

Hastings Humanists *Newsletter* November 2009

Our blog address is: <http://hastingshumanists.blogspot.com/>

This Month's Meeting: Thursday 12 November, 7pm at The Arts Forum. *Evolution, Altruism and Ethics* Introduced by Alexander Hellemans, followed by a general discussion. This evolutionary topic is appropriate to the 150th anniversary of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* which was published on 24 November 1859.

Doors open 6:30 and we close at 8:30 pm. There will be an entrance fee of £2 to cover the cost of this new venue which we are trying for the first time. The Arts Forum is in the colonnade next to Marine Court, roughly opposite the Azur restaurant. (Please note that the map directions on Google are misleading!)

December Meeting. This will be an End of Year Quiz, conducted by George Jelliss, with questions relating to general knowledge and humanist interests. There will be at least one book prize. The venue is undecided as yet.

Special General Meeting I'm proposing that the first meeting in the New Year should reconsider some of the decisions made at our Annual General Meeting in September. In fact it may be a good idea to hold such a meeting every January to assess the progress of the group and to set the programme for the next six or twelve months.

In particular I think we need to introduce at least a nominal £5 annual membership fee for those who wish to be formal Members. Others who come to our meetings can be called Supporters. Everyone will still have to pay the £2 per meeting to cover the cost of hiring the venue when necessary. The difference between a Member and a Supporter will be that Members have a vote in electing the Secretary, Treasurer and Chairperson at the Annual General Meeting, and are eligible to put their names forward for election to these positions. They will also have the right to receive a printed copy of the newsletter (on request) and any other notices.

In part this change is needed because more people are becoming actively involved in the running of the group's activities, and they need to receive some formal recognition. It also allows us to say that we have a certain number of members, as opposed to just counting people who come to our meetings, or who ask for information, some of whom may in fact be unsympathetic to Humanist views.

Next Year's Programme I'm trying to put together a programme for next year, or at least for the first six months. Alex Hellemans has offered a talk on "Misunderstandings of Science", and I've approached our members Dean and Lesley who were responsible for two of our best meetings so far to try to do something similar next year, possibly on Alan Turing and on Humanist Weddings.

I've also contacted James Williams of Sussex University, via facebook, who has agreed to come and talk to us. He was one of the speakers at the "Darwin, Humanism and Science" meeting at Conway Hall in June, where he spoke on the teaching of evolution in schools, and on creationism.

If anyone has ideas for a particular topic we should deal with, or if you have a speaker who would like to talk to us, please let me know. Otherwise it will be me again on History of Secularism and Humanism in the 19th century.

more overleaf

Government Responses to Petitions. Number 10 has responded to two petitions, but neither response is exactly satisfactory, as we have noted on our blog.

Primary education: The first petition asked the PM to include the teaching of evolution by natural selection in the new national primary curriculum.

Following a load of old flannel about needing scientists for the country's growth, etc, No.10's reply [leaving out a lot more verbiage too long to include here] noted that "The proposed new primary curriculum has been developed in consultation with a wide range of key stakeholders" and so as "to ensure that it contained the scientific knowledge, skills and understanding considered essential learning for children aged 5 -11." [Which is what one would hope a primary curriculum would indeed do, by definition!]

It then goes on to arrangements for teaching evolution to Key Stage 4 (age 14 -16) and at Key Stage 3 (age 11 -14), in which "variation between individuals and groups, classification and interdependence are all introduced." [Most of which has nothing to do with the primary stage.] Or, as our blogger "X. Piry" put it: the answer to the petition is "not quite". Lesley asks: When is someone going to teach the PM's office some plain English?

Collective worship: The second petition asked the PM to remove collective worship from non-faith schools.

The reply states: "All community, foundation or voluntary schools MUST [our emphasis] offer a daily act of collective worship which is broadly of a Christian character in keeping with the religious traditions of this country." and "Schools can apply to the SACRE ... to have the requirement for collective worship lifted" [So it's NOT compulsory like they just said after all?] It continues: "... if it is not appropriate for the pupils in their school." [So christian worship IS appropriate in a non-faith school?]

It goes on to say that "collective worship provides the ... unique opportunity to ..." [do all sorts of other things, nothing to do with "worship", that could better be done in other ways.] Finally: "Parents have the right to withdraw their child from collective worship" [but only by creating a hullabaloo, and singling their child out for special bullying.]

Priest Attacks Modern Funerals. Another news story of near-local interest was a statement by Father Ed Tomlinson, of St Barnabas' Church, Tunbridge Wells, who said he had better ways of spending his time than at crematorium services where the dead were "led in by the tunes of Tina Turner...and sent into the furnace with 'I Did It My Way' blaring out across the speakers".

Lesley (our local Humanist celebrant) comments: Better ways of spending his time than helping someone say goodbye to a loved one? That would not appear to be a very supportive or kind attitude. He added: "I have... stood at the 'crem' like a lemon, wondering why on earth I am present." Here's the news, Fr Tomlinson - the funeral is not about you - you are merely a tool (and I use the word carefully) to help a grieving family have some kind of ritual as they make their goodbye. For some people, a priest at the funeral is the right thing; it allows them to pray to their god, and give them the comfort that they get from their religion. But is it really up to the church or its representatives to tell people what they should have? Another quote in the article, from a local funeral director, suggests that many mourners don't know what they want. This is true, particularly if the death is unexpected. But that's where the skills of the undertaker and the celebrant (religious or otherwise) come into play, to let the mourners know what their options are and to only offer advice when it is requested. And, of course, he managed to let people know (because not everyone does) that there is a humanist alternative to the man in a frock. For that, we thank him.

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