



London Humanist Meetings a Great Success!

Jean and Barrie Berkley report on a series of international Humanist meetings held in London in early June

Conway Hall in Red Lion Square, London, provided an appropriate historical venue for the European Humanist Federation General Assembly, a conference entitled 'Darwin, Humanism and Science', the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) General Assembly and a two-day 'World Conference on Untouchability'.

European Humanist Federation General Assembly (EHF) – Friday June 5th

The EHF, based in Brussels, acts as a federation promoting the interests of its member organisations, including those from East Europe. It represents them in the more important European bodies such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the European Economic and Social Committee. The President is David Pollock, who spoke to NEH in October 2007.

At these European bodies EHF takes up instances where the non-religious are ignored and where ethical concerns are assumed to be the monopoly of religion. It is difficult to make progress in this field, but David and his colleagues keep working relentlessly to try to move the position in our favour. However, EHF does have a good relationship with the group of advisors to the European President and they have provided free premises and interpretation for conferences sponsored by EHF. One such conference was held in April 2008 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and another conference on Children's Rights is being negotiated. These conferences raise the visibility of Humanism and Secularism in Europe. For example, the April 2008 conference was introduced by the Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, and was attended by over 200 who heard a programme of distinguished speakers.

EHF's contact with the European Parliament includes cooperation with the Working Group on the Separation of Religion and Politics.

Many other examples of the work of EHF are described in their Report on Activity 2008/9 and they have a very challenging vision for the future. We are convinced that support by NEH is very worthwhile.

<http://www.humanistfederation.eu/>

Darwin, Humanism and Science – Saturday June 6th

The BHA, South Place Ethical Society, EHF and the IHEU together organised an exciting conference to mark the 200 years since Charles Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of "On the Origin of Species". The presence of Richard Dawkins and A.C.Grayling ensured that Conway Hall was packed.

Polly Toynbee, the President of the BHA, welcomed everyone and introduced the first speaker who was Richard Dawkins. His lecture was based on the final words of Darwin's great book, where he speaks of the grandeur and wonder of this view of life. Dawkins, in an absorbing talk, showed how beautifully these words sum up Darwin's ideas.

We then heard several informative but distinctly worrying talks. In the first, a Belgian Professor spoke about the threats to the teaching of evolution in various parts of Europe from numerous recent political decisions and the way many different religious groups (sometimes with the support of national governments) are suppressing scientific discussion in favour of myths and legends.

After lunch, we heard from an English academic who trains science teachers. He told us of the astonishing amount of creationist literature, comics etc, aimed at young children, some of which has managed to find its way into school libraries. Then a young Belgian cognitive scientist talked about why the way our brains have evolved may mean we find it counter-intuitive to accept evolution as a fact, followed by the Director of a German Foundation which promotes Evolutionary Humanism and believes it can counter the idea that evolution leads to a lack of morals.

Finally, we had two excellent talks. Babu Gogineni, who spoke to the NEH twice when he was Executive Director of IHEU in London and is a wonderful speaker, talked about the unfortunate influence of Hinduism on science in India and A.C. Grayling, who was so well received when he gave the 50th Anniversary talk in Newcastle, discussed in his usual fluent way the subject of Humanism and Science and the gap that still exists between science and the arts.

It was a really stimulating day. At a dinner that evening, Richard Dawkins received an award for his 'work in promoting reason and science worldwide' and he responded by giving a witty acceptance speech.

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MPs question national statistician on census question on religion

The House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) held an evidence session on the 2011 Census, where Karen Dunnell, National Statistician, was asked a number of questions about the proposed question on religion. The Office of National Statistics will meet with the BHA in July for further discussions.

This was a truly international meeting with participants from Africa, India, Nepal, the United States, and many European countries. Particularly conspicuous was the group of eleven lively young people from Romania whose Humanist organisation was applying (successfully) for membership of IHEU. Six were students who were prize-winners in a competition for an essay on the work of Darwin and the trip to London was their reward. Their work in Romania includes fighting against government support for the teaching of creationism in schools.

The format of the IHEU General Assembly is that the strategy, activities, future programme and accounts are all presented for discussion and approval by participants.

Representation at the UN and other bodies. A review of the activities of IHEU delegations to the UN in New York and in Geneva on Human Rights and other subjects immediately followed the opening of the Assembly by the President, Sonja Eggerickx. It was interesting to note that IHEU had the support of A.C.Grayling at the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. On 16th June Professor Grayling called upon the international community to give far greater attention to the 1,500 maternity-related deaths that occur every day – the vast majority of them preventable. “We believe that wider recognition that this is indeed a human rights issue will provide additional momentum to efforts to reduce this appalling death toll.”

Also, IHEU international representative Keith Porteous Wood (who is the Executive Director of the National Secular Society) has been reappointed to the panel of nine civil society representatives assisting the EU's Fundamental Rights Agency in Vienna. The Agency advises the European Commission on discrimination and equality matters and has a formal obligation to engage with and receive feedback from civil society.

Strategic Plan. NEH member Jack Jeffery, as IHEU First Vice President, chaired the session on the approval of the 2009-13 Strategic Plan. IHEU's main focus for development continues to be in South Asia and Africa. However, a new Membership Growth and Development Committee has been established with the long-term aim of having a successful and sustainable Humanist organisation effective in every country. Specific geographic responsibilities were allocated to individuals to pursue possible contacts that could lead to new countries being added to the 40 already represented. It was agreed that specific IHEU funds would be allocated to support this initiative. Jean and Barrie participated in the first meeting of this Committee in London and agreed to help with East Africa.

Bylaws. A discussion of new Bylaws is usually an area of limited interest. However, in this case, one of the main goals of the Bylaws revision was to give national Member Organizations from developing countries more influence at the General Assembly. They would become Full Members of IHEU with voting rights at the GA. There was unanimous agreement to the new Bylaws which should be operational by 2010.

Humanist Schools in Uganda. Supporting the three Humanist schools in Uganda is a flagship activity for IHEU. Over 360 pupils receive secondary education in deprived rural areas of Uganda where otherwise no such facilities are readily available. Various donor organisations, including NEH, have contributed a total of over £100,000 to the establishment and operation of these schools over a period of four years. However, at a special meeting immediately after the IHEU General Assembly devoted to the future of these schools, it was agreed that, to become first class educational and community establishments, several times the amount of money raised so far would be required to enable the necessary buildings and teaching aids to be put in place. Ownership of the land, the legal status of the schools and their long term viability will be the subject of negotiation with the schools' managers in the near future. NEH members Jack Jeffery and Roger McAdam agreed to be part of this important dialogue.

World Conference on Untouchability – Tuesday/Wednesday June 9th/10th

IHEU, supported by the BHA and the South Place Ethical Society, organised the first World Conference on Untouchability. It brought together nearly 100 politicians, academics, grass roots workers and others to share successful strategies to combat the social exclusion of people round the world because of the population group they are born into. Untouchability persists in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Nigeria, Burma, Japan and Korea and migration from these countries has brought similar and growing problems to Europe. Nearly 250 million people are affected worldwide.

The conference declaration, passed unanimously, proposes expanding successful grass roots programmes, improving national legislation and strengthening UN enforcement mechanisms.

Footnote. We found that this series of meetings was full of interest and we were very impressed by the devotion of the IHEU volunteer workers as well as the staff and field representatives. At the more informal breaks and meals we were able to renew acquaintance with our many friends from around the world resulting from attending over 10 years of conferences of this type.

Some suggestions for taking action from the BHA

Good PSHE for every child *If you want to make sure that all children get good quality education in this area, go to www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-schools/sex-and-relationships-education/PSHE*

Consultation on New Guidance for Religious Education in England *If you want to make sure that RE includes Humanism and that humanist representatives can have a say in what is included in RE, go to www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-schools/religious-education/reguidance*

Consultation on the new Primary Curriculum *If you want to make sure that children learn about evolution in primary science, go to www.humanism.org.uk/campaigns/religion-and-schools/primaryscience*

The Ethics of Enhancement

In May, Dr Suzanne Uniacke, Reader in Applied Ethics at Hull University, spoke to us on this challenging subject. She has given us this summary of her talk.

Should we use biomedical technology to enhance our physical and mental powers? Some philosophers who address this question point out that we already do this in numerous ways, at various levels, and to varying degrees. Examples include vaccination; corrective and cosmetic surgery and dentistry; heart pacemakers and hearing aids; fertility treatments; prenatal screening; embryo selection; gene therapy. The fact that we already engage in these sorts of activities doesn't itself show that we ought to do these things or that biomedical technology ought to aim at further, much more sophisticated ways of enhancing our physical and mental powers. All the same, many of the above activities are widely regarded as morally acceptable, some are uncontroversial. Indeed, not to avail ourselves of some of these aids can be morally wrongful - think about a case of parents who refuse routine corrective surgery for their infant.

Our discussion of whether we should use biomedical technology to enhance our physical and mental powers will be shaped to a significant extent by what we take *enhancement* to be. Here many people will distinguish between: (i) therapy as opposed to enhancement, and (ii) enhancement to a level of normality, as opposed to enhancement that is an improvement on the normal. As is often pointed out, normality is a statistical notion. But normal physical or mental functioning for human beings is not *simply* a statistical notion.

Some argue that it is ethical to use biomedical technology for therapeutic purposes (where the aim is to cure or remedy disease or ill health), but that it would be morally wrong to aim to develop biomedical means of enhancing our physical and mental powers beyond what we could develop by other 'natural' means. Here we can ask whether there is a sharp distinction between therapy and enhancement, and whether this distinction is ethically important. We already use non-biomedical 'non-natural' means to enhance our physical and mental powers, e.g. contact lenses, microscopes, artificial lighting, computers. So why is biomedical enhancement thought especially ethically problematic? The usual reason given is because it would involve a *direct* modification of the human body (as where, e.g. germ line interventions could be developed and used to increase human intelligence or physical powers or longevity).

Historically many other things (e.g. agriculture, improved nutrition, medicine, technological advances) have had huge positive effects on human physical and mental powers, but they did not profoundly affect human biology itself. But is this last claim true? The effects of improved nutrition, for example, are not directly genetic (as gene manipulation would be), but over time improved nutrition has affected the gene pool.

Consider also medical advances and their effects on who lives to reproduce, and consider modern transport and migration and the ways they affect changes in reproduction. Does it matter ethically that what is proposed by those who advocate biomedical enhancement would have a *direct and immediate* effect on the human body or its genetic makeup?

Ethical objections to this sort of direct biomedical enhancement usually appeal either to the anticipated physical, biological or moral dangers (the spectre of eugenics is often raised in this connection) or to the claim that this sort of enhancement goes directly against central ethical values that we must protect and promote, such as equality, autonomy, appropriate humility and acceptance of human difference.

Relevant reading about these issues includes:

Allen Buchanan et al., *From Chance to Choice: Genetics and Justice* (Cambridge, 2000)

Jonathan Glover, *Choosing Children: genes, disability and design* (Oxford, 2006)

Michael Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in an*

NEH Committee Member Profile - Andrew Duffield

Andrew was born in Plymouth in 1963, graduating from Durham in 1984. An ex-Navy Officer, he married Helen in 1987. They live near Wallington, with their two children at school in Morpeth.



Andrew's managerial career has included working in hospitality, for the NHS and at Newcastle University. He is now a self-employed energy assessor and is starting training as a secondary teacher.

Andrew has served as a County Councillor, and has thrice been a Parliamentary candidate. From the "Libertarian Left", he advocates free trade, local empowerment and a minimal republican state. He opposes economic subsidy and campaigns to tax privilege, not productivity, and for a citizen's income.

Andrew currently takes responsibility for NEH press releases and is the Humanist representative on the Newcastle SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education).

A SMALL VICTORY

Grace Hodge writes

It has been the custom of Newcastle City Council to interrupt their annual meeting halfway through and to adjourn to St Thomas's church for a religious service.

As a result of representations made by Cllr Ron Armstrong, a member of North East Humanists, the format was changed at the meeting of the City Council on 27 May 2009. The proceedings were then held without interruption and were followed by a church service at which attendance was optional.

WELL DONE!

Young People, Crime and Society

In April we were delighted to welcome back Roger Statham, former Chief Probation Officer for Teesside, who gave us a thought provoking talk on this very topical subject. A brief summary of his talk follows. Roger has also given us a very much more detailed account. (Please ask Jean Berkley if you would like a copy)

When New Labour came to power in 1997, their message was that, while youth disorder and crime had risen sharply, these issues were not being dealt with effectively. They intended to be even tougher on crime than the Tories and also to use the Youth Justice System to deal with deep-rooted social problems. This was effectively a politicisation of crime and between 1998 and 2001 there were four Acts relating to Youth Justice, followed by legislation in May 2008 which is expected to encourage further movement towards a single generic community sentence.

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has produced an independent audit on Ten Years of Labour's Youth Justice Reforms. This suggests that there has been a move from welfare to punishment, to managerialism and central control and, more positively, to earlier and more rapid intervention, with young people being brought to court and sentenced more quickly.

The old social services/probation partnership has been replaced by a national system of 156 Youth Offender Teams, under the central control of a national Youth Justice Board, which was commissioning custodial places in Young Offender Institutions, Secure Training Centres and Local Authority Secure Children's Homes by 2000. The funding structure has also been centralised, with a third of the money coming from Probation, Police, Education, Social Services and Local Authority Chief Executives' budgets.

The changes implemented since 1997 have made no improvement in the rate of self reported offending, the numbers of young people going into custody or the numbers of young people under supervision in the community and in suitable full time education. In Young Offenders Institutions, less than 50% of young people achieved a target to improve literacy and numeracy. Poverty and inequality have grown and there are major shortcomings and deficiencies in the quality of supervisory regimes, both in the community and in custody. At the same time the new structure is much more expensive. Furthermore, the continuing rise in the adult prison population suggests that things overall are getting worse.

Against this background, Roger believes that the time has come for a truly radical shift in policy. We need to move crime away from point scoring political rhetoric and recognise the importance of encouraging a culture which will have a favourable influence on behaviour and values.

Two important goals which would help to tackle social disadvantage, would be to ensure everybody is able to read and write and to ensure that we have an apprenticeship scheme that provides a safety net for all unemployed young people.

To be illiterate is to suffer a degree of social isolation unacceptable in a civilised society, depriving people of self worth and the currency for full social involvement. A striking statistic is that a third of adult prison inmates in this country cannot read or write. The development of the Toe by Toe reading scheme suggests that practically everyone has the potential to master these skills. The only barriers to this being achieved are investment and political will. If we can find so much money for the bankers, we can surely start to think about how to remove this unnecessary handicap which is doing so much harm to our society.

Apprenticeships could be used as an antidote to the harmful benefits culture – offering meaningful work/training and aiming to encourage an understanding of social responsibility. Again investment and political will are needed.

It is time to get radical and begin a mature debate on these issues.

Hundred Club Winners

The draw takes place once a month at the start of our meetings at the Lit and Phil. These three winners claimed £46 each

April	No.40	Robert Brindle
May	No.20	Jenny Beveridge
June	No.81	George O'Hara

First Tuesday - Joan Congleton writes

On June 2nd nine members met at Essy's Indian restaurant on South Shields Pier where a very cold wind blew.

However the friendly staff gave us a warm welcome, served good food and a jolly evening was had by all. Here is a photograph of seven of us.



Speaking as a Humanist

In June three of our members had the opportunity to each speak for ten minutes on a subject of their choice. These short talks contributed to an excellent evening with keen participation from the audience.

Jeanetta Bulmer grew up taking for granted a Christian environment at home and at school and only left the church when she decided she could not honestly agree to confirmation. When she became a nurse, she was faced with dying patients. Her view was that, whenever possible, their last wishes should be carried out, but she found some clergy intolerant, with hidden agendas. Jeanetta particularly hated racism, violence and bullying and came to feel that religion could sometimes encourage such behaviour. She also disliked the common assumption that to do good deeds or be a good person, you must have a faith. She became increasingly concerned about the impact of religion on human beings, on society and on our own freedom.

It took some years for her to commit to Humanism, during which time she read up on the subject and attended a number of meetings. She was surprised at the diversity of beliefs and opinions, but did like the desire for a secular society and the willingness to debate important issues. Now she feels she should speak out for what she believes and that life should be about our responsibility to put meaning and shape into our own lives.

Keith Shipsey discovered Humanism through an event of extreme tragedy for him and his family. Keith's eldest son Mark was brutally murdered in November 2006 and, since he and his family were non-believers, a Humanist funeral was arranged. The family found this a perfect and appropriate ceremony and felt Mark's life was truly celebrated. They will be eternally grateful to Chris Haine, the Celebrant.

Keith, in his early youth a pupil at a C of E school and a chorister, cut his ties with the church when his voice broke and he was no longer being paid to sing in the choir. Through his teenage years, he gave a lot of thought to life, morality, deity and creation – coming to the conclusion that there is no god, the world is an amazing and wonderful place and the only moral code necessary is to treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. These conclusions Keith kept to himself. It was only through Mark's Humanist funeral that Keith came to know that others shared his views. He has had great pleasure in discovering the works of Richard Dawkins and A.C.Grayling, whom he heard give an impressive talk in Durham last year.

Leigh Venus spoke last year on the Great Ape Project which advocates conferring basic legal rights on non-human great apes and viewing them as legal persons.

Since then Leigh has moved on to the question of what it means to be a person in relation to the possibility that the time will come, perhaps sooner than we think, when we shall be able to produce an autonomous, highly intelligent robotic entity, a sentient machine with consciousness indistinguishable from that of a human being. Leigh wonders how far these robots could be integrated into our lives and what the consequences could be for our society. Could we exist alongside them? Could they ultimately be of great benefit to humanity? How should we treat them?

The term "roboethics" was first used officially in 2004 and is today the subject of academic discussion, but many scientists are more concerned about the safety of autonomous robots and believe there should be a proper debate about their development. Thousands of robots are at this moment serving in the militaries of the world and casualties from their actions have increased. If a robot indistinguishable from a human is possible, should we pursue this, or would that be irresponsible?

Isaac Newton High School's First University Candidate

This Humanist school has now been in operation for four years. A pioneer student who was there when the school started has now passed her Advanced School Certificate with sufficient points to gain entry to Makerere, the top university in Uganda. She plans to pursue the Bachelor of Arts course in Education with History and Economics as teaching subjects.

The school's manager, Peter Kisirinya, has explained to us that the candidate is already teaching at the school to raise money towards her tuition fees. He has suggested to NEH that instead of using the recent donation that we sent for bursaries for disadvantaged pupils to attend the school, he would like to help support this student to go to University.

This is not only an achievement by the student in attaining a place at Makerere University, but it is also a tribute to Peter and his staff at this comparatively newly established rural school. This will also be a great boost for the school's reputation with the local community. The NEH committee has agreed in principle to this request for a change in use of our funds and is negotiating with Peter on the final details. We will keep our members informed of the progress of this venture.

