



Newsletter November 2015



Social Events

Annual Garden Party in June

On June 14th in a garden drenched by sunshine, with tummies well satisfied by a table groaning under the weight of food brought there by themselves, Farnham Humanists gathered under under gazebos and sunshades to enjoy their annual garden party. This year, members from Guildford and Basingstoke Humanists joined Farnham Humanists, as did some non-humanists. What we had in common was for less than the different life experiences and attitudes towards many things. Of course the plight of asylum seekers and what Europeans should do about it was much discussed. But also, there was a great deal to hear about artificial intelligence, tree pruning, cookery, the aesthetics of chimneys and the hazards of cycling on Surrey roads. Was it the sunshine, or the various bottles that were found to be emptied by the end of the afternoon? Or was it just what happens when you have humanists meeting together? Either way, it was thought provoking and just plain fun.

Pub walk led by Ruth and John de Prey in July

The walk had promised to be pleasant and scenic, but fate dealt us a good dose of wind and torrential rain. Some of us (I'm not saying how few) doggedly walked it anyway, following a sodden route map. Enjoy it they did, but must admit to having been pleased when they found themselves nearing their destination: The Hawkley Inn in Hawkley. There they dried out, congratulating themselves, raising their glasses and enjoying the superb cuisine. Sometimes things we struggle to achieve are more satisfying than those that come easily.

Humanist Cycle in August

Three intrepid Farnham Humanists pedalled along our leafy country lanes to Tilford, lead by Sue Shaw. The Barley Mow made them most welcome. They refreshed their energies with good food, discussions on life, health and all things 'humanist' before heading back to Farnham. Sue comments "I seem to remember it rained but the good company and inspiring talk have blotted out my memory."

Recent Sunday Meetings

May 2015

Memories and Reflections of a Former Cult Devotee

Farnham Humanists were fascinated by a presentation by Alice Herron. Alice described how she once joined a "Hindu" cult and was held within its power for 27 years. It was an International Meditation Group led by a "guru" and based in New York. Her involvement began when she was impressed with the benefits of meditation. It is easy for outsiders who haven't experienced the pull of a powerfully charismatic guru, not to understand how an intelligent young woman can suspend all disbelief, and become enthralled by a guru's promise to make her realise the "Highest".



Once initiated the student in the cult makes the promise that when she realises the Highest, she will become the guru's "perfect instrument to manifest the supreme in him". His control takes hold. He said "...obedience is of paramount importance. If you obey your master, no matter how imperfect he may be, then the Absolute Lord Supreme will be able to illumine you and fulfil you in his own way. Start your spiritual journey with obedience. If you have the inner strength to obey your master, you will be the happiest person".

Alice devoted herself to the community, never questioning or becoming suspicious that things might not be as they seemed. However she always felt that despite her commitment and obedience, she was never included in what she felt was the inner circle of the group. Occasionally she heard troubling things, but dismissed them.

Over time, Alice became unhappy. She felt she was not making “spiritual progress” and decided to leave. Around that time she heard that an ex-follower had started a website, and contrary to cult rules, Alice started to investigate the guru and the cult via the internet. There she learned for the first time of the sexual exploitation of some of the female members and how any woman who became pregnant was told to have an abortion. This was the case with Carlos and Deborah Santana who married at the guru's behest and Deborah was later persuaded by the guru to abort their child.

Alice told of the guru's absurd aim to win a Nobel Prize for Literature for his chronically poor poetry, and of his efforts to win the Nobel Peace Prize through the influence of cult members whom he had encouraged to work at the United Nations.

Having painfully extracted herself from the cult, Alice now has valuable insights into that kind of wholesale surrender to a belief, incredible though it appears now with hindsight. She is currently studying for a PhD in the Psychology of Religion at University of Surrey. She also speaks openly about her experiences, and this was hugely appreciated and loudly applauded by the humanists who heard her. *[John de Prey]*

July 2015

How not to get fooled by myth and quackery

In his talk to Farnham Humanists based on his book “Don't get fooled again - A Sceptic's Guide to Life”, Richard Wilson declared that we are all vulnerable to deception and delusion. His book offers practical proposals for us to minimise our risk to being fooled. He gives many examples of contrived misconceptions, such as the pseudo-history of David Irvine who still has a following accepting his Holocaust denial argument; myths and conspiracy theories about UFOs, high profile assassinations and 9/11; and medical quackery like HIV denial

At the absurd end of the spectrum is Casper Schmidt who claimed HIV to be “a self hating group fantasy among gay men and drug addicts”. He connected the appearance of AIDS with the election of President Reagan, believing a conservative swing triggered an epidemic of a shame induced depression among the groups now feeling vulnerable to AIDS. He claimed psychotherapy could cure AIDS. Unhappily, he died of an AIDS related illness.



Dr. Peter Duesberg achieved respect for his work on cancer cells and the genetic structure of viruses. However, without offering any research back-up, he rejected the whole HIV hypothesis because he found gaps in the research of others. His alternative hypotheses are that the symptoms arise from recreational drug use, and that the taking of AZT to treat people diagnosed with AIDS actually causes the symptoms. But his field was not HIV and his ideas are not found credible in the scientific community. Unfortunately the media provided him with a platform, talking of “a deathly conspiracy of silence” and “the scientific and medical community gripped by collective insanity”. One damaging consequence of that publicity was that people died prematurely because they elected not to undertake AZT treatment.

A more serious consequence of the publicity was Thabo Mbeki's refusal to accept medical evidence of the HIV virus. So he became directly responsible for the avoidable deaths of more than a third of a million people in South Africa. Dr Duesberg was among the apparent experts Mbeki consulted.

Such theories often co-opt the language of scepticism and rational inquiry. It is a rhetorical way of getting a foot in the door, appearing to be reasonable and asking questions. Genuine scepticism is good, but how do we differentiate it from bogus scepticism? Richard Wilson argued that genuine scepticism arises from opinions based on the best available evidence; it should be consistent, even-handed, using evidence that has not been “cherry picked”; and it should be held with intellectual humility on the understanding that “I might be wrong, I might not have all the evidence, I’m subject to prejudices like everyone”. It is not dogmatic.

On the other hand, bogus scepticism tends to use double standards in the approach to evidence. It sets a high bar for proof of established theory. It can reject scientific papers because of a small methodological flaw, using that to reject the whole conclusion. It sets a low standard of proof for the evidence or ideas supporting the ideologically held alternative. A good example is how the tobacco industry misused data to play down the link between smoking and lung cancer.

Wilson recognises parallels between AIDS deniers and those who deny any connection between climate change and carbon dioxide. It was comforting to AIDS sufferers to believe that doctors had it all wrong; likewise it’s comforting to believe climate change scientists are scare-mongers misusing questionable data. He would love the global warming sceptics to be right, and that we have nothing to fear. However he recognises in them the same rhetorical tactics as used in AIDS denial, and suspects that global warming scepticism might turn out to be the most toxic and deadly form of bogus scepticism that the human race has yet been able to come up with. *[John de Prey]*

September 2015

Would You Eat Your Neighbour’s Dog?

I find lambs adorable, yet I love a rack of lamb with red current jelly. I would never eat equally adorable Tilly, my neighbour’s dog. Is that a double standard? My personal morality is based on the Golden Rule, “Do to others as I would have others do to me”. But are pigs among those “others”? After all I don’t very much want to be 20% of a supermarket sausage. Am I an animal that can eat other animals because they let me? Or am I morally superior, able to be guided by reason, sense of duty, compassion or simple tenderness?



I had never thought about these things before I heard the talk “Humanism and Animal Welfare” given to Farnham Humanists by Roger Haines. He questioned whether we see ourselves as animals alongside many other species of animal in nature, or as beings midway in a hierarchy that has God above us, and animals beneath us. If we accept the former view, then maybe we must turn to moral philosophy for guidance.

For instance Utilitarianism, he says, holds that a moral act is one that produces the greatest good for the greatest number. But are animals included in that number?

On the other hand, Kant says I have a duty to follow the the rules I believe everyone else should follow. Poor Tilly the dog would be excluded from this because she can’t make rational, deliberate, moral choices.

Aristotelian Virtue-Based ethics, centering on the importance of moral growth and striking a balance between extremes, is no help to me. Aristotle was unconcerned about the consequences of actions to people, let alone to animals.

Method-Based ethics requires me to keep in touch with my “gut feelings” about animals, as long as they are informed by my reflective mind. I’m sorry, that’s singularly useless. Ah, this is better: the “Ethical Triax” simply says “Be kind”. That I can except - it is what I thought before I started reading any moral philosophy.

So, I want to be kind. Should I simply be concerned about animals’ welfare, or should I fight for them to have the right not to be enslaved, killed for human benefit, or to suffer from environmental deterioration resulting from human mismanagement. The “Animal Welfare” approach is typified by the RSPCA that accepts the human’s right to exploit animals but seeks to elevate or eliminate all “needless” suffering of animals. Philosophically, then, it’s simply “Be kind”.

But Haines asks “Why might animals have more rights than smoke detectors?” and “Why should we be more concerned for the welfare of animals more than for the welfare of tightly folded rock strata?” (Should we unfold the Alps?). Maybe we say yes because animals are conscious of their suffering. Not so easy, because according to Wittgenstein’s philosophy, animals might behave in a way that resembles a conscious being, but that doesn’t prove anything unless we know what that behaviour feels like from the inside, which apparently can’t mean anything with regard to a creature that is intrinsically incapable of discussing it. You might say the same thing applies to smoke detectors and rocks.

Other possible reasons why animals might have rights and deserve compassion, are their intelligence or their possible moral sense. But these are as problematic to establish as is their possible consciousness. These philosophical questions challenge us when we think how we tend to be more outraged by fur than leather or why we favour robins over the more intelligent magpies.

Why does the welfare of animals matter? Imagine Artificial Intelligence in machines or enhanced human brains producing a superior species. Ask yourself how they should treat us, and why.

[John de Prey]

October 2015

Is It Your Right To Say What you Think?

I was once discussing an oil pipeline problem with a client who I knew to be devoutly Muslim. We needed to pass a cleaning pig, but I was careful not to mention the word “pig” for fear of upsetting him. He smiled and said “You know, Muslims are not offended by pigs. It’s only that they are forbidden to eat them”. We laughed, but my ridiculous self-censorship had been racist. I’m sure my client felt it was.

In Britain today our concern not to offend and so avoid possible hostility has allowed censorship to creep in to a degree that would not have been acceptable fifteen years ago. And what about atheists? They are often seen as offending or attacking faiths simply by expressing what they, as atheists, believe.

Christ Moos in his talk “Freedom of Expression and Multifaithism” to Farnham Humanists asked: Are we oppressing one group so as not to offend another? He described how he challenged that oppression by wearing a Jesus and Mo cartoon teeshirt that is popular with atheist students, at a Fresher’s Fair air in the LSE. Perhaps as predicted, the Students Union and the college authorities put a stop to his gesture because, they said, it might offend Muslims and so risk the safety of students. Chris sees the Students Union as being politicised, and their opposition to the wearing of the teeshirts as a political act.



Chris Moos argued: If the college had concerned for the safety of the students wearing the teeshirts they should have offered the students protection rather than suppressing the statement intended by their gesture?

In Britain, strong social disapproval would discourage the burning of poppies, blatant racist abuse or the writings of one Joseph Al-Quaeda. There is clearly a trade-off between the right to free speech and the content of free speech.

If we can reasonably predict that a gesture in the form of a teeshirt will offend some Muslims, should their feelings be ignored for the sake of a perceived “common good” in battling for freedom of expression? Does that gesture further the mutual understanding and trust between Muslims and non-Muslims?

Arguably the teeshirt gesture was taking a stand for freedom of expression, and to promote debate between cultures and faiths in this country on issues such as Sharia Law, and atheism. And perhaps it showed solidarity with those heavily persecuted for their beliefs in other countries. But was it the best way to achieve those aims?

Exactly how best to promote open debate and move towards resolution of points of conflict was hotly discussed at the humanist meeting. The British Humanist Association, and Farnham Humanists, bring together people of different faiths and secularists to explain and discuss differences. That is, after all, what freedom of expression is for. *[John de Prey]*

November 2015

Give up the Gym. Buy a Dog!

Dr Phil Hammond, best known to us as a TV personality, explained “How to get the Most From Your One Wild and Precious Life” at an event organised by Farnham Humanists in conjunction with Guildford & Woking Humanists, on the 3rd of November.

Phil Hammond has been an NHS doctor for over 20 years, and is a campaigner, health writer, investigative journalist, broadcaster, speaker and comedian. He has presented five series of ‘Trust Me, I’m a Doctor’ on BBC2. He has appeared on ‘Have I got News for You’ and ‘Any Questions’ and has written a column in Private Eye. He is also a patron of the British Humanist Association.

Phil’s talk was hilarious, and while we enjoyed his quick wit and entertaining stories, his simple message sank in. He told us what many doctors know but most of us ignore. We could stay healthier by being better at sharing and caring, dog walking and being more mindful to eat and sleep well, than by running to our GPs for medical solutions or working ourselves hard in the gym. He said “Be kind to your mind”. Dwelling on problems and becoming swamped by things of secondary importance, is hugely detrimental to our health.

He observed that inequality is the biggest cause of ill-health. There is twenty years difference in life expectancy between the well off and the poorest in the UK. One of the reasons for this is diet. Now we’ve effectively tackled smoking, and might be about to do the same with sugar in drinks, we should squeeze processed, sometime poisonous, products out of the food chain.

His take on the NHS was similar to the conclusion of the speakers in last year’s Farnham Humanist debate on the NHS: it is the victim of its own success. And now it struggles to cope because of its ever increasing

and costly work load. But it cannot be improved through structural change. Politicians pocking about, “throwing brick-bats” as Phil put it, is not productive because the NHS is built on values. Trust is the issue. Politicians should listen, and see that the NHS works best when staff are, and feel they are, empowered. And when we as patients take an active part in our care, and health.

Pretty dry stuff? Not a bit of it! Phil easily managed to hold us on our chairs alert to every word, delighted by his comedy and quick mind, and then to leave us with his profound thoughts on personal mental and physical health, the threat to our wonderful NHS and how to get the most from our one wild and precious lives.

Farnham Humanists out and about



Speaking to an Elmbridge Multifaith Forum event

On the 29th of September, in Cobham, the Elmbridge Multifaith Forum invited four speakers to present their personal views in the discussion Freedom of Expression: “What limits, if any, should be put on freedom of speech/expression and how?”

Tara Taubman, international lawyer, explained that in the UK freedom of expression is limited by "Article 10". The main aim of this is to protect privacy. Also, there is concern for publications that might incite violence, or be offensive towards people's religion, gender, or nation of origin. The law recognises a limit when such writing or speaking goes beyond being informative. She mentioned that employers have a duty to protect employees from harassment.

Zuymer Calih, Mufti to Kosovan and Bosnian community in UK, said anyone about to speak should ask himself "Will it benefit or harm?" However, he said, freedom to express is vital - how else can believers spread the word of God? But you should not seek to impose your belief on others. If you argue, ego takes

over and you lose your spiritual power. If a doctor prescribes too much medicine he kills the patient. He said "Jihadism" has arisen through too much freedom of speech and its misuse. Furthermore, you should not kill to send an evil man to Hell. You should gently turn him towards the good.

Jennie Johnson of Farnham Humanists said she believes freedom of expression is vital for truth and democracy, and also important for individual happiness. She supports legal toleration moderated by social disapproval but expression which intends to incite violence should be illegal. For example at a demonstration in London in 2006 against Danish Mohammed cartoons, there were banners she would defend saying "Liberalism go to Hell" and, ironically, "Freedom of Expression go to Hell". But there were also banners saying things like "Behead those who insult Islam". These were different as they were directly inciting violence. And indeed one man was found guilty of direct encouragement of murder. Personally, Jenny would not have gone to the London Mohammed cartoon exhibition which threats of violence have just caused to be cancelled. She does not hold with causing offence for insufficient reason. It doesn't fit in with the humanist belief in empathy and compassion, together with the golden rule to treat others as we would like them to treat us. She also wants to build bridges between belief communities and encourage understanding. In February on the BBC's Big Questions, a Christian said that "Humanism is a first-class ticket to a sea of wantonness and debauchery... and is generally demonic". It is offensive to gay people and their relatives to hear it said that gays are sinful and immoral. But Jenny strongly holds that the cartoon exhibition and saying humanists are a sea of wantonness and that gays are immoral, should not be banned by law and certainly should not be prevented by threats of violence.

Hugh Bryant, lay preacher at St Andrew's Church Cobham, said that in Christianity there is no limit to freedom of expression, except in that the third commandment prohibits blasphemy. St Paul was aware of the problem of things being acceptable to one faith but blasphemous to another when he talked about eating meat from a pagan sacrifice being nourishing to a Jew but highly offensive to the pagan. Hugh said Christians can be guided by Jesus saying "Love God" and "Love your neighbour".

In Britain, we are easy with laughing at ourselves, but the parameters of satyr are set by social disapproval, by how much malice there is behind the humour. The Mufti pointed out that there are aspects of beliefs that are too serious to joke about. No one would accept jokes about the holocaust.

Discussion mostly centred on the conflicts between secularism and faiths. When the general view of the floor was evidently to value balance and the avoidance of extremes, Hugh said "Yes, but we don't leave room for people who believe that God is vital". Jennie suggested that it would be useful to invite a humanist to present the humanist view and take part in a discussion on secularism in a multicultural multifaith society. *[John de Prey]*

Launch of the Surrey Muslim Association

On June 9th, John de Prey visited the Woking Mosque for the lunch of the Surrey Muslim Association, SMA. He did this on behalf of Jennie Johnson who represents humanism on the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE).

SMA aims to display and restore the true peaceful image of Islam, to remove misconceptions about Islam from peoples' mind, to reach out to the non-Muslim Community by engaging with them promoting integration and be a channel of communication for other agencies including the media. The SMA, effectively, provides a voice for Muslims but also to serves as a platform/gateway for other organisations to communicate and relay information to the Muslims in Surrey.

Also, via SACRE, Farnham Humanists provided someone to join Religious Education teachers visiting Guildford Cathedral, North West Surrey Synagogue in Weybridge and the Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking. The objective was to help the teachers interest their students in the symbolism used in different faiths.
[John de Prey]

Developing empathy and understanding of different beliefs in Surrey schools

The Surrey SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for RE) is responsible for producing the RE syllabus and worship guidance for non-faith schools across the county. As the Humanist co-optee on the council, Jennie Johnson took part in a June Three Faiths Forum (3FF) training day for SACRE religion and belief members. Although the name 'Three Faiths' reflects their origins, 3FF covers all faiths and none. It sends groups of



volunteers from different belief backgrounds into schools across London and Birmingham to share their stories with students. Its aims are to raise awareness of what it means to be part of a faith or belief tradition, to develop empathic skills, to provide a safe space for difficult questions and to encourage critical thinking. Ironically 3FF is short of Christian and Muslim volunteers, it currently has plenty of Humanists!

Jennie says “3FF delivered an excellent course. It was great to have expert advice encouraging me to be more frank about how I relate my story. 3FF’s selection of “ouch” questions students often ask the different belief speakers was fascinating. Examples for Humanists were “Aren’t you scared you’re going to hell?”, “Why aren’t humanists generous like people of faith – you don’t see charities like Humanist Aid do you?” “Where do you get your morals from?” “Even Atheists pray when desperate – don’t you deep down really believe in God?” *[Jennie Johnson]*

Putting 3FF training into practice

Following a request by the Head of RE at Gordon’s School (a voluntary aided state boarding school near Woking), Jennie gave two 30 minute talks on “What is Humanism?” to 17 year olds as part of a “Body and Soul” day in late June. As well as Humanism, the morning “Soul” sessions included a prayer space, meet the school chaplain and a visit to a Gurdwara or a Buddhist centre. The “Body” session was an afternoon Mini Olympics.



Jennie says “I put my 3FF training into practice by starting both talks with my personal story. It was great to hear from the RE teacher how hugely valuable this was. I was quite touched when a student stayed behind to come up to me to say how much the talk had meant to her.”

SACRE’s aim is for their 3FF trained religion and belief members to provide “Multifaith” workshops to Surrey schools. The first is scheduled for 16th November at The Warwick School in Redhill. *[Jennie Johnson]*

Introduction to mental health issues in spiritual and pastoral care

This is a 10 week course ‘discussing the relationship between spirituality and mental health’ . The course designed by Rev. Josiah Anyinsah, Chaplain Mental Health and Learning Disability and funded by the Surrey and Borders Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, aims to ‘equip participants with the relevant skills, knowledge and self-awareness of mental health issues to be able to provide appropriate pastoral care within a community/faith setting or/and to support people who are under the care of the Trust.’ It is FREE! The NHS must have money!

Sue Shaw is the only non religious ‘student’, an interesting place to be when asked ‘What is spirituality?’, ‘What is the purpose and meaning of life?’, ‘How do you see your identity’ and ‘Who do you think you are?’ Such in depth questions have stimulated Sue’s thoughts and confirm how important it is for her to be a humanist. One of the course objectives is ‘to demonstrate an ability to self-reflect and listen to others.’
[Sue Shaw]

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