Keeping public services fair, inclusive, and secular

The BHA is at the forefront of the campaign to keep public services shared, inclusive, and secular. Since we published our report and policy paper on public service reform, *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations* (http://tinyurl.com/Q-EREport) in 2007, we have been working hard for legal and policy changes to ensure that religious groups cannot discriminate when they provide public services. We’ve also been trying to publicise the issues at stake, which, in light of more public services being contracted to religious organisations, are getting evermore serious for employees, service users, and the public alike.

Fairly provided and fairly distributed public services of a good quality are an essential foundation of a healthy, happy, and good society. We believe that public services can promote the wellbeing of individual citizens and enhance their social capital, that their full availability is essential for full citizenship and equality for all and essential for greater social cohesion. The BHA makes no judgment on the desirability of a mixed economy policy in the provision of public services.

However, we are clear that commissioners must not assume that religious organisations will be better able to serve the local community than secular ones. In fact, many religious groups which wish to take on the delivery of public services may be particularly conservative, evangelical, unrepresentative, or internally discriminatory, causing particular problems with contracting to religious organisations that do not exist with secular ones. There is no evidence to show religious organisations are better able to reach vulnerable people in communities, in fact if they are discriminatory, such as having a men-only board, or are homophobic, they may be less accessible to the wider community.

So we reacted with deep concern when the government awarded a contract to provide vital services for trafficked women to the Salvation Army, withdrawing funding from pioneering women’s charity Eaves Housing, which had previously been commissioned to provide those services through its ‘Poppy Project’. The Salvation Army, an evangelical organisation, has previously declared to parliament that it would be ‘impossible’ for it to be ‘religiously neutral’ in the provision of public services. The Salvation Army’s position statement on homosexuality also details homosexual behaviour as ‘self evidently abnormal’ and condemns gay people to a life of celibacy.

We believe that it is deeply concerning that the government has considered it appropriate to stop contracting with an organisation specialist in working with victims of sexual trafficking, motivated solely with regard to the wellbeing of those women, and has handed over control of those services to a church motivated by a clear mission to evangelise.

The BHA, which is a member of the End Violence Against Women coalition, met with Eaves Housing to discuss how we could work together in the context of the BHA’s wider work on public service reform. As we have already seen with the divisive ‘faith’ schools system, without measures in place to ensure equality of all before services are contracted, there is a real risk of permanently entrenching religious division and discrimination in public services.

Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins talk ethics in Oxford

On 12 April in Oxford the BHA, Richard Dawkins Foundation, Oxford University Atheists, Humanists and Secularists, Project Reason, and Blackwell Bookshops hosted a discussion with neuroscientist and philosopher Sam Harris about how he locates morals and truth within the context of science. The discussion was chaired by CFI UK provost Stephen Law. Harris was joined on stage by BHA Vice President Richard Dawkins. Harris began by stating that without a universal moral framework humanity will lose its way. However, with reference to his latest publication *The Moral Landscape*, he argues that religion isn’t where we find universal morality, and that often morality and behaviour dictated by religion can be counter to ‘avoiding the worst possible misery for everyone.’

In this first joint public appearance, Harris and Dawkins went on to discuss the scientific tools and methods that may be used to determine moral values. In cool tones and clear language, Harris worked hard to undermine the conventional assumption that science has nothing to say about right and wrong. Audience members challenged doing away with moral philosophy and the fact/value distinction, instead focussing on questions of principle which, perhaps, science can’t necessarily resolve alone. A fascinating evening.
Andrew Copson, in saying goodbye to Andrew West, from being our ICT and Web Officer for two years, Bob Churchill went on to be our first President. He simultaneously became a campaigns intern at the BHA and the first President of Oxford University Humanist, Secularist and Humanists, and also coordinated the first Oxford Think Tank. He subsequently became Press Officer of the National Federation of Atheists, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS), and last July was elected as the third President. He has interned with us for over a year and is well placed to take these important campaigns forward. So, three reasons to be cheerful, in spite of these current difficult times!

Andrew Copson has been an active member of the EHF’s general assembly and annual conference in Genoa, Italy, from 2005 to 2007. At a special meeting, the Mayor of Genoa addressed the EHF General Assembly. She welcomed the delegation, and spoke at length about how the city had long been the hub for freedom and for civil and legal rights. The Mayor also said that the Italian ‘Atheist Movement’ (inspired by the BHA’s Atheist+ Campaign!) not only had not been in Genoa – but that Genoa was the only city in all of Italy to permit it to.

The BHA’s interests are focused mostly on the EHF’s interests in the international arena, including information about the key areas of the ‘Community Right to Challenge’ legislation in all member countries, which now number three.

The ‘Community Right to Challenge’ – a key reform under the government’s ‘Big Society’ policy – is a “community organisations’ ‘right’ to bid to run public services in local areas, on behalf of the state. We have already argued that the issue at stake is not one of wishing to discriminate against religious groups, rather it is one of ensuring that all providers are required to work to the same high equality standards, to ensure that all public service employers are treated equally regardless of their personal beliefs, and to ensure that public services continue to be available to all, without illegitimate and unnecessary discrimination.

In the same week as a specialist women’s organisation working with victims of trafficking lost their public service contract to the Salvation Army, a missionary church, a London Council has awarded a local contract to provide counselling services to teenagers on issues including contraception, unwanted pregnancy, and homophobic bullying, to the Catholic Children’s Society. The Catholic Children’s Society famously gave up working with new adopters after the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations came into force in 2007, which meant that they could no longer refuse to take gay couples wanting to adopt. This is another example of the risk to secular, inclusive, and comprehensive public services. Counsellors have to work in line with a ‘Catholic ethos’, which may be contrary to the views and needs of those young people from the community they are working with.

Graduating Celebrants

This year we hope to train over 40 new celebrants as part of the BHA’s new programme. From the EHF’s perspective, celebrants are an essential part of any parliamentarian’s portfolio, and the training of new celebrants is one of the key priorities for the EHF. The new programme is designed to support new celebrants in their work with diverse communities, and to help them develop the skills and knowledge to work effectively with a range of different religious and non-religious groups.

Andrew West is our new Chief Executive. He has been working with the BHA for two years as Project Officer, and has now taken on the role of Chief Executive. He has been a key member of the BHA team and is well suited to this role. He has a strong understanding of the BHA’s work, and is well placed to continue the excellent work that the BHA has done in the past.

BHA News

The BHA is a UK-based humanist group that campaigns for the separation of state and religion, and works to promote humanist values in all aspects of public life. The BHA is a registered charity, and its activities include campaigning, research, and education.

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BHA views shaping public debate

Andrew Copson and Naomi Phillips have been putting forward the BHA’s views on a range of issues – and to a wide audience – through appearances on national television programmes. One of the BHA’s key aims is to have humanist perspectives shaping public debate. So, when we were invited to two very popular shows (both attract well over one million viewers per episode) to represent the BHA, we accepted.

Andrew appeared on Frank Skinner’s Show Me the Money and Richard was on Newsnight.

BHA and Centre for Inquiry host public debate

Herman Philipse and Richard Swinburne have very little they can agree on, but they get in the same room to speak about some of the BHA’s most important campaigns. Naomi argued that is whether the orderness of the universe points to a designer and if discoveries in neuroscience, cosmology, and other branches of empirical science reveal evidence of the hand of God. While the audience was a relatively tough crowd for Swinburne (Philipse began by pollig the audience about their belief with an outcome of mostly atheists), there were some points on which the speakers could find common ground – i.e. that the universe is a wonderful place for us to be in.

The debate was filmed and made available on the BHA YouTube channel. Look out for an announcement in Andrew’s section of the programme on The Big Issue when it is aired.

Radio and TV regular, comedian, author, and BHA Distinguished Supporter Naomi Haynes presented her BHA Voltaire Lecture on 20 April. The lecture aimed to make direct links between our modern life and what we know about the past. But Haynes did more than just that. An engaging speaker with quick wit, over the past three years Naomi has pieced together what life was like in ancient times from one source would be trying to work out what Barbra Streisand was like if her only source for her was her monastic portrayal in the US comedy TV show South Park, but by using multiple sources she was able to present a very convincing argument about how people at the time coped with grief and war, and laughed at themselves, and understood their world and place in it.

The theme of the lecture followed on from Haynes’ latest publication The Ancient Guide To Modern Life, which shows how little civilisation and our social institutions have changed over the millennia. Video footage from the lecture can be found on the BHA YouTube channel: http://www.youtube.com/britishhumanists

BHA at forefront of LGBT equality

As an organisation working on the frontline of equal rights campaigning, the BHA was proud to be involved in the tabling of an Early Day Motion (EDM) this week which called on the government to recognise the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHO).

Together with the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA), we raised initial awareness of IDAHO by asking Lib Dem MPs to sign the EDM (1780), which had cross-party co-sponsorship, and has attracted many signatures from other colleagues. This impressive reaction is in no small part down to the help of our members and supporters who wrote to their MPs urging them to support it.

For so many of you who missed this what is IDAHO? On 17 May, IDAHO is a day to promote anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic messages and to remember those who have suffered as a result of IDAHO.

However, the BHA did not support this particular amendment. We felt it was unnecessary to state “halal” and “kosher” and would be misleading as some halal slaughterhouses do not pluck birds before slaughtering. Stevenson acknowledged his amendment was misleading, withdrew it, and instead supported two similar amendments (353/359) which called for a label stating animals were slaughtered by death (from slaughter without pre-stunning).

Religious slaughter labelling returns to EU

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In April, the issue of labelling of meat slaughtered without pre-stunning came back into the European Parliament, after last year. Many MEPs were surprised when we were invited on to two very influential proponent of natural theology. philosophy at the University of Oxford and and Richard Swinburne, professor of branches of empirical science reveal!

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Alliance for Secular Europe update

Reactionary religious interest groups remain influential within European politics and are becoming increasingly active, the recently established Alliance for Secular Europe has warned. The Alliance, of which the BHA is a founding member, aims to bring together a broad variety of organisations in its work, including those campaigning for equality on the basis of gender and sexual orientation, organisations concerned with family planning, abortion, and assisted dying, religious groups in favour of reform, human rights organisations, and humanist and secularist groups. Though varied in its composition, the Alliance is united in its opposition to the improper exercise of religious interference to undermine the freedom of others.

Through the Alliance, groups will be able to issue alerts and seek assistance on issues where a secular approach in Europe is not co-ordinated, resistance is needed, or in the face of reactivity and often highly organised groups attempting to impose an overtly religious agenda.

The Alliance is calling for all organisations whose work is affected by these issues to consider joining in order to ensure that important voices are heard at a European level.

Aggressive secularists again... yawn

Quoted in The Guardian, Andrew Copson said, ‘If informed attacks on “aggressive” or “militant” secularists are rapidly becoming an Easter and Christmas phenomenon from archbishops and cardinals. What these attacks ignore is that campaigners for secularism in our public life are being vilified, not by overt religious prejudice, but by a positive desire to remain uncontaminated by worldly public space. These alarmist speeches, designed to stir up the faithful and foster an antiscientific, anti-intellectual, and anti-liberal vote, should be no surprise. Their obscurantism presents a threat to the reality of the situation, which is that the sale of religious belief’s underpinnings is of no real influence and privilege totally out of proportion to their significance.’

Evolution and creationism in schools: next steps

The BHA is leading the campaign to have evolution taught as a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools and, as we reported in the previous edition of BHA News, we met with the Schools Minister Nick Gibb MP to discuss our work. We also discussed the growing threat of creationism and intelligent design, not least in the new religious Free Schools and Academies being created. Since our meeting, the government has included a clause in its Free Schools application pack that aims to protect from creationism and intelligent design ideas. The BHA believes that this clause is a step in the right direction.

From the Chair

The BHA calendar for the next two months includes a variety of events that we have ever had – a vibrant set of meetings and events that I am sure will enable the board of directors’ move by refreshing the network of contacts we have, both in the UK and internationally.

In particular I am looking forward to the Annual Conference in Manchester on 17-19 June, an opportunity to renew friendships and make new ones. The Humanist Philosophers conference on ‘Religion in Public Life’ on 16 July will examine the place that religion has taken in public life and how that should be inclusive of both a range of religions, without any privilege, but also include the non-religious on an equal footing. I know that there are key public events, such as the Remembrance Services around the country every November, and particularly at the Cenotaph in London, where many people believe that the non-religious members of the armed forces, both now and who served in the various wars of the past century, should be represented explicitly. The Humanist Philosophers conference, like so many of our recent successful events, is supported by the BHA in its mission to promote Humanism and secular organisations must be a principle of our humanist activity. In this faculty, the BHA is delighted that we have been able to come to arrangements over the past months for working more closely with and supporting the UK Armed Forces Humanist Association (UKAFHA), the National Federation of Atheists, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHSS), and the Centre for Inquiry UK. This is the kind of joined up working together that will really reinforce the common purposes that we have with the other two bodies.

What is your average day like in the BHA office?

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What is the most important thing about working for the BHA for you?

I know that humanist values provide a strong backbone to my life. By supporting the BHA, I feel that we are continuing a tradition that is very important to me.

Ancestors Trail

On 30 May, the BHA walked The Ancestor’s Trail in Somerset. Inspired by Richard Dawkins’ book, The Ancestor’s Trail is an annual ‘biological pilgrimage’ across the Quantock Hills, a metaphorical journey back to the dawn of life on Earth, with the winding footpaths representing branches on Darwin’s tree of life.

Radio 4’s Ramblings came along for the walk and interviewed walkers to see why evolution held a special place in their hearts.

Representative Clare Balding said, ‘People from Nairn described their fear of hell. Chloe remarked with sadness that “if heaven is a fairy tale then hell is a nightmare” and that teaching people such terrifying things can seriously affect their lives. Rabbi Hirschfield agreed. Although the choir didn’t get to sing on international radio, a high spirited rehearsal followed, practising two new pieces.

BHA People

A regular feature introducing some of our staff, volunteers and distinguished supporters

Ben Siegel

BHA Head of Ceremonies

What first interested you about the BHA?

I have always felt that the BHA is an organisation that punches above its weight; a progressive charity that has clearly grown hugely in both its professionalism and influence over the past 10 years. The breadth in the scope of its activities, and particularly how these encompass ceremonies activity, makes it an appealing employer.

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Win! Win! Win!

We have a copy of Robert Rowland Smith’s book *Driving with Plato* to give away to the first person drawn out of a hat who correctly answers the question:

‘Of which ancient city was Socrates a citizen?’

Email your answer to editor@humanism.org.uk or post to ‘Editor, BHA News’, 1 Gower Street London WC1E 6HD by 1st July 2011.

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**Remembrance 2011**

Last year, at least 13 humanist groups throughout the UK laid wreaths to remember all those who fell on our behalf. It is important to many humanists that the remembrance ceremonies that take place all over the UK do not continue to be exclusively religious.

Over the next few weeks, every BHA-affiliated Humanist Group will receive an email from UKAFHA’s Chaplain, David Brittain, inviting them to participate at their own local ceremony this year, and will offer advice on how to set about it. But if you have already decided to participate, you can let him know now, by emailing him on davidbrittain13@hotmail.com.

We hope to include more humanist groups this year and one day persuade the Government to reverse its decision to refuse BHA representation at the cenotaph in London.

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**DISCLAIMER**: Humanists do not agree about everything and some readers will disagree with some views expressed in this newsletter. The opinions of individual humanists are always interesting but are not, of course, necessarily BHA policy. On occasion we include inserts with BHA News. Many of these are part of reciprocal arrangements that allow us to send our leaflets to other organisations’ subscribers. We only accept inserts we think may be of interest to some of our readers, and will not include material promoting causes we wish to promote Humanism and support and respect people who seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs.