Beyond Tomorrow: Visions of the Future

We might not be able to see into the future, but that didn’t stop us from exploring it over three days at our annual conference in the National Museum, Cardiff.

In June, scientists, writers, philosophers, and entertainers joined over 250 BHA members, volunteers, trustees, and staff to gaze into the future and answer the question, ‘What happens next?’

Presenters included environmental lawyer Polly Higgins, comedian Richard Herring, former UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser Professor Sir David King, futurologist Mark Stephenson, the world’s first human cyborg Professor Kevin Warwick, performer and scientist Carole Jahme, and award-winning science fiction author Paul McAuley.

We took the opportunity at the Gala dinner to award Vice President of the BHA and world renowned scientist and author of The God Delusion, Richard Dawkins, the 2012 Award for Services to Humanism. His acceptance speech, in which he delivered a powerful poem by former BHA president Julian Huxley (and composed a rhyme about our current Chief Executive!) emphasised that an understanding of evolutionary science is useful in all fields of study. Following his speech, delegates gave him a standing ovation in appreciation of both what he had said and all his work for Humanism.

Sara Passmore, our Head of Education and Promotion, commented, ‘Everything from climate change to the increase in population needs to be explored and understood if we are to be able to live the most successful and fulfilling lives possible. Our understanding of these issues and debates has to be meaningful; and to be meaningful it has to become personal.’ The conference enabled a wide audience to engage with these issues, find out what is being done that will affect our future, and consider some of the possibilities open to us.

Videos from the conference will soon be available on the BHA’s YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/BritishHumanists. The 2013 annual conference will be taking place in Leeds from Friday 7 to Saturday 9 June. Early bird booking availability will soon be announced.

Help us find new members!

One of the most practical ways you can support the BHA is to help us to find new members. So, in this edition of BHA News, we are making it easy for you!

Tucked inside you will find our membership recruitment leaflet, Do you believe in here and now, not the hereafter? This spells out to prospective new members why now — more than ever before — they should consider supporting our work.

Please would you give this leaflet to a friend and encourage them to become a member of the BHA.

If you would like more copies, Tamsin and Blakeley at the BHA’s office will be delighted to post them to you. Please call us on 020 7079 3580 or email us at info@humanism.org.uk.
One of the most pleasurable BHA events since I last sat down to write for *BHA News* was the launch of former Muslim and current science teacher Alom Shaha’s *The Young Atheist’s Handbook: Lessons for Living a Good Life Without God* which is reported on more fully below. Alom has been a delight to get to know since we first met when I was speaking about Humanism at a Skeptics in the Pub event and he was in the audience. He told me shortly afterwards that he was writing a book and it was wonderful that we came eventually to organise the launch with him. The audience at the event was noticeably younger and much more ethnically diverse that most book launches and BHA events that I have been to and these are surely demographics that we need to work much harder to appeal to in the coming years. Alom himself has trained as a school speaker for the BHA and his eloquence and charm as much as the success of his excellent book is helping to bring Humanism to a new audience.

Always a pleasurable event, not least for the rare chance for members, trustees, and staff to meet face-to-face, is our Annual General Meeting, and it was extra special this year to have it in the Bishopsgate Institute. This is where the BHA’s archive is held and it was appropriate that the many members who attended were able to see items from our collection of the last 135 years in between hearing and debating reports on all of our more contemporary work. Something that never changes seems to be the need to keep up the campaign for liberal and secular education. Our archive contains materials from campaigns against sectarian schooling in the 1900s and it is depressing to see the need as great today. In the past few weeks we have seen schools run by creationists cleared for public funding, an increase in religious schools through the government’s ‘Free School’ scheme, and the announcement that teaching posts in state-funded ‘Academies’ will be opened up to applicants with no teacher training. All of these developments are concerning to those of us who care about an inclusive and rational school system.

The BHA is leading the fightback against these damaging developments. Just this week, we received notice that the European Commission will be investigating the compatibility of religious schools’ employment policies with equality law, as a result of our urging; we broke major national stories on creationist-run schools; and, working with local people, we successfully halted the opening of a new religious school. We can only continue this work with your help and support so, while you enjoy this summer’s holiday, do look out for our appeals for your help when term begins again and we resume our vital campaigns against the indoctrination, discrimination and irrationality that are increasingly a feature of our school system.

**The Young Atheist’s Handbook Launch**

In July we helped Alom Shaha launch his new book *The Young Atheist’s Handbook: Lessons for Living a Good Life Without God*. Over 150 people attended the celebration, which included presentations from comedian Robin Ince, broadcaster Samira Ahmed, geneticist Adam Rutherford, and philosopher A.C. Grayling, as well as a talk and reading of an excerpt from the book by Alom.

Alom, a physics teacher, writer, filmmaker, science communicator, and member of the BHA, described his upbringing in a strict Bangladeshi Muslim area in south-east London in the 1970s and 1980s. He outlined the intellectual journey which led him to Humanism; much of the evening focused on his belief that it is possible to live a compassionate, fulfilling, and meaningful life without God.

The *Young Atheist’s Handbook* is made up of a series of lessons which combine factual content with a personal narrative. They cover the religious beliefs and practices of Alom’s childhood, the contrast between his strict family life on a council estate and his education at a privileged private school, his growing interest in science, his philosophical reflections, and his questioning of received wisdom. Funny and heart-warming, Alom’s book is a must-read for all young people who want to grow up asking questions.

A real-time account of the event can be found at www.bit.ly/O3WcJR.

**BHA AGM and Annual Review**

We’ve had a very eventful year, which was reflected at our Annual General Meeting at the Bishopsgate Institute on 14 July. The day included forums on ceremonies, education, and campaigns; members were able to make suggestions and comments to help inform our work. As well as the formal business – looking at our policies, past year’s work, report, accounts, and resolutions – the meeting concluded with an informal drinks reception, where members could meet our staff and trustees.

Our Annual Review, which was launched at the AGM, is now available online and contains highlights of our work in 2011/12. You can find the Annual Review on our website at www.humanism.org.uk/annualreview2012. Printed copies are available on request from the BHA. If you would like a printed copy please contact us at info@humanism.org.uk.
BHA expresses concern at Steiner and Maharishi schools
In May, Pavan Dhaliwal, our Head of Public Affairs, was a signatory, alongside Edzard Ernst, Simon Singh, and David Colquhoun, to a letter to the Secretary of State for Education, expressing concern about pseudoscientific Maharishi and Steiner schools gaining state funding. The state-funded Maharishi School had as its specialist subject the ‘Science of Creative Intelligence’, while Steiner education is based on an esoteric/occultist movement called Anthroposophy, or ‘Spiritual Science’. The Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship requires for Steiner schools that ‘An Anthroposophical impulse lies at the heart of planning for the school.’

Humanist Funerals Research
The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) released new research findings on humanist funerals in May. Undertaken by Dr Matthew Engelke, an anthropologist of religion, the research examined how people who do not believe in an afterlife are commemorated, with a focus on the funerals we provide. Dr Engelke noted that humanist funeral ceremonies have a strong emphasis on the individual, which is in contrast to some traditional religious funerals.

UK Government agency finds creationist qualifications are equivalent to A-Levels
The National Academic Recognition Information Centre, the UK national agency responsible for advising universities and employers on the worth of qualifications has decided that creationist qualification the International Certificate of Christian Education, taught in around 50 private Christian schools across the UK, is worth the same as A-Levels. The ‘Accelerated Christian Education’ curriculum upon which the qualification is based includes claims that the Loch Ness monster disproves evolution and that there is no biological basis for homosexuality.

‘Conversion therapy’ psychotherapist loses appeal
In May we welcomed the news that Lesley Pilkington, a psychotherapist who was found guilty of ‘professional malpractice’ for using the techniques of ‘conversion therapy’ (a bogus form of treatment which is supposed to make homosexual people become heterosexual), lost her appeal against the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). Mrs Pilkington was found guilty of malpractice last year after trying to convert a gay client to heterosexuality, with the BACP describing her practice as ‘negligent’, ‘dogmatic’, and ‘unprofessional’. We reported on this story when the news broke in January, and where, regrettably, ‘conversion therapy’ continues to exist, that it is not subsidised by public funds.
The Government has backed the opening of three Free Schools that support teaching creationism in science; two of the schools intend to teach creationism in RE (see details in the article below).

Within the first few days of breaking the news, over 3,000 people sent emails through our system to MPs and Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove in opposition to the plans.

There is still time for you to oppose creationist-run Free Schools. Visit the website at www.tinyurl.com/nocreationisminfreeschools.

**‘Humanism and Resilience’ conference**

In May, Andrew Copson, Sara Passmore, and Pavan Dhaliwal attended the annual European Humanist Federation (EHF) General Assembly in Utrecht. The accompanying conference, entitled ‘Humanism and Resilience’, was attended by representatives of Humanist organisations from across Europe.

Held at the wonderful University of Humanistics, the three-day conference, organised by the Dutch Humanists, included a wide choice of workshops and talks on education, civil participation, and the resilience of minorities. It hosted Member of the European Parliament Sophie Int’Veld talking on being a humanist working at EU level.

This was the last conference as President of EHF for BHA Trustee David Pollock. He gave an inspiring presentation on campaigning and on the challenges that lie ahead. He was warmly thanked for all he has achieved on the Board and as Chair. Pavan was elected onto the Board of the EHF, so BHA is still represented there.

**Government approves Free Schools that will teach creationism**

In July, the Government announced its support for 102 new Free Schools to open in September 2013. This includes 33 new ‘faith’ schools, including the first multi-faith school, the first two special needs ‘faith’ schools, and the first alternative provision ‘faith’ school. Alternative provision schools cater for pupils who have difficulties accessing mainstream education. Of even more concern is the inclusion of two schools supportive of teaching creationism in science. We subsequently discovered a third school, backed by the Government to open in September 2012, with a ‘Creation Policy’ on its website and with strong links to the UK creationist movement.

Exemplar — Newark Business Academy is a resubmitted bid from the same group who, last year, proposed Everyday Champions Academy, which was formally backed by Everyday Champions Church. This predecessor bid was rejected by the Government, who said that Michael Gove ‘was unable to accept that an organisation with creationist beliefs could prevent these views being reflected in the teaching in the school and in its other activities.’ However, Exemplar — who say they will not teach creationism in science, but will teach it in RE — has now been approved.

In addition, Sevenoaks Christian School stated on their website that they would also not teach creationism in science — but only because the Government wouldn’t let them. Instead, they say they intend to teach about creationism in RE. Even this is very unusual for a secondary school, as primary schools more typically deal with this subject.

Finally, Grindon Hall Christian School is backed by the Government to open this September. However, the school’s ‘Creation Policy’ stated support for teaching creationism alongside evolution, saying ‘We believe that God, as sovereign Lord of the universe, is capable of creating the world in a few 24-hour days... We will teach creation as a scientific theory... We will affirm that to believe in God’s creation of the world is an entirely respectable position, scientifically and rationally.’ The group now say they will teach creationism in RE.

The Chair of Grindon Hall has long advocated schools teaching creationism. He was chief academic advisor to the Emmanuel Schools when they were teaching creationism last decade, and is also the chairman of the Christian Institute, where he authored its education policy, which rejects evolution.

The BHA has launched a major campaign to oppose these schools gaining state funding. Please write to your MP and Michael Gove in opposition to the state funding of these schools; you can use www.tinyurl.com/nocreationisminfreeschools.

**AHS AGM, Birmingham**

The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS) held their AGM in July and saw the election of a new executive team. Hosted by the University of Birmingham Atheist, Secular and Humanist Society, the event included workshops on campaigning and running large events, a presentation from Professor Stephen Law on the ‘evil God’ challenge, and comedy from Sully O’Sullivan and Rick Molland.

The BHA would like to congratulate and welcome the new AHS executive: Jess Vautier, President; Emiko Kent, Secretary; and Matthew Power, Treasurer.
**Schools minister supports teaching Humanism in religious education**

In response to a letter from Andrew Copson, Nick Gibb has declared his support for teaching non-religious beliefs — such as Humanism — in Religious Education. Mr Gibb said that he agrees ‘that it is valuable for young people to be aware of different philosophical approaches, such as Humanism. I am sure that many schools will be interested to teach about non-religious ways of looking at the world, as part of preparing their pupils for adult life and I am happy to support them if they do.’

In June, a new poll showed most adults support RE remaining a compulsory subject.

_**HowTheLightGetsIn**_

This year we again sponsored events at HowTheLightGetsIn, the philosophy and music festival at Hay on Wye. Over the weekend Andrew Copson chaired a discussion, _Everywhere and Nowhere_, on whether we can transcend thinking in oppositions. Panellists included the Director of the Institute of Philosophy at the University of London, Barry Smith; LSE sociologist, Hilary Rose; award-winning philosopher of the information age, Luciano Floridi; and creative director of HowTheLightGetsIn, Hilary Lawson. A panel focussing on the *Decline of Violence* included Andrew, with psychologist Steven Pinker, economist Judith Marquand, and BBC broadcaster Roger Bolton.

**Assisted dying case goes to court**

Last month, Tony Nicklinson, a paralysed man campaigning for a doctor to be allowed to lawfully end his life, began to have his case heard in the High Court.

Mr Nicklinson suffers from ‘locked-in syndrome’, which means that whilst he is of sound mind, he is paralysed from the neck down and unable to speak.

We support his wish for the ruling that, if he makes the informed decision to end his life, a doctor will be immune from prosecution if they help him do so. The judges are expected to reach a decision in July; we will continue our work campaigning to see a change in the law.

**Evolution added to primary curriculum**

In June, the Government published its draft primary National Curriculum for Science, which, for the first time, explicitly includes evolution. The campaign we coordinated, ‘Teach evolution, not creationism!’, called for this precise change, so we are delighted. The campaign’s nearly 25,000 supporters included Sir David Attenborough, Richard Dawkins, and Michael Reiss.

The draft specifies modules on evolution in Year 4 (ages 8-9) and Year 6 (ages 10-11); at the moment the subject is first taught from Year 10 (ages 14-15), which scientists and educators tell us is much too late. The Government is currently informally consulting on the plans, before having a formal consultation in the autumn; it proposes that the curriculum be introduced from September 2014. We will be responding to the informal consultation shortly.

Andrew Copson responded, ‘Teaching this core concept from an earlier age will give pupils a much stronger understanding of the life sciences and of how we came to be. The Government must be commended for making this change, and we look forward to working with them to ensure this proposal becomes reality.’

Using Gift Aid means that for every £1 of your donation, we can claim an extra 25p from the Inland Revenue, helping your money go further. For example, if you donate £20, this is worth £25 to us. All you need to do is help your money go further. For every £1 of your donation, we can claim an extra 25p from the Inland Revenue, helping your money go further. For example, if you donate £20, this is worth £25 to us. All you need to do is help your money go further.
**BHA People**

* A regular feature introducing some of our staff, volunteers, and Distinguished Supporters.

**Jess Vautier**

National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies President

**What first interested you about Humanism?**

I heard about Humanism when I was at university, and reading up on it I realised I’d been a humanist all along without realising. The idea of being ‘good without god’ really resonates with me, having been told many times (even by family members) that I have no morals because I’m an atheist.

**What is the best part of being president of the AHS?**

I’ve only been president for a few weeks so far, so I’m sure the best part is yet to come! However, I love finding out what all the societies are up to and having the ability to extend a helping hand when it is needed.

**What do you think is the most important thing about joining a humanist group?**

The most important thing for me about humanist groups is the feeling of community. Religious groups automatically have a huge support network and we don’t necessarily get that. That said, everyone has their own reasons and I think that’s a great thing.

Want to find out more about the AHS? Visit their website at www.ahsstudents.org.uk.

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**House of Lords reform**

Over two days in July in a Parliamentary debate on Lords reform, the Government’s proposals to retain Church of England bishops in the legislature came under sustained attack. In all, around one in every five speakers made reference to the role of the Lords Spiritual in a reformed House. What’s more, within hours of the Bill’s introduction, an amendment to remove the bishops had been tabled by Chris Bryant MP (Rhondda).

In the wake of these debates, the Government’s original intention was to hold a vote on a Programme Motion. This would have limited Parliament’s debating time to a dozen days, ensuring the Bill passed swiftly and did not succumb to filibustering. However, in the face of a substantial backbench Conservative rebellion, the Motion was withdrawn at the last minute.

The Government still intends to introduce a Programme Motion, but not until after Parliament has returned in the autumn. In the meantime, Ministers will be meeting with parliamentarians of all hues, seeking concessions which might guarantee the Bill support in the Commons.

Thanks to the thousands of messages emailed to MPs through our website and the strong objections voiced in Parliament, the unjust privileges afforded to Church of England bishops is now firmly among the leading issues of Lords Reform. If we are to gain concessions over the Lords Spiritual, however, it is crucial that we maintain the pressure on MPs and Cabinet Ministers.

Visit www.holyredundant.org.uk to find out how you can get involved.

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**New Distinguished Supporters**

**Warren Ellis**

We would like to welcome author Warren Ellis to the BHA as one of our newest Distinguished Supporters. Warren is an English author, particularly known for *The Authority* and *Transmetropolitan*. He is also well known for his sociocultural commentary, both through his online presence and through his writing, which often covers transhumanist themes (most notably nanotechnology, cryonics, mind transfer, and human enhancement). His new novel, *Gun Machine*, will be released in early 2013. You can find him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/warrenellis

**Richard Bartle**

Richard Bartle, Professor of Computer Game Design at the University of Essex, also joins us as a new Distinguished Supporter. Born in 1960, Richard is best known for having co-written the real world’s first virtual world: MUD (it stands for Multi-User Dungeon), and is therefore in the privileged position of actually knowing what is required of a world-creating deity. He is an influential writer on all aspects of online design and development and in 2003 published the book *Designing Virtual Worlds*. In 2010 he was the first recipient of the prestigious Game Developers’ Choice Award of Online Game Legend.

Richard has said that ‘Making the real world better is better than trusting there’s a world that’s already better.’

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**Author Warren Ellis. Photo by Gage Skidmore**
From the Chair

The year for the Board in many ways is the year from AGM to AGM, although the formal the report and accounts is for the previous calendar year. This is partly because it is at the AGM that we typically say goodbye to trustees standing down and welcome newly elected trustees. Following the very successful AGM at the Bishopsgate Institute, where the BHA archives are held, we have three new trustees, Guy Otten, Paul Blanchard, and Alan Palmer.

In my review of the year at the AGM I noted that 2011 had been a very good year, we had had income of over £1m for the first time and been able to record a surplus for the first time in five years. But this doesn’t mean that we can rest on our laurels — we will be campaigning just as strongly going forward and that means asking for your continued support in some funding campaigns through the autumn. Please remember that these are austere times, but the work that we do is vital for the future, particularly in improving our democracy and making sure that our state education is as free as possible from unscientific bias.

Looking at the rest of the BHA News I am struck by the busyness of the BHA — maybe it should be called the Busy Humanist Association! There is so much going on, on so many fronts. I am delighted to see the appointment of a new Head of Community Services, not just ceremonies, but also for the important piloting of pastoral support and other community initiatives. The Ceremonies Network is going forward now with a new management structure, which Andrew Copson has worked tirelessly to develop. I and the Board wish the renewed Ceremonies Network team every success — it has our wholehearted support as a vital part of what we do for the non-religious in society and how we promote Humanism.

We shall be holding the World Humanist Congress in Oxford in 2014, for which the theme will be ‘Only Connect’, a quote from the end of E M Forster’s novel Howard’s End, aimed at getting us thinking about Humanism as a world movement and working better together on our common international concerns. This relates well to the proposition by Niall Ferguson recently in a BBC Reith Lecture on the reform of the law, where he argued that it comes not from our political institutions, but from the associations of civil society. Associations like the BHA. As he says, reform ‘must come, in short, from us: the citizens’. We can and must address the moral issues in society, nationally and internationally, working together, with our common belief in humanity and reason, to effect political reform.

— Robert Ashby

New resources and additional support for local humanist groups

We have been working closely with local humanist groups to ensure that we provide the right level of support and information. Following consultation with groups in July we launched the Groups’ Hub — a one-stop shop for groups to find: information and guidance; resources developed by other local groups including ideas for events; tips for promoting the group; suggestions of presentations for school speakers; and briefings and artwork for our campaigns.

On the Groups’ Hub the Speakers’ List details the names and email addresses of people willing to travel to local groups and deliver talks; groups can add recommended speakers to the directory.

The Groups’ Hub is also where local groups can promote their upcoming events on our website.

To find out more about local groups visit www.humanism.org.uk/groups.

Upcoming date:
The Group Representatives’ Annual Meeting (GRAM) is on 17 November in central London and is open to representatives of local groups. Find out more details at www.humanism.org.uk/GRAM2012.

Local and groups review

West Sussex Humanists

West Sussex Humanists are leading celebrations over Chichester Free School’s winning of approval for the first mixed school without a religious character in Chichester. Up to now, the residents of Chichester have had no access to a mixed school that is not a ‘faith’ school.

Dorset Humanists

Dorset Humanists have launched their One Life course, exploring Humanism and atheism. This is based on a course developed by Greater Manchester Humanists which is available from the BHA website at www.humanism.org.uk/education/courses

Central London Humanists

The Central London Humanists’ book club meets regularly at the Royal Festival Hall. This month they have been discussing ‘The Black Cloud’, a 1959 classic ‘hard’ science-fiction novel by renowned Cambridge astronomer and cosmologist Fred Hoyle. The book tracks the progress of a giant black cloud that comes towards Earth and sits in front of the sun, causing widespread panic and death. Members of the book club stated that the meeting gave them the opportunity to take part in discussions, read books they wouldn’t normally have read, and have a stimulating and interesting exchange of ideas.

North East Humanists

In June the North East Humanists held their 2012 Humanist Week conference. The keynote speech from BHA Trustee David Pollock was on the influence of religion and faith in our education system. Pavan Dhaliwal spoke about other ways in which religions are influencing and attempting to influence our lives and our society.

Visit www.humanism.org.uk/groups to find your local humanist group.
**Win! Win! Win!**

We have a copy of Alom Shaha’s *The Young Atheist’s Handbook: Lessons for Living a Good Life Without God* to give away to the first person drawn out of a hat who correctly answers the question:

What subject does Alom Shaha teach?

Email your answer to editor@humanism.org.uk or post to ‘Editor, BHA News’, 1 Gower Street London WC1E 6HD by 10 September 2012.

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**BHA news**

This issue edited and designed by Sara Passmore and staff editorial team. Please send contributions for the next issue — news, views, quotes, and cuttings of interest to other humanists — marked ‘For publication’— to editor@humanism.org.uk or ‘The Editor, BHA’ by 10 September 2012.

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The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity.

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