



Cumbria Humanist Group

Rev. Ben Phillips, Vicar of Stanwix on “Existentialism, Humanism and Christianity”

**Meeting at Morton Community Centre, Wigton Road, Carlisle
on Wednesday, 20 May 2009 at 7.30 pm**

Cumbria Humanist Group members were amused when Rev. Ben Phillips arrived to talk to us bearing his own lectern (mobile pulpit?). We had invited Ben, who is the Vicar of Stanwix, following correspondence in the local press last year inspired by our shared revulsion for the values of the extreme right-wing politicians in the local elections. We felt that our comparison of the moral and ethical values of Christianity and Humanism had been left in mid air and we decided to continue the debate with Ben’s address on “Existentialism, Humanism and Christianity”.

While we could have no doubts about Ben’s personal faith and his belief in Jesus Christ and his teachings, we felt that he concentrated on the bleaker aspects of Jean-Paul Sartre’s Existentialism, (which suggests that we exist merely as individuals and are ultimately only responsible for ourselves) and gave less attention to the shared moral and ethical values of Humanism and Christianity. We could not agree with him that Christian teachings were unique and novel, and pointed out that such ideas as considering our fellow humans and treating them as we would be treated had existed for many hundreds of years before Christ, and in fact the acutely moral teachings of the Greek philosophers had been suppressed by the Christian church until the time of the Enlightenment.

Humanists believe that morality is developed from experience and knowledge and is not derived from supernatural forces. We have one life, there is no immortal soul, no divine creator and no life after death. Ben suggested that awareness of mortality is unique to humans and that we need to seek beyond death. He believes that he has ‘evidence’ of God and cites theologians such as Juliana of Norwich as reporting similar convincing experiences, while we claim that such ‘proof’ must be scientifically reproducible to be defined as ‘evidence’. Cooperative societies will have a greater chance of survival than selfish individuals, so we could argue that moral codes to ensure this will evolve within these societies and thus offer a Darwinian explanation for the development of religion.

We all enjoyed the evening, and although it seemed at times that Ben had the pack baying at his heels, he survived it very well and we all came away with food for thought.

The next meeting of the Cumbria Humanist Group will be on Wednesday 17 June, 7.30 p.m. at the Morton Community Centre, and will be a ‘focus group’ to gather information for the Equality and Diversity Project for Cumbria County Council.

If you are interested in Humanism, visit our website at www.cumbria-humanists.org.uk or telephone 01228 810592 or 01768 881245 for more information

(440 words)

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Affiliated to the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society