

Farnham Humanists' Public Debate 1st November 2011

'Morality without religion has no firm foundation'



Farnham Humanists' 7th annual debate, chaired by Norma Corkish, attracted over 150 people on Tuesday night at South Farnham School, to hear four speakers unpick the motion 'Morality without religion has no firm foundation'.

Lord Richard Harries, ex-Bishop of Oxford and Gresham Professor of Divinity, opened the debate with an acknowledgement that one does not need to be religious to be moral, but developed the theme that the firmness of moral foundation derives from a grounding in God. That is, religiosity strengthens morality by supporting it with a value system that is necessarily broader than the individual's or society's interests. He drew on the moral and philosophical struggles of the protagonists in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin* for illustration, and likened the difference that faith makes to morality, to the response of believers to a piece of music as part of a wider whole. He challenged the audience to explain why it is that humans strive for fairness as a norm in society and asserted that the most mature morality is not just a human construct but 'carries something of musical eternity' only explained by religious faith.

David Pollock, President of the European Humanist Federation, likened the rules of morality to the patterns of behaviour that animal species evince (dolphins, bonobos, etc), but recognised that acting morally is not the same as holding moral values. He asserted that humankind shows an inborn instinct for moral discernment. The universal tenet of 'Do As You Would Be Done By' has no connection with religion at all and humankind has used its skills to develop that tenet into broader principles. Religion, on the other hand, often calling on Natural Law for its underpinning, offers torment or reward for the observance of dietary rules and sexual taboos - to the point where it is the justification for discrimination

against homosexuals and vilification of women for allowing their skin or hair to enflame men.

Dr Nabil Mustapha, co-founder and Chairman of Elmbridge Multifaith Forum, asserted that each set of religious teachings anticipated society's needs at the time (eg the Israelites emerging from subservience, and Jesus' teachings, emphasising love, goodwill and magnanimity, and Islam emphasising global nationhood amongst Muslims) to make the point that the contribution of religion is to progress morality a stage further, within the context of the particular era. The development of the principle 'An Eye for An Eye', into 'Turn the Other Cheek' represents the development of an effective civilisation which gradually foregoes inhuman practices, something that no other power could bring about. He argued that what is bad in religion can be explained simply by acknowledging that there are bad religious leaders, with unconstrained superegos. He also argued that current evils in society, citing recent political and financial scandals, widespread dishonesty, delinquent parenting etc – are proof that we need the love of a God, as a higher source of love, to give a steer to society's moral compass.

Dr Stephen Law, Provost of the Centre for Inquiry, countered the motion from a Humanist perspective, perhaps tactically limiting his argument from the outset by acknowledging that morality is none the worse off, either with or without religion, but simply independent of it. The Humanist takes the view that humans can flourish in this life within a secular state, without obedience to supernatural beings, prophets or traditions; the central tenet of this position is a questioning spirit and a responsibility to make one's own moral judgments, rather than rely on a political or external authority. He asserted that mainstream religions have a tradition of censoring the curiosity of children, and over-reliance on guilt, with recourse even to violence to bring Free Thinkers back into line or remaining within a faith. He acknowledged that atheists can be megalomaniacs too, but that Mao, Stalin and Pol Pot were killers of free thinking, and not Humanists at all. He asserted that amongst those who saved Jews in the war, the weakest link between them was religiosity, but that the majority shared an interest in reasoning. His conclusion was that religion is not a safe bet for immunising a people against moral catastrophe and that Humanism offered a good way forward, if that was one's aim.

After each side had an opportunity to deal with the many lively contributions from the floor, the vote was taken and the Chair announced that the motion had been roundly rejected by 90 to 43. A collection from the evening of £312.00 went to Water Aid and the Citizens' Advice Bureau.

