

BRIGHTON & HOVE HUMANIST SOCIETY

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION. Promoting a rational, responsible approach to life, relying on reason and shared human values.

NEWSLETTER: Autumn 2009

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.

PROGRAMME, 2009

Wednesday 2 September [Assisted Dying – What is Legal and What is Not](#) – Michael Irwin

Wednesday 7 October [Challenging Religious Privilege](#) – Peter Vlachos

Wednesday 4 November [Celebrating the 150th Anniversary of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*](#). Includes a recreation of the debate between T.H. Huxley ("Darwin's Bulldog") and "Soapy Sam" Wilberforce (Bishop of Oxford) - Terry Sanderson and Derek Lennard

Wednesday 2 December [St. Paul, the first Christian Trickster?](#) - Ken Humphreys

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

One of the topics of discussion at our A.G.M. on 1 July was the Society's name. On the one hand, our current name "The Brighton and Hove Humanist Society" has a long history. But it's also quite a long name, with many outside the Society still not knowing what the word "humanist" actually means. "Brighton and Hove Atheists" was suggested as a snappier and simpler alternative. Even here though, there's some confusion. Agnostics might feel excluded – though if they think the truth about God can't be known and consequently lack a belief in God, they are actually atheists as well as agnostics. The word "atheist" defines us by what we don't believe rather than by what we do – but seeing as sceptics are reluctant to sign up to any set of beliefs, perhaps the absence of a belief might actually be an advantage?

Plenty of food for thought here, so the Committee decided to consult all of our members via this newsletter to see which is the preferred choice.

Please let us know which of the following options you prefer:

- 1) Brighton and Hove Humanist Society
- 2) Brighton and Hove Atheists

Members can write to Fleur or email Robert. Contact details for both of them are given at the end of this newsletter.

"ARREST ME" SAYS CAMPAIGNER MICHAEL IRWIN, WHO ASSISTS A SUICIDE

Dr. Michael Irwin, a member of the Society and our speaker this September, has challenged police to arrest him over the role he played in enabling another man, Raymond Cutkelvin, to end his own life. Irwin said he paid £1500 directly to the Swiss clinic Dignitas as a contribution towards the total cost of the suicide, estimated to be about £4,500.

Mr Cutkelvin had an inoperable tumour of the pancreas in 2006 and died that year at Dignitas. His partner of 28 years, Alan Cutkelvin Rees, 57, accompanied him to Switzerland and was arrested. "They should arrest me", said Irwin. "I gave financial support, moral support and advice. I consider myself equally involved. If not, they should admit they made a mistake in arresting Alan."



Michael Irwin

Actively helping someone to kill themselves is a crime under the 1961 Suicide Act, and punishable by up to 14 years' imprisonment. However, 117 people from the UK have committed suicide at Dignitas, and so far no friends or relatives have been prosecuted for travelling with them. As this Newsletter went to press, it emerged that MS sufferer Debbie Purdy won her fight to have the legal situation regarding assisted suicide clarified. Appropriately enough, Michael Irwin's topic this September is "Assisted Dying – What is Legal and What is Not". When Membership Secretary Fleur Jacot contacted Michael to applaud his courageous stand, he replied, "Very many thanks, Fleur, for your supportive e-mail. Hopefully, on September 2nd, I will have been arrested, but will be "on bail" - therefore, free to speak to you all!"

One religious objection to suicide stems from the idea that life, being God-given, is of infinite worth. Because a few seconds of life are of infinite worth, nothing should be done to hasten death. However, from *exactly the same starting assumption*, one can calculate that a long life and a short life are both of infinite worth, and conclude from this that a longer life is of no greater value than a shorter one! We are often told that only religion offers ultimate answers.

Yes, ultimately useless answers.

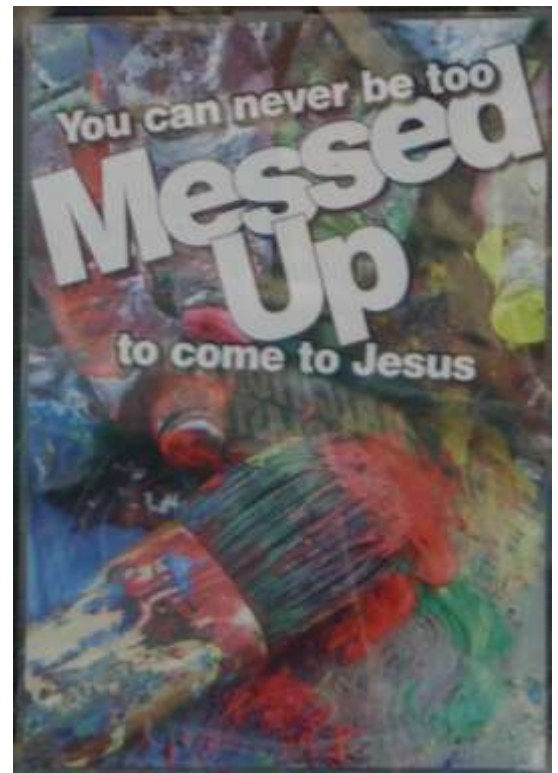
ANGELS AND DEMONS - AND RELIGIOUS APOLOGISTS – Robert Stovold

When the Revd. David Robertson came to the Jubilee Library on 30 June to promote his response to Richard Dawkins' bestseller *The God Delusion*, I was there, along with Barry Duke (*Freethinker* editor) and other members of the Society. As befits Brighton's status as the least religious city in England and Wales (*2001 census*), I was delighted by the critical tone of the audience's questions.

For me, the highlight of the evening was probably Robertson's attempt to caricature Dawkins as having a simplistic fundamentalist worldview. "It's the John Wayne – you know, 'You're with us or you're against us' type thing", whined Robertson. In addition to misrepresenting Dawkins' actual position, Robertson appears to have confused John Wayne with Jesus Christ. The phrase "He who is not with me is against me" comes not from the Wild West but the Middle East (chapter 12, verse 30 of Matthew's gospel, to be precise).

In the context of such crooked thinking, I cannot help but agree with a poster I saw outside Portslade United Reformed Church recently, which proudly proclaimed, "You can never be too messed up to come to Jesus".

Sad, but true.



As this poster outside Portslade United Reformed Church testifies, "You can never be too messed up to come to Jesus"

On Tuesday 12 May I attended St. Luke's church on Old Shoreham Road to hear a talk by the eminent particle physicist and theologian the Revd. Dr John Polkinghorne. His topic was life after death – is such a belief credible? Polkinghorne believes that the universe appears finely-tuned to produce life, and sees this as being consistent with the actions of a divine tuner (namely God). But what happens when the laws of physics are found to be incompatible with Christian theology? The Second Law of Thermodynamics states that matter tends to get more disorganised over time, an idea which Polkinghorne freely admits conflicts with the Christian notion of an eternal afterlife. But hey, no problem! God can just change the laws of physics! I pointed out that this was a classic example of "Heads I win, tails you lose" - flag up the laws of physics when they suit you, and have God sweep them under the rug when they don't. In addition to ditching science at key points in his talk, Polkinghorne ditched certain Bible verses as well, believing (for example) that people in Hell still have the ability to repent and escape punishment. The religiosity of scientists like Polkinghorne does not

prove science and religion compatible, for one very simple reason - scientists do not always think scientifically. Scottie of the U.S.S. Enterprise may have warped the space-time continuum, but he didn't warp his scientific thinking by relying on miracles. "You cannae change the laws of physics".

I returned to the sceptic's slot on a *Premier Christian Radio* programme called "Unbelievable". A key theme in the latest Dan Brown movie *Angels and Demons* is the (in)compatibility of science and religion, a topic that I discussed with theologian and scientist David Wilkinson. The programme was broadcast on 16 May, and can be downloaded from here: <http://tinyurl.com/l7lsg2> My part in the programme begins 54 minutes in, and lasts (on and off) for about 30 minutes. I ended with a kind of atheistic *Thought for the Day*. "If people really want to make a difference in the world they should concentrate on harnessing natural forces, rather than putting their trust in forces that are beyond their control".

SWEET JESUS! "MESSIAH MINTS" LEAVE A BITTER TASTE AT THE JUBILEE LIBRARY



When Jacalyn Oghan, a youth worker at St. Mary's Church in Upper Rock Gardens, tried to advertise a multi-faith event at the Jubilee Library, permission was refused on the grounds that her poster promoted religion. "In the interests of fairness, we have very clear and strict guidelines for displaying information in the library and we do not accept any material promoting a particular religious view point", said a council spokeswoman.

Needless to say, some sensitive souls were wounded by this - and the fact that library gift shop sells a product called "Messiah Mints" in a tin picturing Jesus only served to rub the salt in.

"It's political correctness gone mad and I do think it's a little hypocritical", complained Oghan. "How is it that they are allowed to sell mints which clearly contain a religious figure?"

The simple answer, which seems to have eluded Ms Oghan, is that posters like hers can be said to be *promoting* religion, whereas Messiah Mints cannot. The religion, in fact, appears to have been promoting the mints, with *The Argus* reporting that "Tins of Messiah mints have flown off the shelves of a public library as people have been snapping up the now infamous souvenirs".

In a letter to *The Argus*, a Christian called George Stroud complained that the mints were "a direct insult to the views of Jesus himself". But Jesus wasn't exactly a fan of "multi-faith events", if the Bible is to be believed. The library is not always neutral in matters of religion – witness the platform given to the Revd. David Robertson, described in the previous article.

One can only hope that the Jubilee Library maintains a secular stance regarding posters, and stands firm in the face of religious pressure. Whatever next? No bacon sandwiches (they might offend Jews and Muslims), no Mars Bars (even planetary gods have their followers) and no Fudge (it's a little too close to the mark for moderate theologians).

Jesus is a respected figure in Islam as well as Christianity, but prior to this incident the Council had received no complaints. Which just goes to show that the views of a few religious moaners simply aren't shared by liberal Brightonians as a whole.

COMMENTARY – Bill McIlroy

Christians who take literally every word in the Book of Genesis are also Creationists in another sense. They are adept at creating hate figures like Richard Dawkins. I had the good fortune to know one of their most hated, the admirable Margaret Knight. A staunch unbeliever with Brighton associations, she was a pupil at Roedean School. Roedean's founders the Misses Penelope, Dorothy and Millicent Marwell, were firm in the faith. An atmosphere of piety pervaded the

establishment. Chapel attendance was compulsory on Sunday and on other occasions like Empire Day.

Roedean was followed by Cambridge and a professional career teaching psychology at the University of Aberdeen. It was during that period that Margaret Knight gave two short broadcast talks which aroused the faithful to a fury. For a gently-spoken, scholarly lady to speak about *Morals Without Religion* was not the done thing in 1955. And on *Woman's Hour* too!

The former Roedean girl became a notorious national figure and a target for the God Squad. From high Church to low evangelical, venomous abuse and hatred was poured on "the unholy Mrs. Knight", as the gutter press dubbed her. One over-heated journalist admonished the BBC for "allowing a fanatic to rampage along the air lanes, beating up Christianity with a razor and bicycle chain". With characteristic restraint, Margaret Knight said her broadcasts "caused some excitement".

Then, as now, questioning the perfection of Jesus caused Christians to behave like the hard-up Duchess on being informed that the family Titian is actually a repetitian. But having sampled the Blood of the Lamb (as we sang at evangelical meetings) Margaret Knight went for the jugular. In *Christianity: the Debit Account* (published by the National Secular Society), she debunked the "Gentle Jesus" myth. "He was a fanatic", she wrote. "And like most fanatics, he could not tolerate disagreement or criticism... at one moment holding forth with tears in his eyes about the need for universal love; at the next, furiously denouncing the morons, crooks and bigots who did not see eye to eye with him."

In the same work she declared: "I now incline to the view that the conversion of Europe to Christianity was one of the greatest disasters of history... no other religion has such a bloodstained record".

There was nothing wishy-washy about "the unholy Mrs. Knight".

Editor's note: Christianity: the Debit Account can be downloaded for free from the National Secular Society's website: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/christianitythedebitaccount.pdf>

Whatever will they think of next? Jonathan Blake is a bishop in something called the Open Episcopal Church. And he has a cunning plan. His object is to bring back "a large population who have haemorrhaged away from the church."

To achieve this, Bishop Jonathan has devised a scheme to bring the Host, in the form of pre-consecrated wafers, to those who cannot or will not darken a church door. The Host will be popped through the letter box by the postman. Even atheists and Satanists may avail themselves of the bishop's post-a-Host scheme.

The Eucharist is a sacrament in which wine is partaken with the wafer, representing the blood and body of Christ. As an atheist and a vegetarian, I am not attracted to cannibalism, even symbolic. Admittedly, I do enjoy a tippie (a good malt whisky, since you ask). But wine is not included with Bishop Jonathan's pre-consecrated wafer. Bad show.

OBITUARY

Our sympathy is extended to Dr. Sam Dick whose mother has died in a nursing home at the age of 93. Sam is a respected member of the Society, which was represented at the funeral by Valerie Mainstone who conducted a secular committal ceremony at Eastbourne Crematorium, and by Bill McIlroy.

BRIGHTON & HOVE HUMANIST SOCIETY – CONTACTS

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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).