

# BRIGHTON & HOVE HUMANIST SOCIETY

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION

CHALLENGING RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE

NEWSLETTER: Winter, 2009-2010

## MICHAEL IRWIN BRINGS PUBLICITY TO THE SOCIETY

As well as being interesting in its own right, Michael Irwin's August talk on assisted suicide generated a great deal of good publicity for both his cause and for the Society. On the initiative of Meetings Organiser Bill McIlroy, a Press Release was sent to *The Argus*, which sent a reporter to cover our August meeting. This was front page news on Saturday September 5<sup>th</sup>, with a piece by Michael Irwin entitled "Change the law on euthanasia" published 2 days later. On the day after that, *The Argus* published a letter from Robert Stovold under the provocative title "Religion gives us useless answers to life". When a religious contributor to *The Argus* stuck his head above the parapet on 22 September, Robert had another letter published in response. The same issue carried a piece mentioning Michael Irwin and his campaign.

Publicity like this is a great example of how members of this Society can get its rational message across to a wider audience.



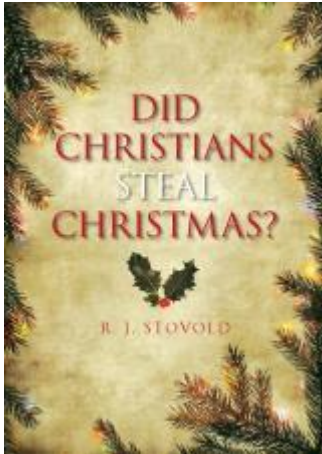
## CATHOLICS RUN INTO HITCH – Peter Brietbart

Our October meeting saw the re-enactment of the Huxley-Wilberforce debate. In addition to witnessing another victory for rationalism at an "Intelligence Squared" debate in London on October 19, Peter Brietbart, who frequently attends our meetings and is chair of the Secular Society at the University of Sussex, had the pleasure of interviewing one of its participants, Christopher Hitchens. Peter writes:

Christopher Hitchens has been an intellectual hero of mine for three years, so meeting and interviewing him was a pure pleasure. Charming and witty, he was immediately interested in speaking with *The Freethinker*, and invited me backstage to talk. (As an aside, at one point I was in the company of both Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens.) An admirer of G.W. Foote and Chapman Cohen, Hitchens was aware of the publication, its history, and its continued importance. We spoke one-on-one for a quarter of an hour, during which I put to him questions on Islamophobia, Bush

invoking Gog and Magog in order to persuade Chirac to join the Iraq war, which author's work he would save at the expense of all others', and more. It'll all be in the December edition of *The Freethinker*.

### **DID CHRISTIANS STEAL CHRISTMAS?**



It's that time of year again, but despite protestations of Christians to the contrary, most atheists have no desire to ban Christmas. Instead they use it as an excuse to flog merchandise, such as "Did Christians Steal Christmas?" The booklet reviews the origins of Christmas's secular traditions, and of the Nativity scene itself. Published by the National Secular Society, it includes a Foreword by N.S.S. president, Terry Sanderson, and would make a great stocking-filler for curious Christians and sceptics alike. It contains illustrations and cites several Christian and Pagan sources, enabling critical minds of any persuasion to determine "the true meaning of Christmas" for themselves. The booklet costs £2.99 and can be ordered securely online from the National Secular Society's shop [www.secularism.org.uk/books.html](http://www.secularism.org.uk/books.html)

### **ONWARD, CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS? – Robert Stovold**

In my capacity of Newsletter Editor for the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society, I was invited by Col. J.M.G. Willis M.B.E. to a presentation entitled "The Army Today". His invitation referred to me as "an influential figure within your community, and a key opinion-former". I was evidently one of Brighton's élite! And so, disappointingly enough, were the hordes of other people attending the same event – there were literally hundreds of people there.

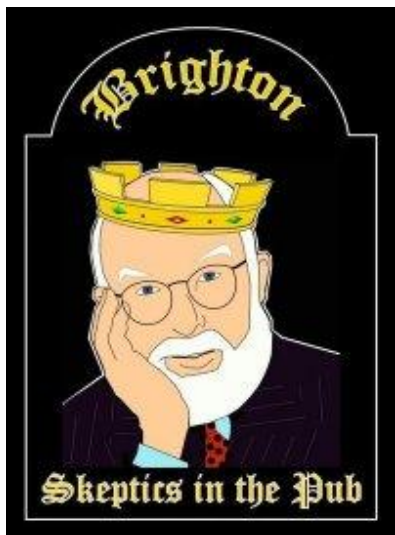
Following a drinks reception, we were shown a well put-together presentation about the Army, and had the chance to mingle with the soldiers and question them directly. Army chaplains (like chaplains in NHS hospitals) are taxpayer-funded, so I was keen to see what the soldiers thought of them. The impression I got is that chaplains do a good job. Being outside the chain of command, they could lend the soldiers an independent ear. If the views of several soldiers are anything to go by, chaplains were there to provide emotional support, not to proselytise. "We go to them, they don't come to us", as one soldier put it. Moreover, the chaplains seemed to provide support in a rather secular way, with the soldiers I spoke to making comments such as "He's a pretty down-to-earth guy", and "It doesn't matter what faith you are - they talk to you as a human being".

Such comments made me realise that it wasn't so much the chaplain's role that I objected to, but his (and I suspect they're all men...) religious title. What's the difference between a chaplain and a counsellor? Both lend a sympathetic ear, and are willing to engage with a person's faith if this is important to them. A key difference is that counsellors don't necessarily believe in that faith, whereas the chaplains do. Or so you'd have thought. But in today's multi-faith army, a Christian might minister to a Jew, or vice versa. I was told the touching story of a Christian soldier who'd been shot and wounded. He wanted to "die looking at the Cross", so the chaplain (who happened to be a Jew) obligingly fashioned one for him from two pieces of wood, and they prayed together. Such use of a Christian cross is of course rank blasphemy as far as Judaism is concerned, and a secular counsellor (who is mindful of a soldier's faith but need not subscribe to it) can avoid such hypocrisy. The story says a great deal for the compassion of the chaplain, but it doesn't say much for the power of prayer - both men were subsequently shot and killed, which makes you wonder who remained to tell this (possibly apocryphal) tale.

Although the chaplains themselves apparently don't proselytise, I was surprised to learn that people who describe themselves as Christians on signing up for the Army are expected to go to Church. "Oh, not every week", added the soldier, in response to the horrified look on my face. "Just on special occasions. And you could probably get out of it if you kicked up a stink, but you're generally expected to go".

Outside of the Army (and I suspect inside it as well) many nominal Christians aren't really religious, and shouldn't be "expected" to go to church. This persistent coupling of religion with military events (think remembrance ceremonies, and the repatriation and funerals of dead soldiers) alienates non-believers and perpetuates the myth that atheists are an unfeeling bunch who lack a need to mark such events.

### **SKEPTICS IN THE PUB - Tim McGregor**



“Skeptics In The Pub” is an international movement consisting of groups who meet regularly to discuss topics of interest to those who reject the supernatural and prefer a more evidence-based approach to reality. Now a Brighton group is planned. “Skeptics In The Pub – Brighton” had its first organisational meeting on 7 November 2009, and hopes to start in around February 2010. You can keep up-to-date by means of the Facebook group called “Skeptics In The Pub – Brighton”.

The organisation already sports a logo featuring the likeness of arch-sceptic James Randi, which is approved by the man himself.

#### **WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

One of the topics of discussion at our A.G.M. on 1 July was the Society's name. Thanks to all those who have responded – the consensus seems to be that the name should stay at is, although the issue may well rear its head again at the AGM next year!

### **COMMENTARY – Bill McIlroy**

There are times when one feels sorry (almost) for the Archbishop of Canterbury. His squabbling flock include the powerful and ultra-reactionary Nigerians who apparently have not heard that Queen Victoria died some time ago. At home, uppity women aspire to be bishops. And as Adam Trimmingham pointed out in *The Argus*, the church in Britain would collapse if all gay priests were suddenly forced to quit.

Adding to My Lord of Canterbury's woes, his brother in Christ, Pope Benedict, has given him a thick ear in the form of an aggressive poaching operation. With little if any consultation, he has invited wavering Anglicans to come over.

In theory at least, the C of E rejects Papal authority. But if Anglican loyalists protest against the Pope's action, the Vatican Rottweiler will bare his teeth and remind them that Rome has declared Anglican Orders to be “utterly null and void.”

Of course, an influx of Protestant defectors will not be welcomed unanimously. Traditionalist cradle Catholics may fear that the incomers will bring mildly liberal baggage and pollute the pure springs of the faith. In fact it is “progressives” who should have misgivings regarding asylum-seekers fleeing C of E enormities like gay priests, same-gender blessings and the possibility of female bishops.

It is reported that the rather colourless John Hind, Bishop of Chichester, may be climbing aboard the defectors' bandwagon. If so, it will not cause much loss of sleep among the faithful. When Eric Kemp, Bishop Hind's predecessor who greatly outstayed his welcome, finally departed, many thought that any successor would be an improvement. Now they are not so sure.

The little difficulty regarding St. Peter's Church in Brighton has been brushed aside for the time being. Despite the prayers, petitions and even Dora Bryan's knit-in, “Brighton's Cathedral” is now controlled by the wacky Alpha movement.

Will there be much goodwill in the dear old C of E this Christmas and beyond? Hardly likely.

## SUBSCRIPTIONS NOW DUE

Membership subscriptions are now due and appreciation is expressed to those who have already paid and received their 2010 card.

Despite ever-increasing costs we have kept the minimum annual subscription at £5. The Society is run entirely by volunteers, and speakers give their services free of charge. Nevertheless, we must pay for postage, stationary, telephone, speakers' travel costs, the Newsletter and meeting room rental.

Any donations in excess of the minimum membership fee enable us to meet current expenses and keep some funds in reserve.

Please complete the enclosed form, and make your cheque payable to "Brighton and Hove Humanist Society".

## OBITUARY – BEATRICE CLARKE

Beatrice Clarke, who has died at the age of 95, was a linguist, traveller and teacher. She was a member of the Society for over thirty years and served on the committee for much of that time.

A Londoner by birth, Beatrice was one of a family of seven children. From her early years she was keenly interested in books and education. Uncharacteristically for a young girl, she was always upset when the school holidays came. As sixteen, she was attending evening classes. She met Roy Clarke, a language tutor who became the love of her life.

Beatrice learned six languages in addition to the Esperanto which she was teaching until a few months before her death. She became Head of the French Department at a Worthing Secondary School. She had a great love for music and the theatre, often attending concerts at the Brighton Dome and plays at the Theatre Royal. A dedicated Humanist, Beatrice gave talks, wrote articles and arranged exhibitions.

Fortunately, Beatrice maintained her independence until nearly the end. She died in the Royal Sussex County Hospital. The Society was represented at the funeral by Fleur Jacot, Joan Nolan and Bill McIlroy who conducted the non-religious ceremony at Woodvale Crematorium.

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## PROGRAMME, 2010

Wednesday 6 January [Living Without Religion](#) – Adam Trimmingham

Wednesday 3 February [Scientology: Is This the Beginning of the End?](#) – Barry Duke

Wednesday 3 March [Defending Darwin, Defeating Design](#) – Dr. Robert Stovold

Wednesday 7 April [The Church of England: Time to Disestablish](#) – Anna Behan

The Society meets on the first Wednesday of every month except August, at 7:30pm (8:00pm start), at The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar Street, Brighton. The Lord Nelson is a short walk from Brighton Railway station and seven bus stops (6, 7, 27, 27A, 37, 50A, 56). It is also a short distance from London Road bus stops (alight at St. Peter's Church). There are good parking facilities nearby.

Meetings usually take the form of a talk followed by a period of informal discussion. Everyone is welcome - existing humanists, people who'd like to learn more and those who just happen to be interested in the topic under discussion.

## BRIGHTON & HOVE HUMANIST SOCIETY – CONTACTS

**Secretary:** Fleur Jacot (Tel. 01273 461404)

**Chairman:** Mike Jelley, 6 Middleham Close, Ringmer, Lewes, East Sussex, BN8 5EN (Tel. 01273 814057).

**Newsletter Editor:** Robert Stovold (Tel. 01273 245990) **Email:** [Robert\\_Stovold@hotmail.com](mailto:Robert_Stovold@hotmail.com)

**Website:** <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>

**Officiants:** Bill McIlroy (Tel. 01273 227549, for funerals), Valerie Mainstone (Tel. 01273 729311, for marriages, child-naming ceremonies and funerals).

**Meetings Organiser:** Bill McIlroy (Tel. 01273 227549).