



Newsletter October 2014

Social Events

Sell out 10th Anniversary Celebratory Garden Party in June



Graced with fine summer weather and live jazz, the beautiful gardens and pavilion of Farnham Museum and a few, mercifully concise, speeches, on Sunday June 22nd Farnham Humanists celebrated, to the month, their first decade. **Some eighty supporters and guests** joined in the merry throng, including the mayors of Waverley and of Farnham, the chairman of Surrey County Council, and representatives of some local churches and other Farnham organisations. Chair Jennie Johnson welcomed everyone and introduced the

speakers. Alec Leggatt, founder of the group, told how the group started and how its early aspirations had been fulfilled to a large extent including those of contributing to the wider community as well as nurturing a social group of like-minded free-thinkers. He outlined his hopes for the next ten years.



Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association then spoke of the work on a national scale, emphasising the need for a more balanced approach to religious education and the way Humanists can serve the community.

[Alec Leggatt]

For more photos please see website page

<http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/10th-anniversary-celebratory-garden-party/>

Pub walk led by Ruth and John de Prey in July

A group of Farnham Humanists met on the 13th July at the Anchor Inn in Lower Froyle for a four-mile walk, part of which was on an ancient pilgrim's track. John de Prey reported "We were lucky with the weather because the chalk would have been slippery had it rained. It was fun and the conversations were fluent (to say the least!). Also I'm sure we all gained some absolution from walking on a bit of St Swithen's Way.....".

Recent Sunday Meetings

April 2014

Humanist Celebrant Ailsa Davies facilitates our Ethical Jury



A group of about twenty gathered in the back room of the Hop Blossom on a Sunday evening for the latest Ethical Jury. Celebrant Ailsa Davies was there to explain the rules at the beginning and deliver the verdicts at the end of each debate, and in between her role was basically to hold everyone's jacket while we all waded in. It was clear from the start that no one had come just to listen!

For those who have never been to an Ethical Jury evening before, the idea is for people to bring some moral dilemmas to be debated and two are selected. These are then discussed for a fixed time before a vote is taken. In all five were put forward, and the two that were chosen were the choices that faced a Muslim woman whose fiancé was non-Muslim and was reluctant to convert, and the decision to give McDonalds the catering franchise for a new children's home at Southampton Hospital, given their contribution to the poor diets of today's young people.

The Southampton Hospital situation was proposed by John and Ruth du Prey. The arguments spread to

wider issues such as the funding of the NHS, and obesity in general. Ronald McD did have his supporters, including our Chairman who said that she had (once) had a very nice salad from them, but the final vote went clearly against the fast food chain.

The second dilemma, proposed by Alec and Pamela Leggatt, attracted opinions that were no less ardent, but it was difficult in the end to find a single point to vote on. A number of those present brought up similar personal experiences of religious differences, including some surprising revelations from two of your committee (who shall, of course, remain nameless). The general advice was that the Muslim woman should talk to her fiancé's parents, which she had not yet done.

If you were there and had your taste whetted for more, or you missed it and wish you hadn't, a substitute may be found in a board game called *Scruples*. This is based on similar moral dilemmas and involves ethical discussion, bluff and challenge. It's highly addictive and beware – it's probably best played with people you know quite well but whose friendship you are prepared to lose

[Mike Swaddling]

May 2014

What options do non-religious prisoners have for pastoral care? – Amy Walden

Currently, chaplaincy teams comprised only of representatives of the major religions provide pastoral care for prisoners. Amy Walden, a probation officer working with prisoners in HMP Winchester, explained how, in practice, providing religiously committed support to prisoners and ensuring their right to practise their religion, discriminates against those without religion. The chaplaincy teams, though responsible for providing pastoral support to all prisoners, give none for those who would chose a non-religious viewpoint. This is because the chaplaincy teams do not include Humanists – or others – who would willingly interact with prisoners



with an atheistic or agnostic viewpoint on their own terms, and with prisoners who for any reason might simply feel uncomfortable talking to religiously committed people.

Clearly then, spiritual guidance is currently provided within the context of religion, so any prisoner who shuns religion will receive no help in his spiritual/moral growth. Chaplains may also provide emotional support and access to the chapel to prisoners not allowed to attend family funerals. This is no comfort to atheists.

Humanist chaplains could provide unbiased support, encouraging prisoners to believe in themselves and find their talents, or to discuss beliefs with an open mind. Furthermore, they could inform on such crucial information as non-religion based charities and housing providers. Given that over 35% of prisoners profess no religion. It seems logical to offer humanist and religious chaplaincy on an equal footing.

[John de Prey]

July 2014

Religion in Healthcare: What's the Harm? – Dr Sara Melly

It is widely thought that religion in healthcare can't do any harm – but it can – according to clinical psychologist Dr Sara Melly. Chaplains are selected by their religious organisations. There are no formal requirements for counselling qualifications or psychology degrees. Perhaps there should be.



Religious hospital staff or GPs may not provide unbiased care for sex workers, gays, patients seeking contraception advice or needing a pregnancy termination. Religious commitment is not disclosed in advance; therefore a long awaited appointment to such practitioners may waste valuable time, and sometimes patients may not be able to easily seek help or advice elsewhere. Religious views also come into play over such issues as end of life care and assisted suicide. Boys, too young to object, are circumcised under the NHS. Dr Melly argued that this surely amounts to child abuse.



Hospital chaplains currently cost the country twenty nine million pounds annually, equivalent to two nurses per hospital trust. Religions hold the monopoly, but what they offer is arguably irrelevant to most of us who might benefit more from skilled non-judgmental support in hospital and a non – biased consideration of our rights and needs. *[John de Prey]*

For more information see <http://www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk/>

September 2014

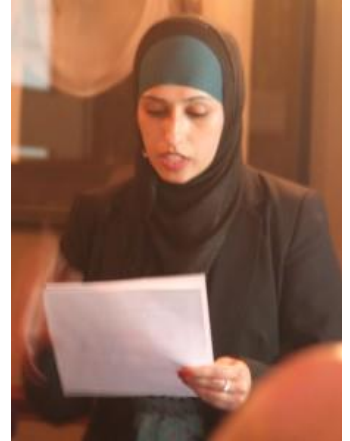
Women and Sharia Law – Kauser Akhtar

Kauser Akhtar spoke to Farnham Humanists and guests to further nurture the much needed understanding and communication between Muslims and non-Muslims. Her work also reaches to those who have no true knowledge of Islam but do things claimed to be in its name. In her presentation “Women in Islam”, she defined key terms and described the use of the Qur’an, Sunnah and Hadith, and Shariah Law. She told how in the early days Shariah gave previously unheard of rights to women, and the spirit of Islam

is for women to be equal to but different from men. Many important, powerful and accomplished Muslim women can be found in history.

Kauser explained that unfortunately there is no one voice of Islam, and it is the negative extremes that catch the attention of the media. Many clichéd ideas of the treatment of women under Shariah Law as regards divorce, custody of children and giving evidence are simply uninformed.

It is in recent times that some men have distorted interpretation of the Qur'an to subjugate women, particularly in India and Saudi Arabia. Also, very evidently, the young are being influenced by misbehaving, unqualified "Imams". The work of Kauser Akhtar and others is hugely important, to encourage Muslims to be guided by true scholars and to communicate with the wider community. Her honesty, clarity and wit were greatly appreciated. *[John de Prey]*



Kauser works as Surrey Faith Links Adviser for the Church of England Diocese of Guildford in partnership with Surrey County Council. She says: "I am passionate about creating community cohesion between people of different faiths and no faith." Her presentation and other links can be found on Farnham Humanists' webpage <http://farnham.humanist.org.uk/kauser-akhtar-women-and-sharia-law/>.

Farnham Humanists out and about

Speaking to an interfaith event hosted by Ahmadiyya Muslims

May

Farnham Humanists were invited to talk to a woman-only assembly within the Ahmadiyya group, a moderate Muslim organisation which promotes the education of its members. After a debate amongst ourselves about whether by going we would be condoning women-only groups, we decided there was more to be gained by communicating. Our speaker was listened to with respect; and the meeting served, we hope, as the first small step in a dialogue. *[John de Prey]*

Meeting reviews way forward for Christian worship Surrey's non-faith schools

June

The British Humanist Association says it receives "more complaints about Collective Worship in schools than many other issues with students often being left distressed and parents feeling discriminated against". Together with other members of the Surrey SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), Jennie Johnson was invited to review Surrey's guidance on collective worship in non-faith schools titled "Time to reflect".

At the June SACRE meeting, whilst faith members explained what worship means to them, Jennie emphasized the need for inclusivity, respect and integrity. She recounted how her six-year-old son (who had lost his father when he was four) cried at home because he was being forced to sing hymns in assemblies despite not believing that Jesus loved him. Initially the school head said he had to sing or miss assembly, but after consultation with Surrey County Council the head relented and allowed him

to sit quietly. Jennie was then kindly allowed by the meeting to present her research into the law and national guidance on school worship followed by suggestions for a way forward.

Current law **requires all pupils** to participate in **daily collective worship** with *“the majority of acts of collective worship...wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character”*; *“the extent to which ...worship ...reflects the broad traditions of Christian belief”* should take into account *“the family backgrounds of the pupils...”* (the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 Section 70 and Schedule 20). There is no explicit legal requirement to mention Jesus Christ.

National guidance given by NASACRE and AREIAC



NASACRE and AREIAC's joint statement on Circular 1/94 and collective worship

October 2012

Since March of this year NASACRE and AREIAC have been in contact with the Department for Education regarding the status of Circular 1/94 with respect to what this Circular says about collective worship. In the course of this correspondence it has been made clear that 1/94 has no legal or semi legal status, nor does the Circular have a quasi-legal status. It does not represent the Government's official advice on collective worship which schools are in some sense obliged to follow. Officials state that in this area local determination is a key strength and for this reason all schools and Academies can choose whether or not to use Circular 1/94.

The view of NASACRE and AREIAC is that collective worship can and should be an inclusive experience which, when done well, can make a valuable and highly positive contribution to life in general in all schools. All schools and Academies should be meeting the legal requirements for collective worship. However, we are aware that in attempting to do so many institutions experience difficulties which stem from statements which appear in Circular 1/94. The Circular is thus often a barrier to good collective worship. For this reason NASACRE and AREIAC advise that schools and Academies should not use Circular 1/94 but that their provision for collective worship should be guided by the legal requirements as set out in the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) and confirmed in the 1996 Education Act.

emphasizes that *“collective worship can and should be an inclusive experience”* and should be *“an educational activity which protects and affirms the integrity of all those taking part”*.

Expecting students to recite prayers or sing hymns which contain words they do not believe in, or agree with, is disrespectful of their beliefs. It is not going to encourage them to feel included or secure or to develop an understanding of, and any respect for, other people's beliefs, values and cultures.

The requirement for 51% of acts of collective worship to be “broadly Christian” could be met by celebrating moral values and guidance important in Christianity but also to other religions and non-religious beliefs e.g. forgiveness, compassion, kindness, empathy and the Golden Rule to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”.

What about hymns and prayers? Hymns could be chosen which do not contain overt references to God or Jesus or if they do, students could be given the choice of whether they join in or sit quietly experiencing the music and reflecting. Likewise joining in prayers should be optional with alternatives of quiet reflection or meditation.

It was **encouraging that there seemed much agreement at the end of the meeting** for reform of this nature. This will also have been helped by the more recent comments in July by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt Revd John Pritchard, in favour of non-faith schools being more inclusive and providing assemblies drawing upon values. It will be interesting to see what the final draft of Surrey's guidance has to say.

[Jennie Johnson]

Supporting the BHA's inaugural RE Teachers' Conference

July

Farnham Humanists' school volunteers Mike Adams and Jennie Johnson joined over 100 RE teachers and others at the free conference geared to improving confidence in teaching about Humanism. The day comprised a mix of roundtable sessions and talks (including by humanist philosopher Stephen Law and Dr Mark Chater - director of Culham St Gabriel's, a Christian charity which pursues excellence in RE). Practising RE teacher and researcher Maxine Beech highlighted conflicts between the non-statutory national framework for RE lessons provided by the RE Council for England and the varying, usually narrower, syllabi throughout the country as determined by



local SACREs. Her evidence shows that including Humanism in lessons can enliven pupils who have been disaffected by RE, stimulating them to engage critically with the beliefs of others (non-religious and religious), as well as with topics such as symbolism, meaning, ritual, and community. [Jennie Johnson]



Mixing with Humanists from all over the world in Oxford **August**

Eight Farnham Humanist members joined over 1,000 Humanists from 67 countries for the 2014 three-day World Humanist Congress in August. Over 70 eminent speakers from across the world facilitated 35 separate sessions focusing on freedom of expression and the pursuit of a '21st century Enlightenment'. The sessions ranged from being stimulating, entertaining (music, dance and comedy) to shocking and moving. Sessions had titles like "The difficult case for incitement to hatred" and "Key challenges to freedom of religion or belief" and "Building humanist community" and "Getting the message out: challenges to news and opinion journalism".



We heard from inspiring humanists such as Gulalai Ismail, whose developmental work in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Northern Pakistan saw her family targeted by armed Islamic extremists, and the Bangladeshi blogger Asif Mohiuddin, who was stabbed in the street and beaten for being an apostate, put in jail and tortured by police. Asif said "I met my attackers when I was in prison... We had a nice discussion. I asked them why did you attack me? They said, 'You left Islam, you are not a Muslim, you criticized the Koran, we had to do this.' They said they would try to kill me again when they leave prison. I said to them that I would always speak out against them."

Author Taslima Nasreen, who faces death threats for her writings and has been expelled from her native Bangladesh and India, provided a passionate close to the congress saying 'Without the right to offend, freedom of expression cannot exist. Without freedom of expression, there can be no democracy.' She declared, 'I am truly homeless but I have a home... Atheists, feminists, humanists, you are my country, you are my home.'

It was wonderful to meet humanists from so many different countries and hear about their experiences. It felt a great privilege to be there. The next congress in three years time is in Brazil. Maybe not eight, but it wouldn't surprise me if one or two of us don't find that São Paulo is the perfect holiday destination for 2017. [Jennie Johnson]



Feedback on newsletter - we would like to hear what you think. Please email any suggestions for improvements and subjects you would like to see covered to newsletter@farnham.humanist.org.uk

We would also like to thank Mike Swaddling for his editing support in producing this newsletter.