



# NEWS & VIEWS



[www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk)

New Series

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*Humanists are a large and growing population of ethically concerned but non-religious people. We are always pleased to welcome as new members those who believe we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs and who try to make sense of life using reason, experience and shared human values. Our group is affiliated to the British Humanist Association, The Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association & the National Secular Society.*

## **PAST EVENTS & WEBSITE**

Unfortunately numbers attending our most recent meetings seem to have slumped a little, with the Darwin, Remembrance and Thomas Paine events each failing to attract an audience of more than 15 and the Philosophers' Dinner being postponed to next year. Perhaps part of the reason has been our failure to send out reminders to those on e mail around 4 days before each event. Another is that our website was 'down' for a few weeks due to problems with the internet service provider. Thanks to Malik's efforts it is now back up and running smoothly and we hope to bring it right up-to-date in the very near future.

## **GRATEFUL THANKS TO JANE, TOVA AND DANNY**

Although though thanks were expressed verbally at the AGM, I was not able to find space in the last News & Views to put in print the debt that the Group owes to the 3 long-standing committee members who stepped down in June. Tova Jones had been our Membership Secretary continuously for the last 20 years or so and Danny Collman served 3 stints as our Newsletter Editor between 1990 and 2002. Danny was also Group Secretary from the turn of the new Millennium, Treasurer for 2 years after the 1998 AGM and Vice Chairman from 1988 to 1991. The third long-serving member was Jane Wynne Willson who since 1987 has volunteered for 3 spells as Chairman, 2 as Vice chairman, 2 as Newsletter Editor, 1 as Secretary and she was programme co-ordinator for 3 years 1998 until the whole committee took over the role. Birmingham Humanists is looking forward to celebrating its Golden Jubilee in 2012 but it might well have folded before this date had it not been for the loyal efforts of these individuals.

## **SACRE UPDATE**

On 24<sup>th</sup> September Bill Green & John Edwards attended the Birmingham SACRE meeting at the Town Hall as observers and the latter also 'observed' at the next meeting which was held on 25<sup>th</sup> November at the Martineau, having previously attended the BHA's Annual Meeting for SACRE reps, potential reps & observers in London on 7<sup>th</sup> Nov. There are 142 SACRE's in England (which represent a tremendous duplication of effort as each committee devises and revises their own syllabus every 10 years) & there were just over 30 representatives at the BHA meeting. When Mark Chater (responsible for RE at the QCDA) asked for a show of hands to indicate who were 'full voting' members of their SACRE only 4 or 5 were raised, so we are not alone in struggling to get our voice heard. Around half of the others sat on their SACRE as non-voting co-optees and the rest as observers, unable to either speak or vote. At the Birmingham Town Hall meeting, one of the non-religious teacher representatives raised the possibility of a Humanist being co-opted to Committee A (Christian & other religious denominations, not including the CoE) and at the Martineau meeting it was agreed that they would try and get a Humanist from another SACRE to speak to the next meeting on the afternoon of 10<sup>th</sup> February. I will again go along to observe and, if they have drawn a blank and there is no Humanist presentation, will offer to say something at either 9<sup>th</sup> June or 13<sup>th</sup> September. Perhaps intentionally on the part of certain people, things seem to move exceedingly slowly. The 'new' syllabus with 24 "dispositions" was only adopted in June 2007 so there is no chance to influence a revision for many years. The Chairman & representative of Birmingham Local Authority, Guy Hordern, has offered to come and speak to Birmingham Humanists about the new syllabus (which the BHA do not like) and maybe we should take him up on this offer, after having first provided his likely audience with some 'impartial' background information. Incidentally you may be interested to learn that B'ham SACRE has a budget of £102,000 for 2009/10 !!

### **TREVOR DENNING (1923 – 2009)**

We are sad to announce that Trevor Denning, a member of Birmingham Humanists for over 25 years, died at Moseley Hall Hospital on 22<sup>nd</sup> October and pass our condolences to Jean, his wife for 57 years, and his 4 children. Trevor was one of the few in our group with an entry in Wikipedia, which was created initially in March 2008 by a graphic designer living in Erdington, who was obviously convinced of Trevor's noteworthiness.



Trevor was born in Moseley and studied painting and graphics at the Birmingham School of Art from 1938 to 1942 and then worked on the land as a conscientious objector. At the end of the war he started teaching at the College, becoming a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Art when it became Birmingham Polytechnic, retiring in 1985.

Throughout his life he contributed a significant amount to art in the city. He was one of the founders of the Birmingham Artists' Committee in 1947 – a platform for contemporary artists - and in the 1950's he was Secretary of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists (R.B.S.A.) He became a member of the Society of Industrial Artists & Designers in 1956, working in book-design and film, and in 1960 he was elected a Member of the R.B.S.A. A year later he organised the "Four Letter Art" exhibition for the society, and it was this exhibiting of contemporary art in the city which influenced the founding of the Ikon Gallery in 1964. Trevor completed several mural decorations at the Ikon and had a solo show of his paintings there in 1966.

He was a keen collector, particularly of playing cards. He wrote many books on the topic of Spanish playing cards and in 1989 was made the first Member of Honour of the *Asociación Española de Coleccionismo e Investigación del Naípe* (the Spanish Association for the Collection and Study of the Playing Card). In 1993 he was awarded the Modiano Prize for the best contribution to the knowledge of the history and origins of playing cards.

In 2004 the artist took part in the 40th anniversary celebrations of the Ikon Gallery at Brindley Place by exhibiting his oil painting of fellow artist Sylvani Merilion's lips. He created the painting called Large Mouth which measured about 4 x 3 feet in 1966.

His obituary notice in the Birmingham Post on 26<sup>th</sup> October concluded with the following tribute by Jonathan Watkins, the current director of the gallery: "Trevor Denning was vitally important for the post-war Birmingham art world. His incisive mind, his radical scepticism and commitment to cultural life here made an enormous difference. Ikon will always be in his debt."



### **'MUSLIM TAKEOVER' ARTICLE (PAGE 4 LAST ISSUE) IS NOT CREDIBLE!**

A big 'thank you' to Brum Hums member Peter Stanwell who has written to say that the website for the Radio4 programme "More or Less" (which deals with facts and figures) states that the figure of 8.1 fertility for Muslims is complete "bunkum" and that the fertility rate for Muslims in Europe was pretty much the same as all groups (nationalities/culture/ religious) in 'Euroland'. I also noticed a letter in the November Freethinker from someone writing about the need for population control who had heard that the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) is bizarrely organised on a continental basis so that Europeans can only donate help to fund birth-control projects in Europe and it is left to Africans to fund family planning initiatives in Africa! Her letter ended saying "And yet, what Iran has managed to do should be feasible in other overpopulated nations...( Iran's birth rate fell from 6.5 in 1980 to 2.3 in 2002 !)"

### **GROUP MERCHANDISE – MUGS & T SHIRTS!!**

The Brum Hums Mugs mentioned in the last News & Views sold out within a few weeks but there are still T shirts available to purchase if you would like to help to publicise our group. They are available at the very reasonable price of £5.00 (£6 if you want it posted) we have S, M, L & XL in stock and you can have any colour you like so long as it's white.

We've also 'splashed out' and bought some Brum Hums badges (one of which is hopefully included with this issue) and we may well re-order the mugs if there seems to be a demand. Please email or phone a committee member to say how many mugs you would like featuring the logo opposite. Also let them know if there is anything other item you would like to group to sell.



## **BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION CELEBRANTS**

At the beginning of October Victoria Denning gave me an article on the training she and other celebrants have to undertake to become accredited by the BHA and shortly afterwards John Bason sent me the clipping from the Metro News. While we can all understand the vicar feeling a 'spare part' at a non-religious funeral, it is he who can be accused of "making money for old rope" for his funerals in the 'CoE standard format' take little or no time at all to prepare but, as Victoria points out, each unique Humanist ceremony takes at least 10 hours to put together. She writes:-

"In the Birmingham region there are over 12 accredited BHA celebrants who conduct Humanist Funerals, weddings & Civil Partnerships and / or Baby Namings or Welcomings. These people have had in depth training from the BHA which begins with an Induction Day when candidates are vetted as to whether they have the potential to deliver excellent Humanist Ceremonies. Once they have been accepted they then attend a General Skills day when they have the chance, within a group, to explore the key behavioural and functional competencies necessary to become an accredited celebrant.

Next comes a 2 day session of Technical Training for each of the different type of ceremony (funerals, namings & weddings) in which the trainee celebrants create ceremonies to an agreed set of competencies and then deliver them in front of one another and the instructors. Trainees are allocated a personal tutor from the training team for feedback on their progress and achievement. During this formal training, which takes place over a period of several months, each trainee is allocated a trained mentor who is an accredited celebrant working in or near their area. They invite them to accompany them on family visits, to observe their and other accredited celebrant's ceremonies, encourage them to deliver a poem or reading in a ceremony and to write part of a ceremony and deliver it. They give them 101 really useful tips and in the case of the funeral training they introduce them to the local funeral directors, crematorium staff. Once the "Probationer status" has been achieved, ceremonies passed on by the mentor or regional co-ordinator can be taken on and the novice can begin to work towards accreditation.

After presenting several ceremonies, an Accreditor comes and observes the Probationer presenting a ceremony and makes copious notes, filling in numerous forms on everything including commitment to Humanism, creativity, self discipline, organisation, delivery of the ceremony, relationships with the family and other professionals, personal appearance and even personal hygiene. These notes are then sent to the Ceremonies Management Committee where they are discussed and it is decided whether or not the Probationer should be awarded Accredited Status. "Accredited Celebrants" are then included on the British Humanist website and in the BHA Funeral Directors Directory and can begin advertising themselves.

Professional development and regular training continues, to ensure celebrants are kept up to date with current trends, are able to share ideas, support one another, and to encourage them to continue to be critical of their own scripts.

It is costly to complete the training, and not all celebrants want or feel the need to cover all three types of ceremonies. Many just do funerals. Anyone can advertise themselves to take humanist ceremonies, but by becoming an Accredited British Humanist Association celebrant the public knows that a high quality ceremony will be guaranteed.

Each ceremony takes a minimum of ten hours to prepare; this includes at least one visit to the family to discuss ideas, possibilities and what they want included. Often there are then phone calls or emails to check on details and to check through draft scripts etc.; there is usually some research required for relevant poems/readings or information that is to be included. Then there is the typing up and printing off. In the case of weddings and baby namings, two scripts are usually required, one for the celebrant with stage directions and one family copy which is handed over in a presentation folder after the ceremony. In the case of funerals there are three copies, one for the celebrant, one for the family and one for the organist/person in charge of the music with their cues highlighted. All the music/CDs have to be taken to the crematorium at least 24 hours before the ceremony to help

## **Tina makes vicar 'feel like a lemon'**

A VICAR has said he feels like 'a lemon' at funeral services when mourners listen to Tina Turner and bad poetry as a loved one is cremated.

Father Ed Tomlinson, of St Barnabas' Church, said he feared that his presence at funerals was 'pointless'.

'Many families I have conducted funerals for have absolutely no desire for any Christian content whatsoever,' he wrote on his blog.

'I have then stood at the crem like a lemon, wondering why on earth I

By **Joel Taylor**

am present at the funeral of somebody led in by the tunes of Tina Turner.

'What is the point of my being present if spiritually unwanted?'

Those who chose a non-religious ceremony were conned by 'humanists' making money from death, he said.

He added: 'I still have the gorgeous liturgy of the requiem

mass to look forward to. Whereas the best our secularist friends can hope for is a poem from Nan combined with a saccharine

message from a pop star before being popped in the oven with no hope of resurrection.'

But the Tunbridge Wells vicar was criticised for being insensitive.

'Bereavement isn't funny. We all mourn in different ways,' said Denise Cantor-Kaydar, of Cruse Bereavement Care.



eliminate any last minute malfunctions. The day before a wedding ceremony, a rehearsal usually takes place at the venue so that all the key players know where they should be and what they ought to be doing before the big day to help make everything run smoothly. The length of time preparing a ceremony varies depending on the requirements of the family. When visiting a family we start with a blank page – we have no format we have to follow. Some families want more music than others, some want various members of the family and friends to speak, some want almost nothing. I take samples of poems, vows, promises, music etc. just in case a family has no ideas at all where to begin.

Having completed the training for all 3 types of ceremonies myself, I have now been doing them full-time for over 12 months and I am finding it very rewarding and interesting work. I meet such a diverse array of people, with such interesting backgrounds and histories that each ceremony is completely different. Over the last twelve months have done 9 weddings, 23 baby namings and 48 funerals but, unfortunately at the moment there are not enough Humanist ceremonies to make a living – so if you know of anyone requiring a unique, individually written baby naming, wedding or funeral in the near future please suggest they contact one of our local celebrants!"

### **WHY EDDIE IS AN ATHEIST**

The November "What's On Live" magazine interviewed Eddie (Izzard, not Roberts) who had recently announced he was an atheist. They asked "Do you wish there were a God?" to which he replied, *"Only if he came down and made all the bad things better. If he was tolerant, then yes, but I'd certainly want to know what his plan was, because there doesn't seem to be any kind of plan at the moment. If there's a God, why do we need pee and poo? We don't need those waste products; why can't we just get on with living and doing things? Why would God have let World War Two happen? Why do we get cancer?"* When then asked "Without a God, what's the meaning of life?" Izzard replied, *"I don't think there is a meaning. We're here, there's life, let's live it. I think you should try and put something positive into the world and do whatever you can to encourage other people to do the same".*

### **ANOTHER ENCOURAGING SURVEY ON RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN UK**

An analysis by Professor David Voas to be published in January 2010 by the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), looks at the results of 4,486 interviews conducted in the respected 2008 British Social Attitudes survey. He said: "More and more people are ceasing to identify with a religion at all" It shows that just 50 % of respondents now call themselves Christian, down from 66 % in 1983. At the same time, the proportion of Britons who say they have "no religion" has increased from 31 % to 43 %. The religious who are non-Christian, including Muslims, Sikhs & Jews, now represent 7% of the population, up from 2 % 25 years ago. NatCen says this confirmed "the sharp decline in religious faith in Britain."

The steepest fall was among those who say they worship in the established religion, the Church of England, down from 40 % of those who call themselves Christians to 23%. Official Church attendance figures show that average Sunday attendance was 978,000 in 2007, compared with 1.2 million in 1983. Prof Voas said: "The declining Christian share is largely attributable to a drift away from the Church of England." The proportion of Roman Catholics declined only slightly from 10% to 9 %. Further questions showed that 37% of Britons either do not believe in God or are unable to say if a supreme being exists, while 35% have a definite belief in God or belief with occasional doubts. Only 7 % described themselves as very religious, and 62% said they never attended services in a place of worship. Even 49% of those who said they were Anglicans claimed never go to church, while just 8% go every Sunday. It will be interesting to see what the next census shows on non belief but I am not too optimistic as it now looks as though the same badly-worded question as in 2002 is likely to be asked, namely "What is your religion?" At least the first option is "None".

### **WORLD HUMANIST DAY**

World Humanist Day is a Humanist holiday celebrated annually around the world on June 21st. According to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), the day is a way of spreading awareness of Humanism as a philosophical life stance and means to effect change in the world. It is also seen as a time for Humanists to gather socially and promote the positive values of Humanism. What will you / we do to celebrate it next year? Suggestions to any committee member please!

## **MORE ON FAITH SCHOOLS**

One of the most encouraging pieces of news in 2009 was that the lobbying of Durham Council by North East Humanists helped see off a bid by the Emmanuel Schools Foundation to run three new academies in the area. The foundation, run by evangelical Christian Sir Peter Vardy, already runs three schools in the North East. As well as writing to and meeting with the local government members involved, the North East Humanists also helped to raise awareness in the local press including the *Northern Echo* and the *Durham Times*. After a long process, control of two of the academies was eventually awarded to a secular consortium which included Durham University and the Durham Secondary Heads' Association, and the third to a group led by New College in Durham. Faith schools campaigner Alex Kennedy said, "This campaign shows how a well organised and well informed local campaign can make a real difference to school provision. Because of the hard work and determination of humanists and others, thousands of children in Consett, Stanley and Durham will benefit from secular schools for years to come."

There was another story in the *TES*, this time about academies and their religious sponsors. The largest single sponsor of academies is the United Learning Trust, a Christian Charity with close connections to the Anglican Church. It already runs 17 academies and was preparing to take on another one in Portland, Dorset, when the Government suddenly pulled the plug and told the local authority to find a different sponsor.

The reason? Deep concerns about the performance of ULT in other areas of the country. Two of its academies in Sheffield have been described as "inadequate" and, indeed, in September one of them became only the third academy ever to be placed in special measures. The ULT has done well with one of its academies in Manchester, but otherwise it is struggling. Now the Government is considering the introduction of some kind of "kite mark" scheme that would only give accreditation to sponsors it was confident could provide excellent results. On its present performance, ULT would be unlikely to gain such accreditation. More than half of its headteachers have been sacked within two years of schools opening.

## **RELIGIOUS & HUMANIST GROUPS IN OUR UNIVERSITIES**

The information below comes from a report of last November's meeting of the Humanist Society of West Yorkshire and is included because of its possible interest to the newly formed Aston University Atheist & Humanist Society as well as our members.

"The Leeds University Atheist Society was launched in January 2007 when only ten students came to its first meeting but half joined! In April 2007 they held three 'Awareness Weeks' attracting over a thousand students to the meetings. It is now the largest student AHS in the U.K. Six societies met in Edinburgh in January 2008 to form the national federation (AHS); it had its national launch in February 2009 at Conway Hall. It represents twenty student societies with a total of around a thousand members.

Religious societies are very powerful in student unions - with only 10% of students they have half of the money available for Union societies! Thus 90% of students were not represented before this. Moslems can refuse to take exams on their holy days. They can also wear the burqa in exams and there has already been a case of it being used for a substitute candidate! The religious societies have been very much against the Atheist Society. When the Leeds Islamic Society were invited to the screening of the TV programme "What Moslems Want", this ended in a very heated argument. The scheduled speaker on "I'll Mock Mohamed if I want To" (on the Danish cartoons issue) received death threats and hate mail, resulting in the meeting not taking place. A motion at a meeting to outlaw the unethical slaughter of meat animals greatly aroused the Islamic and Jewish societies. Atheist Society members were personally insulted and one was physically assaulted! In April this year, the Atheist Society held an 'Atheist Week'; their generator was vandalised and Islamic graffiti daubed on their hired marquee. So the Society had to pay for cleaning. The Christian societies are less unfriendly as they hope to make conversions, however, the Atheist Soc. has made two religious students change their ideas - even a Jehovah's Witness!

The society is now in its fourth year, so it has been handed over to new students, not the founding members. The main focus of the national body is to give support to get young people involved and keep the AHS societies going. Young people can make a difference in the campaign against faith schools, for instance."

**THOUGHT FOR THE DAY** :- Why are we allowed to show endless footage of humans waging war and killing people in the media but not making love or showing friendship?

## JAMES HEMMING ESSAY PRIZE

In 2009 the BHA, the South Place Ethical Society & New Humanist launched an essay competition for pupils in years 12 and 13 in memory of Dr James Hemming (1909 -2007; President and later Vice President of the British Humanist Association). I wrote to the BHA to say that we tried something similar with schools in the West Midlands a couple of years ago without any great success and asked if it was possible to see the winning entries. By their closing date at the end of March they had about 70 entrants, although they didn't advertise it very much. Andrew Copson said they found the judging more of a trial than expected but felt that it was well worth it and gave permission to print the essay that won first prize, which was written by Alex Mace of Ripley St Thomas CE High School

### 'IN LIFE, THE MEANING COMES IN LIVING.'<sup>1</sup> DISCUSS.

A meaningful life is one that has significance: one that has point, substance, purpose, quality, value, and direction. The meaning of life is that which gives human life this significance. The American entertainer Danny Kaye (1913 - 1987) said "life is a great big canvas, and you should throw all the paint on it you can." To borrow Kaye's metaphor, life – your stint in existence – is a blank canvas waiting to be painted, and the meaning of life gives us a reason to do so.

There are many different candidates for the meaning of life. At the grim end of the spectrum sits Freud and his belief that death was the meaning of life. According to Freud, the whole intention of the life-instincts, *Eros*, is to return to a death-like state where the ego cannot be harmed.

More cheerfully, happiness is one of the more common answers to the meaning-of-life question.

Terry Eagleton, inspired by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethic*, describes happiness as "a kind of baseline in human life ... you cannot reasonably ask *why* we should seek to be happy."<sup>2</sup> Happiness appears to be an end for human behaviour to which all else are merely means. For instance, money and power only act as means to allow happiness.

Death and happiness are just two examples. As Eagleton demonstrates, the sheer number of different candidates for the meaning of life is overwhelming: "power, love, honour, truth, pleasure, freedom, reason, autonomy, the state, the nation, God, self-sacrifice, contemplation, living according to Nature, the greatest happiness of the greatest number, self-abnegation, desire, worldly success, reaping as many intense experiences as possible, having a good laugh, and so on."<sup>3</sup> Faced with this vast list of possibilities it is unsurprising that many despair and conclude that the meaning of life is whatever you make it to be. Such a conclusion borders on becoming a most unsatisfactory cliché, leaving a bitter aftertaste.

However, James Hemming throws a lifeline to those stuck in this state of indecision. Hemming argues that the meaning of something is derived from our relationships with it and the relevance it has to us. Life is no exception: "its meaning for us lies in the relationships we have established with it."<sup>4</sup> This relationship can be created by interacting with, and getting involved in, life. In other words, by living. Hence, "in life, the meaning comes in living."

With his argument, Hemming moves away from the meaning *of* life to meaning *in* life. The distinction is subtle but significant. The meaning of life is something universal that gives life significance, and it applies to us all regardless of who we are; it is akin to a transcendent meaning of *human* life. If we deny the possibility of this, we are left with meaning in life: there are aspects of each life that give it significance, but these are not the same for everyone. If there is a source of meaning present in every single life, then its universal nature could elevate it to the status of *the* meaning of life.

Hemming's argument denies the possibility of a meaning of life because no two people will have the same relationship with life (due to free-will, freedom, personality, preference, and the other aspects of individuality). As there is no universal relationship, there is no source of significance that we all share – there is no meaning *of* life. Instead, each life will have its own significance derived from the individual's unique relationship with it.

This approach is very attractive. Instead of simply saying that the meaning of life is whatever you make it to be, it shifts the focus from the yearning for a mystical meaning of life to the apparently more realistic and practical realm of meaning in our individual lives. Hemming shuts the door on a meaning of life.

But is this shift justified? Is it true that there is no meaning *of* life, only meaning in individual lives?

This requires deeper understanding of why the meaning or significance of something comes from our relationship with it. Hemming provides us with the explanation: "meaning comes from relationship,

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<sup>1</sup> James Hemming, *Individual Morality*, 1969, p.191

<sup>2</sup> Eagleton, Terry – *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*, 2008, p.81

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

<sup>4</sup> Hemming, James – *Individual Morality*, 1969, p.180

and relationship of any depth involves commitment.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, “to be fully committed ... is to get from life the fullness of its meaning.”<sup>6</sup> So for Hemming, meaning comes from commitment. For the claim that there is no meaning of life but only meaning in life to hold up, there can be no sources of significance or meaning that are universal to us all, as any such source would qualify as a possible meaning of life due to its universal nature. This appears problematic for Hemming. It is reasonable to accept that commitment does produce significance, but commitment is not the only source of meaning. For instance, it can be argued that reason is such a source: the ability to understand life and the world around us using that “God-like light called ‘reason’,”<sup>7</sup> and the opportunity we have to use it, gives life significance without any commitment to actually use the ability. The fact that we have it is enough to make our lives significant. Similarly, it is an aspect of human life that it has great potential to accomplish and achieve great and varied things. This part of our nature gives us significance, purpose, quality and value, without us actually being committed to fulfilling our potential or to doing anything. Commitment is clearly not the only source of significance for life, while other sources such as reason and potential are universal. This reopens the door to the possibility of a meaning of life. Hemming appears to have no way of stopping a meaning of life from casting a shadow over commitment and the relationship found within life. In life, the meaning doesn’t just come in living.

This, however, is not the end of the story. Although the claim that there is no meaning of life doesn’t work when grounded in Hemming’s idea that commitment generates meaning, another basis for the claim is that meaning is a purely subjective concept that is entirely dependent on individual perception and opinion. In the extreme form of this position, meaning boils down to individual opinion and taste, and there can be no universal sources of meaning that could become the meaning of life as meaning is irrational.

This claim is quickly rebutted by pointing out that people’s judgements on meaning are informed and created logically, rather than just being random and irrational inclinations. Once meaning is allowed to be rational in this manner, the door swings open for a meaning of life: if, for instance, the argument for happiness being a source of meaning in life is strong enough, and it is accepted unanimously, then it is perfectly possible for happiness to be elevated to **the** meaning of life as opposed to **a** meaning in life.

Hemming provides a valuable insight into the meaning-of-life question and presents valid ideas about meaning being derived from commitment within relationships. However, his argument does not stand up on its own. It presents a major source of meaning in life, but it fails to either deny the possibility of a universal meaning of life or provide a candidate. Nevertheless, if we alter the quotation to ‘in life, the meaning *also* comes in living’, Hemming’s idea lives on as a vital consideration in the meaning-of-life debate. This alteration allows for meaning to come from elsewhere, while still highlighting an important point: remembering that meaning comes in living provides an anchor for those who risk being caught in the flow of a *raison d’être*. The meaning of life is not the totality of meaning *in* life: meaning can and should be derived from a vast range of areas in life, from personal relationships to contributions to a wider cause. Pursuing the meaning of life may be necessary to live a fulfilled life, but what good is this pursuit if you fail to embrace the other more immediate sources of meaning and experiences that life places before you? What good is knowledge of the meaning of life, in other words, if you fail to ‘live’?

Returning to our canvas metaphor, there remains the possibility of a meaning of life, something that presents our canvas with significance while inspiring our creative talents, and we should continue to seek it out in order to make the most of the opportunity before us. By amending Hemming’s idea slightly, it becomes a warning and serves as a reminder that we must take to heart as we start painting. It allows our great big canvas of life to be transformed into a work of art.

**There are 5 spare lines here!** Just space to say “**Happy New Year**” and send the best wishes of the committee for 2010 to all our readers. Plus an interesting reflection from an old Times Educational Supplement from a Dennis Hayes:-

“Only science is truly magical but we casually forget even the obvious benefits of science. We forget, for example, that until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century most of human misery was toothache from early childhood to late adulthood, at which time teeth painfully decayed.”

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.181

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pp.188-189

<sup>7</sup> Soloman, Robert – *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, 1993, p.12

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

*From Adrian Bailey:*

Unlike Marti (my wife), I was never very interested in homeopathy, but once I became aware of what it really is (i.e. an expensive sugar pill) I've become keener to discuss it. It worries me that if we're not careful a lot of the important work in medical advances may be undone if people start to turn back to various forms of faith healing.

If you're skeptical about homeopathy like me, please consider joining the new "10.23" campaign (named after Avogadro's Number) at <http://www.1023.org.uk/>. The first phase of the campaign will be targeted against Boots because of their attitude at the recent government hearings into the subject. Asked about why they sell homeopathic remedies, Paul Bennett, Boots director of professional standards, said, "There is certainly a consumer demand for these products; I have no evidence to suggest they are efficacious."

### UNSCIENTIFIC AMERICA (& UK ?)

From a Scientist and a Writer: A Plea to Change Our Science-Anemic Culture

In his famous 1959 Rede lecture at Cambridge University, the scientifically-trained novelist C.P. Snow described science and the humanities as "two cultures," separated by a "gulf of mutual incomprehension." And the humanists had all the cultural power. The low prestige of science, Snow argued, left Western leaders too little educated in scientific subjects that were increasingly central to world problems: the elementary physics behind nuclear weapons, for instance, or the basics of plant science needed to feed the world's growing population.

Now, Chris Mooney and Sheril Kirshenbaum, a journalist-scientist team, offer an updated "two cultures" polemic for America in the 21st century. Just as in Snow's time, some of our gravest challenges - climate change, the energy crisis, national economic competitiveness - and gravest threats - global pandemics, nuclear proliferation - have fundamental scientific underpinnings. Yet we still live in a culture that rarely takes science seriously or has it on the radar.

For every 5 hours of cable news, less than 1 minute is devoted to science; 46% of Americans reject evolution and think the Earth is less than 10,000 years old; the number of newspapers with weekly science sections has shrunk by two-thirds over the past several decades. The public is polarized over climate change - an issue where political party affiliation determines one's view of reality - and in dangerous retreat from childhood vaccinations. Meanwhile, only 18% of Americans have even met a scientist to begin with; more than half can't name a living scientist role model.

For this dismaying situation, Mooney and Kirshenbaum don't let anyone off the hook. They highlight the anti-intellectual tendencies of the American public (and particularly the politicians and journalists who are supposed to serve it), but also challenge the scientists themselves, who despite the best of intentions have often failed to communicate about their work effectively to a broad public and so have ceded their critical place in the public sphere to religious and commercial propagandists.

A plea for enhanced scientific literacy, their book "*Unscientific America*" urges those who care about the place of science in our society to take unprecedented action. They argue we must begin to train a small army of ambassadors who can translate science's message and make it relevant to the media, to politicians, and to the public in the broadest sense. An impassioned call to arms worthy of Snow's original manifesto, this book lays the groundwork for reintegrating science into the public discourse - before it's too late.

I had been thinking of including the above piece when I received Adrian's letter, then I received Ben Goldacre's book "*Bad Science*" for my birthday and discovered he came to very similar conclusions on both homeopathy & the media. His basic hypothesis is that the people who run the media are Humanities graduates with little understanding of science, who wear their ignorance as a badge of honour. In their choice of stories & the way they cover them, the media create a parody of science, portraying it as something that is likely to change soon and, most ridiculously, always hard to understand. The scientists themselves are presented as being detached from reality, doing work that is either 'wacky' or dangerous. They rarely if ever give the factual evidence, preferring to quote 'authority figures', many of questionable ability such as Andrew Wakefield (who wrongly says the MMR vaccine is dangerous) or Gillian McKeith (media Nutritionist – and apparently you don't need any qualifications to call yourself one!)

**It is hoped to produce the next issue in April. Please send any articles, letters, news or suggestions to the editor, John Edwards B.Sc (Hons) Ph.D. (Botany) & Expert Nutritionist, at 157 Welford Road, Shirley, Solihull B90 3HT or via e mail to [jaejed@hotmail.com](mailto:jaejed@hotmail.com)**

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