

BRIGHTON & HOVE HUMANIST SOCIETY

LIVING WITHOUT RELIGION

CHALLENGING RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE

BECAUSE EVEN IN BRITAIN'S MOST GODLESS CITY, THERE ARE STILL TOO MANY GULLS!

NEWSLETTER: Easter 2012

THE TRUE MEANING OF EASTER – Robert Stovold

Oh God, please save us from trendy vicars! Saying “Easter is a time for staying in bed, eating chocolate and having sex” may have gained Father Phil Ritchie of All Saints Church in Hove some ~~pieces of silver~~ column inches over Easter in both the [Argus](#) (p.3, 6/4/12) and the [Daily Mail](#), but smacks of desperation; Ritchie appears to have confused erections with resurrections! At least the Brighton and Hove Humanists got a mention in the paper keeping their principles intact, and enjoyed a good laugh at religious expense. Bill McIlroy responded, “For Christians it’s a glorious celebration but I think it’s terrible that they mark what is essentially a festival of blood and gore”. The very next day, as if to prove Bill’s point, the *Argus* carried an opinion piece by the Reverend Archie Coates of St. Peter’s Church: “I love the way the risen Jesus still bears the marks of the nails that crucified him in his hands and feet. It’s a reminder that belief in the resurrection is not some unrealistic, escapist fantasy”.

That defence is laughably circular, as it assumes what it ought to be proving (namely the reliability of the gospel accounts). Coates described some admirable work being done by churches (“every night up to 15 rough sleepers have been put up in church halls across the city”) then went and spoiled it all by mentioning Jesus: “We believe that Jesus died on the Cross on Good Friday but rose from the dead on Easter Sunday. If that’s not true then faith is a pointless exercise”. How can putting up rough sleepers be dismissed as a “pointless exercise”? What rubbish! The *good work* is real in this case, even if the promised *reward of eternal life* isn’t; which of these, I wonder, do Christians really regard as being the more important?

SIR HARRY KROTO TO SPEAK TO THE SOCIETY IN AUGUST

Sir Harry Kroto, a prominent non-believer who shared the Nobel Prize for Chemistry in 1996, will be speaking on 1 August 2012 at the Sallis Benney Theatre in Brighton. Brighton & Hove Humanist Society are organising this event, and all are welcome. It begins at 7.30pm and tickets will be £3 each.

Tickets will be available online from the [Sallis Benney](#) website and also at our meetings. The talk’s title had not been confirmed as this newsletter went to press, but we’ll keep you updated with further details.

PETER TATCHELL WINS ‘SECLARIST OF THE YEAR’ 2012

The 2012 ‘Secularist of the Year’ award has been won by human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell.

The £5000 Irwin Prize is awarded annually by the National Secular Society (NSS), and is named after its sponsor Michael Irwin, a member of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society.

Also in attendance were the biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher A.C. Grayling, and representatives of the NSS’s sister organisation from France, *Libre Pensée*.

This thoroughly enjoyable social occasion began with a three course meal.

Fresh from a seminar at the United Nations in Geneva, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, stressed what a successful year it had already been; as well as establishing that saying prayers during local council meetings was illegal under the Local Government Act, the recent NSS court victory over Bideford Council had kick-started a much needed debate regarding the place of religion in society. Journalist and author Nick Cohen was next on the podium, humorously contrasting the



Peter Tatchell. Photo courtesy of the National Secular Society

frightful spectre of “Militant secularism” (as raised by Radio 4 presenters who “make their living by never saying a word out of place”) with the atmosphere of intelligent conversation prevailing in the room, adding “The presenters on Radio 4 who are first to shout about ‘militant secularism’ are nowhere to be seen when fights against militant religion need to be fought”.

Student Neil Dewar won a bottle of champagne for his successful defence of the motion at an Oxford Union debate: “This house believes that the dividing line between politics and religion should shine brightly”. UCL lecturer Dr. Ronan McRae also won a bottle of champagne in recognition of the help he gave to the NSS when it intervened in European Court of Human Rights cases relating to religious privilege in employment law. NSS member Peter Fisher, whose evidence that prayers were actually continuing, proved useful in the case against Bideford Council, also won a bottle of champagne. Clive Bone, the ex-Councillor who brought the Bideford case with the NSS won the £1000 Simon Biber Memorial Prize. The main prize of the day, the Irwin Prize, was awarded by Nick Cohen to Peter Tatchell. In his acceptance speech, Tatchell described some of the campaigns in which he’d been involved, including a 1994 demonstration against Islamic fundamentalists at Wembley Arena:

“We turned up outside their rally to be surrounded by hundreds of them who openly threatened to track us down and kill us. The police listened to this but did nothing but arrested us for having on our placards just a restatement of what *Hizb ut-Tahrir* was saying. We were simply exposing their hateful murderous incitements and we were arrested and charged under the Public Order Act... In the end, through a long, long protracted legal battle, we did get our convictions overturned... We have a problem when it comes to the licence religious fundamentalists are often granted. They can get away with saying things that we could never get away with saying about them.”

The award was made days after Rowan Williams announced his intention to resign as Archbishop of Canterbury. Tatchell noted tellingly:

“I knew Rowan Williams before he became Archbishop, and he was broadly a liberal progressive theologian... on women’s rights and the rights of LGBT people he was on our side. But when he became archbishop, that man did a complete turn. He became a prisoner of the Lambeth Palace Mafia installed by George Carey to make sure that his successor would be knobbed and tied, and Rowan Williams ended up colluding with some of the most vicious fundamentalist theologians around the world – a great personal tragedy for him, because he has not been true to his own conscience. He has put high office before moral values. And once again it shows the malevolent influence of organised religion, not just on society as a whole but on individuals as well. When it comes to the contenders to replace Rowan Williams, I think it’s pretty depressing. Pretty depressing because all of them are conservatives and evangelicals... but perhaps it may be a blessing in disguise. Because perhaps it will expose the truth, the reality about what’s really going on. When Rowan Williams was in charge, people at least thought there was, underneath it all a liberal progressive person at the top. But if we have someone like Richard Chartres or John Sentamu take over, it will be very clear where the Church really stands. Their stance on the whole range of issues has been on the wrong side of humanitarian values”.

Tatchell ended his speech with a rallying call: “We will win because we have reason on our side. We have scientific knowledge and understanding. We have a rational humanistic perspective. We have the value of universal human rights and those will ultimately triumph.... it’s sad that we are still fighting the battles of the Enlightenment all these hundreds of years later, but we are fighting them, and we will win. We will win because justice, freedom and liberty are on our side.”

CALL YOU AND YOURS – Bob Charlwood

On February 21st, the BBC Radio 4 “Call You and Yours” programme did a one hour phone-in slot asking what part Christianity plays in British life. The programme set out to explore whether it is being eroded and, if it is, is that a good or a bad thing. This is in the aftermath of recent comments by David Cameron that “Britain is a Christian nation and we should not be afraid of standing up for Christian values”, and Baroness Warsi condemning what she calls the “rise of militant secularism”.

With about half an hour’s notice, I decided to attempt a contribution to the debate. This was a totally new venture for me but I duly logged on to the website and followed the procedure. I was confronted with a page that informed me that I could submit a comment of up to 250 characters. I have never tweeted before, so 250 characters didn’t seem very much to me. “Confine yourself to one point”, I told myself, “and make it

concisely.” In case there are Baroness Warsi types ranting on about militant secularism – I thought – it might help to put a more balanced perspective on the debate.

So, here’s what I sent off: “Secularism is often mis-represented as trying to get rid of religion. In fact, the National Secular Society has an explicit policy to defend the absolute freedom of religious and other belief, and protect the right to manifest religious belief.”

So, there it is – all 243 characters of it (including spaces). I confess to being delighted on hearing my offering read out, about ten minutes into the programme.

The debate itself was interesting and quite balanced. Many of the religious contributors supported the secularist cause with hardly anybody aligning themselves with Baroness Warsi’s more extreme stance. There was a feeling that it was the strident tones of religious politicians that come across as being more militant than the ‘militant secularists’. The point was well-made that the current secular drive is anti-theocratic, not anti-religious.

Several contributors wanted to highlight the good charitable works that churches do, with an implication that religion is, therefore, good and true! Others pointed out that churches are selective as to which marginalized groups they choose to support. One gay man expressed a feeling of exclusion from his church community. There was an eloquent account of the difficulties a woman had faced in securing school places for her children without, she felt, being hypocritical about her beliefs – or lack of them. We subsequently learned that in France, in 2000, a law was passed banning the teaching of religion in state schools during class time; although French faith schools do get state funding. Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, was one of the studio guests and his contributions were typically measured and thoughtful.

CAMP QUEST DONATION

The Brighton & Hove Humanist Society has again made a £250 annual donation to Camp Quest, a summer camp programme for children aged 9-16, dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy and free speech. In addition to the usual activities for summer camps, such as campfires, canoeing, crafts, drama, games, nature hikes, singing, and swimming, the camp’s programmes and activities introduce campers to the history and ideas of freethought. Campers also learn about science, the scientific method, critical thinking, and world religions. Campers are taught that ethical behaviour is not dependent on religious belief and doctrines, and that non-religious people are also good and fully capable of living a happy and meaningful life.

COMMENTARY – Bill McIlroy

The proposed suspension of restrictions on Sunday shopping hours during the Olympic Games period has alarmed some church leaders and what’s left of the “Keep Sunday Special” lobby. Their well-heeled campaign on this issue a decade ago failed; as a concession the Government restricted opening of large stores to six hours on Sunday.

A local voice has been raised in defence of “Our Lord and His Day”, to quote the old Sabbatarian battle-cry. Writing in the Brighton and Hove [Argus](#) (20/03/12), the Reverend Andrew Manson-Brailsford, Rural Dean of Brighton, devoted a dog’s dinner of clichés and platitudes to the lost cause of Sunday observance. Throughout the article, he never mentioned his real objection to removing restrictions on Sunday shopping hours. And that of course is the Bible command to “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”.

Sabbatarians have a history dating back to the 18th century of imposing their obsession on the nation. Five years before Queen Victoria’s accession ushered in Britain’s own dark age, the first annual meeting of the Lord’s Day Observance Society has held. It embarked on a campaign to encourage and, if necessary, compel Her Majesty’s loving subjects to observe Christian cheerfulness by attending church services, reading the Bible, holding family prayer sessions and, above all, avoiding pleasurable activity, except snooping and informing. They frightened innocent children by telling them that Heaven was like an everlasting Sabbath day.

Sabbatarians' targets included enormities like Sunday opening of the British Museum, military band concerts in London parks, frivolity in tea gardens, cycling, Sunday newspapers, and children's playgrounds. Sunday funerals were deplored for their "unseemly conviviality".

Our northern cousins' spiritual welfare was not forgotten. In Thurso, Caithness, the authorities were pressurised into locking up a public well from Saturday night to Monday.

However, opposition to Sunday dreariness and boredom gathered apace. It was led by organisations like the National Sunday League ("an evil confederacy") and prominent radicals including Charles Bradlaugh (founder of the National Secular Society), T.H. Huxley (Darwin's Bulldog) and Peter Alfred Taylor (a Reform League vice-president who lived in Brighton).

Indeed carefree Brighton played a key role in defeating the Sunday killjoys. True, closure of the Aquarium was balm to the Sabbatarian brow. But they had to swallow a bitter pill. It came by rail. "The evil of cheap excursions on the Lord's Day", specifically the London to Brighton line, was a long-standing bugaboo. Rowland Hill, freethinking chairman of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway, made matters worse for opponents of Sunday freedom by promoting cheap Sunday excursions. Thousands flocked from London slums to enjoy Sunday by the sea.

During the post-war years, Sunday observance zealots were swimming against the stream. But they managed to put a stop to a charity performance of classical music and ballet in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral. Preventing Sunday opening of the Festival of Britain Pleasure Gardens was another triumph.

Soul-stirring victories for our Lord and his day were faithfully recorded in the Lord's Day Observance Society's magazine, the incongruously named "Joy and Light". I still miss it. But the Rural Dean of Brighton's *Argus* article reminded me of a past age.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

The Society does not usually meet in August, but this year has arranged a talk by Sir Harry Kroto at the Sallis Benney Theatre on **Wednesday 1 August at 7:30pm**.

Mike Jelley's Garden Party is a real favourite with members, taking place this year on **Saturday 1 September** at his house in Ringmer. More details to follow.

PROGRAMME 2012

2 May **Christian Science Debunked** Robert Stovold

6 June **Fairy Stories, Probabilities and Sacred Truths** Mike Jelley

4 July **Annual General Meeting**

1 August **Title to be confirmed** - Sir Harry Kroto (7:30pm, Sallis Benney Theatre)

The Society meets on the first Wednesday of every month 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 several bus stops (6, 7, 27, 37, 50, 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 questions and 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)

Chair: Valerie Mainstone (Tel. 01273 729311)

Newsletter Editor: Robert Stovold (Tel. 07754 046749)

Email: robert_stovold@hotmail.com

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

Officiants: Bill McIlroy (Tel. 01273 227549, for funerals), Valerie Mainstone (Tel. 01273 729311, for marriages, child-naming ceremonies and funerals), Maggie Hall (Tel. 01903 813953 for funerals).

Meetings Organiser: Bill McIlroy (Tel. 01273 227549)