



Members Newsletter, November 2013
Edited by Margaret Godden

Living without religion

A British Humanist Association Partner and
affiliated to the National Secular Society

www.oxfordhumanists.org.uk

The Sunday Assembly comes to Oxford

It has not taken long for the Sunday Assembly movement to reach Oxford. The idea is to give non-believers a chance to join a friendly, supportive group so that they can get the social benefits that churches give their members while helping each other to 'live better, help often, wonder more'. Several of our members were at their first meeting and John White now gives his impressions:

In the email that outlined the format, our forthcoming "assembly" was identified as a "party". And in his opening remarks our host, Sanderson Jones, (co-founder of the SA concept), was keen to welcome us to 'a joyous occasion'.

Sanderson immediately got us to our feet for a fulsome rendering of the *Circle of Life* song from the film "The Lion King". In the course of the meeting we sang three more songs - *Don't Stop Me Now*, *What a Wonderful World* and *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*

Two women members of the Oxford SA team read out a couple of thought-encouraging poems and another narrated a personal episode in support of the SA's various *Mottos* and *Missions*

The day's main speaker was Mark Leonard from The Mindfulness Exchange. As Mark started speaking, cups containing little bits of screwed up aluminium foil were circulated around the audience and we were all asked to take one. After he'd got us into a "mindfulness" frame of mind, Mark asked us to open the screwed up foil and identify the small objects inside. They all turned out to be ordinary raisins and we were invited to examine our raisin unhurriedly via our various senses, finally slowly eating it. After this the audience was asked to tell the rest of us if we'd experienced anything worth noting during our various examinations - and Mark commented on them. Soon after this Mark's time was up - which somewhat disappointed me since I was beginning to think that he might be getting round to something more profound than just being more aware of the input our senses are constantly sending our brains only to be ignored once they've arrived!

Sanderson's concluding remarks encouraged us to re-gather, same time, on Sunday December 1st but this time in the Old Fire Station; and to develop, via all our senses, a keener sense of gratitude for life, the universe and everything.

Our introductory email had confirmed that: *Children are welcome, all people are welcome regardless of age, gender, political view, religious view, etc. etc.* We certainly included people well into their seventies and baby children still in their parents' arms. Clearly, most of us enjoyed things overall, if not absolutely everything - and I'd be surprised if most of us don't expect to come again



Remembrance Day - a good outcome

Our Chair's patient but persistent discussions with the organisers of Oxford's Remembrance ceremony have borne fruit. This year he will be making a statement on behalf of Humanists alongside the usual faith leaders. We shall also be laying a wreath, as has already happened in the last two years.

It would be good to have a bunch of our members and supporters at the ceremony this Sunday, the 10th November. We shall be gathering outside the Ashmolean Museum in Beaumont Street from 10.15 am and moving from there to a better position in St Giles at 10.30.

Do join us if you can

A Sunday discussion with Grani Sankaran

Report by John Webster

Our meeting with Gnani Sankaran, described as 'a high profile Humanist and 'cultural heavyweight' from the state of Tamil Nadu in Southern India, was an enjoyable and stimulating encounter where all felt able to 'shoot the breeze' in an Oxford garden at the end of summer.

Gnani had been travelling in Europe and was sounding people out on his tour, specially on the subject of education and religion. A journalist and writer with a sizeable audience back home, his approach was to tap into people's experiences and views; early on a question he asked related how young people in Britain were responding to contemporary social and political conditions.

He discovered that we [Oxford Humanists] were almost all worried about the influence of religions in schools, which we all thought had taken advantage of the introduction of academy and free schools to pursue their agendas.

There was some talk of the contrast between other European education models, and also how the education system in India worked, as well as the influence of the caste system there. (Useful quote: 'Wherever you turn, caste is the monster that raises its head' - Dr Ambedkar.)

In this context the influence of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) was discussed, as were: the strength of the secular parties in India, the possible results of the next Indian general election, and the possibility that political and social polarization could result from the financial difficulties faced by Europe.

Overall, Gnani was a very open-minded interlocutor, and a pleasure to converse with and learn from.

Details of our Sunday discussions are circulated by John White by email. Or contact him for more information.

Have you looked at our web-site recently?

John, who is managing the site while David Lahee is working abroad, will be glad to hear your comments, critical or otherwise. Your committee think it is very good, so do give a go:

www.oxfordhumanists.org.uk



A record number of members and friends turned out for our garden party this year. The weather was, as usual, kind Joe made us very welcome, there was plenty of good things to eat and drink and conversation ranged widely. If you weren't there, you missed a very pleasant afternoon.

Can you help with the World Humanist Congress?

This major event will be held in Oxford next August, 8th to 10th. Our own Joe Trakalo is assisting in the organisation and is looking for local members who could offer a bed to a foreign visitor OR who would like to help with the work up to and during the event.. You can volunteer by visiting the WHC web-site: whc2014.org.uk. Or you can contact Joe at evojoe2002@yahoo.ca.
Or do you want to attend? You can register on the WHC web-site, Places are limited and bookings are already coming in so don't delay.

Are you interested in school visits?

We are trying to develop links with secondary schools to ensure that all of Oxfordshire's young people have a chance to hear about Humanism in a fair and balanced way.

If you think you might be able to help (not necessarily doing the visits) please contact John.

Anyone for a good read?

It has been suggested that we might set up a Book Club - a group of people who meet monthly or bi-monthly to discuss a book they have all read. Anyone interested please contact Margaret.

Books for sale needed

Do you have any books relevant to Humanism or Secularism that you no longer want to keep? Penny is looking for anything suitable for us to sell on our stand at the Green Fair on 7th December
Please contact Penny direct if you have anything to offer

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