# Dorset Humanists

A partner of Humanists UK

National Secular Society Affiliated group






# Remembrance Service

**Sunday 9th November 10.55am**
**Bournemouth War Memorial**

David Warden will speak on behalf of Defence Humanists and non-religious members of the Armed Forces at the Bournemouth Remembrance Service. Join other humanists near the War Memorial from around 10.45am to support this humanist presence at a civic occasion.

# Why Remember the Dead?

## Remembrance across cultures

**A presentation and interactive discussion facilitated by Simon Whipple. All welcome. Free entry. A voluntary donation of around £3.00 to help with our expenses is appreciated but not obligatory.**

**Saturday 8th November 2.00pm. Moordown Community Centre, Coronation Ave, BH9 1TW**

The first mass Remembrance Day was held on 11th November 1919, honouring the 744,000 British soldiers, sailors and airmen who died in the First World War. Over the past century, the day has changed in many ways but remains a powerful symbol of collective memory. Remembering the dead is important across cultures, each finding unique ways to preserve memory. In this interactive talk, Simon Whipple will explore global traditions and invite us to discuss whether, in a secular society, we still wish to remember the dead — and in particular, whether we should continue marking Remembrance Sunday.

We will also be asked to discuss whether it would be good for our society to adopt other customs to help us remember the dead. This promises to be a thoughtful and timely discussion.

Email: chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk
Phone: 07910 886629
HMRC Charities Ref No EW10227

Click for events

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# Festive dinner at Marsham Court

**Thursday 18th December 7.00pm  Marsham Court Hotel, 3 Russell Cotes Road BH1 3AB**



Join fellow humanists for dinner at the Marsham Court Hotel – contact Sandra Lucie-Smith on ☎ 07779 769108 or email sandra.luciesmith@live.com to reserve your place and your 3-course menu choice.

The cost is £33.95 per person – ask Sandra for payment details. Concessionary rate available for members on low income.

Partners welcome. Dress code: smart casual – festive wear optional. Please bring some cash if you would like to donate to our Annual Appeal.

# Getting there

**The heyday of the ocean liner in the 20th century**

**Wednesday 26th November 7.30pm Westcliff Hotel**

A fully illustrated talk by John Hubbard. In this fifth talk in his series on human achievement, John will explore the evolution of the extraordinary engineering and design of the ocean liners that transported people across the globe in the era before mass air travel. He will also consider how these great ships reflected the ambitions and also the rigidities of the societies which they served, and the manner in which they have laid the foundations for the modern world of passenger seafaring. John is a retired teacher of English and drama.



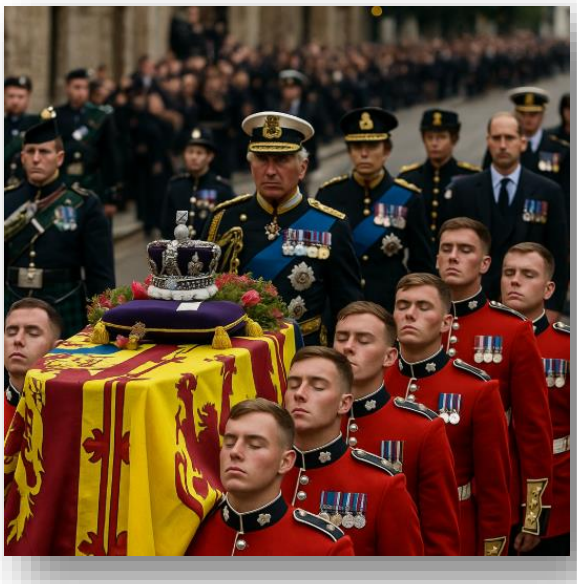
# Dates for your diary

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|---|---|---|
| Thursday 6th November 7.30pm | Moon in the Square | Humanists in the pub. Informal pub social hosted by Dean or Lyn. |
| Saturday 8th November 2pm | Moordown | Remembrance ceremonies across cultures. A presentation and discussion led by Simon Whipple. |
| Sunday 9th November 10.55 | War Memorial | Remembrance Service. David Warden will speak on behalf of Defence Humanists and non-religious in the Forces. |
| Friday 21st November 7.30pm | Westcliff Hotel | Humanists in the hotel. Informal social evening hosted by Sandra. |
| Wednesday 26th November 7.30pm | Westcliff Hotel | The heyday of the ocean liner in the twentieth century. A talk by John Hubbard. |
| Thursday 18th December 7.00pm | Marsham Court Hotel | Festive dinner. The cost this year is £33.95. A limited number of free places are available for members of Dorset Humanists on very low income. |
| This list is not exhaustive. Please check all events nearer the time on Meetup in case of any changes. | | |

# Managing death in the 21st century

## How it might improve

*Twenty-five people attended our October event at Moordown to hear Simon Whipple's talk and to consider their personal responses to the variety of funeral customs across the world. This is an AI-assisted summary version of Simon's talk.*



This talk is part one of a two-parter: funerals today and, next month (the day before Remembrance Sunday), how we remember the deceased. Last year's Death Café was valuable but unstructured. Today we're taking a more structured look at how different cultures and worldviews manage death and what human needs are at stake. I'll outline the terrain, then you'll discuss at tables using a short questionnaire; there's also an optional written survey which Cathy will analyse for next month.

### First things first: the body

Whatever our beliefs, the first practical task is disposing of the body. In hot climates this is urgent; in overcrowded countries, even getting a crematorium slot can take weeks. Practicalities shape ritual.

### Afterlife and the purpose of funerals

Most of the world still believes in some kind of afterlife. Historically, the funeral's job was to speed the deceased on their way and provide a "proper send-off" (there's even a trade in professional mourners). But the other central task is for the living: helping the bereaved cope.

### Rituals that carry us

Rituals–sometimes seemingly purposeless–do real work. They give people something automatic to do when focused thought is hard: a military salute for fallen soldiers; the civilian habit of laying flowers at a pavement shrine; lighting candles, even by the non-religious. These gestures translate feeling into action and are widely understood.

### A Christian template (and its echoes)

A familiar local pattern runs: pastoral visit, church service (commendation to God plus eulogy), committal (burial soil or the curtain at cremation), then a wake where people reconnect. It answers recognisable human needs: accompaniment at the threshold, story-making, solemn leave-taking, and community.

### Islamic practices

Islamic funerals are quite similar in honouring the dead but differ in speed and form: burial as soon as possible, no cremation (except rare public-health cases), the body washed and oriented toward Mecca. There's typically no eulogy–an emphasis on humility–and prayers can be quiet and succinct. From a mourner's perspective, some may find this less emotionally expressive; nonetheless, the structure is clear and meaningful within the tradition.

### Buddhist approaches

Buddhist funerals vary widely. There's attention to stillness after death, chanting, music, a eulogy, and often a procession. In some places the wake precedes burial ▶

or cremation with the body present. Unique practices include the sky burial in Tibet – a funerary practice in which the body of the deceased is placed on a mountaintop to be consumed by vultures and other scavenging birds.

## Ancestors and living memory

At this point I handed over to Cathy Silman, who worked in southern Namibia. Among Herero communities she visited, the ancestral fire is central: weddings and funerals are conducted before the fire, with offerings and words to the ancestors–whose presence is felt as ongoing. The effect is striking: the dead are not entirely gone; they remain in relationship. A comparable ancestor-centred outlook appears elsewhere–for example among Indonesian communities where, for bureaucratic and cultural reasons, burial may be delayed and the deceased remains present in the home for a period. One consequence: grief is different when presence, rather than absence, is emphasised.

## Grave goods: the oldest pattern

Archaeologically, one of the oldest universal patterns is grave goods–equipping the deceased for the next world. From local long barrows to Egyptian tombs, goods begin as literal provisions and, over time, become symbolic of status and story. Either way, the message is the same: the person continues, and we honour that by what we place with them.

## Humanist funerals today

According to Humanists UK guidance, the key point is flexibility: with a humanist celebrant, families can shape a ceremony that truly fits the person–readings, music, tributes, silence, humour, tears. Legally, the UK is relatively permissive: you can, within environmental rules, even bury on private land; burial at sea is possible in designated zones (e.g., off the Isle of Wight). What's harder is decision-making under stress. Funeral directors can be excellent guides, but there is a tendency toward "upselling" at a vulnerable moment. Know that simplicity is allowed.



**Gus Summersgill, a member of Dorset Humanist who died in August at the age of 86. At his request, there was no ceremony. But this left friends and family without a shared moment to mark the loss.**

## When there's no ceremony

I mentioned a former member, Gus Summersgill, who chose a very simple end with no funeral. While we respected his wishes, many friends–and his sons–were left without a shared moment to mark the loss. Psychologists debate terms like "closure"; my layman's view is that people need some communal punctuation–not to end grief, but to hold it together for a time and say, "He lived; he mattered; we remember."

## Costs and choices

Belief and culture are changing, and so are costs. Local authorities still fund funerals where there are no assets, but delays and disputes do occur. A practical aside from my former life as a solicitor: pre-paid funeral plans are often poor value (apart from a narrow tax benefit). Please read the small print and consider simpler routes. ▶

After the talk we compared cultural patterns, named the human needs funerals meet even without theology, and moved to table discussions using a short questionnaire (with an optional written survey for Cathy to analyse). My working hypothesis is simple: in a secular world, ritual, narrative, and communal gesture still *do the work* – they honour the dead and help the living. If we understand why these elements help, we can design funerals that are truer to the person and kinder to the bereaved – with or without doctrine.

### Group Discussion and Findings

Following Simon presentation, participants explored a series of questions about how we might manage death and funerals in a secular society. The discussion touched on both practical and symbolic aspects of bereavement, producing some thought-provoking results.

There was broad agreement that, where possible, a person's wishes about how their body is disposed of should be respected. In the absence of explicit instructions, the bereaved should make the decision, guided by sensitivity and custom.

All tables agreed that the body should be treated with reverence – partly because respect for others affirms our shared humanity, and partly because most people would wish their own body to be treated respectfully after death.

The presence of the body was considered important by some participants, as was having a designated place and time for collective mourning. Dress codes were seen as optional, depending on the deceased's preferences.

Suggestions for meaningful rituals included the performance of a eulogy, the symbolic lowering or closing of the coffin to mark finality, and even creative ideas such as communal cremations or individuals constructing their own coffins. One participant proposed rapid composting as an ecologically responsible alternative to burial or cremation.

A distinction was made between mourning – a communal process of shared remembrance – and grieving, the private emotional journey of each individual.

**In summary, as Cathy Silman observed, the general consensus was that a good funeral should balance respect for the deceased with the needs of the living – offering space for reflection, closure, and a sense of community.**

# Humanists UK Special Offer

Dorset Humanists is a Partner Group of Humanists UK and many of our members are already members of Humanists UK as well as Dorset Humanists, which is an autonomous and self-funding group.

As part of our partnership agreement, and if you are not yet a member of Humanists UK, we are offering a special membership offer with you: two years' membership of Humanists UK for the price of one. This is a great opportunity to strengthen your connection with the national movement, receive the Humanists UK magazine, and support their vital campaigns on issues such as assisted dying, secular education, and humanist marriage.

Use this special offer code **PARTNERGROUP12**, and click here: Special Join Offer

Humanists UK has launched a social media campaign called *That's humanism!* featuring four animations narrated by Stephen Fry and a new series of eye-catching educational posters for schools. Click here for more information.



# Café Sapiens

## Coffee, cake and conversation for those who want more from life than small talk…

**Beginning in January, our Saturday afternoon meetings at Moordown Community Centre could take on a new humanist shape under the banner of *Café Sapiens*. Think of it as a relaxed conversation café for curious minds – a space where ideas, stories and friendships brew together as naturally as coffee and cake.**

The suggested name **Café Sapiens** says a lot about the purpose of humanism and Dorset Humanists. Sapiens – from the Latin for "wise" – reminds us that we are *Homo sapiens*, the thinking, reflective species. The word has also been popularised by Yuval Noah Harari's bestselling book *Sapiens*, which tells the story of how our storytelling, imaginative minds made us human. The café is where those human minds come together: not to show off our cleverness, but to share wisdom, curiosity and good humour.

Each month we'll explore a big human question – in the same spirit as our **Compass** sessions – drawing on philosophy, psychology, science and art to illuminate the human condition. The aim isn't to win arguments, but to practise the virtues of good conversation: curiosity, courage, listening, humour, humility and kindness.

**Café Sapiens** is about building our humanist community. Together we'll tackle the themes that make life rich and meaningful: belonging, joy, ethics, creativity, purpose, loss, and hope.

### What to expect

- Coffee and cake on arrival (homemade contributions welcome!)
- Small-table discussions led by volunteer hosts
- A relaxed, inclusive atmosphere
- A place to learn new things, share stories, and make friends

### Our humanist rules of engagement

- Listen generously
- Speak honestly but with respect
- Be curious rather than certain
- Seek understanding, not victory
- Maintain a sense of humour

### Could you host a table?

We're looking for friendly, open-minded facilitators to help each group feel comfortable and heard. You don't need to be an expert – just someone who enjoys guiding conversation, making sure quieter voices are included, and keeping the tone thoughtful and welcoming. We'll provide guidance beforehand so everyone feels confident.

Our venue may be a little stark, but with your help – a few tablecloths, flowers, and good company – we can turn it into something special. If you'd like to help host, bake, or enliven the room, please let us know.

So what do you think? Would you like to help launch **Café Sapiens**?



David Warden, James Sharp, Sali Knight, Tama Merdaci, Lynda Ford-Horne

Many Faiths Together

Many Faiths Together is a local initiative bringing people of different faiths and worldviews into conversation – not to agree on everything, but to show that genuine friendship and respect can thrive even where beliefs diverge.

Representing Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Humanism, Many Faiths Together visit schools, colleges, and community spaces across Dorset and the BCP area. Its aim is to help young people see that adults can disagree deeply about life's biggest questions and yet still listen, laugh, and learn from one another.

## Recent feedback from a local school

"Very interesting to hear people of different faiths talking to each other about their beliefs while also being very good friends." James

"So nice to see people of different faiths interacting and talking in a friendly manner instead of just giving facts about the religion. Very enjoyable and informative." Lily

"I loved the friendly atmosphere and also the different views that were explored and expressed I enjoyed listening to how respectful and open each of them were to each other despite disagreements about certain views. The discussion was engaging and interesting without being too serious, which made it easy to listen to. I learned a lot from the different perspectives and really valued the inclusive and positive environment they brought to us." Ellia

"It was the best personal enquiry lesson we have had." Ash

"It was super encouraging and interesting to see people of all faiths talking together and being friends. The discussions were very interesting to listen to and made me question lots. It was a super positive experience." Zac



# Letters & Emails

*It's your column…*

## *From Barry Newman on race and racism*

Racism is discrimination – usually harmful and often brutal – against a group of people identified by their shared physical and cultural characteristics. It designates some peoples as less worthy of justice and empathy and is abhorrent. However, let us consider the concept of "race" as distinct from the regrettable human activity called "racism".

In science, both "species" and "race" are imprecise terms, but a common definition of "race", in the context of humanity, is a group within the species *Homo sapiens* whose members share both common genetic (and therefore physical) and cultural characteristics. In animal biology these are termed "subspecies" or "ecotypes". In humans and animals, these characteristics are generated by periods of relative reproductive and cultural isolation. Examples of race abound in the human species although migration and interbreeding are rapidly diluting racial differences. However, the rejection of the concept of race has very recently gained popularity.

The justification for this rejection of race is that there is the observation that there exists greater genetic variation among individuals within a population subgroup than between different population subgroups. The second justification states that because all humans belong to the species *Homo sapiens*, further groupings within the species on the basis of genetic traits and culture are arbitrarily deemed impossible. An example of human exceptionalism. Note that genetic differences between groups is not denied, and geneticists can certainly shed light on a person's ancestry by examining the genetic makeup of individuals. Despite this, arguments supporting the existence of race have been called pseudoscience! Do groups of humans have differing physical characteristics, or do our senses deceive us?

I suggest that "race" has recently been consigned to nonexistence, not because there is a sound scientific case for this view, but because of our justifiable abhorrence of racism. I suggest that it is the denial of race that is in fact a cultural artefact. Importantly, if we deny the existence of race, how do we tackle racism? Denying the existence of race, or the designation of "race" as a cultural artefact, is not a rational response to racism, and could place those suffering racial discrimination at great risk. Like gender and sex, there seems to be an unfortunate social trend to deny reality when a reality presents us with moral challenges. And if the reader is troubled by the word "race", exchange it for "ethnicity" – until that too is de-platformed by our social warriors. Personally, I look forward to a world where human migration and interbreeding dilutes race, resulting in a much more homogenous family of humanity. I think the world will be a better place for it, but before that, we must recognise and deal with reality.

Do you have a viewpoint on this subject that might interest our readers?
Email: chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk



# A point of view

## David Warden

One of the ideas we've been exploring in our *Compass* series is that we all live by "mental maps" of reality. Individual humanists, for example, can have different mental maps of humanism. At a recent session, I made what I thought was an uncontroversial statement: "There's no such thing as race – only the human race." It soon became clear this was anything but uncontroversial. Yet our disagreement wasn't about reality itself. No one denies the obvious facts of human difference. The disagreement was about conceptual maps.

The concept of race harks back to the eighteenth century, when the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus classified humanity into four "varieties" – Europeans, Native Americans, Asians, and Africans – based on appearance and temperament. Later thinkers such as Johann Blumenbach added further refinements, coining familiar terms like "Caucasian". These early taxonomies have long since been superseded. In 2019, leading scientists in Germany issued the Jena Declaration, concluding that the theory of human "races" has no scientific justification. From a biological standpoint, race is a construct based on arbitrarily chosen physical features that fail to reflect the real genetic diversity of our species.

In a 2019 statement, the American Association of Biological Anthropologists (AABA) reached a similar conclusion: "Race does not provide an accurate representation of human biological variation. It was never accurate in the past, and it remains inaccurate when referencing contemporary human populations." The AABA points out that the Western concept of race arose "in support of European colonialism, oppression, and discrimination." The rejection of race, therefore, is partly driven by political correctness but equally by descriptive accuracy. Race, AABA notes, is "not a scientifically accurate biological concept", though it remains "a social reality" that developed in tandem with racist ideologies.

This conceptual shift doesn't deny human diversity. It simply rejects an old and misleading map of it. That's why, when you fill in a diversity form today, you'll no longer see the word "race" — but you will be asked about "ethnicity". Mine is White English; another person might be Black English. We don't belong to different races, but "ethnicity" captures something real about ancestry, culture, and physical appearance.

Letting go of the biological concept of race won't erase prejudice overnight, but it clears away one of its oldest justifications. If we can update our conceptual maps to match the best evidence, we can also begin to talk more rationally about difference itself. We might, for example, refrain from reflexively labelling as "racism" the natural human preference for familiarity and cultural continuity. Instead, we might open up more nuanced conversations about migration, integration, and social cohesion. That, after all, was the deeper purpose of our recent *Compass* discussion – to explore how humanist dialogue can illuminate even the most sensitive questions with reason, empathy, and courage.

*Do you have a viewpoint on this subject that might interest our readers?*
*Email: chairman@dorset.humanist.org.uk*