

Hastings Humanists *Newsletter* June 2009

Our Next Meeting, 18 June: *Did God Survive Darwin?* by Dean Morrison. As part of the 200th anniversary celebration of Darwin's birth and 150th anniversary of publication of *Origin of Species*, Dean examines whether the concept of God survived the impact of the Theory of Evolution. Did Darwin simply make God unnecessary, or did God need to change to survive? Are there mysteries of the Universe we still need God to explain?

An illustrated talk, covering the latest science, and the philosophical implications for us all. Dean studied Ecological Science at Edinburgh University. His working career has been in environmental protection; for most of the last twenty years organising environmental volunteers in Hastings.

Change of Date for the above meeting. I was slow in reserving the Notley room for our June meeting and it was instead reserved by another group (Hastings Environment Network) for a special meeting. (They normally meet in the bar on the second Thursday in the month for "Green Drinks"!)

I've had difficulty in getting publicity of our meetings into the *Hastings Observer*. A report of our last meeting has only just appeared (5 June page 32). In the same issue (page 26) is an announcement of the June meeting under the title "Group to discuss the big questions". Unfortunately both notices still give the 11th June date.

Likewise, Bob Churchill of BHA arranged for an announcement of our meeting to appear in their e-bulletin, but besides giving the date as 11th June it also, in the heading, gave the date as 10th June! But hopefully people will check on our blogsite.

I will in any case be at White Rock Hotel on 11th June, from 6:30pm, in case people turn up for a Humanist meeting. Anyone who wants a chat, away from a formal meeting, is welcome to come along as well.

Simon Singh the science writer was accused of libel by the British Chiropractic Association for describing some of their claims as "bogus", and the judge ruled against him. However he is appealing against the ruling, and the "Sense in Science" lobby group has set up a petition against this use of libel laws in scientific disputes. The list of signatories to this statement of support is impressive. From the statement: "Freedom to criticise and question in strong terms and without malice is the cornerstone of scientific argument and debate, whether in peer-reviewed journals, on websites or in newspapers, which have a right of reply for complainants." And: "The libel laws discourage argument and debate and merely encourage the use of the courts to silence critics."

Kind Hearts and Archbishops. In his inaugural address, the new Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nicholls (who has opposed plans for catholic schools to accept pupils from other faiths, and campaigned to prevent gay couples from adopting children) attacked secularists, and in particular Richard Dawkins, who criticise religion and called for it to be given more respect. Meanwhile the outgoing Archbishop, Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, said that a lack of faith is 'the greatest of evils.' He blamed atheism for war and destruction, and implied it was a greater evil even than sin itself.

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Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse. The above comments of the Archbishops come at the same time as revelations in Ireland of sexual abuse against children in Catholic care over many years. From the *Irish Times* (21 May): Mr Justice Ryan's report does not suggest that this abuse was as bad as most of us suspected. It shows that it was worse. It may indeed have been even worse than the report actually finds – there are indications that “the level of sexual abuse in boys' institutions was much higher than was revealed by the records or could be discovered by this investigation”. With a calm but relentless accumulation of facts, the report blows away all the denials and obfuscations, all the moral equivocations and evasions that we have heard from some of the religious orders and their apologists. The sheer scale and longevity of the torment inflicted on defenceless children – over 800 known abusers in over 200 institutions during a period of 35 years – should alone make it clear that it was not accidental or opportunistic but systematic.

God is Back (!?). This is the claim of a new book by *Economist* editor John Micklethwait and his US colleague Adrian Wooldridge. They argue that "modernity" does not lead to secularisation, but promotes religious pluralism, and secularists need to recognise that religions have a positive role in providing care and support for the oppressed and in nurturing aspirations for political freedom, and should accept that religion is here to stay. The assumption seems to be that the US is in the forefront of "modernity" because of its separation of church and state, when in fact it is one of the most religiously backward countries. The most progressive societies are those in Northern Europe, which are atheistic.

Accord. A letter to the Times on 2nd June, signed by people from nine different religious denominations, connected with the Accord coalition (of which the BHA is also a member), called on the government to "eradicate two forms of discrimination that breach human rights and are religiously offensive, yet are currently enshrined in the Equality Bill," namely the freedom of faith schools to reject children and staff from other religions, resulting in segregation by religion, leading to social discord.

Ida. Was the name given to an exceptionally well preserved fossil, 47 million years old, that has been identified as a precursor of humans and other primates, an "adapiform". Even berries in her stomach were preserved. However it was discovered in 1983, and Keenan Malik writing in the *New Humanist* considers that publicity of the find has been hyped up for unscientific commercial reasons.

Another letter to the Times on 2nd June, and others since, have pointed back to discoveries made in 1859, the year of *Origin of Species*, or even earlier, of evidence for the "antiquity of man" in the form of human artifacts found alongside fossils of extinct species.

Planck and Herschel telescopes. These were launched on 14 May on an Ariane 5 rocket from Kourou in French Guiana. They will travel out a long way in space to what is known as "Lagrange 2" a stable point in Earth's orbit. *Physics Today* gives details: The far-infrared and submillimeter Herschel observatory is the largest telescope put into space. The Planck telescope will survey the cosmic microwave background. Meanwhile the space shuttle Atlantis captured the Hubble Space Telescope and started the first spacewalks to install the new Wide Field Camera 3 into the 19-year-old observatory.

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