

## Ludlow and Marches Humanists

# Newsletter

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### Winter 2018

Welcome to the Ludlow and Marches Humanists first newsletter of 2018. With the new website up and running ([www.ludlowhumanist.org.uk](http://www.ludlowhumanist.org.uk)) we are hoping that these Newsletters may not be needed for the internet community, but there are still some who don't have access and prefer paper. It's also useful to set out what we're doing as a group a few

**Note:** Your membership to L&MH is shortly due for renewal and we've included the branch membership renewal form with this Newsletter – it's at the end of this newsletter. Membership has been increased to the still remarkably low level of £10 (the first increase in 20 years), and we've given you until April to pay, so it's very much a bargain. April fits better with our financial year, hence the change.

#### **EVENTS PROGRAMME**

A review and reminder of last year's programme of events, followed by what we can expect this year:

#### **WINTER & SPRING 2017**

**'Ludlow's Workhouse' – 21 February:** an exploration of its history and consequences, by John Nash. From its

historical origins in the 1601 Act for the Relief of the Poor, and the gift of Lane House, combined with Gate House in 1621, to the assumption of responsibility by the local authority in 1929, this was a fascinating history of poor houses and work houses in Ludlow and the UK, and the changing of social attitudes through the ages. It's always useful to link this to local interests, and the fact that we still have buildings with historical connections to this issue dotted through Ludlow increases our feelings of connection. Personally, as my own father spent some of his childhood in the Workhouse in 1920s Portsmouth, I felt the historical connection particularly keenly.

**'The South Shropshire Furniture scheme' - 21 March:** a unique local 'social enterprise' which recycles used items, especially furniture, and helps train locals in refurbishment/carpentry skills. James Cooper gave an excellent exposition of the activities and aims of this local charity, the primary aim of which is: 'To improve the quality of life for disadvantaged people in Southern Shropshire'. Founding and expansion was aided significantly by lottery funding in the 1990s, in these financially tougher times it has to support itself much more though

local sales. The centre is the workshop in Ludlow, where around 50, mainly young men, are given training and help mainly with restoring of furniture. The project offers a discipline and skills which can enhance their ability to get permanent jobs, and 10 week placements are offered via the job centre.

Furniture is offered free or subsidised to those in need, and also sold for more upmarket users via the Renaissance shop on Tower Street, online, or at the Warehouse on Weeping Cross Lane. The community centres at Rockspring in Ludlow, and Craven Arms, offer affordable lunches (1day/week), community activities and support, and a library in Craven Arms. Currently 28 volunteers keep it all running.

**'Defend our NHS campaign' - 18 April:**

Gill George discussed this from the South Shropshire perspective, which became particularly pertinent last year with the neonatal death concerns at Ludlow Maternity centre and elsewhere in Shropshire drawing attention to lack of funding and support for the NHS, particularly at the peripheries.

**Annual General Meeting – May:** The usual formalities, plus an appropriate video and refreshments & cakes, and election of the new committee: David Flory (Facebook), Chris Hyde, Frances Lloyd, Michael Radford (web site), Jano Rochefort (secretary), Malcolm Rochefort (chair), David Trotter (publicity), and Juliet Trotter (treasurer).

**Garden Party - 3 June:**

In a change from our usual walk and a pub lunch, David and Juliet very kindly offered their delightful garden for an afternoon tea, cakes, strawberries and

wine event where we sat round, chatted, and played 'boule', very ineptly in my case. The sun came out, and a very pleasant afternoon was had by all.

**AUTUMN 2017**

**Religious Education – a Humanist understanding/perspective - 19**

**September:**

Michael Radford noted that religion was banned as a topic in both France and the USA. In the latter, especially, this had not, in general, led to an increase in the enlightened view of fellow members of society, and there was a case to say that lack of any discussion of religion outside of the family could make children more prone to prejudice, and, with social interaction limited to like-minded individuals, could increase the diffusion of extreme views and bigotry. We share the search for answers to important questions with religious people – such as the purpose of life (if there is a purpose), how we treat one another, etc. There is a strong case for a universal religious education for children, but this should cover all the major religions and belief systems, including Humanism. Existential (why and how we and the universe exist) and moral (how we treat others, why is there suffering, what defines us as human beings) questions should be covered.

**A history of Islam and current issues - 17 October:**

Imam Soyhayb Peerbhai talked to us about his upbringing in Leicester, training in Bury, and his understanding of the religion and principles of Islam. Following

his training, he had spent 8 years in the prison service as a Chaplain (to cover all faiths), counselling, and drugs & suicide watch. He now works as Imam at Craven Arms mosque, and services the local Halal abattoir. There are currently around 1.3 billion Muslims in the world. He gave a brief resume of Mohammed's life, the new era (start of Hijiri calendar) beginning when Mohammed set foot in Mecca at the age of 53, in 622 AD. Before that time is known as Jahilia (or Jahiliyyah– the age of ignorance) in Islam. [Interestingly, the Hijiri calendar is lunar, based on 12 months, so only 354 or 355 days long. Hence in late January 2018, we are in year 1439 of the Hijiri calendar, though only 1396 Gregorian years from 622]. On current issues, Soyhayb believes Islam is much misunderstood – the Qur'an should not be literally followed. However, he was equally critical of media and political pressure to 'integrate', when it wasn't clear exactly what integration meant. Did this mean abandon their religion? The Q&A session was lively: it was clear the Imam did not have a strong understanding of science, for example believing that the Earth was a few thousand or tens of thousands of years old, rather than the scientifically accepted 4.5 billion years. Presumably, he has no understanding of evolution, though we did not ask the question (his comment regarding fossils – 'what do bones mean?' was enough). And this is disturbing, if it's a typical view from a 'moderate' Muslim, as I'm sure he'd describe himself.

Our talk in November was a complete contrast – **Does God Exist? By Burt Flannery - 21 November:**

Burt admitted it was impossible to prove the non-existence of God to a dogmatic

believer, but thought the burden of proof rested with someone who claimed something existed without any clear evidence. Although some thought it was a little simplistic, in its steady attack on all the basic reasons for believing in an omnipotent God, it was at least clearly thought through and delivered by Burt, who also brought along copies of his book (What has God got to do with it?) for sale at a reduced rate. Proceeds went to his chosen charities, child welfare and animal, including his appearance fee. Tony Akkermans has usefully reviewed his book and the review is available on our web site.

We also presented a wreath for the remembrance ceremony on the 12<sup>th</sup> November, Remembrance Sunday, but again we were disappointed by the nature of the religious introduction. To prevent a recurrence, we are discussing with the town council how best to show our remembrance of the lost lives in various wars on 11<sup>th</sup> November 2018, which this year falls on a Sunday.

### **Forthcoming events:**

Note: Meetings will continue to be held at 7:30 p.m. in the Friends' (Quakers) Meeting House (St Mary's Lane, Ludlow) on the third Tuesday of the month, unless otherwise indicated. We know there are plans to refurbish the meeting house, so please beware that the meeting venue may change later in the year.

**20 February 2018 – “Telling people about Humanism” by Dr Simon Nightingale.**

Simon is a semi-retired neurologist and also chair of our neighbouring group –

The Shropshire Humanists, based in Shrewsbury. He has given many talks on Humanism and is occasionally heard on Shropshire Radio. He participates in inter-faith discussions and will be considering techniques, tactics and pitfalls when communicating Humanist messages to people of different outlooks.

**Thursday 8 March 2018, special meeting – on Brexit legislative programme by Lord Jeff Rooker:**

Please note that **this meeting only** will be in the **Zion room at the Methodist Church Hall**, Broad Street, Ludlow. Jeff Rooker will be concentrating on the progress of the legislative programme through the House of Lords, full title yet to be revealed.

**20 March 2018 – The Reverend Kelvin Price, Rector of Ludlow. Talk title to be agreed.**

We have not had a formal talk from the Church of England for many years now, and it will be interesting to see his approach to falling numbers and alternative uses of church buildings, as well as the continuing relevance of the C of E as a state religion.

**17 April 2018 – Christine Hyde on Greece "Changed or Unchanged"**

Chris and Hugh spent several years in Greece and grew to appreciate the culture, albeit different in many ways from our own. Chris will be concentrating on the village (Elaia) and area they know best, quote: "I will talk about customs still practiced from Dorian times, the Orthodox Church, and the Evil Eye, ending with a few photos of the wild life. Hence the suggested title".

**15 May 2018 – AGM**

As usual, we will try to make this an interesting evening, with cake and refreshments and either a video or a special discussion to follow the AGM

If anyone would like to attend any of the above programmes, but needs a lift please contact Jano or Malcolm Rochefort (01568 770282) to see if something can be arranged.

If you have any suggestions on topics for discussion or for speakers or events, please share them with a member of the Committee.

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***FROM THE CHAIRMAN***

Jano and I again attended the BHA/Humanists UK Convention in June 2017, this time in Cambridge. Although both of us thought that this was a little less impressive than the previous year's convention in Birmingham, there were, nevertheless, several very interesting presentations and discussions.

The conference talks kicked off on the Saturday with the provocatively titled "**Sex with Robots**" by Kate Devlin. Kate's view was that this would happen, and needed to be taken seriously – what were the risks and benefits? Should there be legislative control?

The more conventional talks and discussion followed with "**Faith to Faithless**". Faith to Faithless was founded in 2015 by Aliyah Saleem and Imtiaz Shams, now a trustee of Humanists UK, in order to draw attention to the discrimination faced in particular

by 'minorities within minorities and to give a platform to the faithless and apostates, to come out in public and speak out against this discrimination'. It deals with those who've left a controlling religious environment in which they'd be brought up or educated. Interesting and disturbing talks by Jonny Scaramanga (a victim of ACE – Accelerated Christian Education, set up by the extreme Christian right, which mocks evolutionary theory and promotes creationism); Audrey Simmons (ex Seventh Day Adventist); Theo Howarth (ex Jehovah's Witness) and Aliyah Salim (ex Muslim). All share the experience of extreme control by those in power in the 'Faith', showing abhorrence of apostasy and apostates, who are generally shunned or worse. All had difficult and affecting stories of how they struggled to break free.

Mark Lynas gave a talk on **GMO journeys: how I learned to stop worrying and love genetic engineering**. This was an interesting exposition of how successful the anti-genetically modified organism movement had been in Europe and of how Mark, who was an enthusiastic anti-GMO journalist, came to realise that there was not a good scientific basis for the fears and biases expressed by the anti-GMO movement. He has similar worries about aspects of the organic food movement. The problem with all these populist movements is an adherence to dogma and refusal to follow true scientific research and methods. Exaggeration of the perils makes popular journalism, but poor science (I think we may be seeing parallels in the current anti-plastic furore).

Sara Khan discussed **Offering solidarity: the struggle of progressive Muslims**.

There were some disturbing statistics – there are 23,000 Jihadists in the UK. For truly moderate Muslims to speak out, it takes a lot of courage. Progressive Muslims are concerned that the centre ground across the country is under siege. 'Hope not Hate' tries to counter extremist views, such as those of Wahabi preachers who spend 5 years in Medina learning this very austere and fanatic version of Islam.

**Atheists in foxholes: humanists in the armed forces** by Defence Humanists discussed the problems and some encouraging developments in the UK armed forces, with real experience from Sqn Ldr Emily McCullough, Lt Cdr Craig Jordan, Flt Lt Robin Crosse, and Flt Lt Ruth Staton. We had an interesting discussion session, with Emily's very positive experience of the 2016 remembrance ceremony, in which they were given space to be recognised.

Julia Ebner discussed the links between Islamic extremism and the far Right in **The rage: far right and Islamist extremism**. Both feed one another, and rely on a similar narrative – i.e. West vs Islam, crusades, etc.

Lord Alf Dubs discussed **Humanist issues in the next parliament**. He had concerns on the influence of the DUP sharing power in the UK government, which could set back abortion reform in Ireland as a whole, and may block other progressive measures. Topics he saw as key for his future work in the House of Lords: dignity in dying; bishops in the House of Lords; integrated education in Northern Ireland; faith schools damaging cohesion in the community.

On the Sunday we had a discussion on **The work of the public affairs and policy team**, with Richy Thompson, Jay Harman and Andrew Copson. Interesting talks by Boyd Sleator (N. Ireland) on decriminalisation of abortion and Humanist marriage legalisation in Northern Ireland; Mike Reynolds (Wales) on a number of legal challenges: collective worship, pastoral care, marriage law (not devolved). Mike also covered UK issues of illegal religious schools, and Humanist marriages (more in Scotland than religious marriages).

We had a relatively light hearted final talk by Jim Al-Khalili on **Aliens: Science's search for extra-terrestrial life**, with the broad conclusion that there is almost certainly life out there (the sheer size of the Universe and probability). Fermi's paradox that 'if it's intelligent, why have we seen no signs of it?' underestimates the scale of the distances involved and the timescale of the existence of civilisations vs. that of the Universe (if the age of the Universe is scaled down to 24 hours, humankind has only been capable of transmitting information beyond the planet in the last 0.7 milliseconds). If Humanity lasts 2 million years as a civilisation, our first radio signals will still not have reached the nearest large galaxy (Andromeda). It's likely that there are one or two advanced civilisations in our own galaxy, a mere 100,000 light years across. Jim Al-Khalili discussed the more recent exciting findings of more exoplanets around distant stars, and promising bodies to search in our own Solar system (such as the moons Enceladus and Europa, both with significant liquid water). One interesting exploration possibility is sending nanobots to 'near' likely stars,

such as Proxima Centauri B (a mere 4.3 light years away). Well, I found it interesting.....suppose we're already being surreptitiously observed by alien nanobots?

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## **HUMANISTS UK NEWS**

### **January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018: Opposition to bill that would limit access to abortion and increase end of life suffering**

Several members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group (APPHG) [have spoken](#) in opposition to the Conscientious Objection (Medical Activities) Bill, which received its second reading in the House of Lords on Friday.



Baroness Thornton was among those humanist peers who spoke out against the bill.

At the moment, staff can object to carrying out abortions if they are directly involved in its provision. However, the Bill seeks to dramatically extend the right to object to any staff, whether directly involved in the procedure or not, and to allow medical professionals to refuse the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment, even in cases where that is against the patient's express wishes.

Baroness Barker, Baroness Thornton, Lord Cashman, Viscount Craigavon, and Lord Dubs, were among those who spoke out against the bill.

Humanists UK Campaigns Officer Rachel Taggart-Ryan commented, 'The current law, established under the Abortion Act 1967 and reinforced by a recent Supreme Court ruling, provides a sensible framework for those who object to directly performing abortion procedures to opt out of doing so. This Bill, in attempting to broaden the scope of objection and introducing a new provision to refuse to withdraw life-sustaining treatment, will limit patients' ability to make their own choices about their healthcare.'

#### **January 26<sup>th</sup>: Peers call for legal recognition of Humanist marriages in England and Wales.**



Baroness (Joan) Bakewell and other members of the House of Lords called for the legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales, during a debate on the Registration of Marriage Bill currently being debated. Labour peer Joan Bakewell and crossbench peer Baroness (Molly) Meacher highlighted both the popularity of humanist marriages and the simplicity of the changes needed to enable legal recognition. They were

supported in interventions from the Conservative peer Lord (Tristan) Garel-Jones and Labour peer Lord (Meghnad) Desai..

#### **January 25<sup>th</sup> : 120 leading philosophers oppose 'appalling' Home Office humanism test that 'makes no sense':**

Over 120 leading philosophers have signed a [joint letter](#) to Home Secretary Amber Rudd calling on the Home Office to reconsider its decision to deny asylum to a humanist after it was revealed that he was questioned on his knowledge of classical philosophy during an interview. Hamza bin Walayat, a Muslim apostate originally from Pakistan, was chastised for failing to name Plato and Aristotle as humanists, despite neither being so. Humanists UK, which provided evidence in support of Hamza's claim, welcomed this intervention from the UK's top philosophers, highlighting the Home Office's profound and dangerous lack of understanding about humanism and non-religious beliefs, and the persecution faced by those who hold them.

Humanists UK Chief Executive Andrew Copson commented, 'The questions put to Hamza reveal a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of humanism, its origins, and the persecution faced in certain parts of the world by those who hold humanist beliefs. This letter, signed by the nation's leading experts in both humanist and classical philosophy, provides important evidence of this misunderstanding. We hope that this will not only help Hamza's appeal, but also those humanists in the future who will look to the UK for sanctuary.'

## **January 24<sup>th</sup>: Church of England side-steps rules in attempted takeover of community schools**

Contravening the Government's model documentation for multi-academy trusts (MATs), a Church of England diocese is seeking to gain majority control of seven schools with no religious character as part of plans for a new MAT in Yorkshire. Despite the fact that just two of the nine schools in the proposed MAT are voluntary controlled church schools, the Diocese of York is requesting majority membership of the trust, given its ultimate control over the running of all the schools.

Humanists UK, which has repeatedly warned about the Church of England's efforts to use Academisation to [expand its influence](#) within the education system, has called for the proposals to be rejected by the Department for Education (DfE), and for reforms to be introduced preventing religious organisations from gaining influence over schools without a religious character.

More details on these and other current stories can be found in the News section of the Humanists UK website (<https://humanism.org.uk>)

Humanists UK events coming up in 2018:

**February 8:** Darwin Day lecture at the Institute of Education, London WC1, featuring Diana Fleischmann on the Evolution of Human Morality, in a talk moderated by Jim Al Khalili.

**February 22:** Enlightenment Now: the case for reason, science, humanism and progress - lecture by Stephen Pinker, also at the Institute for Education

**March 7:** The Rosalind Franklin lecture by Angela Saini: Under wraps: the policing of

female sexuality. London venue to be confirmed.

**April 11:** The Voltaire Lecture by Henri Marsh (a brain surgeon): Do no harm. London venue to be confirmed.

**June 21:** World Humanist Day; A day long event in Shrewsbury organised by Shropshire Humanists. Details to be confirmed.

**June 22-24:** Humanists UK Convention in Newcastle this year at the University. Still time to register. At least two of us will be attending this again this year.

<https://humanism.org.uk/convention2018/>

## **AND FROM THE NSS.....**

**January 30<sup>th</sup>: Lewis cinema shows Star Wars on first Sunday showing.** The cinema on the Isle of Lewis has opened on a Sunday for the first time as it held a trial screening in the face of Sabbatarian opposition.

The An Lanntair arts venue in Stornoway sold out as it showed *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* this weekend. Around 250 people watched the film while others built a model Death Star at a workshop. An Lanntair has traditionally closed on Sundays, along with other businesses on the island, to ensure observance of the Christian 'sabbath'.

Elly Fletcher, the centre's chief executive, [told](#) BBC Scotland no decision had been made on whether to open the centre in the long-term. She said the trial opening was a "very genuine audience research exercise. Sabbath observance is something very important to the Isle of Lewis... we are mindful and respectful of that."



The National Secular Society's spokesperson in Scotland, Alistair McBay, welcomed the initial opening and said he hoped it would set a precedent.

**January 24<sup>th</sup>: Creationist appointed to South Lanarkshire education committee:** The National Secular Society has called for urgent reform of council education committee structures in Scotland after one of "Europe's most active creationists" was reappointed to one.

Dr Nagy Iskander, who has called evolution "really illogical", [is to sit](#) on South Lanarkshire Council's education resources committee as an unelected religious representative. Local authorities in Scotland are required to reserve at least three places on each council education committee for religious nominees. The NSS has said Dr Iskander's appointment casts "a sharp light" on the need to scrap this requirement.

Dr Iskander is a member of the Westwoodhill Evangelical Church in East Kilbride. The founder of the US-based religious ministry Answers in Genesis, Ken Ham, has described him as one of "Europe's most active creationists". He was the only applicant for the role. A council advert for it read: "Any person, or any church or denominational body which has a duly constituted charge or other regular place of worship within South Lanarkshire, is invited to nominate a person who is interested in the promotion of religious and moral education."

The three individuals have full voting rights but are not accountable to voters. The requirement to appoint them results from legislation passed before devolution in [1929](#) and [1994](#). Dr Iskander has served in a similar role since 1999. In 2015 he gave a series of lectures at a 'creation conference' and made several statements on the subject of creationism. At one point

he said a distinction should be drawn between "operational science" and "historical science".

**January 22<sup>nd</sup>: School 'intimidated' into lifting restrictions on hijab and fasting:** A top-rated primary school that restricted hijabs and fasting has been forced to back down on its policies following a campaign of "intimidation" from opponents.

St Stephen's Primary School in Upton Park, Newham, east London, [had banned girls under eight years old from wearing hijabs at school](#). It had also told parents that children should not fast during Ramadan. The school's chair of governors, Arif Qawi, had come to the decision after consulting with Muslim clerics who told him that boys should fast only from the age of puberty. However, some children at St Stephen's were fasting from eight or nine.

Following criticism of the decision by activists, the school was sent up to 500 emails a day, many allegedly abusive or threatening violence against staff. Some messages falsely branded head teacher Neena Lall a "paedophile" who "deserved what she had coming". Police were called in as a result of the emails.

On Friday Mr Qawi said he was stepping down. According to the [Daily Mail](#), Mr Qawi felt that he had to step down because staff were frightened to come into school.

Muslim women who expressed their opposition to the hijab being worn by young girls also faced threats and abuse over the weekend.

The school's reversal of its policy has prompted the National Secular Society to reiterate its call for guidance from the Department for Education.

**And finally**, a blog on **Sara Khan**, who has been appointed by the Government

as a new **anti-extremism chief**, and is mentioned earlier in the Humanist UK convention review:

**January 25<sup>th</sup>: Why are journalists dancing to the Islamists tune over Sara Khan?:** *Islamists and their apologists have dominated coverage of the Government's appointment of Sara Khan, says Chris Sloggett. Journalists should stop indulging them just because they shout loudly.*

'Controversial' is a word that means almost nothing while revealing a great deal. Pretty much anything worth saying is controversial. If something is newsworthy, it's either controversial or very likely to become so.

But when something means so little, the fact someone has chosen to use it usually tells you something.

So let us consider the case against Sara Khan, the Government's new Commissioner for Countering Extremism. Today the BBC's headline about her appointment is: 'Controversy over new counter-extremism tsar Sara Khan'.

Many of those who claim to speak for Muslims do not like Khan because she

promotes a positive message. She encourages a degree of integration into British society. She says Muslims should obey the same laws as everyone else and cooperate with the British state. She has called for honesty among Muslims about hateful ideologies and intolerant practices which are specific to, or particularly prominent among, those who share their religion.

Her organisation **Inspire** encourages girls and women from Muslim backgrounds to be aspirational. It has done important work countering the narrative of grievance and resentment peddled by so many. And Khan wrote a book, [\*The Battle for British Islam\*](#), in which she tackled many of those peddlers, as well as their counterparts on the white far right, head-on.

Is this really work that we should explicitly describe as 'controversial'? Anyone interested in the future of British society should support the general thrust of what Khan has tried to do.

[Editors note: as well as the BBC, articles critical of the Government's appointment of Khan have appeared in the Independent and Guardian. Disappointing.]

**LUDLOW AND MARCHES HUMANISTS (L&MH)**

**MEMBERSHIP FORM**

Ludlow and Marches Humanists group is partnered with the Humanists UK and is a member of the National Secular Society.

Membership of L&MH will ensure that you receive the group's newsletters and notifications about the monthly meetings and socials. Your details will be stored securely and will not be passed to a third party.

The annual membership fee is £ 10.00 and is due every April.

**Extra donations most welcome!**

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I/We wish to (re)join the Ludlow and Marches Humanists. I/We enclose my/our membership fee(s) of £ 10.00 per member + optional  £ donation

**(Cheques made payable to Ludlow and Marches Humanists)**

TITLE: ----- FIRST NAME(S): -----

LAST NAME: -----

ADDRESS: -----  
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POSTCODE: ----- TELEPHONE: -----EMAIL-----

Please indicate if you are members of the British Humanist Association (BHA) – Yes / No

**Return to: J Rochefort, Membership Secretary, Ludlow and Marches Humanists,**

**The Old Rectory, Leinthall Starkes, Ludlow, SY8 2HP**