



Agreeable Disagreement The Famous Five Many Faiths Panel



Tama (Muslim)
Sali (Buddhist)
David (Humanist)
Lynda (Jewish)
James (Christian)

Saturday 11th November 2.00pm Moordown Community Centre, Bournemouth BH9 1TW

What happens if you put a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Humanist, a Jew, and a Christian together in front of a humanist audience? We're about to find out! 12-19 November is interfaith week and the importance of fostering good relations between faiths and worldviews has rarely been as important as it is now. Dorset Humanists has always aimed to have positive and friendly relationships with local faith groups. This event showcases the brilliant team called *Many Faiths Together* which has been visiting local schools for several years. We disagree about some fundamental things, like belief in a god, but we've also discovered some surprising and encouraging points of agreement and common ground. Come along to put your challenging questions to our panel. If they can cope with teenagers they can probably cope with a bunch of argumentative humanists!



Unlocking the Masonic Mysteries

Wednesday 22nd November 7.30pm, Orchid Hotel 34 Gervis Rd, Bournemouth BH1 3DH

Malcolm Williamson, a lifelong Freemason, is set to demystify an organization often shrouded in secrecy and intrigue. Offering an intimate look into his own Masonic journey, he aims to dispel common misconceptions and shed light on the true nature of Freemasonry.

Malcom, a retired solicitor, is a Past Master of Royal Alfred Lodge No 777, one of the oldest Freemasons Lodges in Guildford. He is also Vice President of the Surrey Campaign to Protect Rural England.



Civil Partnership

We are very happy to report that Frances Usher and Angela Joynson had their Civil Partnership ceremony in Dorchester Register Office on Saturday 14th October. David Warden was one of the witnesses. A small gathering of family and close friends were present at the ceremony which was followed by breakfast at the Horse with the Red Umbrella café in Dorchester.

Frances and Angela have been members of Dorset Humanists for many years. Angela was a member of our committee and a school speaker. Frances founded our humanist library. Both of them have given talks to us over the years and hosted garden parties for us. They live in Wareham.

Dates for your diary

Saturday 11 th November 2pm	Moordown	Many Faiths Together Question Time – a Humanist, a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Buddhist will answer all your questions.
Sunday 12 th November 11am	War Memorial	David Warden will speak at the Bournemouth Remembrance Service. Please show your support.
Wednesday 22 nd November 7.30pm	Orchid	Unlocking the Masonic Mysteries – Malcolm Williamson
Sunday 26 th November 10.15	Walk 7 miles	Along the coast to Poole Starting from Branksome Chine and ending at Poole Quay.
Saturday 9 th December 2pm	Moordown	Navigating the Maze of Logical Fallacies – Daniel Dancey
Tuesday 19 th December 7pm	Marsham Court Hotel	Yuletide dinner £27.95. Contact Sandra 07779 769108 to book. Places limited.

Plus our regular pub social, usually on the first of the month at Moon in the Square. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes. Please RSVP on Meetup so we can plan for numbers.



Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses

Around 45 people attended our Moordown event in October to hear Dr George Askwith tell her story about leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses and becoming a volunteer for Faith to Faithless – a section of Humanists UK which supports people leaving high control religions. George is a member of Dorset Humanists committee and a doctoral research assistant at Bournemouth University. This is a brief extract of some sections of the talk. A fuller transcript is published by Humanistically Speaking magazine. You can also watch the video by clicking on the image of George or visiting our YouTube channel.

Today's talk is going to be a whistle-stop tour. We'll talk about apostasy and high-control religions, specifically Jehovah's Witnesses. We will also talk about Faith to Faithless, who support people who have left high-control religions.

What is an apostate? According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an apostate is someone who has given up their religion or left a political party. But for those of us who have left, this term has many negative connotations. I am considered to be "mentally diseased" because I am an apostate.

Leaving a high-control religion can lead to shame and dishonour for a family, emotional and physical abuse, and even worse outcomes like isolation and loneliness, depression, and self-harm. Simon Cottee, who wrote *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (2015) stated that the biggest risk ex-Muslims face in the Western context is not violence, but the loneliness and isolation from being ostracised by loved ones.

What exactly is a high-control religion? I prefer this term to 'cult' because it's more specific. These are faiths that demand obedience, discourage questioning, and teach that only people within the group can be trusted.

Imagine growing up in a tightly-knit community where everyone inside is someone you trust and everyone outside is considered scary and dangerous. You might not have much education because the

expectation is that you'll work within the community. Then imagine having all that security ripped away from you. You lose your family, home, job, friends, and you don't know how the benefit system works or how to secure housing. That's the reality many apostates face when they leave high-control religions.

There are about 140,000 Witnesses in the UK today and 8.7 million across the world. These numbers are according to the Jehovah's Witnesses; we don't have figures outside of that. The movement originated in the 19th century with William Miller, an American Baptist preacher who used a prophecy in the Book of Daniel to claim the world would end before October 22, 1844. When that didn't happen, the movement split into various groups, including the Seventh-day Adventists and ultimately, Jehovah's Witnesses.

Charles Taze Russell started what we know today as the Jehovah's Witnesses, although in his day they were called Bible Students. Russell founded the faith, but it was his successors, Joseph Rutherford and Nathan Knorr, who developed what people recognize today as Jehovah's Witnesses.

They diverged from mainstream Christianity, rejecting beliefs in hellfire, an immortal soul, and the Trinity.

Russell founded the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and became its president. The headquarters were established in Brooklyn, New York. ▷

Over the next 40 years, his teachings reached millions worldwide. His sermons were printed in newspapers, he published magazines and books, and even created the first film to use synchronized sound through a phonograph. This innovation garnered him extensive publicity. Branches soon formed in London, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, and Australia.

During the 1920s, members were encouraged to count their time to keep track of the hours spent preaching. As of 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses had spent 1.5 billion hours preaching, but they no longer have to count their hours—a major shift that shocked many in the ex-community. The assumption is that door-to-door preaching numbers have tanked recently, perhaps because people found it easier to write letters during the COVID era.

Rutherford further distanced the group from mainstream Christianity in several ways. For example, Jehovah's Witness literature never shows Christ on a cross, considering it a pagan symbol. Rutherford also put an end to the celebration of Christmas and birthdays.

Rutherford also tightened the anti-nationalist stance, forbidding activities like singing the national anthem or saluting a flag. Around this time, the number of Jehovah's Witnesses exceeded the 144,000 that were supposed to go to heaven according to their interpretation of Revelation. To resolve this, the concept of the 'great crowd' was introduced. These were people who would live forever on Earth under benevolent conditions. This is what most Jehovah's Witnesses, including myself at one time, believed would happen to them.

Rutherford was succeeded in 1942 by Nathan Knorr who implemented the ban on blood transfusions in 1945. The organization began acquiring property in Brooklyn, which they later sold off in 2018 for a significant sum. They also developed their own Bible translation, the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures, and tightened disciplinary measures, including disfellowshipping and shunning of members starting from the late 1960s.



Alia and George organise Faith to Faithless meetings in Bournemouth and Southampton

Jehovah's Witnesses hold the Bible to be infallible and literally true. They're old Earth creationists, and believe the human soul is just a life force that ceases to exist after death. They believe in an imminent Armageddon, and that a paradise will be established on Earth, where all beings will live in harmony as vegans.

They maintain that 144,000 elect are ruling in heaven and that Jesus did return in 1914; he was just invisible. I subscribed to all these beliefs until I was in my 30s, even though they never truly resonated with me. What I did want was an end to suffering and for others to find peace and happiness.

When I was growing up as a Jehovah's Witness, my life was highly structured. A typical week would involve religious activities every single day. The cycle was relentless; even holidays didn't offer a break.

On top of this, there were three large assemblies or conventions every year where we'd sit all day listening to Bible instructions. Living in Pembrokeshire, Wales, meant we would usually go to Cardiff or Bristol for these assemblies. It was a constant, unending cycle of indoctrination.

We were discouraged from consuming any media about Jehovah's Witnesses not produced by the organisation. Anything else was considered Satan-controlled media. Speaking to ex-members was strictly off-limits; doing so would lead to excommunication and shunning. It was a form of control that effectively kept you within the bubble of the organisation.

There's a strong element of thought control. Anyone outside the Jehovah's Witnesses is deemed wicked and untrustworthy. This serves to create an 'us versus them' mentality.

On one hand, you're enveloped in a community that uses terms like 'brother' and 'sister,' creating a fictive kinship. On the other hand, you're constantly reminded that you're a sinner, unworthy of God's love. Love-bombing inside the congregation contrasts with the often rude rejections faced when preaching door-to-door, reinforcing the idea that people outside the faith can't be trusted.

One of the harsh realities of being a Jehovah's Witness is understanding the cost of leaving, particularly through disfellowshipping. According to Watchtower guidelines, if a family member is disfellowshipped, not only are you prohibited from seeing them face-to-face, but you must also avoid any form of digital communication like phone calls, text messages, and emails.

If someone does choose to return to the fold after being disfellowshipped, they have to endure up to two years of sitting at the back of the Kingdom Hall, completely ignored by the congregation, until the elders deem them repentant enough to rejoin.

“...minors are made to describe intimate actions in detail, often without any parent present”

[Disciplinary] 'counselling' can be deeply invasive and inappropriate, especially when minors are made to describe intimate actions in detail, often without any parent present.

Being 'marked' in the Jehovah's Witness community doesn't result in being kicked out, but you do become socially isolated outside of Kingdom Hall. Actions that can get you marked range from dating a non-Jehovah's Witness to questioning the congregation, or even engaging in 'improper entertainment,' like reading Harry Potter or watching horror movies. The community is informed about your conduct in an anonymous manner through a public talk. Although they don't explicitly mention your name, everyone knows who the talk is about. This happened to me, and such was my level of indoctrination that I actually attended the talk aimed at humiliating me because I felt I deserved it.

Jehovah's Witnesses often do not present their most outlandish beliefs up front; they appeal to vulnerability, and the idea of a better world. For example, imagine you're a new mother. You're home when the Witnesses come by, and even if you're not particularly religious, their message could resonate because you're physically and emotionally exhausted, and you're concerned about the state of the world—global issues like Ukraine, the cost of living, or Israel. When they remind you of something as simple as the Lord's Prayer, asking you to reflect on 'Thy Kingdom come on Earth as it is in Heaven', they make you question if the current state of the world is what was intended, thereby drawing you into their belief system.

Emotionally, growing up in such a high-control group can be overwhelming. ▷

Biologically, we're wired to trust our primary caregivers, so my early indoctrination was deeply impactful. The children's books we were given contained disturbing images. For instance, the story of Noah's Ark was not just about animals marching two by two; it included images of people drowning. These horrifying images contributed to a childhood where I constantly expected to be arrested and tortured, and feared that all my non-Witness friends would die in Armageddon.

I grew up with the knowledge that if I ever needed a blood transfusion, I would have to die for my beliefs. A 1994 issue of 'Awake!' magazine even glorified children who had died because they refused blood transfusions.

Being a Witness is very gendered. Men can become elders and have responsibility; women can clean and provide free labour on Witness projects. You can't have women in any kind of managerial role within the Witnesses. And preaching is hard and horrible work; it reinforces all the time that you are not of this world. I was baptized at 15, left school at 16, and began to preach. I was spending 40 hours a month going door-to-door.

So, with all of that indoctrination, how do people get out? It's hard. For many people, the only thing that will get them out is something happens; it could be a tragedy in their lives, it could be just falling out with someone. For me, it was exhaustion. I was absolutely exhausted having tried to be a good Jehovah's Witness for as long as I did. I was also trying to pretend I wasn't gay. They are very homophobic. They will allow you to be gay as long as you don't 'do gay.' Without consciously realising it, I'd lost my faith. I hadn't given myself the time previously to think about what I actually believed, and when I did have the time, when I stopped attending the meetings and doing all of that study, I realised I did not believe the Bible.

But I'm lucky; I've not been disfellowshipped. I moved away from my congregation so my family will still talk to me, it's why I can do what I do. Since leaving, I have met people

from many different religious backgrounds—ex-Muslims, ex-Mormons, ex-JWs, ex-Hindus, ex-Children of God, ex-Plymouth Brethren, and many more. I've also met people who come from high-control secular groups.

Faith to Faithless was set up in 2015 by two ex-Muslims. They began using social media and along the way they kept bumping into ex-Jehovah's Witnesses who had very similar stories. In 2017, they became part of Humanists UK. I became involved in 2018. Currently, we have a team of three running Faith to Faithless. We stage all sorts of events: panel talks, lectures, many of them are on YouTube. Our next talk will be in November by Alom Shaha, an ex-Muslim and humanist science communicator. The idea behind these talks is to give us, as apostates, the education we never had in school about things like evolution.

We're also doing research on the effects of leaving high-control groups, and this is being done with Canterbury Christ Church University and the Open University. We also provide training for frontline services and safeguarding professionals to help them understand the issues that apostates face, particularly the harmful consequences of some cultural and religious practices and the danger that can cause to apostates, as well as shunning and isolation and what that does to someone.

If there's one takeaway point I'd like you to remember from this talk, it's the importance of groups like Faith to Faithless in offering support for people who've left high-control religion. Apostates often find themselves in dangerous situations. They need to learn how to make friends, how to make a life, how to cope with losing family, being shunned, and then being able to thrive as survivors.

Further information

Coercive Control in Cultic Groups (2022)
Family Survival Trust

Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems (2021) by
Alexandra Stein

Humanist Values – a brief summary



Values are fundamental to humanists because they provide the ethical and moral framework within which to navigate life in a meaningful and fulfilling way. Unlike religious traditions that may derive values from a divine source, humanism bases its values on reason, empathy, and a concern for human well-being. Here's a categorised summary of some humanist values (and they are not exclusive to humanism of course):

Personal & Character Values

- **Autonomy/independence:** Being self-directed in our personal lives allows us to lead authentic lives, in accordance with our own beliefs and aspirations.
- **Honesty and Integrity:** Adhering to a consistent set of ethical principles fosters trust and is essential for maintaining self-respect and the respect of others.
- **Resilience:** The ability to adapt and recover from setbacks.
- **Courage:** Standing up for your beliefs, and for the well-being of yourself and others
- **Hope:** Hope is a motivational force that encourages us to aspire for a better future, both for ourselves and society.
- **Happiness:** The importance of enjoying life and seeking happiness for yourself and others.

Ethical, Moral & Relationship Values

- **Humanity:** seeing others as human and never dehumanising them.
- **Love:** Whether romantic, platonic, or familial, love creates bonds that provide emotional support and enhance well-being.
- **Empathy:** The ability to understand and share the feelings of another.
- **Compassion:** A sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it.
- **Community:** A focus on building and maintaining meaningful relationships and communities.
- **Cooperation:** Working together for mutual benefit.

Cognitive & Thinking Values

- **Rationality:** Employing reason over superstition or tradition.
- **Critical Thinking:** Encouragement to question and critically examine one's beliefs and decisions.
- **Scepticism:** A willingness to question received wisdom and challenge authority.
- **Open-mindedness:** Being willing to consider the perspectives and opinions of others.

Aesthetic Values

- **Beauty:** An appreciation for harmony and aesthetics, whether it be in art, nature, or human accomplishment.
- **Creativity:** The ability to come up with new and original ideas.

Social & Political Values

- **Liberty and Freedom:** The right to express your thoughts and to forge your own path in life.
- **Equality:** Belief in the equal value and worth of all individuals, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation.
- **Justice:** A commitment to fairness, equality, and treating everyone with respect.
- **Democracy:** Governance that takes into account the will and welfare of citizens.
- **Secularism:** The belief in a separation between religion and state affairs.
- **Peace:** Working towards this demands compromise and openness.
- **Stewardship:** A responsibility for taking care of our environment and the planet.



Letters & Emails

It's your column...

From Simon Bowden on George Askwith's talk on Jehovah's Witnesses

What I took from George's excellent talk was that the world has a lot of people in it who want to control every aspect of other folks' lives, like a choreographer.

So George escaped from the stifling control of the Witnesses. Someone else at the meeting escaped from the pressures of an orthodox Jewish family. Someone else was brought up as a Methodist – and was fated to become a Methodist lay preacher like her mother, until she moved away and discovered a wider world.

In my own case, I was sent away to a private boarding school at the age of 10. The headteacher and owner was an ex-Cambridge Christian zealot with a huge appetite for preaching, moralising and finding excuses for administering humiliating physical punishments. One of his mantras was "Supposing all 84 boys did that?" Definitely time for a beating. When the old paedophile said "this hurts me more than it hurts you", it may have been literally true. He may have completely lost the boundaries between himself and the little boys he was trying to control.

So the issues raised by George are really important, about closed communities which make it extremely hard and painful to leave. But they also point to a wider problem when people with an urge to see the world in black and white terms try to coerce others to fit into their over-precise view of the world.

Dorset Countryside Volunteers

Keep warm beside our bonfire this winter!



We work on nature reserves across the county throughout the year

- Give nature a helping hand
- Discover Dorset's hidden corners
- Get fit whilst doing something useful
- Make new friends and have fun!

What are we doing next weekend?

Check out our next task on our website!

www.dcv.org.uk



Simon Bowden's poetry reviewed

Dorset Humanists committee member Simon Bowden has received a great review of his poetry volume, *Gifts of the Dark* by the influential poetry website London Grip. You can read the review here:

<https://londongrip.co.uk/2023/09/london-grip-poetry-review-simon-bowden/>



"Gifts of the Dark is a sequence of thirty-two remarkably candid and authoritative poems written during and after being in hospital recovering from a cancer operation. It's a fascinatingly original and thought-provoking collection."



Monday 13 November

7.30 for 7.45pm

*Farnham Maltings, (Barley Room) - Bridge Square,
Farnham GU9 7QR (Satnav for the carpark: GU9 7QN)*

FREE PUBLIC talk and discussion

Speakers: **David Wood**, Chair London Futurists
Daniel Dancey, Software Engineer and AI Speaker

Farnham Humanists have secured the insights of some AI experts to steer us all, as members of the public – no doubt interested, but uninitiated, as yet - towards thinking hard, **about how to think about AI and AGI** – and hopefully galvanising us out of the equally unattractive extremes of scaremongering, paralysis or complacency.

We're not the only ones with concerns: having set aside a £100m fund for safe development of AI models in the UK, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and other world leaders will discuss the possibilities and risks posed by AI at an event in November, covering a dozen challenges, including bias, privacy, misrepresentation, transparency, copyright and employment.

Do come, ask questions, give views. All are welcome!

Refreshments available. Collection for a tech-related international charity at the end.



Hosted by **farnhamHUMANISTS**

Enquiries: chair@farnham.humanist.org.uk
www.farnham.humanist.org.uk



View from the Chair

David Warden

Chairman of Dorset Humanists

I've included a brief summary of humanist values in this month's Bulletin. Which ones can help us to navigate the moral complexities of the Israel-Palestine crisis? Perhaps the most important humanist value is *humanity* which means seeing other people as human and never dehumanising them. This can be especially difficult in today's febrile atmosphere, following the dreadful massacre on 7th October and subsequent bombings. Both sides are being called "Nazis" and some have been called "animals". *Humanity* needs to be balanced with *justice* and the avoidance of harm. When terrorist groups commit massacres there is a moral duty to stop them by whatever means are necessary. By the same token, avoidance of harm means achieving military and security objectives with the minimum amount of harm to innocent civilians. In the current situation in Gaza this, of course, is extremely difficult. *Justice* also means looking at the root causes of the conflict. Some humanists campaign for *justice* for the Palestinians. But this has to be balanced with *empathy* for the Jewish people who have endured centuries of vicious persecution, culminating in the Holocaust. Establishing a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine gained historical momentum from the 1880s onwards and was supported by the League of Nations in 1923 and the United Nations in 1947. But Palestinian Arabs never consented to it, including numerous partition plans and two-state solutions, and Jewish nationalism collided with Palestinian nationalism. Since 1948, one side has been maintained by superior military force with the backing of the US. Humanists also feel *empathy* for Palestinians.

Other important humanist values in the current crisis are *rationality* and *critical thinking* and the avoidance of fanaticism. We should try to avoid thinking in terms of slogans which drastically simplify complex situations and which often conceal a *my side bias*. Slogans are the kind of statements which can be chanted in the streets and waved on placards. Some humanists may want to join protests but street protests reduce complex problems down to simple binary narratives of good and evil, oppressors and oppressed. Reality is always much more complex and reducing things down to binary narratives can dehumanise the other side, leading to more violence and massacres.

Community is an important humanist value and we can do our bit by reaching out to Jews and Muslims in our own communities. We'll be doing this at our next Saturday event at Moordown Community Centre. Lynda, who's Jewish, and Tama, who's Muslim, are friends with us and with each other. Humanists can support and cultivate these cross-cultural friendships to help prevent hatred from spreading across the world.

Peace is a humanist value and I will be speaking about peace at the Bournemouth Remembrance Service. Please support me if you can. Finally, *hope* is a humanist value. We must try to keep the flame of hope alive.