

Chiltern Humanists

Newsletter No. 124 October 2016



This life is all we have - make it good to be alive

Humanist Heroes

The speaker for our September meeting, Andrew Copson CEO BHA had to cancel for health reasons. He now plans to come to talk to us next year.

At the start of the meeting, Faith Schools were discussed. Humanists are opposed to faith schools. There is a requirement for all faith schools to keep the entry to these schools at 50% of the children of that faith. This provides the opportunity for children of other faiths or none to enrol. The Catholic Church is lobbying for a change in the selection process. They do not want a cap on the selection process. In discussion it was agreed that this change in the selection process would lead to further segregation in local communities damaging social cohesion.

In Andrew's absence, Steve West had hurriedly prepared a talk based on heroes. He gave us a list of well known people who are patrons of the BHA - for example, David Attenborough, Glynis and Neil Kinnock, Jenny Murray and Brian Cox. A second group of celebrities well known for their atheist views but now dead included Michael Foot, Ronnie Barker & Christopher Hitchens.

Steve also researched history for well-known people who openly declared themselves anti-theist: Confucius 479 BCE, Thomas Paine, Shelley, Darwin and many more.

Whilst many of these heroes are respected for their secularity, unlike saints for example, they are not worshipped. In Steve's view, all Humanists are heroes.

Mary Peeler

Assisted Dying

Much has been written on this subject but I was particularly impressed in an article about Desmond Tutu in The Guardian on 8 October, the day after his 85th birthday. He had written in the Washington Post "With my life closer to its end than its beginning, I wish to help give people dignity in dying." He continued "Just as I have argued for compassion and fairness in life, I believe that terminally ill people should be treated with the same compassion and fairness when it comes to their deaths. Dying people should have the right to choose how and when they leave Mother Earth. I believe that, alongside the wonderful palliative care that exists, their choices should include a dignified assisted death."

Having prepared for his own death, he said "In refusing dying people the right to die with dignity, we fail to demonstrate the compassion that lies at the heart of Christian values. I pray that politicians, lawmakers and religious leaders have the courage to support the choices terminally ill citizens make in departing mother Earth. The time to act is now." It's as though underneath the robes of this Christian Archbishop is a Humanist trying to get out!

This leads me on to recommend our next speaker. On Tuesday 8 November 2016 in Wendover, we will welcome Phil Cheatle from "My Death, My Decision" which was previously known as the Society for Old Age Rational Suicide. Bring your friends.

Steve West

Elaine Lever – SACREs

At our afternoon meeting on the 11th October, Elaine Lever told us about her work with SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) which exist for all local authority areas. The Bucks SACRE has a wider aspiration “to ensure that all pupils in our schools develop spiritually, academically, emotionally and morally so that they are able to understand themselves and others living in a rapidly changing world” Religious instruction should be seen as a private matter for families. Elaine is concerned that there has been a cut in funding for training for teachers who teach religious education as a subject and many are not suitably qualified.

SACREs consist of 4 groups representing Faiths, The Church of England, the Local Authority and Teachers’ Unions. A meeting

can only go ahead if all of the groups attend. The duties of a SACRE are to give advice on religious education, to ensure a collective worship is of a broadly Christian character and to review the curriculum every 5 years.

The SACREs are often influenced by the approach of the chairman. They meet 3 times a year and one day a year for development. They meet in local schools which is helpful for the members of the SACREs as the teacher often give a presentation involving the children. The SACREs hold a list of approved speakers relied on to give a balanced view. Bucks SACRE produces a magazine with articles by members.

Elaine feels there is a better understanding of Humanism in recent years, and is optimistic for the future,
Mary Peeler

National Secular Society

The NSS is celebrating its 150th Anniversary this year and recognising this, its President, Terry Sanderson, has agreed to talk to us on 14 December in Amersham. The title of his talk is “Religion: A Threat to us All?”

The NSS, to which we are affiliated, works towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. It campaigns for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state, where everyone's Human Rights are respected equally.

Terry Sanderson has been President of the NSS since 2008. Prior to that he was for many years a gay activist. In his recent autobiography, “The Adventures of a Happy Homosexual”, he writes: “At the beginning of

this story I, along with every other gay man in the country, was a sexual outlaw. If I had expressed my sexual preference for those of my own sex I could have ended up in prison. Now, six decades later, I am about to exercise my option to be married to my male partner. During that same period, religion has staged a revival that could conceivably reverse everything that gay people have achieved. In Europe, only a few short years ago, religion was regarded as being in its death throes. Now it is renewing itself in new and more frightening forms, with the potential to threaten us all.”

Is he right? If so, what can or should we do about it? Discuss these issues with Terry, and with Keith Porteous-Wood, NSS General Secretary, who will also be attending. Anticipating a larger than normal attendance, we will use the Large Barn Hall, Amersham Community Centre.

Mulled wine and mince pies provided!!!

Dataism: Our New Religion.

An old friend recently sent me an article from FT Weekend Magazine entitled: Dataism - our new religion by Yuval Noah Harari. My friend is not a Humanist as such, but I would certainly regard him as a 'kindred spirit'. The article made references to Humanism which suggested that it was being taken over by Dataism, so I think his purpose in sending it was probably to 'get me going'.

Before going further it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'Dataism', the article presented the term as a progression from religion, where our behaviour is dictated and monitored by 'gods', to Humanism, where the basis is our feelings, which come from within and appear to be the product of our evolutionary development, to Dataism in which our lives and conduct are effectively controlled by algorithms using vast amounts of collected and analysed data. Dataism was illustrated by the hypothetical case of Google running a dating agency that provides guidance on choice for a young woman, Mary, who has two possible male partners in whom she is interested, John and Peter. Peter is undoubtedly more physically attractive. However, the Google algorithm is sufficiently advanced to realise that Mary will not like the choice it makes for her since it goes for Peter. Mary protests with the choice, but the algorithm points out that looks are not everything, and that, based on the huge amount of data it has on all three, a relationship with John will have an 87% chance of success. Note that the algorithm does not predict with absolute certainty, which would be unrealistic, but assigns a probability that is very good but not perfect.

At first, I was impressed with Dataism as a means whereby important life choices could be made on the basis of huge quantities of analysed data, and consequently have a very good chance of being correct. But whilst this is a valid conclusion, is it enough? It seemed to me that Dataism was very much focused on practicalities, but that the whole area of ethics, which as a Humanist I regard as of supreme importance, was not considered. The author admits that Dataism, and computer analysis in general, has so far failed to address some of the fundamental aspects of life such as consciousness, although one should remain open to the possibility that it might get there eventually. Nevertheless, for the time being Humanism offers the best basis of making life choices relating to our ethical behaviour, but this is a very complex area where the situation is often anything but clear cut, and in some cases, even with the best of intentions, we may simply get it wrong.

My conclusion then, is that whilst Dataism will become an increasingly valuable tool for sorting out the practicalities of our lives, it is not about to usurp Humanism's place in respect of our ethical values. What is your conclusion?

Yuval Noah Harari has recently published a book entitled "Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow", which is available on Amazon where it has attracted very good reviews.

Richard Jakeman

January 2017 Diary Date

Our New Year Lunch is scheduled for Saturday 21 January. Details to follow.

SORRY NO PICTURES IN THIS EDITION. Ed.

Forthcoming Events

*Bring a friend to the next meeting
All meetings are open to anyone interested*

**Tuesday 8 November - Wendover - 7.30pm: Phil Cheadle
– “My Death, My Decision”**

Wednesday 14 December – Amersham – 7:30pm: Terry Sanderson (NSS) “Religion: A Threat to us All?” (This will be in the Large Barn Hall).

Suggestions for future meetings, events and activities are always welcome.

If anyone needs a lift to a meeting, please contact Steve West and we will try to help.

Our usual venues:

Wendover Public Library, High Street, Wendover HP22 6DU. We meet in the room on the left as you approach the Library entrance. There is ample free parking.

Amersham Community Centre, Chiltern Avenue, Amersham. HP6 5AH. The Community Centre is close to the station with a large adjoining car park (free after 6.30). We normally use the Small Barn Hall.

For any queries about Chiltern Humanists or Humanism generally, please call Steve West on 01494 726351 or email: west@waitrose.com

For the latest news about Humanism locally and nationally keep an eye on our website www.chilternhumanists.org.uk . Comment on or submit material to the website via the ‘Contact Us’ page.

Please send any contributions, comments or letters for Newsletter No. 125 to Steve West at west@waitrose.com

Chiltern Humanists works in partnership with the British Humanist Association and is affiliated to the National Secular Society.

Please note that we maintain a computer record of our membership. The record is used strictly for administrative purposes and is not divulged to third parties.