



Humanistically Speaking



February 2022

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

LEAVING MY RELIGION



Imtiaz Shams
Faith to Faithless
The Alpha Course
Humanism in Kenya
Witchcraft in Africa
Humanism and Star Trek
Is Humanism a cult?
Origins of Covid-19
Jonathan Glover
Readers' Responses
Poet's corner

Humanistically
Speaking



send an email



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.

Dear Reader,

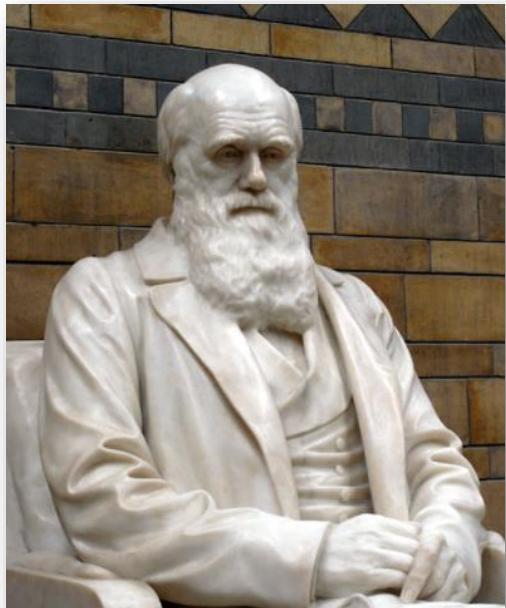
This issue of *Humanistically Speaking* comes with a warning because it deals with cults. Some of our articles this month contain stories and pictures that some readers might find disturbing. So this issue is not for the faint hearted. But that makes it all the more important to place on record because we are addressing issues that seem, persistently, to be overlooked by the national media and which are therefore off the radar of public consciousness. So we hope this serves as a wake-up call, drawing attention to the terrible suffering of innocent people through ignorance, stupidity and the kind of moronic superstition that we thought we had left behind with the Inquisition. So please brace yourself - particularly from page seven - where our Africa correspondent Lynda Tilley reports on the persecution of so-called 'witches'. But it's not all bad news from Africa because we understand from Steve Hurd (who is chair of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust) that the BBC's Panorama Team have been working on a programme about the development of Humanist Schools in Uganda for the World Service TV Series 'Africa Eye'. We'll try to let you know if and when it will be broadcast.

Also this month, we've included a fascinating report from Anthony Lewis about a possible evolutionary explanation for religious beliefs. Then David Warden reports on his experiences at an Alpha course – and later on rounds off his thoughts by asking whether Humanism itself is a cult!

And then there are moral reflections, with Maggie musing on some of the less-than-savoury Bible teachings, and Paul exploring whether there is any ethical difference between allowing someone to die and actual killing. In his new column *Humanists in Profile*, John Coss discusses Jonathan Glover's reflections on the slippery subject of conventional morality. Add to that my interview with Faith to Faithless founder Imtiaz Shams, and his hopes for a telephone helpline for apostates, and you will begin to understand why I think this month's issue is not only an important read for any Humanist – but vital reading for anyone who is prepared to look the world in the eye with honest enquiry, integrity and compassion.



Humanist News



Darwin Day to be celebrated around the world on February 12

'International Darwin Day' inspires people around the globe to reflect and act on the principles of intellectual bravery, perpetual curiosity, scientific thinking, and hunger for truth as embodied in the life and work of the great naturalist Charles Darwin. It's a day of celebration, activism, and international cooperation for the advancement of science, education, and human well-being.

Darwin Day is observed by the United Nations and its members as an opportunity for international partnerships through the common language of science for the common good of all.

<https://darwinday.org/>

Darwin Day with Ariane Sherine

A number of humanist groups around the country, including Greater Manchester Humanists and Dorset Humanists, are hosting Ariane Sherine as their special guest speaker for Darwin Day. Ariane will be talking about her book *How to Live to 100: What Will REALLY Help You Lead a Longer, Healthier Life?* (2020). Ariane is an author, comedy writer, journalist, singer-songwriter, podcaster and designer. She created the hugely successful Atheist Bus Campaign – "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Ariane went on to edit and compile the bestselling celebrity charity anthology *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*.



Humanistically Speaking is for humanist groups everywhere, but our readership is growing and is fully open to non-humanists and persons of faith.



BBC Panorama reports on Uganda Humanist Schools

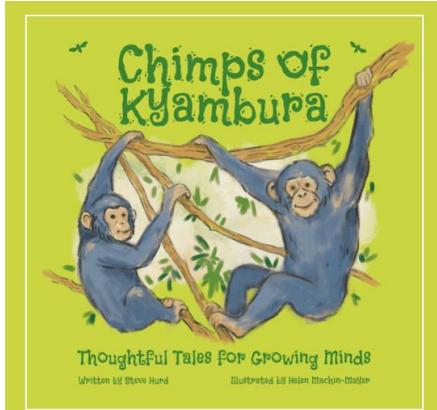
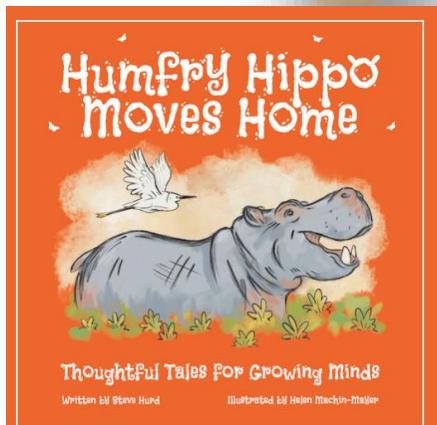
Steve Hurd, chair of the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust, sent his heartfelt thanks to everyone who supported them in their efforts to get the Humanist Schools through the enforced school closures of 2021. On January 10th, 2022, schools in Uganda were allowed to reopen and children are returning as parents find money for school fees.

School income remains low but the trust is helping them out with supplementary funding until they can cover their day to day running costs again.

As they return to their main task of bringing inclusive, liberal and humanist education to children, the Humanist Schools are feeling optimistic. The schools were doing well before Covid struck and the Trust is determined to restore and improve on the high standards of education and welfare that they were achieving then.

The growth in Uganda of Humanism and of Humanist Schools is unique in the world. The Trust is delighted that the BBC's Panorama team arrived in Uganda to document this development for the World Service TV Series 'Africa Eye'.

Why not find out more about how you can help? See link below.



You can buy these 'Thoughtful Tales for Growing Minds', written by Steve Hurd and illustrated by Helen Machin-Mayer, to help support the Uganda Humanist Schools Trust. Go to <https://thoughtful-tales-for-growing-minds.webflow.io/>



Further information on the Uganda Humanist Schools:
<https://ugandahumanistschooltrust.org/latest-news/>

Is there an evolutionary basis to religious belief?

By Anthony Lewis



There's an exciting revolution under way in genetics, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and evolutionary psychology which indicates that belief in something might be a requirement of our cognitive and societal health.

Could this be why religious belief endures four hundred years after the Enlightenment and the success of science in explaining our place in the universe? Could it be that there's an evolutionary basis for religious belief? If you remove religion, do political and secular ideologies inevitably emerge to replace supernatural faith? Might we replace religious faith with something far worse if we are not careful? Historic horrors cannot all be laid at the door of the world's great religions. The horrendous history of the last century illustrates that non-religious ideologies can drive us to the Gulag or the concentration camps.

In this article, I will explore three interlocking brain systems which, when put together, suggest that *belief* has been a powerful driver of our social evolution.

Our 'Chimp Brains'

The oldest parts of our brains (brain stem and the amygdala) are used to manage our emotions and our autonomic bodily systems. This powerful system controls our flight, fight or freeze responses. We are intricately linked to our senses and emotions as embodied creatures. We're a seething mass of biochemistry in constant flux and we share



these deep-seated visceral systems with all living creatures. Our emotions are like a herd of wild horses. Corralled and tamed they can be a force for good; untamed they can destroy us. Human progress has depended on societal controls of these violent excesses. But we are easily hijacked by our primitive chimp brains – a truth which social media companies cynically exploit.

Social Species

We are naturally a social species. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar has discovered that there's a direct correlation between the size of the neocortex and the average primate group size. In humans this 'Dunbar Number' is 150. This is the number of people with whom the average person can comfortably maintain good stable working relationships.

Language and 'mental models'

Linguistics researcher Vyv Evans in *The Language Myth: Why Language is Not an Instinct* (2014) outlines how human language co-evolved with our other mental abilities. ▷



The Chomsky hypothesis of a unique language instinct, setting humans apart from other creatures with a ‘universal grammar gene’, has been debunked by neuroscience. Language developed closely with our cognitive abilities to help us build *internal mental models* of reality to help us survive.

Mortality salience

Humans are probably the first creatures to evolve a direct awareness of their own mortality. The conscious realisation that our embodied existence is contingent, and our inevitable demise a certainty, would have been a scary thing for early humans both at the individual and social levels. This emerging ‘mortality salience’ is an unsettling side effect of our improving cognitive abilities and probably represents a unique cognitive singularity in the evolution of life on earth. The resulting ‘existential terrors’ have been fertile ground for superstitions, religions and assorted explanations about our existence and death throughout the ages in all human societies. It appears likely that a *stable belief framework* helps keep our various competing cognitive systems in balance, so that we are freed from the existential burden of over-contemplating our mortality so that we can get on with living useful and constructive lives.

Three interlocking brains: chimp, cognitive, and social

Our brains consist of three primary brain systems that have co-evolved with our physiology and which all have to work together. Our chimp brain runs our autonomic body systems, senses, emotions and feelings. Our cognitive brain provides us with our mental models of reality, and our social brain keeps tabs on all our social relationships and hierarchies including norms of behaviour and fairness.

Belief systems

Belief systems probably represent the highest level of our evolved cognitive capabilities. Our beliefs help provide us with a coherent sense of purpose, meaning and significance to our lives helping to lock our different cognitive systems together. The belief systems that give us the best survival chances will endure through normal natural Darwinian processes by being shared and replicated through language and propagated long term by our cultures through the generations. They represent the ultimate manifestation of a ‘meme’ – an idea proposed by Richard Dawkins. Many cults or extreme political ideologies deliberately seek to hijack our brain systems for purposes that are not healthy for us as individuals or for society. Sadly, our history is littered with many atrocities and genocides driven by those with extreme shared beliefs, many untethered from reality.

Humanism – rooted in reality

One of the few belief systems that actually roots itself in reality using science, evidence and reason and which objectively places us firmly in the natural world as evolving embodied creatures is Humanism. As science advances it’s important that we progressively replace religion with belief systems like Humanism that take account of our improved understanding of the natural world. The need to believe in something has clearly evolved to be a deep-seated cognitive need in all of us. Our beliefs can drive us to great things, but they can also lead us to disaster, both individually and collectively. In my view this is why Humanism is so important, because it’s best placed to replace religious faith in a constructive way to protect us from even worse secular belief systems.



Trigger warning!

David Brittain – Executive Editor



I'd like to warn our readers that the following two pages contain images of 'witch' persecution which some of you may find disturbing.

We make no apology for this, but we feel it's only fair to explain our editorial decision-making process. *Humanistically Speaking* wants to bring you stories of human interest that are truthful, honest and, in this case, brutal. There are things that happen in the world which some media sources will tidy up, sanitise, and render pleasant for 'tea-time' viewing. But if something is blunt and contains a story, we feel is worth bringing to you, then we will advise you accordingly, and let you make your own decision about whether to look and read or look away.

Lynda Tilley, our Africa correspondent, explains that 'These images were all circulated on social media and WhatsApp groups at some stage and a few ended up in local newspapers. No source is ever given. No one wants to own up to having taken these, I would imagine.' The images and descriptions are heart-breaking. Women being accused of witchcraft for no other reason than having unusually-coloured eyes or a late-stage pregnancy. Community misfortunes are blamed on 'witches' and religious pastors cash-in on their claimed ability to identify witches and perform exorcisms.

Witchcraft in Africa is partly a legacy of Christian colonialism. It is, undoubtedly, one of the most revolting legacies imaginable, considering that, in England, we stopped burning witches 300 years ago. We pay tribute to humanists in Africa who are trying to promote rationality and science.



A woman accused of being a witch pleading for her life. One of the less disturbing images sent to us by Lynda.

How you can help

Lynda informs us that Malawi is currently reviewing their Witchcraft Act and trying to get witchcraft recognised legally. You can read about the proposed new Malawian law [here](#) and you can email the Malawi Law Commission at lawcom@lawcom.gov.mw with your objections.

Please also visit the "Advocacy For Alleged Witches" website [here](#) to see how you can help in the "Decade of Activism Against Witch Persecution In Africa". You can also find them on Facebook or email them at :

advocacyforallegedwitches@gmail.com

Witchcraft in Africa

by Lynda Tilley

Witchcraft. People being burned at the stake. A barbaric practice from medieval times, one of the horrors of another era, banished to the history books. Or so you might think, but sadly you'd be wrong. It's taking place right here, today, in Africa. Not only is it present in almost every one of our countries, but it's believed to be increasing and spreading.

Along with this we have another rapidly growing superstitious belief known as "Money Rituals" where the murder of a person and presentation of their body parts is said to bring a person money or cause their business to prosper.

Both superstitions stem from desperation and greed. As countries fall into economic decline and unemployment rises due to Covid-19, increasingly desperate people are paying, with what little cash they have, for a money ritual in the hope of getting out of poverty. At the cost of an innocent person's life the only "winner" in this evil game is the con man (or woman) taking their money.

Witchcraft allegations are yet another scam - by a self appointed "witchdoctor" who mysteriously is able to tell who's a witch and who has become ill or had "bad luck" due to a supposed spell cast by said witch, or a wizard, as men are not immune to this accusation either. Even innocent children are not safe.

Both 'witchdoctors' and pastors of revivalist-



This woman, probably from the Congo, has light coloured eyes which is probably why she was considered a 'witch'. She allegedly 'flew over' a church and crash-landed on her way to a meeting. No one saw her flying, of course. They just heard the story and saw the body. The first person on the scene apparently saw her 'vomit up' the hand of one of her victims.

type churches, which are springing up everywhere in Africa, are making money off this practice. 'Cleansing of witches' or exorcism ceremonies are charged for by the church. The pastor is mysteriously 'gifted' with the sense to know who is a witch and what is the cure.

Anyone can be accused of 'witchcraft' but older, poorer women in rural areas seem to be targeted in particular. The root cause of it is almost always jealousy or greed. Elderly widows can be targeted by younger family members who want their land or possessions. Orphaned children left in the care of family members who already have too many mouths to feed, or twins or disabled children seen to cause a burden on the family may also be targeted.

Every accident or act of nature can, conveniently, be blamed on 'witchcraft'. ▷



'Unmasking The World of Witchcraft' article [here](#)

Someone in the home or village dying from disease can be seen as the result of a witch's curse or spell. Failed crops or businesses, a neighbour's rooftop caving in, unusual weather, livestock dying, a person who cannot fall pregnant, has grey hair or suffers from epilepsy – everything can be blamed on witches, it would seem.

Innocent children are not immune either. Those born as twins or with disabilities, or who frequently wet their bed, are left-handed, badly behaved or very energetic. Many are cast out of communities and end up living on the streets. Others suffer awful physical abuse – beatings and burnings as part of the 'exorcism rituals' from which they never recover.

Albinos are at great risk and many, in parts of East Africa for example, never live past the age of around 40. They are hunted for their body parts, used in rituals and said to bring luck or money.

Most of our countries have 'Witchcraft Acts' which not only reject the existence of witches but also make it punishable (with a fine or imprisonment) for any person to aid or abet a "witch" by e.g. soliciting their services or being taught how to perform Witchcraft by them. Despite this, belief in witchcraft is growing. It fills people with fear, and they take the law into their own hands in vigilante-type justice. It doesn't help that the Bible



A pregnant Nigerian woman suspected of being a 'witch' because she was thought to be too old to still be able to conceive.

recognises a 'spiritual world' or that several members of the police and government fear and believe in these mythical witches too, as do successful, educated members of society and people viewed as leaders in their communities.

Worryingly, Malawi is currently reviewing their Witchcraft Act, trying to get witchcraft recognised legally. How can you recognise a superstitious man-made belief, and accuse a person of something in a court of law which exists only in the imagination? Will the killing of an innocent person because, say, they have epilepsy, no longer be considered a crime? Will murderers walk free, only to kill again? Will a woman be sentenced to death because of the colour of her hair? Where do human rights fit in to the picture? What qualifies a person to be a 'witchdoctor' or a pastor to have the ability to 'treat' and know who's a 'witch'? What kind of people justify writing myths and superstitions into law? If this is accepted into law, how and when will this madness ever end?



'Witches' being burnt



A United Nations report on witchcraft is [here](#)

Humanism in Africa

Part Two: Kenya
by Lynda Tilley

Kenyan Humanism and the *harambee* tradition

The Republic of Kenya (Jamhuri Ya Kenya), situated in East Africa, has a population of 55.5 million which is made up of over twelve ethnic groups. It has an adult literacy rate of 81.5 per cent and the main languages are Kiswahili and English.

Kenyans are proud of their heritage. They've always known and valued their connection to family, community, and tribe. Despite the variety of tribal languages, there's one language we all identify with and that's the spirit of 'harambee' which means 'let's all work together'. Caring for each other, sharing food and workloads, making joint decisions that affect the community, all look out for one another – this makes them better, stronger people that achieve more together than they would alone. This unity binds each community together and all communities together as one country.

Harambee is more of an inherited trait than a learned one. It's a way of life that everyone relates to, and it stretches back long before the dark years of colonization when their harambee was turned upside down and their communities were shattered and displaced.



Dans Odhiambo, President of Kenya Humanist Alliance

With independence in 1963, they remembered 'harambee'. The new President, Jomo Kenyatta, adopted it as the country's motto, including it in Kenya's coat of arms, and during his first speech he stated that they should embrace 'harambee' and all pull together to rebuild Kenya.

Introduced in the mid 1800's by missionaries, Christianity remains the main religion, practised by 85 per cent of people, followed by Islam at 10.9 per cent with the remainder following 'other' religions or 'none'. Kenya's Constitution prohibits religious discrimination and respects freedom of belief/no state religion, but in reality, it's different. Like many African countries, these 'freedoms' are included because they are expected in international law, and they make good reading for tourists and international investors.

Dans Odhiambo, President of Kenya Humanist Alliance, a 250-member organisation of mostly students, active at Moi University, knows of these struggles first-hand. ▷



Kenya Humanist Alliance: www.kenyahumanistalliance.org

They could really use your help, so please donate if you're able to.



Dans, a teacher, lost two positions when he said he was an atheist. Orphaned as a child and taken in by kind people, he knew he too wanted to help orphans someday, to pay the kindness back. Referring to churches as 'religious cartels' which, together with law enforcement and members of the public, harass the irreligious, Dans says that funding and donations are mostly given only to religious groups. He opted to build the orphanage in 'neutral territory', near the city of Kisumu. As Chair of the National Youth Council, Dans had been part of the change to Kisumu (the third largest city in Kenya) when it transitioned into a secular city in 2016.

Dans' Widows & Orphans Home, built by Dans, houses forty-eight orphans and twenty-seven widows. Most orphans' parents have died from malaria, cancer or AIDS. Several are HIV positive and take antiretrovirals. Those born from teen pregnancies or forced child marriages are with their mothers. Some older girls are escapees of female genital mutilation (a traditional practice). 'Widows' are women

shunned in their communities due to divorce, HIV or 'witchcraft' allegations.

Assisted by old university friends, Grace and Daisy (both teachers as well), they care for the orphans and widows and keep everything running on their teachers' salaries. Their 'Young Humanist Mothers' program includes community education on birth control, menstrual health, domestic abuse, FGM and forced child marriages.

Accepted into the 'Beyond Belief Network' Food Security Project 2022, they are extremely grateful as with few donations coming in, they are barely coping and still desperately need to upgrade the orphanage building. It has no electricity, running water or beds for the kids (only mattresses on the floor). Long-drop outside toilets, bathing with buckets of heated water, and washing clothes in a nearby river, are all things Dans hopes to change some day. School fees cost £41 - £370 per child per year (age/grade dependent); the cost per day of basic food for all is £11. ▷



"We need each other," Dans says of Humanists across Africa, "to raise awareness together that religious and outdated cultural practices mostly result in atrocities. United African Humanists – that's what we need! Kenya first – then let's all work together for Africa!"

How you can help

If you can help in any way, they'd be extremely grateful. You can visit their website www.kenyahumanistalliance.org or email me (Lynda) mamakelele@gmail.com. All money spent is recorded and receipts are provided so you'll know exactly how it's used.

Each African country and tribe has its own name for an instinctual trait that we're all born with: "Umundu, Muntu, Utu" are just three from Kenya alone. We can't define what it encompasses, it's really hard to explain, but we now know it's similar to the English word 'Humanism'! It's what unites us all worldwide – the good hearts – no matter where we live. It's what I hope will one day unite all Africa's people, my tribe – embracing the 'harambee' spirit, working together as communities and then as countries, finally unifying as one. One Africa. Then, one world. It's how I feel. It was somehow always meant to be.



KENYA HUMANIST ALLIANCE

Uniting all Humanists in Kenya for the common purpose of upholding human dignity, promoting Science, Reason, Logic, and enriching humanity.



Sources and further reading: [Demographics](#) [Freedom](#) [Population](#) [Harambee](#) www.kenyahumanistalliance.org

The Alpha Course Is it a cult?



Assistant Editor David Warden attended an Alpha Course in 2013 in Poundbury near Dorchester. The most enjoyable aspect of the course was the gluten-free puddings...

Alpha



Alpha is an evening course which introduces participants to the basic beliefs of evangelical Christianity. Its duration is typically 7-10 consecutive weekly sessions, with complementary food included. In its current format it was created by the Reverend Nicky Gumbel at Holy Trinity Brompton church in London. It's been running for around thirty years and millions of people worldwide have been on the course. If you haven't seen the banners for it outside a local church, you must be going around with your eyes closed!

It's a long time since I was a Christian myself. I lost my faith forty years ago after completing a degree in theology. So why did I go on the Alpha Course in 2013? The main reason was that Jo Adams, chair of West Dorset Humanists, asked me to do a talk on the Alpha Course from an atheist perspective and so I decided to do my research by attending the evening sessions. I was perfectly up-front with the course leaders about my reasons for attending and they tolerated my presence on the course with friendliness and evangelical optimism. They also fed me with delicious gluten-free puddings.

It's often been noted by those who have escaped from high-control versions of Christianity that it resembles the pattern of abusive relationships: *God loves you, he gave his life for you, you are hopeless without him, and you will go to hell for eternity if you do not make him Lord of your life.* Most psychologists and therapists would recognise a clear pattern of coercive control and potential abuse in this account of the religion. And it's this that makes evangelical Christianity look very much like a cult.

The Christian participants on the course said repeatedly that they are *incapable* of running their own lives. They had to keep running back to God for guidance. Harry, the church pastor, said: 'I mess up and I fail' and he spoke about 'our brokenness'. Christianity tells people repeatedly that they are sinful, broken, helpless creatures who are not capable of running their own lives. Christianity tells you that you're chronically unwell and morally depraved so that it can hook you into its remedies for life. Doesn't this look as though converts are being set up for a lifetime of being controlled? ▷



You can watch David's talk here: [An Atheist on the Alpha Course](#)

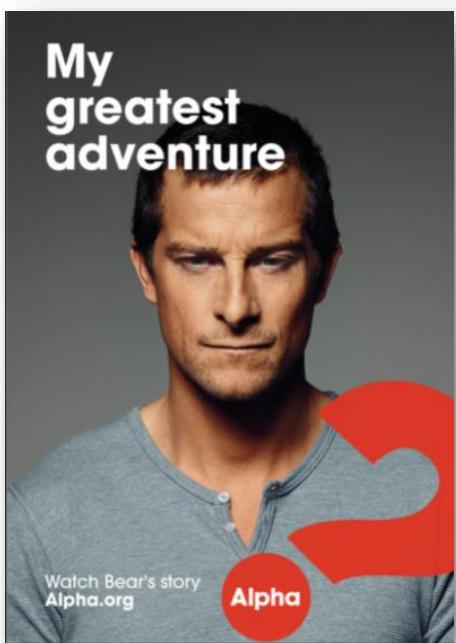
Similarities of Alpha-style Christianity to cults

It's quite striking how the Alpha Course resembles aspects of cult psychology. These include:

1. A bold appeal to vulnerable people who may be questioning the meaning of life (students away from home, drug addicts, prisoners etc.)
2. Intense group experiences are manufactured through prayer, singing, and being 'filled with the spirit'
3. The cult provides the *one true path* to God
4. Cult members mustn't put too much trust in their own fallible minds – they must submit to the authority of God mediated through the cult leaders
5. The cult is grounded in philosophical dualism – good vs evil, truth vs error
6. There are supernatural threats all around – Satan and his demons
7. Members of the cult are part of an elite corps chosen by God
8. A state of extreme dependency on God is fostered
9. Cult members seem weird to outsiders as if they've been colonised by some alien being
10. Leaving the group is almost impossible because of the social sanctions imposed by the group on apostates and also because of the threat of eternal damnation
11. The apocalypse is just around the corner
12. Cult members are effectively locked into a psychological and intellectual prison

This list is partly derived from Steven Hassan's book *Combating Cult Mind Control* (1990).

My greatest adventure



Alpha Male - Explorer Bear Grylls advertises the Alpha Course

Christianity is arguably the most successful scam in the history of the world. It promises a gigantic pay-out *after you die* and the payment plan is fairly straightforward – give the church your money, your time, your trust, and your devotion. It has appealed to highly intelligent people who are fascinated by its philosophical paradoxes, its pseudo-historical claims, and its easy route to male power over the lives of millions of people.

The Alpha Course is one of its most successful marketing strategies. But beware. The religion on offer bears a striking resemblance to a high control cult and the vulnerable and unwary can easily be drawn in. Some humanist groups run an alternative called the *One Life Course* which is based on humanism, reason, science, and critical thinking. We highly recommend this alternative!



Have you been caught up in a high-control religion? **Faith to Faithless** can offer support and guidance: <https://www.faithtofaithless.com/>

Aaron Explores

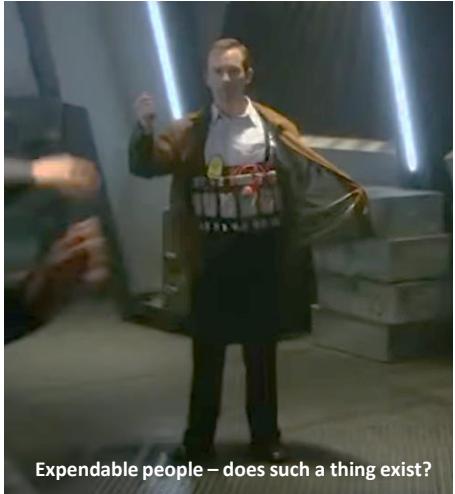
'Disposable people in suicide vests'

Between 1981 and 2015 a total of 4,814 suicide attacks occurred in over 40 countries, killing over 45,000 people. During this time the global rate of such attacks grew from an average of three a year in the 1980s to about one a month in the 1990s to almost one a week from 2001 to 2003 to approximately one a day from 2003 to 2015. [Wikipedia](#)

Throughout human history, suicide bombing has been perceived as something an unspeakable enemy would do to attack a largely civilian population with impunity and without any moral scruples whatsoever. So, it startled me when an episode of *Battlestar Galactica* turned this theory on its head and portrayed the 'good guys' utilising this tactic.

It was an amazing piece of work in which the heroes were living in occupied territory under harsh conditions, outnumbered, outgunned and with very little in resources to combat the enemy. Think occupied France in World War Two. The suicide bomber in question, who had lost his wife in the conflict, agreed to sacrifice himself to take out some of those who were collaborators. He positioned himself among the volunteer force so as to take out a lead enemy figure. ([clip here](#))

I'd never seen this before and it led to a lot of debate among fans and friends as to what might provoke us to adopt such drastic measures. Can any cause or belief justify such means?



Expendable people – does such a thing exist?

Humanists, of course, hold values of freedom, thinking, individuality, and common sense as core elements of their being, but if we lived in a country where we were surrounded by an oppressive force that threatened our very existence, would we strive to use any means at our disposal to achieve liberation?

Sitting here in our warm, comfortable, and safe homes in the calm light of day I'm sure that we'd like to think that we would never resort to such lengths. But just how far do we need to be pushed before we break? Would we walk meekly into a gas chamber these days, or would we do anything to prevent that, including blowing ourselves up to, perhaps, save the lives of others? Would we see it as a fight for Humanism and humanist values?





Humanists, of course, don't have a second life to look forward to once we've sacrificed ourselves in the name of our cause. Is it, then, the case that extreme religious cults are so in fear that their way of life is threatened, and that our way is so wrong, that they will do anything to ensure their voice is heard? That by killing innocent civilians, a group can gain respect, or just be feared?

As Westerners are we spared the prospect of becoming suicide bombers because we're wealthy, numerically superior, and the possessors of technology which can do the job for us? In World War Two, Japanese kamikaze fighters were far more destructive flying a plane into a ship than trying to drop a bomb from a great height. Islamic State jihadis have flown planes into buildings and Hamas has used women as walking bombs (link below) against a superior enemy. Is suicide bombing, then, a weapon of the poor, or a weapon of choice?



Palestinian Women Suicide Bombers ([click image](#))

The use of children as suicide bombers seems to be entirely acceptable in various corners of the world as a [BBC report demonstrates](#) in Africa. How can one defend oneself against such a threat, either from the attack itself, or from the reality that people's own children are being manipulated, threatened, coerced and brainwashed into such deeds? How do religious people reconcile this kind of action with their deity, such that this becomes an okay thing to do?

I believe that these lines, when crossed, lie at the heart of where humanist values should move us from a stance of respectful non-interference to a much more pronounced and proactive stance involving prevention of harm and humanitarian protection for victims on all sides. Our acceptance and tolerance of religious freedoms then moves very much into the territory of self-defence and doing what's right.

There's a fine line between non-interference in the affairs of a sovereign nation state and feeling compelled to act because something is just so wrong and 'our way of doing things' trumps theirs – at least in our eyes. The "We're right, you're wrong" card is played, on an international scale, resulting in a struggle between the ideals of national sovereignty versus military action to try and force a way of life onto people who have always done things differently.

Do we have the right to invade other nations and tell how to conduct their affairs? When they respond by sending their citizens to blow us up using their own bodies as bombs, should we be surprised by such a response? We enjoy lives that, by our standards, are free, accommodating and right, but if religious extremists were in the majority, and decided that we were wrong and tried to force their ideals onto us, would we respond as they do?



Are you for or against humanitarian interventions?
Let us know what you think.

The Brittain Interview

Our video conference with notable Humanists, interviewed by David Brittain

Imtiaz Shams

Ex-Muslim **Imtiaz Shams** is a member of Humanists UK board of trustees and co-founder of **Faith To Faithless**. This is Humanists UK's support programme for so-called 'apostates' and those who leave high-control religions such as Islam, Hasidic Judaism, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Click the YouTube button to listen to this revealing and fascinating interview...



***"Apostasy... it's
the biggest
problem no-one's
heard of..."***

If you are affected by these issues as an apostate, or belong to an organisation that would like to access apostate awareness training, please email info@faithtofaithless.com Website is [here](#)



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Thought for the Day

Is Humanism a cult?

Assistant Editor David Warden answers this perennial question

One of the early theorists of Humanism, the 19th century French philosopher Auguste Comte, imagined it as a new 'Religion of Humanity' in which the cult object or god-substitute was Humanity itself. 'Humanity' was conceptualised as the totality of the human project and every individual human being – past, present and future – were its worker bees, contributing to the greater good of Humanity itself, or not.

At the time, Comte's Religion of Humanity was also known as Positivism and in positivist chapels in Paris, London, and (still to this day) in Brazil, Humanity was symbolised by Raphael's painting the *Sistine Madonna*. The similarity of this iconography to Roman Catholicism's devotion to the Virgin Mary was deliberate. Comte's background was French Catholicism.

Comte's Religion of Humanity has all but died out but the idea at its heart, that we should all be working towards the greater good of humanity, as well as all life on Earth, is a good one. When people ask me whether I have a faith I say yes – I have faith in humanity.



Raphael's the *Sistine Madonna*
(Gemäldegalerie Alter Meister, Dresden,
1513-14) Wikimedia Commons

But we shouldn't fetishise humanity, nature or the planet, or idolise human gurus. Humanism today is based on science, reason, freedom of thought, ethics, empathy, and compassion. We have some ceremonies for namings, weddings, coming-of-age, and funerals but we have no cult objects or cult leaders. We have no dogmas except those which have been well established by empirical science. Today, Humanism is the very opposite of a cult.



Do you have a **Thought for the Day** worth sharing?
humanistically.speaking@gmail.com



Musings by Maggie

The Book Says...

Misogyny, slavery, ignorance, homophobia... religious texts have been used to justify some of the worst forms of human prejudice.
Maggie investigates...

For millennia, ‘sacred scriptures’ have provided the basis of many human beliefs. They contain stories which attempt to explain the unexplained and prescribe moral rules in an effort to bargain with whatever deity was thought to be in charge of the universe and to mitigate the difficulties and sufferings of everyday life. The book with which most of us in the West are most likely to be familiar is the Holy Bible. Here are some things it has been used to justify.

Misogyny

According to Genesis, Eve was created from Adam’s rib as a ‘help meet’ (2:18-22) and then cursed with painful childbirth and domination by her husband (3:16) as a punishment for tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. Things don’t improve as you read on. Sexual abuse is rife. Women are the property of men and can be taken as spoils of war (if they’re virgins – if not they’re killed), turned into a pillar of salt for disobedience, stoned for adultery, considered unclean during menstrua-

tion and after childbirth (although not for as long in the case of a male child as a female one), not listed in a census (only the males count), not permitted to speak in church and must be modestly dressed, including a head covering, at all times. Jews and Christians no longer stone women for adultery, but Jehovah’s Witnesses still don’t allow them to speak in the Kingdom Hall, teach or give counsel to a man. Only males are permitted to hold positions of responsibility. In orthodox Judaism women are hidden behind a screen in the synagogue and again all the dominant roles are handed to the men. It is very interesting to note, however, that in the fight for women’s suffrage the Bible was used both for and against allowing women the right to vote and that one of the most vociferous supporters in America was a Reform Rabbi, Stephen Wise.

Slavery

According to Genesis 9:18–27, Caanan was cursed by God because he happened to find Noah drunk and see him naked. His punishment was that he and all his descendants would forever be slaves to his brethren and their descendants. God ‘blessed Abraham’ by multiplying his slaves ▷

(Genesis 24:35), there were numerous laws regulating the owning and treatment of slaves (Exodus 21 and Leviticus 25), Jesus said nothing against it, and it is endorsed in the Epistles (1 Corinthians 7:20-21, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:22-25, 1 Timothy 6:1-4, Titus 2:9-10, Philemon 10-18, 1 Peter 2:18-19). The Church of England generally accepted the idea of slavery. It had links to the slave trade through the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and owned plantations in Barbados. In both Europe and the United States some Christians argued that slavery was actually justified by the Bible:

[Slavery] was established by decree of Almighty God...it is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation... it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts.” — Jefferson Davis, President, Confederate States of America.

“... the right of holding slaves is clearly established in the Holy Scriptures, both by precept and example.” — Richard Furman, President, South Carolina Baptist Convention.

However, abolitionists used the very same scriptures to argue for the abolition of slavery: *“Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.”* (Exodus 22:21).

Ignorance

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding.” (Proverbs 3:5). Jehovah’s Witnesses take this and other scriptures against what is considered too much learning, very seriously:

“Yet, many who pursue such education end up with their minds filled with harmful propaganda. Such education wastes valuable youthful years that could best be used in Jehovah’s service.” (Watchtower 2008 Apr 15)

Homophobia

“Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind...” (1 Corinthians 6:9, see also Matthew 19:4-5). These verses are used to justify prejudice against gay people and to promote so-called ‘conversion therapy’:

“The teaching of the Bible is clear that sexual activity is restricted to monogamous marriage between one man and one woman. For Christians who hold to this biblical teaching, it is essential that those who experience same sex attraction are free to pursue and receive support to help them live in accordance with their beliefs.” (Peter Lynas, UK Director of the Evangelical Alliance).

It would take far more space than I have here to discuss similar examples from other faiths, such as Quranic justifications for severe punishments or Hindu texts justifying child marriage, with which I could have filled several more pages. Readers who have an interest in these may wish to take advantage of the references below.

<https://listverse.com/2014/03/20/10-religious-verses-used-to-justify-terrible-atrocities/>
<https://www.religiouscriticism.com/bible/the-sexist-bible/>
<https://www.myultimatedecision.info/2019/02/why-do-muslims-sacrifice-animals.html>
https://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/97367/jewish/Women-in-the-Synagogue.htm <https://www.jw.org/en/jehovahs-witnesses/faq/jw-education-school/>
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/19-march/news/uk/conversion-therapy-ban-could-criminalise-christians-says-evangelical-alliance>



Doing harm or allowing harm: is there a difference?

Most of us think that it's worse to *do* harm to someone than it is to *fail* to save them from being harmed, but are we right about that?

The philosopher James Rachels asks us to consider a thought experiment. A man called Smith will receive a large inheritance if anything happens to his six-year-old cousin. One day when the child is in the bath, Smith enters the bathroom and holds the child under the water until the child drowns. He then arranges things so that it looks like an accident. Now compare this with a slightly different situation. In this case a man called Jones will receive a large inheritance if anything happens to his six-year-old cousin. Just like Smith, Jones enters the bathroom intending to drown the child. But as he enters, Jones sees the child slip, hit his head and fall face down in the water. Jones does nothing and the child drowns. So, Smith killed the child while Jones let the child die, but that is the only difference between them. Both had the same motive and the same intention – both wanted to collect the inheritance, and both intended to kill the child. So, did one of them really behave worse than the other?



If acting and failing to act are equally wrong, this has serious implications. Suppose I can save a child's life by donating a certain amount of money to charity. If I fail to donate the money and the child dies, am I responsible for the child's death? Of course, someone else may donate the money and save the child, but this does not solve my problem because many children die every day for lack of help. So, do I have a moral obligation to make a sacrifice and donate the money or do I not? If failing to act is wrong, our liability becomes unlimited because there will always be people who need our help. But carrying such a large burden of responsibility would make our lives impossible. So just how far do our moral obligations go? Where exactly should we draw the line?

Jonathan Glover

The first of a 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.

By John Coss



Jonathan Glover (1941-) is a distinguished moral philosopher and Patron of Humanists UK. For many years he taught philosophy at New College, Oxford and he currently teaches ethics at the Centre of Medical Law and Ethics, King's College London. In 2008 he gave the Humanists UK/Humanist Philosophers Group Bentham Lecture, on 'Terrorism, Torture and Human Rights'. He argued that despite problematic aspects of the concept of human rights, there is good reason to prohibit torture.

Glover has been a pioneering figure whose thought and personal influence have had a significant impact on applied philosophy: he has made important contributions on topics such as genetic engineering, abortion, euthanasia, war, and moral responsibility. His own website contains a fascinating collection of essays, interviews, quotations, and insights. Here is an extract which encapsulates his style and approach:

'Conventional morality is too easy: "Life is sacred." "Criminals deserve to go to prison." "Killing people in war is completely different from murder." "Never break a promise." "We should respect the dignity of the human embryo." "Lying is always wrong." Each item of these bits of conventional moral wisdom is easy to say. And each is open to serious doubts and objections as soon as questions are asked about its assumptions, and about its human implications. Conventional morality is not only too easy: it is usually too insulated from the imagination and from intellectual curiosity. Intelligent children start to ask questions about this. Who decides what gets on the list of things it is wrong to do? What do the items on the list have in common?'

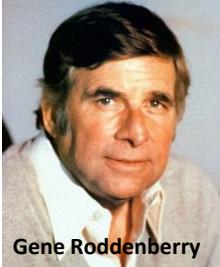
Some books by Jonathan Glover

In *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (1977) he addresses the moral problems of abortion, infanticide, suicide, euthanasia, capital punishment, war, and other life-or-death choices. According to the *Journal of Medical Ethics* this book is 'an excellent example of the way in which moral philosophy can illuminate, and be illuminated by, practical problems'.

In *Humanity – A Moral History of the 20th Century* (2001) he offers a philosophical reckoning with the history of the 20th century. It includes vivid descriptions of a wide range of atrocities, which can be hard to read.

Utilitarianism and its Critics – edited by Glover, can be downloaded from his website.

STAR TREK AND HUMANISM



Gene Roddenberry



Aaron Darkwood
Star Trek nut



Kai Winn, religious
leader of Bajor



One of the key reasons that Star Trek has so many atheist fans, including many humanists, is its values and ideals. Creator Gene Roddenberry, former Air Force pilot, former police officer, himself a humanist, decided early on that Starfleet and the United Federation of Planets would be built upon a core ethos of scientific integrity and human values. Values derived from humans, not from imagined or invented deities.

As a result of Roddenberry's direction, many episodes featured the main characters encountering planets and people who were deeply religious or spiritual. In early Star Trek episodes, races with godlike powers would often be discovered and by the end of each episode it would be found that some mysterious alien race had created machines with miraculous powers. Kirk never for a moment considered that such aliens could be gods. This was truly *illogical* as Spock would concur. Everything comes with an explanation, and science always finds the way to the truth.

In Star Trek, the action is driven by mysterious events: people vanishing and being imprisoned by miraculous powers – phenomena never actually witnessed on Earth of course. There are no actions for our modern day scientists to explain away. Everything is entirely based upon faith alone. As Star Trek evolved into *The Next Generation*, more godlike aliens appeared such as the Q, people who believed in spirits and more, and the Bajoran people whose story dominated an entire series.

The Bajorans are a deeply spiritual race who have a wormhole near their planet connecting two corners of the galaxy. An alien race lives inside it, outside of normal space. Our linear timeline doesn't exist to them, and thus these creatures are worshipped and prayed to like gods.

Starfleet comes along with all of its science and technology and puts the nose out of several of those who teach the way of the prophets, on a space station shared by earth people and those from Bajor. As rational and logical viewers, we can watch on with open eyes, yet those who only see gods and prophets only see what they want to see.

As humans progress into an increasingly technological future, will we leave religious faith behind in the 21st century or will faith continue into the future, bringing comfort to some and misery and oppression to many more? Do humanists have a role to play in educating others in the ways of logic, or do we allow them to go the way of the Bajorans, burying their head in the sand, and ignorant as to what life really is all about?



Through the eyes of Science Fiction, we have eliminated religion on Earth, is this truly our destiny as an enlightened race?

ALINA CHAN
& MATT RIDLEY

VIRAL

The Search for the Origin of Covid-19

Alina Chan is a molecular biologist specializing in gene therapy and cell engineering at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. Matt Ridley, also known as The Rt Hon The Viscount Ridley, is a science writer, journalist, and a Patron of Humanists UK.

Most people will recall the horrifying images of the Huanan wet market in Wuhan which was believed to be the origin of Covid-19, a disease which has killed more than five million people worldwide. At one stage, it was believed that the virus could have jumped from pangolins to humans through a process known as 'zoonosis' or 'natural spillover'. Pangolins are cute creatures about the size of a small dog. They are eaten as a delicacy in the Far East and their scales (which are made of keratin – the same stuff as your fingernails) are used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat cancer, impotence, and other ailments. In February 2021, Facebook censored any claims that Covid-19 was 'man-made or manufactured' but in May 2021 the ban was lifted as scientific interest in a possible lab leak origin intensified. So much for Facebook being a reliable guardian of scientific truth.

Viral by Alina Chan and Matt Ridley is an attempt to get at the truth of how Covid-19

'Viral: The Search for the Origin of Covid-19' (2021) by Alina Chan and Matt Ridley

Book Review by David Warden



originated. It could take decades, however, for the truth to emerge, given the secrecy of the Chinese government and the vested interests in not implicating the Wuhan Institute of Virology in the Covid-19 catastrophe.

The authors inform us that vast bat colonies in caves and disused mines are reservoirs of new viruses that can make their way into human populations. A horseshoe bat virus appears to be the likely precursor of the Covid-19 virus, but SARS-CoV-2 has an unusual genetic feature known as a 'furin cleavage site' which makes it especially infectious. Debate has focused on whether this mutation occurred naturally or as a result of human engineering.

Scientists are, of course, interested in studying and even genetically modifying viruses in an international effort to identify and, one hopes, protect us from dangerous viruses. China plays a leading role. But the process of bringing viruses or virus-carrying mammals such as bats into laboratories, let alone modifying them for benign or malign purposes, is inherently risky. Viruses can and do leak from laboratories, including the first SARS virus which infected people in Singapore, Taiwan and Beijing in 2003 and 2004. Biosecurity for research into bat viruses is less stringent than for pathogens like Ebola.

Many people stand to gain from the idea that Covid-19 originated in a seafood market, or from illegally-traded animals, or from someone being shit upon by a bat. The possibility that virology labs are themselves a colossal danger to humanity is less welcome, but one which scientists must take seriously.



Note: SARS-CoV-2 is the virus which causes Covid-19 disease.

Wikipedia article: [Investigations into the origin of COVID-19](#)



Readers' Responses

Emerging Contemporary Issues – what should humanists care about most?

I would speculate that a significant proportion of humanists – and especially young humanists – are today more concerned about global warming than issues like assisted dying or the legalising of humanist marriage or homeopathy, or organ donation. Core topics change as new issues emerge and old ones are resolved or become less relevant. I'd love to see a straw poll of members to find out which contemporary issues they would prioritise.

Can I suggest two that are interlinked: disinformation and artificial intelligence? Humanism is built on science and reason, but these 'pillars' are directly threatened by an infodemic of disinformation facilitated by AI: facts and events are being manipulated by crooks, malcontents and 'useful idiots', and weaponized by conspiracy theorists, political opportunists and hostile foreign powers. This is undermining science and public health messaging; and it's causing social division and destabilising democracy – and jeopardising global efforts to tackle climate change.

We are living through times of unprecedented technological change and destabilising political tension: the Fourth Industrial Revolution is well underway; social media is causing all kind of problems for politicians, our mental health, and the law (cybercrime is flourishing); there's also the spread of populism and collapse of trust in politicians (and faith in democracy); and the concomitant

rise of state repression (assisted by AI and mass surveillance). What's more, international cooperation – which is of paramount importance in tackling climate change – is in crisis, and the rules-based international order has all but broken down.

The issues that I've highlighted are of real concern to me and I'm sure, many others. It would be good to get a humanist perspective (and action?), especially in respect of the moral and ethical issues that they raise for responsible citizenship and human rights – and for climatic and intergenerational justice.

Mike Flood - Fighting Fake and Chair, Milton Keynes Humanists

PS. In recent private correspondence, I thought Charles Baily (Bedfordshire Humanists) summed up the situation really well: "Humanism has its roots in a society dominated by religion, so it was natural to see religion as Public Enemy No.1. This remains true across much of the world, but Europe is becoming increasingly secular. The enemy now is barbarism – a hyper-individualised, competitively self-serving, dog-eat-dog world, careless of truth, cultural traditions and scientific objectivity. I think Humanism is facing a pivotal moment. The new frontier is between rationality, balance, mutual respect, fact and objective truth – and barbarism. Clearly, Humanism does not have a monopoly on concern. There are many among the more moderate Christian communities, reformed Judaism, Buddhists, Hindus, even courageous Muslims, who share many of these values, and with whom we must be prepared to make common cause."



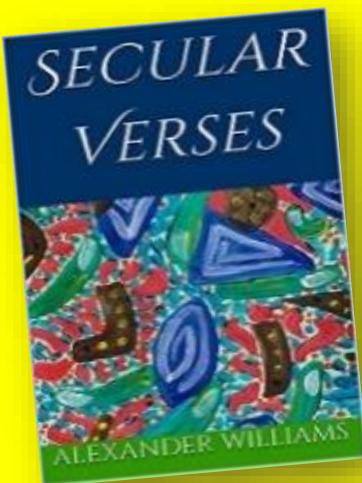
We love hearing from our readers, so why not drop us an email and let us know what you think...

Poet's Corner



Your Religion Is Wrong

Your religion is wrong
Your parents are dunces
Forgive me if I'm not
Pulling my punches
Your holy book's nonsense
Your leaders are hoaxes
Peddling fairy tales
Dressing up roaches
You must be so gullible
To believe in that trash
All that they want is your mind
All they want is your cash
You buy things that only
A child would believe in
Swallowing falsehoods
Too odd for conceiving
It's all superstition
It's magical tripe
It ought to be flushed
Down the nearest waste pipe
Your faith can be slammed
By the laziest sleuth
Your religion is lies
But mine is the truth.



Alexander Williams is a writer, teacher and singer from Watford. His new collection of poems *Secular Verses* is now published and available on Amazon. Click the link or the book image and help support his great work. Details of his previous books can be found at www.thedialup.blogspot.com



Too harsh? Have you ever crafted a poem on religion yourself, want to share?



Stockport Humanists extend a warm invitation to readers of *Humanistically Speaking* to this free online event on Wednesday 16th February 7.30 – 9.00pm.

A talk by Jeremy Rodell

Demographics of Religion or Belief: New Data, New Thinking



Jeremy Rodell is Dialogue Officer for Humanists UK. In this talk, he considers the implications of changes in our religion and belief landscape, especially for the Established Church. If values are becoming more significant than beliefs, what does this mean for humanists?

Jeremy draws extensively on *Values are the New Religion*, the 2021 Cadbury Lectures by Professor Linda Woodhouse, which can be accessed [here](#) if you would like to look at them. Each of the four videos is about 90 minutes long, but the actual lectures only last about forty-five minutes.

For the Zoom link, email stockport@humanistgroups.org.uk
Or register on <http://www.meetup.com/Greater-Manchester-Humanists>
(this is the joint Meetup group for the Greater Manchester area)

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