



Humanistically Speaking



May 2022

Speaking out for the non-religious. On values. On issues. On life.

Can Humanists be Spiritual?

Exclusive interviews with Jeremy Rodell & Steve Banks

Mubarak Bala sentence not for blasphemy

Spirituality: A Humpty Dumpty word?

Complexity and Transcendence

Japanese Spirituality

A Neanderthal Tale

Abraham Maslow

Poet's Corner

Sam Harris

"Spirituality involves the recognition of a feeling or sense or belief that there is something greater than myself, something more to being human than sensory experience, and that the greater whole of which we are part is cosmic or divine in nature."

Dr Maya Spencer

Humanistically Speaking



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In this Issue

Come in, sit down, put your feet up...

David Brittain
Executive Editor



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CONTENT DISCLAIMER

Our editorial team consists of humanist volunteers. Articles are written by them, or by our readers and contributors, and published at the discretion of the editorial team. We strive to publish content in line with humanist aims and values but views expressed by writers are their own and not necessarily shared by any associated Humanist groups or Humanists UK.

Many Humanists (including myself) find words like 'spiritual' toxic because of their association with religion. However, I believe that the term 'spirituality' simply involves a feeling or sense that there is more to being human than just sensory experience. And this feeling can be understood in *secular* terms. It does not have to be the preserve of the religious.

Most of us have experienced that sense of absorption, or transcendence, or connectedness with our environment, whether it is through music, art, nature, inspiration, compassion, the cosmos, or relationships. But it is ethereal and always personal in nature, and we Humanists – wedded as we are to an empirical approach to questions of existence – often have trouble expressing those elusive experiences. The religious answer is often glib: it's "an experience of the Holy Spirit". I believe they have managed to hijack spirituality and rob non-believers of any expression to match that. And it matters, too. One reason given for not allowing Humanists to speak on BBC Radio Four's *Thought for the Day* is because this slot addresses the spiritual and is therefore deemed to exclude those who are 'merely' secular.

There are two interviews in this month's issue. The first is with Jeremy Rodell, who will be known to many of you, and who has strongly held views about what is meant by 'spiritual'. The second interview is with musician Steve Banks who has composed some beautiful music entitled *The Blue Pearl – A One World Oratorio* which he describes as Humanist and also spiritual. He invites us all to join the concert online, or in person at the world premiere at St. Giles' Cripplegate, London, on 14th May (see page 20 for more details). *Humanistically Speaking* subscribers can get 25% off the price of tickets by adding the word 'Humanist' to their ticket application, but please apply by the 8th May to get your discount.

I have often said that *Humanistically Speaking* is a journey and its purpose is to seek (if I might paraphrase) to explore where no Humanist has gone before. Spirituality is an important issue for Humanists, and one that we will return to again someday. I hope you enjoy this month's sortie into what is, for us, a difficult subject.



Humanist News



Mubarak Bala sentenced to 24 years... but not for blasphemy

The humanist world was reeling after it was reported on 5th April that Mubarak Bala, President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, was sentenced to 24 years in prison after pleading guilty to all charges against him. He had been detained for two years following his arrest in April 2020.

Most reports about the case state that Mubarak Bala has been convicted of blasphemy. A clarification of the case, however, has been provided by Bill Flavell who is Vice President of Atheist Alliance International. In an article published on the Foundation for Religious Freedom website, Flavell writes that 'Many people are under the misapprehension that Mubarak Bala was charged and convicted of blasphemy... That is not the case'.

According to Flavell's article, Mubarak was charged under the Penal Code of Northern Nigeria and 'There is no crime of blasphemy

in the Penal Code. Under the Penal Code you can publicly insult any religion or incite contempt for any religion. Such behaviour only breaks the law if it is done in a manner "as to be likely to lead to a breach of the peace" (Penal Code S210). The maximum penalty provided under S210 is two years imprisonment or an unspecified fine... Section 114 of the Penal Code has a similar effect except that is not concerned with insulting religion. It deals with any act "with intent to cause or which is likely to cause a breach of the peace."

The prosecution found nine Facebook posts, each of which was charged under Sections 114 and 210. None of the charges related to blasphemy. They all related to posts thought likely to cause a breach of the peace.

Flavell has not been able to speak to Mubarak, but he believes that Mubarak thought it unlikely he would get a fair trial and decided, therefore, to plead guilty and appeal for leniency. Not only did the judge ignore sentencing guidelines but against normal practice he decided to run the sentences consecutively instead of concurrently. This is how we have ended up with a draconian sentence for charges that are unprovable and which contradict the right to freedom of expression guaranteed by the Federal Constitution. There are many grounds for appeal, however, and Flavell is optimistic that there will be a fair outcome ultimately.

Full article is [here](#). Our Africa correspondent Lynda also writes about this case in this issue.





Humanist News



Humanists UK unveils new 5-year strategy

Humanists UK has launched its new five-year strategy, 2021-2025. Its three strategic aims are as follows:

- 1. More people knowing what humanism is and more non-religious people with humanist beliefs and values recognising themselves as humanists.** We're committing to an extensive programme of education, public awareness, and dialogue to increase and deepen understanding of the humanist approach to life.
- 2. More non-religious people living happier, more confident, and more ethical lives.** We're committing to help non-religious people get the resources and support they need to be more fulfilled, whether that's ceremonies, pastoral care, a local like-minded community, or new programmes built on humanist thinking about how to lead a happy life.
- 3. More people enjoying greater freedom of thought, of expression, and of choice over their own lives.** We've always been a movement for social progress. Our new strategy focuses on the ideas we want to flourish in law and policy, the specific policies we work to advance, and the campaigns we run to build a better world in the here and now.

The full strategy is [here](#)

Layout Editor Opportunity



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Humanistically Speaking magazine is put together using PowerPoint and then edited, proofread and published as a PDF. Some contributors send in their articles already templated whereas others will write in Word. Your role will be to collate these together, page number and index them, and chase up articles from guest writers. In addition, there are two 2-hour online editorial meetings to attend: a planning meeting at the start of the month and a detailed sign-off meeting at the end of the month.

As a volunteer-run magazine, we can offer no pay, but your reward will be playing a vital part of a team that creates the UK's only free Humanist magazine.

To apply, simply email Humanistically.Speaking@gmail.com and we can go from there.



Japanese Spirituality...

By Megan Manson, co-founder of Gravesham Pagans



‘Spiritual’ is a word that’s difficult to define, perhaps because it is so subjective. But these days, I often hear people describe themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious’.

I think this is partly because the word ‘religious’ comes with a lot of baggage. For many, ‘religious’ conjures up images of fervent evangelism, uncompromisingly conservative attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and wide-eyed, even dangerous, fundamentalism. It also implies a well-defined affiliation to a particular religion.

But ‘spiritual’ feels softer. The person who finds themselves praying every now and then, or who has a vague belief in a deity or life after death, or who dabbles in traditions with religious roots such as meditation or yoga, may be more comfortable with the label ‘spiritual’. That’s why I think ‘spirituality’ is increasingly used as a euphemism for ‘religion’, as it avoids all those negative connotations.

I spent nearly a decade working for the Japanese government and lived in Japan for several years. While there, I learned that the Japanese are also somewhat squeamish about the word ‘religion’ (*shuukyō*). The Japanese share some of the negative associations with religion held by Brits: fundamentalism, extremism, cults.



Megan in Japan

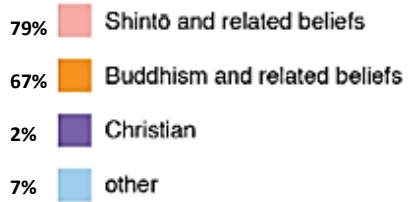
Perhaps this is unsurprising. Religious nationalism contributed to Japan’s aggression in the Second World War, and in 1995 it suffered its worst act of terrorism at the hands of an extremist religious movement, Aum Shinrikyō. It’s no wonder over 60 per cent of Japanese people say they have no religion. Yet I would call Japan a deeply spiritual place. The two main religions, Shinto and Buddhism, are practised side-by-side, to the extent that one blurs very much into the other. Japan’s domestic tourism evolved from pilgrimages to its many Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, and this has changed little in modern times, with places of religious significance still occupying a central position in Japanese holiday destinations. Wherever you go in Japan, you will see elements of spirituality everywhere, from statues of deities set at roadsides to protect travellers to symbolic rope tied around a tree or rock to indicate it is sacred. ▷



Japanese people will happily engage in religious rituals without worrying too much about any theological underpinnings. Many visit shrines to pray for success at school and business and buy charms (*omamori*) they can display in their homes or hang on their bags as protective talismans. Religious festivals (*matsuri*) are extremely important community occasions, although for many the spiritual aspects are less important than the alcohol and local delicacies on offer and the chance to socialise at such events. They may even get their home or car blessed by a Shinto priest.

Japanese culture is highly ritualised, and many of those rituals have a spiritual dimension. For example, before and after eating, Japanese people typically clasp their hands and express gratitude for the food. This gratitude may be directed to *kamisama* – the word for ‘deity’, which is used to refer to the numerous spiritual beings in Shinto beliefs as well as the monotheistic God of Abrahamic religions. Japanese language doesn’t usually distinguish between singular and plural, and when the Japanese refer to *kamisama*, they’re often not bothered as to which one(s) they mean.

The famed Japanese emphasis on cleanliness, typified by the custom of removing shoes when entering the home and their love of hot spring bathing, also has a deep spiritual dimension; keeping the body physically clean is also thought to keep it spiritually clean. Getting to know the Japanese perspective on religion and spirituality really influenced my own approach to these concepts. I was raised Catholic, which strongly shaped my ideas about religion. I thought religion was ‘faith first’ – you can only take part in religion if you have complete faith in its teachings, and you can only be a member of one religion at a time. But these, I learned, are quite Christian ideas of religion. I didn’t encounter anyone in Japan who seemed preoccupied with this idea of ‘faith’. Instead, emphasis is placed on the



Religion in Japan – sums to more than 100% because many practise Shinto *and* Buddhism
Encyclopaedia Britannica

rituals themselves, how they make you feel, and how they help create a sense of belonging to the local community and to Japan itself.

This realisation prompted me to look into Paganism – a religion I already knew a bit about because my parents ran a shop catering to the New Age/Pagan market in the 90s and 00s. Paganism has a lot in common with Japan’s religious traditions – a lack of strict doctrine, veneration of nature, pre-Christian pedigree, a huge number of deities, and an emphasis on rituals and feelings over ‘faith’. I know many Pagans who don’t like to call Paganism a religion and think of themselves as spiritual rather than religious. And I’m still not sure where ‘spiritual’ ends and ‘religion’ begins – perhaps there’s no clear line.

A final thought – Japan is one of the most successful secular democracies in the world, which maintains an excellent balance between protecting religious freedom and preventing religious imposition on public life. Could this contribute to Japan’s ‘spiritual but not religious’ outlook? I don’t know, but I do know that religion looks much less menacing and much more comforting when the state isn’t trying to force it down your throat.



A Humble Humanist Complex

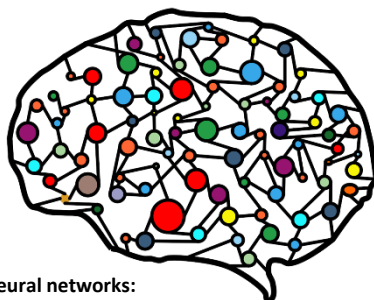
Anthony Lewis explores the connections between complexity science and transcendent awareness



All of us, at different times, experience those moments of the transcendent in our lives, whether in response to music and art, watching a beautiful sunset on a beach, experiencing the birth of a child, falling in love, hearing the dawn chorus, or even enjoying the beauty of scientific explanations pared down to the simplest level with Occam's famous razor. These are the times when we feel that we are connecting with something bigger and deeper than ourselves. It's an integral part of the human experience of being alive.

Religious people may believe that these 'out of body' experiences are evidence of unseen forces, of the supernatural, of the divine. Our languages are suffused with words rooted in these perspectives. The Japanese call them 'moments of satori', when we connect deeply with reality. I have meditated and practised yoga for twenty years and have, many times, experienced the calmness and beauty of satori, the ever-present moment.

Humanists understand these experiences as subjective emotional responses which occur in the biochemistry of our own brains, triggered by our bodily senses of the external reality around us at any moment in time. In a sense, we 'project' these experiences into the neural processes within our own brains. Our feelings of wonderment, beauty and the existential are no less real for being subjective



Neural networks:
embodied complexity

and personal. In fact, they represent an emergent property of the complex systems that are our brains and minds.

'Complexity' is an emerging science which is marching in step with the computer age. The UK scientist James Lovelock was an early pioneer. Most sciences so far have used linear explanations of reality which quickly break down even for the simplest of complex systems. Complex physical and adaptive systems are non-linear and have to be studied using computer modelling and simulations. Modelling of the simplest complex systems with only two interacting 'agents' with minimal feedback has revealed that they can remain stable for long periods but can also become very chaotic, and often change 'state' or 'phase' in unpredictable ways. Most of reality comprises 'Complex Adaptive Systems' which have an enormous number of feedback loops and interactions. Examples include our brains, our bodies, the climate and weather, economics, human behaviour and societies ▷



and our consciousness. These areas are often termed the 'hard problems of science' and understanding them will require significant advances in our understanding of the behaviour of 'complexity'.

Early results of this new science were popularised by James Gleick in his book *Chaos: Making a New Science* (1987) with its famous quotation: "Tiny differences in input could quickly become overwhelming differences in output. In weather, this is known as the Butterfly Effect – the notion that a butterfly stirring the air today in Peking can transform storm systems next month in New York". Some of the results emerging will profoundly change our understanding of human society. In 2004, for example, the economist Professor Eric Beinhocker described how modelling has demonstrated that all economic systems generate 'log normal' inequalities in society that match the actual inequalities observed. But where am I going with this you may ask! How on earth does the study of complex systems connect with our subjective feelings of the transcendent? Well, hold on to your hats. This is going to get complicated very quickly at the edges of science 'fiction'!

As living creatures, we are ourselves *an embodied complex system* which can be studied separately as a system in its own right – that is, our physical bodies and brains. But we are also *embedded entities in an external reality* as individual 'nodes' in numerous overlapping external complex systems. For example, we are independent agents interacting in the human social and economic spheres which themselves can in turn be studied separately as complex systems. We therefore exist in a reality that consists of multiple nested complex systems interacting in extremely complex and connected ways. The levels of complexity, feedback and dynamics is truly mind blowing!

Will science ever be able to unravel and explain such complexity, especially when complex systems themselves aggregate to form higher level complex systems? Will there be whole areas of reality that are unpredictable or unknowable due to the underlying mechanics of how complex systems behave? For example, some of our complex systems could be permanently fixed into an unpredictable 'chaotic state' through evolutionary forces. And could understanding complex systems be beyond our cognitive abilities given that we are deeply embodied and embedded within such systems ourselves? For example, our drive to explain and understand the universe could itself be an emergent property of our consciousness which is itself a complex system. Are there [Rumsfeldian](#) areas of 'unknown unknowns' that will forever be beyond the reach of the human intellect and scientific explanation? Would we ever know if the internet became 'conscious'?

I suspect that those moments of 'satori' we all experience are when we connect, albeit fleetingly, with the myriad of complex natural systems of which we are an integral part as embodied creatures. Could we possess 'mirror neurons' that have evolved to provide us with that connection, much as we have 'mirror neurons' to help us empathise with other human beings? What does seem to be clear is that these moments can have a profound and transformative effect on us as individuals. As a humanist, I believe we have to approach this whole area with humility, acknowledging that we might, ultimately, be dealing with what is fundamentally unknowable given our cognitive limitations. But as a scientist, I dearly hope this is not the case! I suspect that complexity science will eventually deliver the next paradigm shift in our understanding of the universe.



Humanism and Spirituality

By John Coss

Spirituality is a toxic word for many humanists, which I suspect is usually due to conflating spirituality with religion but may also be a reaction to 'New Age' spirituality.

However, the meaning of the word has developed and expanded over time, and in the modern sense has a wide range of meanings, some of which seem to me wholly compatible with Humanism. The issues were explored in a debate at South West London Humanists some years ago asking 'Can humanists be spiritual?', led by [Jeremy Rodell](#) for 'yes' and [Marilyn Mason](#) for 'no'. My impression is that they were in general agreement over the substantive issues, with Marilyn put off from using the word 'spiritual' by strong dislike of its religious connotations, whereas Jeremy focused on those meanings consistent with the humanist approach to life.

Subsequently, in his article [Spirituality and Humanism](#), Jeremy identified three kinds of spirituality:

Interior spirituality : our profound inner life, relating to the 'deepest values and meanings' by which we live; the ongoing part of us that

can be subject to self-examination, care and development; and the part that can be impacted by spiritual experiences.

Experiential spirituality : a wide spectrum of experiences with the common characteristics of being non-intellectual, feeling not thinking; involving a sense of transcendence or connection with something larger; associated with emotions of elation, joy and compassion; and being specific to the individual.

Religious spirituality (including 'New Age' spirituality) : obviously not for humanists.

The Humanists UK on-line course *Introducing Humanism: Non-religious Approaches to Life* includes a section on a humanist sense of spirituality by [Jacqueline Watson](#), in which she says: 'Many humanists argue that spirituality can be understood as referring to a set of natural human characteristics which are as vital to those who are not religious as to those who are. If we use the language of spirituality to refer to a natural dimension of human life, then non-religious people can be included in the discussion'.

Here is Terry Biddington's take on spirituality in a talk to Greater Manchester Humanists when he was the Anglican chaplain to ▷



Manchester Universities: “A ‘collage’ of everyday practices which give life meaning - this collage can include art, music, personal disciplines and practices, and religious concepts. All humans have spirituality as a formative element in their lives. It is essentially an openness, or opening up to other people and experiences, and religious people see prayer as central to this listening process”. In the discussion, a Humanist definition of spirituality was proposed as ‘the active use of our imagination and reason to find our own view of what life experiences tell us about meaning’, which Terry later said accorded with his own view of spirituality.

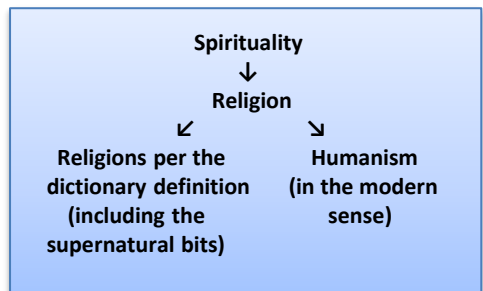
Further ideas about non-religious spirituality are presented in *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* by Sam Harris, *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* by Abraham Maslow, and *Spirituality for the Sceptic* by Robert C Solomon, which was suggested as preparatory reading for a humanist retreat organised by Humanists UK which I attended in 2019, though like several other participants I did not find it particularly helpful.

Nevertheless, I share the view of many humanists that there is ‘a world of the human spirit without a holy spirit’, which is found for example in the cultural sphere, in the enjoyment of nature and in the wonder inspired by the universe. But while I have no personal animosity towards the word, spirituality is not a term which naturally comes to mind for me in relation to activities that can reasonably be regarded as spiritual: listening to music I find inspiring, such as Schubert’s *Winterreise* and the slow movement of Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No 23*; visiting historic monuments such as Stonehenge and the Acropolis in Athens; visiting art galleries and museums, such as the Henry Moore Sculpture Centre at the Art Gallery of Ontario and the International

Slavery Museum in Liverpool; and looking at beautiful scenery with memories from previous visits, such as Buttermere in the Lake District looking towards Haystacks (main image on previous page).

However, I am attracted by the thesis put forward by Noel Cheer in a presentation to the 2006 Sea of Faith Conference entitled [The Religion of the Wilful Disbelievers](#), in which he quotes the definition of spirituality proposed by American theologian [Owen Thomas](#): “. . . the sum of all the uniquely human capacities and functions: self-awareness, self-transcendence, memory, anticipation, rationality (in the broadest sense), creativity, plus the moral, intellectual, social, political, aesthetic, and religious capacities, all understood as embodied.” Cheer argues that under this definition spirituality is a natural phenomenon, oriented to this life and to this world and to this time. It is part of the human condition and best seen not as a free-thinker’s alternative to religion, but as its very source. When we talk about religion without any qualifying ‘a’ or ‘the’ we are talking about the realised spirituality of an individual, without reference to any particular formalised path of faith. And when we use the expressions ‘a religion’ or ‘religions’ we are talking about historical cultural phenomena such as Christianity or Judaism.

The schema below shows the relationships between the various terms, which I think it would be reasonable for humanists to accept.



Humanism in Africa

Part five: Mubarak Bala
by Lynda Tilley



Nigeria's Mubarak Bala not guilty of, nor charged for, blasphemy

News of the 24-year sentence passed earlier this month on President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, Mubarak Bala, has devastated the African Humanist community and caused bewilderment and concern amongst godless people worldwide.

The narrative being promoted in the media and reinforced by the public, that he's been 'sentenced for blasphemy' is not only incorrect, but is extremely damaging, especially for Nigerian atheists who are suffering personally from the backlash of this 'fake news' with taunts and threats on their lives as the misinformed appear to be riding the high of a fake 'victory wave'.

Introduced into twelve Nigerian states in 1999, Sharia Law *only applies to Muslims* in relation to family/personal matters, not to criminal matters (these twelve states also practice Nigeria's penal code, not its criminal code). Sharia law plays no role in the judicial system and much of it goes against not only the Nigerian Constitution (which guarantees citizens' rights to freedom of thought, expression and religion) but also the laws of international Human Rights Agreements, of which Nigeria is a signatory. Under Nigeria's penal code, blasphemy only breaks the law if it either intends to (deliberately) cause a



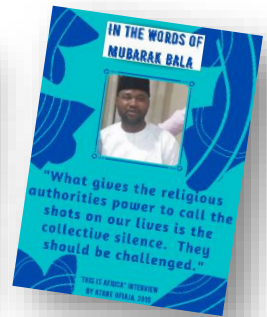
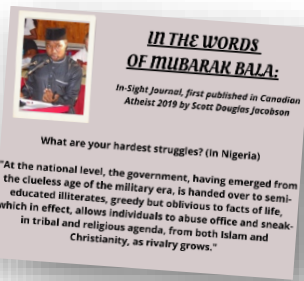
breach of peace or leads to (an unintended) breach of peace.

The four Facebook posts Mubarak was charged for grew to nine as his Facebook page – 'the scene of the crime' – has been left open and unsecured since his arrest, so old posts were used to add to the charge sheet.

He's been given 24 years for possibly causing a breach of peace (none ever occurred). I'm hopeful that an appeals court will finally see justice served and he'll be released.

Mubarak Bala has never been a religious but rather a political prisoner. The posts that got him arrested related to 'blasphemy' but were merely a convenient way to imprison him and therefore silence and control him. If not this, I'm certain something else would have been used instead.





Mubarak was schooled from a young age in the Wahabi way with Jihadist ideology. Furthermore, his father is considered a 'respected' Islamic scholar and is one of the senior people responsible for enforcing Jihadist Sharia Law in Nigeria. This is a law and belief system which Mubarak strongly opposed because it repressed his people, and he knew it would be disastrous for Nigeria's future. He wanted to establish a secular political party, get into a Kano State government position in order to abolish Sharia Law and one day run for the presidency in a secular Nigeria. His goals were common knowledge, even to those who never knew him personally.

When he left Islam and declared he was an atheist he received a personal warning on video by the then leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, that if he didn't turn back onto the path expected of him, he would be killed. Mubarak responded to him in writing, advising him that he was unafraid, refused to be threatened and went on to explain exactly what he thought of Boko Haram's interference in and destruction of Nigeria and how he would one day be in a position to not only banish them forever off the continent, but also to recover compensation from them and seek justice for crimes they've committed in Nigeria.

Nigeria's dubious "free and fair" elections in

2019 gave the current long-serving and Sharia law-enforcing government a shake up and it's my belief that Mubarak was one of five leaders targeted between 2019 and 2021 who all opposed Jihadist ideology and who all stood against making deals with the likes of Boko Haram, had loud voices on social and other media platforms and respect amongst large groups of forward-thinking young Nigerians who supported and endorsed their beliefs. Three of these other four leaders were also arrested for bogus 'crimes' with fabricated charges and the fourth was abducted and went missing in the same manner as Mubarak; sadly, to this day his whereabouts are unknown.

Mubarak is significant not only as a Humanist, but as a much-respected Godless African leader with an intricate knowledge of Jihadist Ideology that no one else has, in one of our countries where terrorism is taking control rapidly and threatens our entire continent.

In my two-year fight for his release, I've come to know the harshly-judged and misrepresented Nigerian people, in a country where atheism is growing rapidly too. In contrast to all the evil, there are mostly wonderful, kind, upstanding Nigerians with Humanist hearts and values. Mubarak is one of them and I'll never stop campaigning for his freedom, for human rights for all Nigerians, and for a free and secular Nigeria.



Aaron Explores *Are we spiritual?*



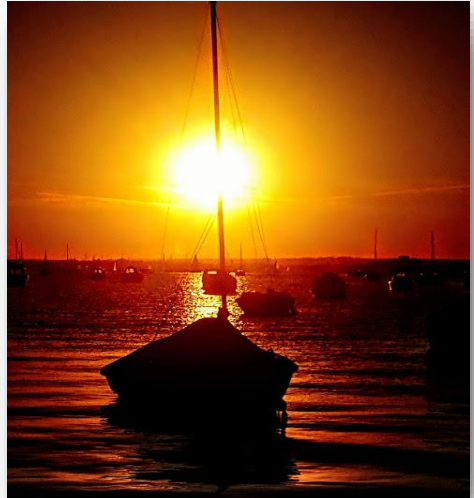
“Can a Humanist even be spiritual?” – is my starting point. Surely, it’s all that God stuff, isn’t it? Mystical life force? I mean, it’s in the name, ‘Spirit’, for goodness’ sake.

“Spirituality. noun. the state or quality of being dedicated to God, religion, or spiritual things or values, esp. as contrasted with material or temporal ones. The condition or quality of being spiritual.” Dictionary.com

Others will delve into the definition in depth in this issue, but for my own understanding, I wanted to grasp if there was indeed any way a Humanist falls into this area? I’m still not convinced.

In conversations with friends and on a **One Life** course this has cropped up, and the feeling held when observing a sunset was raised. I do like a good sunset and take pictures of them regularly. Several friends tell me, “You’ve seen one before, why are you taking another picture?” and I guess I need an answer to that – why do I? What feeling is invoked within me when I see a sunset? Why am I drawn to it? Why do I want yet another picture?

In short, I think it’s because it’s not an everyday occurrence. Sunsets don’t happen every night, and sometimes they are just nice, and other times stunning. Also, colours can be misty and faint, or vivid and full of strength and depth. But why should that matter? It’s just light refraction on the atmosphere or something. Why would this invoke any feeling within a person? Why go to a place to view it?



In the editorial meeting for this issue, a lot of angles were discussed, including music. Only last week I was lying in bed, in total darkness, earbuds in listening to a soundtrack that was very mood-evoking and powerful. The mathematical sequence of sounds played in a certain way, volume up, building, conducted, harmonised... it all initiated an emotional response. But was that spiritual? Certainly not a word I would ever use to describe anything in my world. It does give me goosebumps when I listen to it and combined with dramatic imagery as in this sequence it can be very emotional.... but it is NOT universal. This may set *my* blood on fire with tingling emotions running up and down my spine, but it may not for you. Music is a very subjective and individual thing, yet sunsets do mostly seem to be liked by everyone.



Do you describe yourself as spiritual?



Looking at the sunset above, can one say that the beauty of creation is being held back by my atheism, that my lack of belief and acceptance is preventing me from fully experiencing it? I don't think so. Beauty can be found in all things, even something as gross as coagulated bacteria and plankton waste washed up as foam and decorating the seashore. But when I see it, I am drawn again to capture its beauty in photography. Am I experiencing a spiritual moment, or just amazed at a random formation of bubbles?

I am no scientist, but I would imagine that when writing this article my brain is lighting up in certain areas, when I am jogging a different area lights up, when I am working on a Wordle puzzle another area, and when I appreciate beauty yet another area. Does the brain connecting neurons in one part have any significance to another? We feel, for whatever reason, different things based on different stimuli. Eating chocolate, having sex, being stroked, gazing deeply into someone's eyes – these all evoke feelings but aren't these experiences just the activation of different clusters of neurons? We don't see sunsets every day and so when we do, and a particular cluster of neurons lights up, we notice it as special.

Is this a coldly rational view of all the wondrous moments we can experience?

Humans have often imagined that God is the source of all those things that are unusual, or which cannot be explained easily: "I can't describe the feeling a sunset gives me, therefore it is from God, or from my inner spirit, a secret life-force that only comes alive when prompted by rare stimuli." I am sure if we saw a sunset each and every night it would cease to be special, just as sex every single night might also become routine.

How *can* we describe what a sunset does to us, how music makes us feel, how a piece of art can inspire us, or a poet's words connect with something inside. Perhaps we are just short of adjectives in our vocabulary, and when we are feeling 'something' we need to work harder to express the meaning of what we are experiencing, to tell the story our body is connecting with in that moment, and to commit it to memory.

We live once. We may only love once. For every sunset we see, we only see it once. Perhaps we need to live in the moment. Embrace the beauty, the tingles, the sensations and the heart flutters, and enjoy them whilst they last. The stimuli may be the cause, but it is our own body that is creating that feeling.





The Voice of Britain

David unleashed – without his Executive Editor's hat on

When Music First Transported Human Beings

A fanciful story inspired by a 60,000 year old Neanderthal Flute found in 1995

It was one of those cold, starry nights at the threshold of a cave near to what would one day be Cerkno, in North West Slovenia. Two dozen or so individuals – men, women and children – sitting around an open fire. The wood was fresh, so the burning fizzled and spat and reflected blazing red in their faces – quite in contrast to their blue, Neanderthal eyes. They looked on, deep into the flames, some of them shivering, but all of them covered in skins to keep warm.

This had been a difficult day. A mammoth hunt had gone wrong, and two men had been injured. One of the men – the leader – had been killed and he lay dead and wrapped in skins next to the huddled circle, but outside of any direct light of the fire. His mother, his mate, and his children were grieving but they would gather flowers tomorrow and bury him with cries of lament. The other man was still alive, but he fell during the hunt and broke his ankle. Such a break would be considered minor in these modern times, but 60,000 years ago it was a grave injury. The group would have to move on when the food ran out in a couple of days, and if he could not keep up with them, he might have to be left behind,



which meant almost certain death. Even if he were able to follow the group, he might never be able to walk normally again, and might spend the rest of his life in constant pain.

But at least there was plenty of food on this night. They had managed to bring down a young deer, which would provide for them all for the time being. And when their bellies were full, they would sit, satisfied and sated, enjoying the warmth of the fire before falling into a deep slumber.

This cave was a regular haunt, and they had often lodged there. The last time they visited was during winter, when they discovered a cave bear and her cub inside. With aid of fire, and spears they were able to drive the bear out and kill the cub – which provided food for some while. But when the meat was all but gone, they shattered the cooked bones of the





Thilo Parg / Wikimedia Commons

bear cub to get to the marrow inside – very nutritious.

One of the women in the group picked a broken thigh bone at the feast and attempted to blow at one end to extract the marrow at the other, but as she did so, the air through the bone emitted a pleasing whistling sound. She had heard bones make sounds like this before, and she sometimes wondered if it was the spirit of the dead animal speaking to her. She also knew well enough that if she drilled holes along the length of it, she could use her fingers to alter the tone at her control. A long, pointed tooth from a carnivore that she kept would do the trick. She stabbed the pointed end into the slightly softened bone and twisted it to the left and right, drilling holes that she could manipulate with her fingers to change the notes as she blew. It would make

a nice accompaniment, she thought, to the regular drum-rattle of sticks against wood that would be part of the ceremony of grief that they would have the following day for their dead leader.

But blowing through the instrument as the fire burned that night somehow provided some extra comfort for all of the assembled, as they watched the sparks flying up from the fire, and the stars in the heavens shining above. Such a scene filled them with awe and wonder, and the strange music of the flute expressed and enriched how they felt.

After the burial the next day, she would leave the flute at that cave in memory of that special night.

It would be a better day tomorrow.



The Brittain Interview

Our video conference with notable people, interviewed by David Brittain

Steve Banks

Executive Editor David Brittain was privileged to interview composer Steve Banks about his inspiration for “Blue Pearl: A One World Oratorio”. See the full advert on page 22 and the humanist discount. Click the YouTube button below to watch the interview.



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The

Brittain Interview

Our video conference with notable people, interviewed by David Brittain

Jeremy Rodell



Humanist Jeremy Rodell hesitates to use the word 'spirituality' but he does believe that it can be used meaningfully by humanists in at least two distinct ways.

Click the YouTube button below to watch the full interview with David Brittain.



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“We can have peace or air conditioning....”

At a press conference on 6th April to discuss sanctions on Russia, Prime Minister Mario Draghi said this: “We ask ourselves if the price of gas can be traded with peace. Faced with these two options, what do we prefer? Peace or heating, or air conditioning on for the whole summer? I would put it under these terms. What do you say if you ask yourself that question? Do you prefer peace or air condition on? That’s the question we should ask ourselves.”

It’s heartening to see that politicians can frame moral questions in such stark terms. But what do we mean by that pleasant-sounding word ‘peace’? It’s not just the presence of desirable states like harmony, serenity and tranquillity. It’s the avoidance of terrible things: a woman asking why soldiers are digging a trench in her back garden and being told it is her grave; drunken soldiers smashing up your home and raping your daughters; a man cycling down a street and being shot; an old woman with nothing left to do but bury her son and feed abandoned dogs in her ruined village; people living in bunkers for weeks on end with no food, water or electricity.



Mario Draghi, Prime Minister of Italy
Photo credit: Quirinale.it

Russia has produced some of the world’s greatest writers and musicians: Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov. And today, apart from oil and gas, its main exports are terror, barbarism, and wanton destruction. It has become an abomination. The memories and hatreds it is creating today will stain the pages of history for centuries.

The choice for Europe is pretty stark. We can prioritise our GDP growth figures and our home comforts. We can prioritise jobs and economic stability. Or we can join the good fight and make sacrifices for peace, as our parents and grandparents did when they were faced with a similar choice.





'Spirituality' and Humpty Dumpty

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."

From *Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll

I'm with Alice on this one, especially when it comes to a word like 'spirituality'. As a humanist, I find this particular word problematic. Some humanists seem happy to use it quite freely. Others, like me, avoid it like the plague. The reason I avoid it is that I want my discussions with other people, whether fellow humanists or people of faith, to be clear. What I might mean if I use the word is likely to be quite different from the meaning intended by, say a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Muslim or a Christian. Even among humanists the intended meaning is not always clear. It may mean the ability to be transported by a work of art, a piece of music or literature, something that engages the imagination and the emotions apart from oneself. The term I would use for this is transcendence. I would use the same word to describe the feeling of awe inspired by nature: a beautiful sunset, a rainbow, a rugged coastline or a clear night sky. Others seem to use it to describe a sense of peace, quietude and meditation. That is what I would call contemplation.

Resorting to the dictionaries in order to try to find a secular definition doesn't really help. The Cambridge Dictionary definition is "the quality that involves deep feelings and beliefs of a religious nature, rather than the physical parts of life". The Oxford English Dictionary offers "the quality of being concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things." Merriam-Webster gives four definitions of 'spirituality':

1. something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such
2. clergy
3. sensitivity or attachment to religious values
4. the quality or state of being spiritual

The definition of 'spiritual' doesn't get us very far either:

1. of, relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit: incorporeal
2. a: of or relating to sacred matters
b: ecclesiastical rather than lay or temporal
3. concerned with religious values
4. related or joined in spirit
5. a: of or relating to supernatural beings or phenomena
b: of, relating to, or involving spiritualism : spiritualistic.

So, it seems very difficult to separate any idea of 'spirituality' from 'spirit', for which there are too many definitions to elucidate here, but most of them are to do with something sacred, supernatural or 'incorporeal', none of which seem to be definitions appropriate ▷



for Humanism. I don't believe any part of me is 'incorporeal'. Everything about me is quite definitely contained in my body, including my mind which is, after all, an emergent property of my brain which, last time I looked, lived in my skull. Therefore, definitions referring to my 'spirit' or 'soul' do not apply. Similarly, I have no belief in the supernatural, so ideas attached to the purported existence of metaphysical or spiritual realms and beings are also not applicable.

I feel fairly confident in assuming that people of faith would not understand how people who do not believe in the existence of the soul or of purely incorporeal beings could talk about 'spirituality' at all. To the faithful these ethereal, non-physical realms do exist. Even Buddhists, most of whom don't believe in a god as such, do, like Hindus, believe in *samsara*, the concept of an ever-revolving wheel of life and death, where the spirit is repeatedly reborn into a succession of different bodies or spiritual realms, the kind of reincarnation you experience depending on what positive or negative karma you have accumulated during life.

The Christian concept of spirituality is a feeling of being in communion with the Spirit of Christ, without undue focus on the physical world, being led by the Holy Spirit. Islam teaches that humans are made from 'sounding clay of altered black smooth mud' (the body) and that the soul was a part of Allah, breathed into the body by him at the time of creation - *Quran, Chapter 15 (Surah Al-Hijr), verses 28-29*. Classical Judaism postulates an afterlife. According to Jewish tradition, the human soul is immortal, surviving the physical death of the body into the Hereafter, or *Olam Haba* (the 'world to come'). New Age Spirituality has various manifestations, but the basic concept seems to be that there is 'something out there', in the form of a kind of 'natural energy', a spark



New Age meditation group at the Snoqualmie Moondance festival, 1992.

Photo by [Joe Mabel](#), CC BY-SA 3.0,

of which exists within us all and which we can all tune into.

With so many different concepts of what 'spirituality' means, I find it difficult to see how the word can be used in a way that clearly and unambiguously expresses a secular or humanist meaning.

Possibly, humanists could agree among themselves what they mean by it, but I still think that words like 'transcendence', 'awe' and 'contemplation' serve the purpose better and make it easier to participate in dialogue with others.



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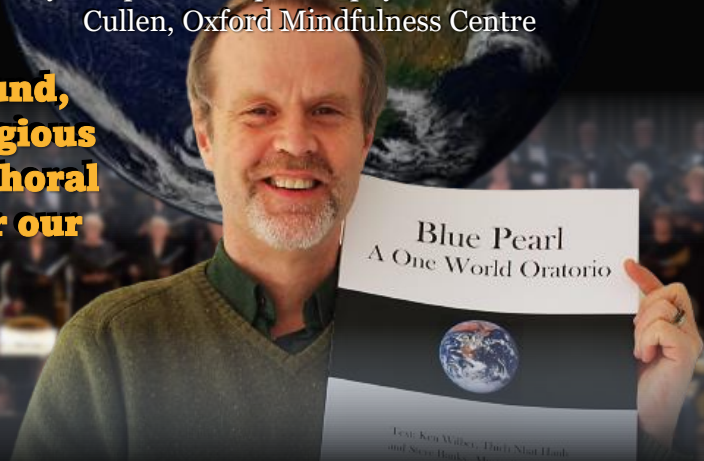
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Ethical Encounters

Paul Ewans explores moral questions



Humanists often emphasise the importance of kindness, that we should try not to harm people and help them as much as we can. New research has highlighted our readiness to act in kindly ways.

With help from [the BBC](#), researchers at the University of Sussex have interviewed 60,000 people about their experience of kindness. Their main finding is that acts of kindness are very common. Three-quarters of respondents said that they received kindness from close friends or family quite often or nearly all the time, while 59 per cent said they had benefited from a kind act within the past day. And two-thirds believe the pandemic has made us kinder. This may be because we are now more ready to look after each other. But perhaps it is simply that stressful times have made us quicker to notice small acts of kindness.

Not surprisingly, people who often receive acts of kindness have higher levels of well-being than other people. But the research additionally shows that people who often act kindly, or even just notice other people acting kindly, also have higher levels of well-being. Kindness makes us feel good regardless of whether we are the one who is being helped or the one who is being kind.

So why are we not even kinder than we already are? The main reason people gave for not being kind was that they were afraid their



Image: host-students.com

actions might be misinterpreted. They also said that they didn't have time to be as kind as they'd like to be, and that social media played a part in stopping them from being kinder. Sadly, when being kind involves giving money to those in need, it is not only the people with the lowest incomes who give the least. People with the highest incomes also give very little.

So while we often act kindly, most of us prioritise being kind to friends, family and those who ask for help. But is this enough? The research suggests that things would go better all round if we tried to be kind to everyone, no matter who they are. Just as it costs nothing to be polite, it often costs nothing to be kind. Why not give it a try?





Granny's Spiritual Awakening

Paul Ewans

My grandmother was the daughter of a railway director and was living a conventional middle-class life when a profound mystical experience threw her completely off-track.

Like many middle-class women of her time, my grandmother had a sheltered life while she was growing up, a life of refined domesticity. Her parents expected that she would marry a man from a similar background to her own and that she would continue to live a 'drawing room life' after her marriage.

But one sunny day granny went out for a walk and wandered into a wood in which there was a stream. She stopped beside the stream and looked down. The sunlight was shining through the leaves and dancing on the surface of the water. And as she watched the flickering and dancing of the light she had an experience, an experience which she was unable to describe, but which left her utterly convinced that there was a God.

It seems that granny had an experience of the kind first described by William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). She had no control over the experience (it simply happened to her), it lasted only a short time and, although she



could not describe what had happened, she believed that she had learnt something important. Are experiences like this very rare or really quite common? It seems impossible to know for sure but, for what it is worth, [a survey](#) of British adults in 2000 found that 38 per cent of respondents had experienced 'an awareness of the presence of God' at least once in their lives.

But were all these experiences as intense and as influential as granny's was? Her new-found spirituality caused her to break with her family to marry a working-class Baptist who later became a clergyman. Together they went through most of the Second World War in the Portsmouth dockyards. Their home was destroyed by bombing and granny's bath – to her great shame - ended up on the pavement for all the neighbours to see. But despite all her many troubles over a long life, she never lost her faith in the 'God' that she encountered in the dancing light one day when she was young.





By John Coss

Abraham Maslow

Continuing our series of profiles of Humanists who are not as widely known as they should be, including distinguished men and women not generally known to be Humanists.

“Our earth does not seem to be made for us, as a home is made for a man by an architect. If there were such an architect or designer, he made a sloppy job of it and should not be trusted in the future.”

Abraham Maslow (1908-70) was one of the founders of humanistic psychology, which emphasizes human uniqueness, subjectivity, and capacity for psychological growth. A lifelong atheist, he was the 1967 American Humanist of the Year*.

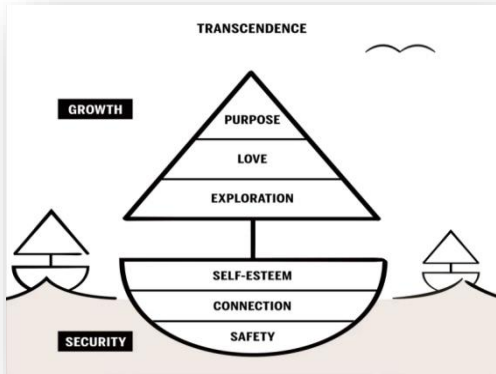
Maslow focused on the development of healthy individuals rather than abnormal behaviour. He is best known for three key ideas: the hierarchy of needs, self-actualisation, and peak experiences. Maslow had a strong philosophical bent: his ideas derived from a wide range of experience, contact with many eminent thinkers from a wide range of disciplines, and extensive reading. They are deeper and more complex than those popularly attributed to him, and developed throughout his life. Maslow was the subject of [Mind Changers](#) in 2013. *The Right to be Human* by Edward Hoffman is an excellent account of his life.

[SimplyPsychology](#) gives a good introduction to Maslow’s ideas. It traces the development of the familiar pyramid representing his hierarchy of needs (a metaphor which he never used himself) to the final eight-stage version. This is divided into the lower four levels of ‘Deficiency needs’ (physiological, safety, love and belonging, and esteem needs) and the

higher four levels of ‘Being or Growth’ needs (cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation and transcendence needs). According to Maslow, the Being or Growth values of self-actualisers are:

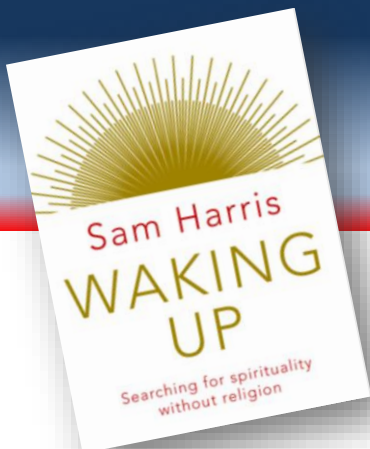
Goodness; Beauty; Unity, wholeness, transcendence of opposites; Uniqueness; Perfection and necessity; Completion; Justice and order; Simplicity; Richness; Effortlessness; Playfulness; Self-sufficiency; and Meaningfulness.

Maslow’s ideas remain influential in education, management, and health and social care. But there have been many developments in humanistic psychology since his time. The [Sailboat metaphor](#) of Scott Barry Kaufman (graphic below) integrates Maslow’s thinking with the latest research on attachment, connection, creativity, love, purpose, and other building blocks of a life well-lived.



*Awarded to ‘a person of national or international reputation who, through the application of humanist values, has made a significant contribution to the improvement of the human condition.’

Book Review by David Warden



Sam Harris is an American neuroscientist and well known atheist author of *The End of Faith* and *The Moral Landscape*. *Waking Up: Searching for spirituality without religion* was published in 2014.

Waking Up is essentially about Buddhism and the benefits of mindfulness meditation. Whether it is necessary to refer to this as 'spirituality' is perhaps a matter of personal taste. I do not think calling it 'spirituality' adds any value – except perhaps to Harris's bank balance – and it may have the unfortunate effect of putting off people who might otherwise benefit from mindfulness.

The core idea of the book is that most people react, or overreact, to their thoughts and emotions and this is the principal cause of conflict and suffering in the world. Humans suffer from tides or waves of psychological distress in the form of fear, anger, envy and shame and many people resort to harmful coping strategies, such as alcohol or overeating, in order to assuage the pain of such emotions. That's the basic diagnosis of the human condition. So what's the remedy? The remedy, according to Harris and his Buddhist teachers, is to realise that the *self* which is the subject of all this pain and suffer-

ing *does not exist* and that thoughts and emotions are nothing more than *transitory appearances or fleeting phenomena* in your field of consciousness. If you've never come across these ideas before they may at first seem strange. But if you've ever tried to *observe* your thoughts and feelings as they arise in your mind and in your body, treating them not as horrible things happening to *you* but as electrochemical events ebbing and flowing in your brain and body, then you may well have noticed that the power and potency of painful emotions can be diminished simply by this act of deliberate observation and awareness. And that's it. That's the secret. I know it works because I do it quite often when I become aware of a painful emotion like *threat*. I treat it as a chemical event in my body (it's a cortisol surge) and I know that it will simply dissipate in time (of course, I may also have to assess the nature of the threat and take appropriate action).

I think this is a useful psychological skill and if you don't have it in your repertoire, especially if you are troubled by toxic emotions such as rage and you resort to harmful coping strategies like drink, then you may want to get yourself on a mindfulness training course. Harris informs us that mindfulness masters can spend 10,000 hours perfecting their skill. I think there are better things to do with 10,000 hours, frankly, but the basic skill of mindfulness meditation is useful for everyone. It may help to reduce suffering and conflict in the world. And that would be a good thing.



Flat Earthers need kindness not contempt

Anthony Lewis's article in the March edition of *Humanistically Speaking* strikes exactly the wrong tone for the issue of Flat Earthers. The writer Lee McIntyre has recently published a wonderful book on this subject entitled *How to Talk to a Science Denier*, a large portion of which was about the author attending a Flat Earth convention. These believers were (anecdotally) all traumatised individuals who no longer trust society and the information it gives them. They have instead embraced another community that embraces them back. No number of facts will ever argue them out of this. They need to be lured back with kindness and questions. For more, see my overview of McIntyre's book here:

<https://is.gd/FGit8h>

Ed Gibney, Trustee of North East Humanists

Did we have a 10-day week prior to the Genesis creation story?

It is rather a shame that a report on Stonehenge being a giant solar calendar was not issued or published until after the March 2022 edition of *Humanistically Speaking* was put to bed (see link on the right). Having read the article, it immediately occurred to me to wonder why this system of dating was abandoned and replaced by the present one. The answer, I am guessing, is because the Bible says the mythical creator god took six days to create everything and then rested for one day. This, presumably, was taken by

early Christians to imply that a week should last for exactly 7 days and not for 10 days, as previously. Would any of your contributors have any knowledge on this question? It would be interesting to know just when and why the 10-day week was abandoned, and the 7-day week was adopted. If it turns out, as I suspect, that it was because of religious influence, then maybe we should spark a debate to get the 10-day week restored?

I do like the idea of one 'month' in the year being 5 days. Perhaps the best time for it to take place would be on/from Winter Solstice Day? This 'month' could be re-created and named Saturnalia to revive the tradition of Saturnalia in place of the now overly-commercialised Christmas? There may be other, better, alternatives.

Maybe *Humanistically Speaking* subscribers could be asked to nominate alternative dating systems? My understanding is that the speed of Earth's rotation is very gradually slowing down. This presumably will mean, in time, that the average day length will get longer? Perhaps we need to create a new calendar based on an average 365.5 days to meet this event? So, a leap year every two years instead of every four years, to allow more marital proposals by women? What do you think?

John Dowdle, President of Watford Area Humanists

See <https://news.sky.com/story/stonehenge-mystery-solved-heres-why-the-monument-was-made-12555094>





A 'Humanist Reflection' in Council meeting

I've just returned from the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Council Meeting where I gave a moment of reflection as the 'opening prayer'. I was so nervous as it was all very formal, and no one warned me I would be part of the Mayor's procession into the chamber! Quite a few people assumed I was a Reverend and kept calling me Rev Lewis or Rev Anthony, so it was a bit Basil Fawlty at times! But it is a first for Windsor Humanists and the first time a non-religious perspective has been given as part of the full Council Meeting. I was there representing Windsor and Maidenhead Community Forum, the local interfaith group. My script is shown below.

Anthony Lewis, Windsor Humanists

Our Shared Humanity – a Humanist Reflection

Many of us now live in a social media echo chamber where we mainly interact with people who are like us or think like us. We are becoming ever more suspicious of difference and contemptuous of people who hold equally valid but different views from ourselves. These people we unfriend, block, or worse. We all have experienced the vitriol of the faceless online troll and wonder how can anyone be so nasty to a stranger.

The pandemic has exaggerated these trends and, in some ways brought us together against the shared threat from Covid, but the successive lockdowns also isolated us even

further from each other.

These experiences online and during the pandemic could drive us to turn even more inwards to our own church, family or community thus exaggerating our differences and separation further. It becomes a vicious circle which narrows our wider community, dividing us into smaller identity groups based on faith, belief, ethnicity or wealth.

But we all have so much more in common than the barriers of difference and fear that we erect. We have our shared humanity.

At the core of most religions, when you strip out the doctrinal and divine aspects, is a wish to live a good life according to the Golden Rule – treat others as you want to be treated yourself. And that is Humanism - a positive life stance centred on people based on our shared humanity guided by reason, evidence and science, without reliance on unseen supernatural entities.

Humanists focus on this one precious life that we all know and experience directly. We believe our innate altruism and evolved sense of empathy will always endure over our more violent primitive instincts, otherwise humanity as a species would not have survived for us to be here in this chamber today.

Therefore, as a humanist, I have a deep faith in the unlimited power of human love, kindness and compassion to win through in the end, to bring us together despite our differences. Wouldn't it be good for us all if we had more of it?



Poet's Corner

By Alex Williams



Spirit

A wish
That our bodies contain
Immortality.

A dream
That our essence transcends
This muddy earth.

A faith
That heaven
Will be better.

A hope
That hell
Will be worse.

A word
That blushes
With nebulous meanings.

A metaphor
That died
But still distorts.

A ghost
That survives
In frightened yearning.

A soul
That thrives
In desperate wanting.

A centre
To our misunderstanding
Of ourselves.

Astonishing

The gravestone of authority
Casts its shadow over me
Obliterating liberty:
Punishing.

I march to their percussive beat
Submit to their oppressive heat
A slave to their shameless deceit:
Perishing.

I cling to an instinctive dream
To live in peace in nature's stream
But they have crushed my self-esteem:
Vanishing.

Look to those whose ancient shoulders
You can climb on, tough as boulders
Legends whose fire burns and smoulders:
Nourishing.

Choose your purpose, map your way
Walk your journey day by day
Sculpt yourself from life's warm clay:
Flourishing.

Finally, soar, ascend the air
Fly with acrobatic flair
Live the life you dream and dare:
Astonishing.

Secular Verses (2021) by Alex Williams is a collection of original poems inspired by secularism, atheism, and humanism. Available [here](#)
More info: www.thedialup.blogspot.com



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A guide to those groups sharing our magazine

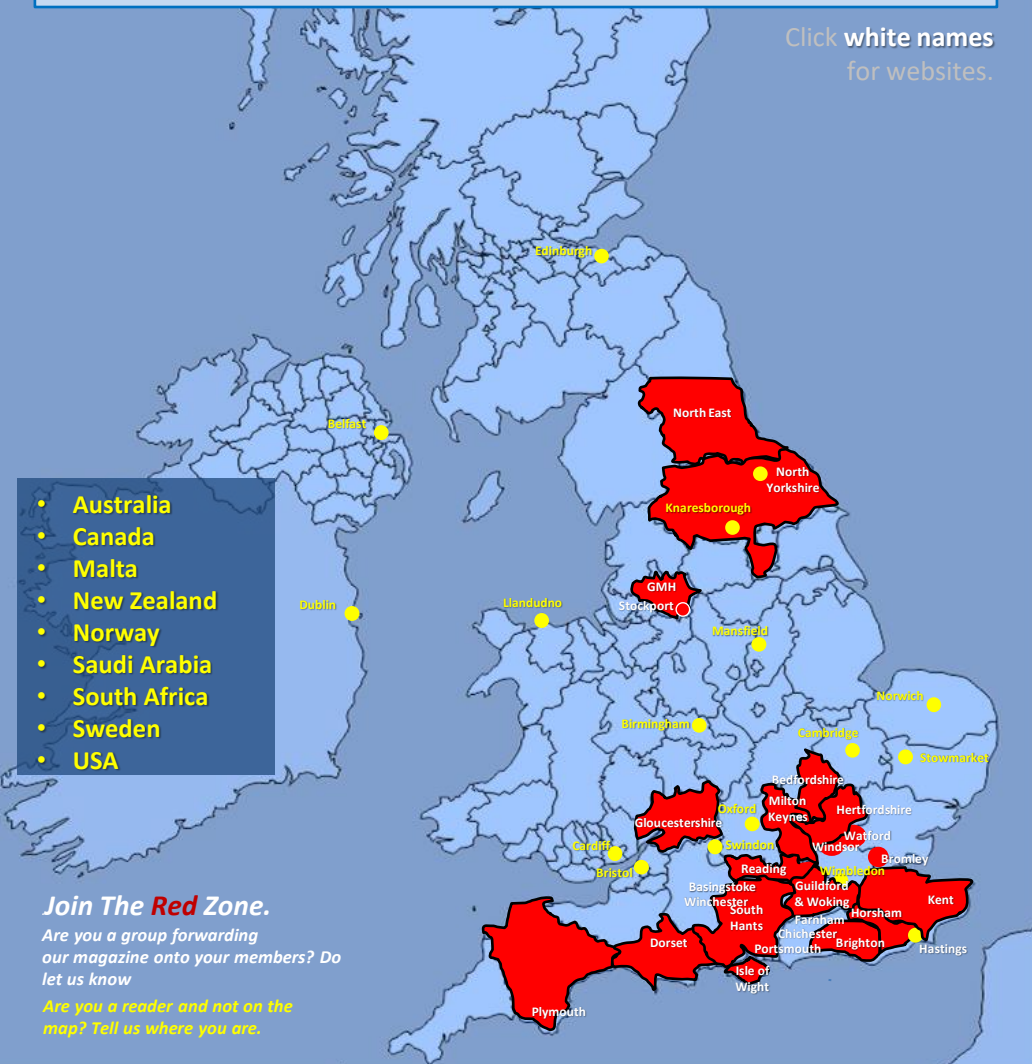
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Humanistically Speaking

A free magazine created for and by Humanists

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