00 donation requested.

Are things getting better or worse?

David Warden and Phil Butcher will introduce two books by Steven Pinker, the Canadian-American cognitive psychologist.

Phil's talk is based loosely on Pinker's 2011 book *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* and on his TED talk

on 'The Surprising Decline in Violence' which he gave while preparing the book.

David will talk about Pinker's latest book, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* in which he writes about universal human nature, humanism, the threat from authoritarian populism, religious fundamentalism, and radicalism of the left and right, but overall his optimism for the future of humanity based on the stunning progress we have made so far.

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

Future dates for your diary...

■ **Saturday 13th October 2pm Moordown**
Charles Darwin: the many faces of a remarkable man. Emeritus Professor Norman Maclean

■ **Weds 24 Oct 7.30pm Green House**
Influence & Persuasion: How to get other people to agree with you. Dr Peter Connolly

Other events of interest...

■ **Wednesday 12th September 7.30pm**
Skeptics in the Pub at Brunswick Pub, 199 Malmesbury Park Rd, BH8 8PX. £3

A Virus to End Humanity?

A talk by statistician and epidemiologist Liam Brierley.

■ **Wednesday 10th October 7.30pm**
Skeptics in the Pub at Brunswick Pub, 199 Malmesbury Park Rd, BH8 8PX. £3

Jesus: History or Myth?

A talk by Chair of Dorset Humanists David Warden. David has had an interest in the so-called 'historical Jesus' for 25 years.



The Big Change in Religion and Belief

“We are living through the single biggest change in the religious and cultural landscape of Britain for centuries, even millennia.”



Humanists UK's Dialogue Officer Jeremy Rodell gave us a brilliant talk at our Moordown meeting in August.

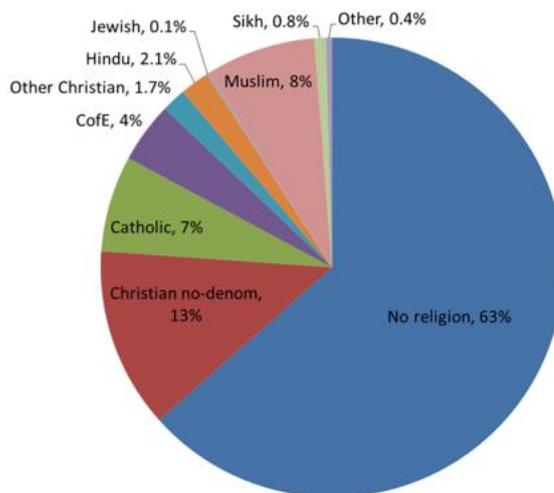
Quoting a major report on religion and belief in schools, he said “We are living through the single biggest change in the religious and cultural landscape of Britain for centuries, even millennia.”

According to the Pew Research Center (named after a 19th century philanthropist called Joseph Pew) religiosity correlates with higher ‘existential insecurity’, lower education, higher inequality, lower life expectancy – or being American. In Ethiopia, for example, 98% of the population say that religion is very important in their lives compared to just 10% in the UK.

Over the next 45 years, Islam will grow faster than any other major world religion. By 2060, Christianity and Islam will each claim about one third of humanity in terms of followers. The religiously unaffiliated population (also known as the ‘nones’) will also increase numerically but as a proportion of total world population this bloc will show a marginal decline.

Religious affiliation is not just about belief however. For example, according to one survey, 31% of Christians said they do not believe in life after death. This indicates that religious affiliation can be based on behaviour and belonging rather than belief.

Census and poll results can be massively skewed depending on how the question is framed. In the 2011 Census, 25% of British people stated that they have ‘no religion’. But in the same year, the British Social



Projected religious landscape of the UK by 2040 (British Social Attitudes). The CofE is facing virtual extinction but non-denominational Christianity is growing. ‘No religion’ will be the biggest group by far.

Attitudes Survey found that 46% of the British population have no religion. The difference in these figures can be put down to the leading question in the Census: “What is your religion?”.

The big rise in the UK ‘no religion’ population has been almost exactly mirrored by a steep decline in the Church of England population. The Catholic population is holding steady owing to immigration from countries like Poland. There has been a steady increase, however, in non-denominational Christianity.

Around 40% of people brought up as Christians now have ‘no religion’ whereas nearly everyone brought up with ‘no religion’ continue to have no religion in later life. This suggests that religion is not as ‘sticky’ as you might think. Non-Christian religions such as Islam, however, seem to be better at holding onto people in later life.

Younger people are less likely to identify with a religion. For example, in the 15-24 age group, according to the 2016 British Attitudes Survey, 70% have ‘no religion’. By 2040, the Church of England share of the UK population could be down to as low as 4% - an existential threat?



Jeremy also spoke about the diversity within the UK Muslim population including conservative mainstream Muslims, nominal Muslims, Islamists who want political control, and violent jihadis. There are also progressive Muslims who want to integrate Islam with democracy and human rights and ex-Muslims such as Maryam Namazie and Imtiaz Shams (both of whom have spoken to Dorset Humanists).

A \$3 million research project called 'Understanding Unbelief' is due to report in 2019. It's funded by the religious John Templeton Foundation but the foundation has given an assurance that they will be 'hands-off'. A 2015 YouGov poll revealed however that only 64% of those professing 'no religion' are outright atheists with 18% believing in some kind of spiritual power. According to a European Social Survey, more than 50% of those professing 'no religion' did, nevertheless, say that they were 'religious' to varying degrees whereas...

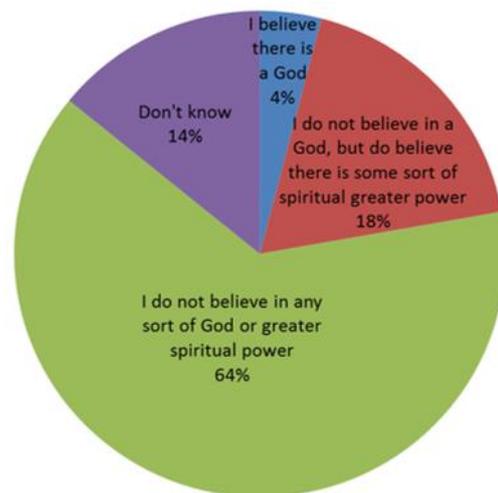
"Around half with no religious identity have a broadly humanist worldview."
(2017 YouGov poll for Humanists UK)

Jeremy said that 'This situation is unique in history - how can we help make it work?'. He said that declining religious institutions such as the Church of England will fight to hold onto their privileges and that uninformed generalisations about "the other" can lead to polarisation, conflicting values, and lack of social cohesion'. Jeremy suggested that there can be three humanist responses: explain and promote secularism, educate in schools, and take a lead in dialogue and participation.

Secularism means separation of religion and state, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and equal treatment. Given this kind of definition of secularism, many religious people are in favour of it.

Humanists can also contribute to the provision of high quality education about religious and non-religious beliefs, values and ethics. Dorset Humanists has its own school team.

Humanist engagement in dialogue has two objectives: Making a positive humanist



18% of the 'no religion' population believe in some sort of spiritual power (2015 YouGov poll).

contribution to building a peaceful, plural, secular society and improving others' understanding of Humanism.

In conclusion, Jeremy said that humanists can help determine the outcome of this big change in religion and belief. We can assimilate, live separate lives, or we can promote what he called 'messy integration' or 'interculturalism'.

Could you be a schools speaker?

Humanists UK will be running a schools speaker training course for us on Saturday 29th September. This is a rare opportunity for Dorset Humanists to get trained up to go into schools and ensure that local pupils and students have the opportunity to hear about Humanism first-hand from real humanists! Please email David on chairman@dorsethumanists.co.uk for more details.

■ Monday 1st October 7.30pm for six consecutive Mondays

The Existentialism Course

This course is now fully subscribed. Please contact David Warden if you would like to go on the reserve list in case of any cancellations.

Education & Inequality



John Hubbard (left) provided much food for thought with his talk on education and inequality at our August 'short talks' meeting. This is an abbreviated version of his talk.

The topic of education and its social effects is a vast one so I want to reflect mainly on the ways current structures and systems appear to obstruct access for all young people to an equally well-equipped and high quality education. I think most people would agree that inequality is likely to be reduced if there was the widest possible access to uniformly good schooling, and that policy should be shaped to allow this but it begs the question as to how you judge a truly good school. For many years the popular evaluation was made on a survey of exam results – a fairly crude measure that ignored intake. A new change to a whole-school pupil-related measure, Progress 8, compares schools with similar intakes and shows whether students have made more or less progress than expected in that institution. All well and good. Yet, anecdotally, I am aware of schools which have recently done very well by this measure but talking to a highly capable and intelligent teacher I know that this progress has come at a significant sacrifice to the arts and some humanities subjects. Methods of drilling students solely for exams makes me absolutely sure I'd never want a child I knew to go there.

The two institutions with the lowest state school intake in higher education are the Royal Academy of Music and the Royal College of Music. In the same year that a local independent school opened a huge new specialist music school costing £7 million there were reports in the press of secondary schools in Suffolk selling all their instruments as the music department had closed. It is worth asking what individuals and the country are losing by this level of difference. Out in the zeitgeist is this question: 'Why are all our most well-known actors nowadays from independent schools?' It may have something to do with

the esteem in which drama and the arts are held rather than being seen as a time-wasting incidental which steals hours from subjects like English and Maths. I was head of English at a local school and two years after I left the drama department was shut down and the head actively discourages students from taking up opportunities to join in shows run by a neighbouring school. The folly of this is shown by the fact that the neighbours get much better exam results. Looking more widely, however, the nation is famous for its creative industries. If we are not careful we will be excluding a significant part of the population from these fields of rewarding endeavour.

I'd like to address the most obvious vestige of inequality – the independent schools. I went to one and I started my career in one. I have a sense that private schools are now so awash with cash that they have become grotesque parodies of themselves. Price inflation over the last 25 years has been 200%. Independent school fees have risen by 550%. To send two children through boarding secondary will set you back £300,000. Because of the anomaly of their charitable status the surplus has to be reinvested in capital projects so we have what I term 'facility porn' – over-designed and over-appointed classrooms, music schools, IT suites, science labs, art schools, drama studios, cross-country riding courses, and a polo team. For a while under Labour there was a real attempt to create environments that supported learning but what really enhances grades is the quality of teaching and the relationships between students and their mentors. Huge numbers of state schools have no problem matching the results of independents with students of similar abilities – and many of them have aging facilities and buildings.

Would abolishing independent or fee-paying schools help address inequality? Strangely, its immediate effect would be to massively increase the disposable income of the significantly wealthy and make that available to their heirs down the line. So in those terms, it would be entirely ineffective. Of course, it would have a sudden and dramatic effect on state school intake at the seven universities which have the lowest



rate of offers of places (Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, Durham, etc.) but the real question is this: would those same students still get there? I think it most likely that they would, given that they'd be likely to be well taught and that their inherent ability would be enhanced by family interests and encouragement to broaden their field of enthusiasms. One thing that abolishing independents probably wouldn't do is to prevent middle class parents using financial power to jostle for advantage with the excuse that 'you always do the best you can for your children'. But one thing abolition would do is to end selection by narrow social class even though it is questionable whether the schools themselves significantly improve academic outcomes. At university state school students almost invariably perform better in relation to prior attainment than their private school peers. Admission interviews have almost completely died out except for Oxbridge and the medical schools and so the social confidence delivered by private schooling will increasingly be seen as a superficial disguise.

Were the fee-paying schools to be abolished the state would have to fund the education of another 7% of the population and that money would have to come from somewhere, probably a tax rise at the higher rates. On balance the best solution would probably be to remove charitable status over time and use the savings to upgrade older school buildings in the public sector.

On the question of grammar schools, a number of social commentators have observed that the period of greatest social mobility in England, 1945-1975, was in the heyday of the grammar schools. But if you think about it, it is not surprising. As a result of the 1907 and 1945 Education Acts the *only* route to higher education was through the grammar schools. Today, with sixth form colleges and an increasing number of schools with sixth forms, the grammars are just part of a mixed market of providers. A study by the National Foundation of Educational Research has found that there is no overall academic benefits to students going via a selective route.

A recent study of selection by UCL, Bristol, and Warwick universities demonstrated that it was highly skewed by socio-economic background. If you take students of the same level of academic attainment the most deprived had a 25% chance of attaining a place whilst the least deprived had a 70% chance.

We now have a huge array of further complicating factors in secondary provision. Not so long ago, LEAs had responsibility for all local schools but endless initiatives and bullying from the centre has seen them shrink and lose control. Academies (often organised into chains of schools), free schools, and faith schools, are all adding to the incoherence and lack of responsiveness to local needs. The changes have also produced some unwelcome funding results as governments tend to launch new initiatives with cash inducements. In 2016, funding for pupils in free schools was 60% higher than in LEA schools. Austerity has produced further negative effects on equality. Schools with the highest proportion of students on free school meals have faced the biggest cuts and special needs support is under threat.

Good schools obviously attract over-subscription and they have to prioritise entry. State funded faith schools actively discriminate against the non-religious. 60% of Catholic schools do it and 40% of secondary faith schools prioritize children of *all* religious backgrounds against children of non-religious backgrounds. You may ask why if religious discrimination is illegal in the workplace and all spheres of public life, why people can be victims of it because they are under sixteen.

Perhaps first steps to equality would be the guarantee of a universal basic capitation topped up by additional funding where there was need and disadvantage. Then the abolition of selection at any transfer points and the bringing back of all schools under a streamlined form of LEA control.

■ John Kingston also gave a short talk on 'The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone' (2010) by Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett.



When Boyd met Dawkins and Krauss

A profile of our September speaker, Boyd Sleator

Boyd Sleator is the Development Officer for Northern Ireland Humanists, a section of Humanists UK. Five years ago, after returning from living in Manchester for over a decade, Boyd realised there was a need for a community of non-religious people to push back at the religious conservatism of Northern Ireland. He initially organised a self-funded event at the first ever Northern Ireland Science Festival, where he brought Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss to Belfast (photo, right). This was the largest event at the science festival with over 700 people in attendance. This was the initial move in bringing lots of non-religious people from Northern Ireland out from behind their computer screens to hear these two eminent speakers. During the organising and running of this event, he met six other people who were willing to put time into making Northern Ireland a more tolerant and secular country. With these six other people, Boyd set up Atheist Northern Ireland. Boyd volunteered full time to the organisation and was the Chair for over a year. At some point over those first 16 or so months, and to this day still unsure how it was initiated, Andrew Copson (CEO of Humanists UK) picked up on the work Boyd was doing and decided to visit. After a few months of discussions, it was decided that there was a need for Humanists UK to be working in Northern Ireland. Boyd was selected to be the Development Officer for this section and was jokingly referred to as 'Northern Ireland's only professional atheist' by his friends. Since then, Northern Ireland Humanists has gone from strength to strength. On setting up, there were around 250 members or supporters of Humanists UK with an NI postcode. Today there are in excess of 1400 and it is still the fastest growing section of Humanists UK.

Northern Ireland Humanists have been key in pushing for a change to the restrictive abortion laws in Northern Ireland. They have intervened in the Supreme Court,



campaigning for NI women to have free abortions on the NHS and worked with other grassroots organisations to lobby both the NI Assembly and Westminster to trust women with their own reproductive health care.

Northern Ireland Humanists has taken the NI General Registrar to court because of their unwillingness to legally recognise humanist marriage. The outcome of the appeals court judgement should be heard by the time the speaking event happens. Northern Ireland Humanists also works on campaigning for same-sex marriage, letting pupils choose to take part in collective acts of worship, changing the religious education curriculum to be more inclusive, as well as pushing for a more secular Northern Ireland. On top of all the campaigns, Northern Ireland Humanists has trained 14 school speakers who are now regularly going into schools across NI. NI Humanists has 12 celebrants who are carrying out funerals and weddings weekly. Northern Ireland Humanists also have 16 pastoral care volunteers, not including Boyd, who are working in the Belfast Trust as well as Maghaberry Prison. Quote - 'For me this is not a job but a way of life. Even if the word humanist didn't exist, I would still be trying to live an ethical life free from superstition with a focus on human rights and equality.'





Dorset Humanists
Chairman's View
September 2018

I didn't know that death was such an interesting subject. It was a bit of an experiment to run our 'Death Café' last month but 24 people turned up and they found plenty to talk about in a very animated fashion. On our table, one person said that she would like to be completely vaporised without trace, like the people in the section of the Twin Towers directly where the planes struck. This was not to make light of what happened on 9/11 but to make a more general point about the whole business of disposing of remains, including ashes following cremation. I take her point. I find it hard to relate to the remains of dead relatives. I am much happier thinking about how they were in life. We also spoke about euphemisms such as the ghastly word 'passed' meaning died. We decided it was an American import. I also remarked on the curious tradition of displaying coffins in glass-sided hearses, rather like the Queen when she is driven about. Why do we do that? Why not a discreet, windowless vehicle? On another table, the suggestion was made that instead of sending cards of condolence, mourners could write a message directly onto a cardboard coffin as part of the funeral ceremony. Another table discussed whether they could arrange the whole funeral and ceremony themselves, without even involving a trained celebrant. They also discussed why the thought of nothing after death was such a problem for some people, considering that it was no different from the nothing before birth. I'm reminded of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir who thought that death was an 'outrage' against life. The most uplifting comment came from one of our oldest members, now in her early nineties, who said that she is thoroughly enjoying every day. Now that seems to me to be the best kind of defiance of death and a great affirmation of life.

I have sometimes had difficulty persuading people that humanist groups are competing with churches. I think I now see the confusion that may have arisen. It's not that we are competing for the same customer base – the kind of people who are attracted to religion are probably not the same kind of people who are attracted to Humanism. But we know that politicians only take note of groups that command large numbers and so we are competing for influence. A humanist movement with a million members would have more clout than one with tens of thousands. So in this sense I maintain the view that we are competing with churches. We are also competing in another sense. The more successful we are at getting our message out, especially to young people in school, the less susceptible people will be to religious proselytism.

