



Click image to RSVP

## Understanding conflicts big and small, and how to manage them

**Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2.00-4.30pm – free entry – all welcome**  
**Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW.**

**Please RSVP via Meetup. Browse our humanist library and join us after the break for our popular TalkBack discussion.**

Our guest speaker Jon Nicholas has been involved in conflict resolution work in places such as Bosnia, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Indonesia, and all over the UK. It's taken him into many schools, prisons and communities, often working with people holding extremist views to find solutions. He's worked with a number of NGOs including Save the Children, the European Union Police Mission, the Danish Refugee Council, Search for Common Ground and The Nansen Network. He will share anecdotes and explore how a 'needs-based approach' to conflict resolution can help manage tension on many different levels. In addition, he will draw attention to the role that emotions and habits can play in prolonging and exacerbating conflict. Join us for what promises to be an enlightening talk. This is Jon's second visit to Dorset Humanists. He was on our hustings panel in April for the 2024 General Election, standing as a Liberal Democrat. Photo credit: BH Living 2019

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## Multiculturalism and social cohesion

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 7.30pm at West Cliff Hotel, 7 Durley Chine Rd, Bournemouth BH2 5JS. Please RSVP via Meetup.**

### **A talk and discussion led by David Warden**

Has multiculturalism failed? Or do we just need to make it work better? Do we value our own history and culture or are we ashamed of it? Does multiculturalism lead to vibrant and diverse societies or does it lead to community tension, sectarianism, and riots? Rather than approaching such questions through an either/or lens, David will help us consider how we can accommodate difference and diversity whilst valuing and preserving the best aspects of host cultures. He aims to facilitate a respectful and balanced discussion about cultural identity, migration, class interests, and social cohesion. David is Chairman of Dorset Humanists and Editor of *Humanistically Speaking* magazine.



# Marsham Court Festive Dinner

Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> December 7.00pm, Marsham Court Hotel, 3 Russell Cotes Road BH1 3AB

It’s never too early to start planning for the festive season! Our festive dinner has become a tradition: excellent food and a fun time.

To book your place, contact Sandra Lucie-Smith on 07779 769108  
or [sandra.luciesmith@live.com](mailto:sandra.luciesmith@live.com)

Cost: £31.00. We understand this may be expensive for some members on low income. Please contact our pastoral team (David or Cathy) on a confidential basis if you would like to discuss how we can help.

David Warden 07910 886629  
Cathy Silman 07817 695615

Dress code: Feel free to dress up in your fancy shirt/black tie/dress to impress etc., but this is not a requirement or an expectation. Please wear whatever feels right for you.

*From Roger Eede last year: “I thought last night’s yuletide dinner was excellent. A good choice of venue, wonderful service and food and beautifully laid out tables. David’s opening words of wisdom and yearly round up, Simon’s MC eloquence and glass tapping skills and Aaron’s gaming expertise. What a laugh! Just what we all needed. A big thanks to Sandra for pulling it all together. Great to see so many folk in their seasonal finery.”*

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## Dates for your diary

|                                                                                                                                              |                                    |                                                                                              |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Saturday 12 <sup>th</sup><br>October 2pm                                                                                                     | Moordown                           | Understanding conflicts big and small, and how to manage them - Jon Nicholas                 |
| Wednesday 23 <sup>rd</sup><br>October 7.30pm                                                                                                 | West Cliff Hotel                   | Multiculturalism and social cohesion – a humanist approach – David Warden                    |
| Saturday 9 <sup>th</sup><br>November 2.30pm                                                                                                  | West Cliff Hotel<br>Pls note venue | How the World Eats: A Global Food Philosophy<br><i>Dr Julian Baggini</i>                     |
| Wednesday 27 <sup>th</sup><br>November 7.30pm                                                                                                | West Cliff Hotel                   | Alfred Sisley: The Place of Light <i>John Hubbard on the ‘English Impressionist’ painter</i> |
| <i>Plus other social events and walks which will be announced on Meetup. Please check all events nearer the time in case of any changes.</i> |                                    |                                                                                              |



# Charles Darwin pilgrimage

On 3rd September, a group of humanist pilgrims from Dorset Humanists set out for the long drive by coach to visit the home of the naturalist Charles Darwin. The trip was organised by committee member Simon Whipple.

Darwin and his family moved to Down House in 1842 and it remained his home until his death in 1882. The surrounding gardens and grounds were particularly important for his scientific observations and experiments. He converted parts of the garden into research areas, where he studied plants, earthworms, and the behaviour of pigeons, among other subjects.

The house itself is a large Georgian house that Darwin expanded and adapted to suit the

needs of his growing family and his scientific endeavours. The interior of the house is preserved much as it was during Darwin's time, with his study, the dining room, and other rooms reflecting their 19th-century appearance. Darwin's study, in particular, is arranged with his original furniture and scientific instruments, offering a glimpse into the environment in which he worked.

The whole site has been recognised as a place of outstanding historical importance. It was nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, highlighting its global significance in the history of science and natural history.

We celebrate Darwin Day every year on or around Darwin's birthday of 12th February.



**Down House**



**Darwin's greenhouse**



# Quest

*Humanist answers  
to life's biggest  
questions*



**Quest** is an exciting and brand new series of tutor-led discussions about the humanist approach to life, taking place over consecutive weeks starting in the New Year. It's the successor to our popular *One Life* course.

Humanism has an impressive pedigree going back thousands of years. It emphasises thinking for yourself... but not by yourself. We can "converse" with all the great thinkers past and present, as well as with each other, as we try to grapple with some of life's biggest questions.

What's wrong with us? What's right with us? Are we "the universe made conscious of itself" or a plague upon the Earth? Will we make it to the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Will we colonise other planets? Will AI replace us? Meanwhile, how can we experience happiness, connection with others, and a sense of meaning and fulfilment?

***"Helped enormously to clarify some of my thinking. Feel more confident to say what a humanist is all about!"***

There's no "humanist handbook" which will give us all the answers. But we're not starting from scratch. There's a rich deposit of ancient wisdom and modern science for us to learn from. Humanism is a framework, a starting point. Our focus, therefore, is not humanism itself but our existential quest for love, meaning, understanding, connection and happiness.

***"Fascinating – just what we need to introduce people to humanism."***

We plan to start *Quest* from Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 7.00-9.00pm at the Westcliff Hotel, continuing for eight consecutive weekly sessions (subject to venue availability). You can sign up for the whole series, or just the ones that take your fancy. We recommend attending as many as possible to derive the full benefit of the series, which is partly about making new friends and connections.

***"I think your course is fantastic. I am so glad to live in Dorset and have access to such superb activities for the non-believing."***

You do not have to "identify as a humanist" to attend the series. All humans are welcome!

The series is completely free, but we appreciate any donations you would like to make in support of this venture.

The series will be facilitated by David Warden who is chairman of Dorset Humanists, editor of *Humanistically Speaking* magazine, and a qualified humanistic therapist.

In order to book yourself onto the series, without obligation if you change your mind, email [chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk](mailto:chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk) or text David on 07910 886629.

We'll publish more details about the contents of the series in subsequent bulletins and notifications. We'd love to see you at *Quest*. So let us know you're interested.

# Sex and Gender in the Early Church

**“This talk will contain references to sex workers, nudity, beheadings and torture.” Dr George Askwith’s trigger warning to us before her talk in September...**

When we look at Christianity today, we see how diverse beliefs are, particularly when we consider individual belief. For example, how many Catholics today use birth control? There are arguments within the Anglican tradition about LGBT Christians. Some Christians are fundamentalist, take the Bible literally and expect to be taken bodily to heaven. For others, God set evolution in motion, stood back, and heaven is numinous.

One of the most important takeaways from this talk will be how diverse Early Christianity was for the believers. I’ll discuss what the Bible says about sex and gender, the development of the biblical canon, what early Christian writers said, and the potential role models for Christians – the figures who showed them how to live their lives.

## **Virginity was the ideal – but how do you define virginity?**

Celibacy and virginity was the ideal. In the writings of early Christians, the concept of virginity was more important than actual virginity. But how do you define virginity? And yes, I am asking you this question! Virginity is often linked to the hymen, a membrane that covers part of the vaginal opening. It’s flexible and stretchy, but over time, it loses its elasticity due to everyday movement, playing sports, having sex and, yes, using tampons. Eventually, the hymen thins and tears. But except in cases of vaginal trauma, generally no singular action, like having sex or using a tampon, will definitively break the hymen. Virginity in early Christianity was a multifaceted concept, reflecting broader



Photo by Aaron

theological and social values of the time, and often went hand in hand with a wider asceticism, promoting self-denial and spiritual purity. Bodily virginity was physical chastity, and “spiritual virginity” was purity of the soul, as many had come to the church after marriage, after being a parent, but became celibate. As martyrdom was no longer a danger, celibacy and asceticism demonstrated the ultimate faith. It was a “higher way” toward salvation. To be continent sexually, was to be continent in all: food, drink, dress, money, emotions and so on. Virginity was dedicating oneself entirely to God, free from the distractions and obligations of marriage. And for women, one of those obligations was pregnancy, with the very, very real danger of death in Childbirth.

Early Christians often linked celibacy and asceticism to eschatological beliefs, that the end of the world is coming. Asceticism was a way to prepare for what they believed was the imminent return of Christ. Not being physically attached to this world showed spiritual readiness.

Watch the full talk [here](#).



# Freethought: “an antidote to dogmatic thinking and authoritarianism of all kinds”

*Dr Emma Park, editor of The Freethinker (Jan 2022-March 2024) spoke to us in September.*

*G.W.Foote, pictured on the right, founded The Freethinker in 1881.*



## A very brief history of free thought

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines free thought as ‘the free exercise of reason in matters of religious belief; rationalism’ and a freethinker as ‘a person who refuses to submit the reasoning process to the control of authority in religious belief; a rationalist.’

Emma traced the origins of freethought back to Greek and Roman philosophers such as Xenophanes, Socrates, Epicurus and Lucretius. Fast-forward to the Renaissance and we find Giordano Bruno being executed by the Inquisition in 1600 for cosmological and theological heresies. According to author Hilary Gatti: ‘If there is an intrinsic link between science and liberty of inquiry, then Bruno was among those who guaranteed the future of the newly emerging sciences.’

One of our greatest English freethinkers was the author and revolutionary Thomas Paine who declared: ‘My own mind is my own church.’ In the nineteenth century, the reformer and radical Richard Carlile was imprisoned in Dorchester Gaol for publishing the works of Paine and founder of the National Secular Society, Charles Bradlaugh, was briefly imprisoned in the Clock Tower of Big Ben for attempting, as an atheist, to take his seat in the House of Commons. In 1883, founder of *The Freethinker* G.W.Foote was tried and imprisoned for a year for publishing “blasphemous” cartoons.

The founding charter of *The Freethinker* stipulated that “The Freethinker is an anti-Christian organ, and must therefore be chiefly aggressive. It will wage relentless war against Superstition in general, and against Christian Superstition in particular. It will do its best to employ the resources of Science, Scholarship, Philosophy and Ethics against the claims of the Bible as a Divine Revelation... Any competent Christian will be allowed reasonable space in which to contest our views.”

The 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Bertrand Russell was a humanist and a freethinker. In 1944, he wrote a pamphlet entitled *The Value of Free Thought: How to Become a Truth-Seeker and Break the Chains of Mental Slavery* (1944).

## Humanist ambivalence about freethought

Emma posed the question: “Is free thought part of humanism?” Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, in an interview with Emma replied: ‘ “Freethought” feels to me a historically specific thing. I think of freethinking as being a 19th-century phenomenon – a very 19th-century word.’ Humanists UK’s website and Twitter profile clearly state, however, that “We advance free thinking”. Similarly, the Twitter profile of the *New Humanist* magazine (founded in 1885) refers to “Free thinking in an age of extremes”.

Emma said that free thought has always been against established authority and dogma. But what are the established opinions and dogmas today? It's different from 100 years ago. It's not just the church. Since 2016, we have seen a huge divide, as if we now have two poles of authority and dogma with public opinion pressing down on anyone who wants to be a liberal, a freethinker.

A more sceptical position (Emma called it an "extreme view") about freethought has been expressed by Charlie Lynch, one of the authors of *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain: A History of Ethicists, Rationalists and Humanists* (2022). He asked "In a society where most humanists, atheists and secularists have grown up and lived without religion, what can freethought mean?" Emma responded by saying that free thought is not just about religion; it's about many different dogmas. And there are a lot of places in the world where religion really does matter and where freethought is not just a luxury – it's a matter of life and death. And we have extreme religious cults in Britain such as the Plymouth Brethren and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are always new extremist ideologies which need to be challenged.

Sarah Bakewell, author of *Humanly Possible: Seven hundred years of humanist freethinking, enquiry and hope* (Hardback edition 2023) wrote: "Freethinking is an essential part of humanism because humanists of many kinds prefer to guide their lives by their own moral conscience, or by evidence, or by their social or political responsibilities to others, rather than by dogmas justified solely by reference to authority."

Is free thought possible in modern world? Is it important, or dangerous? There were different answers during the Covid pandemic with some people saying that free thought is dangerous. In her book *Freedom to Think: Protecting a Fundamental Human Right in the Digital Age* (2022) human rights lawyer Susie Alegre argued that the right to freedom of thought should be a fundamental human right – absolute and not just relative.

Simon McCarthy-Jones in *The Battle for Thought: Freethinking in the Twenty-First Century* (2023) took a different position. He wrote: "It looks like freedom of thought should allow citizens to embrace or oppose any narrative for any reason. Yet if thought is not to be destructive of order, it does need to be restrained... A virtuous thinker may acknowledge permissible limitations on free thought, when this can promote the just." Emma described this "a difficult claim because who decides what the just is? Who is going to decide how to limit thought?"

Emma's view is that "a freethinker should fearlessly face all controversies." But is free speech a liberty (Orwell) or a licence (Billy Bragg)? Was it right, for example, for Facebook to limit dissemination of different views about Covid on the basis of what the White House told them to do? Was it right for the police to come out in such force against Covid protesters and not to deal in the same way with the Black Lives Matter protests? Emma touched on the transgender debate, quoting writer Helen Joyce: "Gender identity [ideology] is harmful for everybody, because it is a very sexist ideology... If you deny the reality of sex, it is women rather than men who suffer". An opposing position is taken by "humanist but not necessarily a freethinker" Charlie Lynch: "There is at present a large-scale moral panic being pushed by the political and religious right, ably assisted by 'gender critical feminists'... If transphobia might now be acceptable under the umbrella of 'freethought', why not other alt-right positions?" Emma observed that the political right seems to defend free speech in print, with the left defending free speech as protest. A protester who held a banner depicting Rishi Sunak as a coconut was acquitted of racism whereas pro-Palestinian protesters with images of Hamas paragliders on their backs were convicted for supporting terrorism.

**The National Secular Society's Secularism Conference "Protecting Liberal Values" is on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> October in London.**  
<https://www.secularism.org.uk/events>



# Letters & Emails

*It's your column...*

## ***From Eric Hayman: "I never promised you a rose garden"***

David Warden said in his September View from the Chair: "Most humanists probably want to give Sir Keir Starmer a chance." Well, he has had it – and blown it.

First he withdrew the £300 Winter Fuel Allowance from those he knows cannot fight back: old age pensioners. Then he gave inflation-busting pay rises to strongly-unionised doctors and train drivers. Where does the Labour Party get its life-blood money from? Those same unions.

He has made several trips to Germany, as part of his cosying up to the EU – all part of what he calls his "reset" with the organisation that saw the UK as a cash cow for all the years it was part of it.

Any chance of the UK being self-sufficient in gas and electricity production has been crushed by not giving any more licences for North Sea oil and gas exploration. Yet static wind turbines in the Highlands area of Scotland cost consumers nearly £68 million in 2023. They accounted for more than one-quarter of all Scottish wind farms receiving "constraint" payments for zero energy output. And he wants to build more wind turbine power stations, at tremendous cost to the environment. All that concrete for the roads and bases, and the materials for the pylons and blades; then the need to take the electricity to the national grid. With a lot of Chinese technology involved.

The Labour-Party-funding National Union of Teachers is demanding the "scaling back" of

teaching schoolchildren their "times tables" and English grammar testing because "they waste time with testing". And, of course, too much learning is "stressful".

That's enough for now to know what Starmerism is in action. I'll never be able to listen to the sweet melodic song "Rose Garden" again without thinking of Starmer and his pessimistic maundering out in the back of No 10. Thankfully he did not actually sing, "I never promised you a rose garden". What we have so far is all the thorns, and no flowers.

## ***From Graham Marshall, thinking about getting a tattoo***

I recently came across this quotation by Carl Sagan and I thought that if I was forced to have a tattoo I would choose this:

"I don't want to believe. I want to know."

He is now up with Richard Dawkins in my world. It might be fun to have all members list the three people alive or dead who seem to best know the truth about the world!

More Carl Sagan quotations are here:

[https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10538.Carl\\_Sagan](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10538.Carl_Sagan)

## ***From Aaron Darkwood***

I was pleasantly surprised that George Askwith, in her talk on *Sex and Gender in the Early Church*, brought the topic alive with enthusiasm, pizzazz and sex! Sexuality and gender was the focus, and with learning, questioning, and understanding came laughs, inquisition and intrigue. I like George a lot, and it was a great loss to our committee when she had to relocate to Bedfordshire. Very glad she came back to see us. Also present was Christian gatecrasher John MacDiarmid, who was able to offer some insights and contributions from a religious angle.



# View from the Chair

David Warden

Chairman of Dorset Humanists

Emma Park clearly positioned herself as a champion of free thought and speech in her recent talk to us. As a former editor of *The Freethinker* this is unsurprising. But how can some humanists be in favour of free thought and free speech while other humanists, such as historian Charlie Lynch, seem to take a dim view of it? I've always considered that free thought and free speech are foundational elements of humanism and it's disturbing to see a new generation of humanists sometimes adopting a more negative stance on free speech, and the belief that free speech and social justice may be on opposite sides of the progressive fence.

Let's try to unpack what Charlie said, as reported by Emma: "If transphobia might now be acceptable under the umbrella of 'freethought', why not other alt-right positions?" This is a complex and subtle argument but, essentially, Charlie is positioning himself in a radical progressive worldview which denounces traditional conservative beliefs as tantamount to hate speech. Examples might be the belief that biological sex exists and that it is binary (radical progressives might call this basic biological fact 'essentialist' and 'transphobic') or that mass immigration might be a social problem (they might call this 'racist' or 'xenophobic'). The free-thought position, which I believe was espoused by Emma in her talk, is that such traditional conservative beliefs, whether you agree with them or not, must be expressible in a democratic and free society. If such views are labelled as 'hate speech' it is but a short step towards not only suppressing them but also criminalising them. Humanists of all people should not be going down this slippery slope of authoritarianism.

Western societies seem to be in the grip of assorted mind viruses and fanaticisms and this is being driven, to a large degree, by social media algorithms which promote extreme views because they are profitable. As an advocate of free speech, I'm not a fan of government regulation of social media, but this puts me in a bind. If big tech makes money by increasing the velocity of fanaticism, shouldn't I be in favour of more regulation? Probably not, because I don't trust governments or big tech to be the arbiter of truth or what counts as 'extreme', especially if they themselves have been captured by a radical belief system. What we need is a culture that is committed to free thought, free speech, and the cultivation of humanist virtues such as evidence-based thinking, critical thinking skills, and toleration of views we do not like. The best way to counter them is by debate, not by regulation or suppression.

I attended the 7/10 memorial in Bournemouth Square with the local Jewish community. It was a dignified and moving occasion with only a few minor disturbances from passers-by. I was pleased to see a Christian priest take part in the spirit of interfaith solidarity and some Jewish-Muslim friendships remain intact despite the difficulties of the past year.