

## Humanists UK Convention 2023 in Liverpool: review

*Individual session notes from Tony Brewer and Helen Warner.*

### **Why humanism is the future**

*Speaker: David Voas, Professor of Social Science at UCL Institute of Education, and Co-director of online centre 'British Religion in Numbers'*

1. UK ('The West'?) is in a secular transition, from predominantly religious to non-religious
2. In UK 59% of those older than 75 claim to be religious, whereas only 17% of those 18-24 are
3. Modernisation theory(?) partly explains this: as people become more wealthy they have increasing choice, they're open to secular and scientific information and opinions, so growth in secularity is proportional to increase in wealth
4. Each succeeding generation learns less about religion from their parents so become more secular. If a generation is born non-religious it tends to stay non-religious
5. Decline in religious belief also leads to decline in religious socialisation
6. The C of E is the established church in UK but is no longer the popular church
7. Growth in secularity does not equate to growth in support for Humanism.

*Tony Brewer (TB)*

### **What do we misunderstand about energy?**

*Speaker: Zion Lights, science communicator, founder of evidence-based environmental group 'Emergency Reactor' and author of 'The Ultimate Guide to Green Parenting'*

Zion has been an environmental activist for many years and tried many campaigning methods. She was spokesperson for Extinction Rebellion (XR) for two years. For a long time she was also anti-nuclear. But in 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels. It set out four alternative paths to decarbonisation and they all depended on an element of nuclear power.

Zion said we need all the clean energy we can produce but need nuclear power as a back-up for now. The need to decarbonise is greater than the risks of nuclear power.

She said some of the anti-nuclear information in previous decades was misinformation, including some from the fossil fuels industry, and that it played on people's fear of radiation. She said we have a responsibility to communicate the facts better, for instance that one is exposed to more radiation from sleeping next to someone than from living next to a nuclear power station, and that nuclear waste facilities are not dangerous: in the Netherlands, waste is managed by a body called COVRA. It is stored above ground in a facility, which is also an art gallery, for 100 years and then in "stable underground strata". You can read more about COVRA here: <https://www.covra.nl/en/>

Her message about nuclear was a wake-up call to me – I have always thought of it as a dangerous and very expensive technology that has transferred billions of pounds from tax payers to profits for tax-avoiding investors at the expense of cleaner and cheaper fuels. The responsibility is now on me and other sceptics to look at the evidence and get our facts straight.

*Hester Brown*

## **Staying human in the age of AI**

*Speaker: Susie Alegre, international lawyer with expertise on tech ethics and neuroscience through the lens of human rights. Her book: 'Freedom to Think: the long struggle to liberate our minds'*

Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is Freedom of Thought, one's conscience and belief, ie inside your own head. Article 19 of the UDHR is on Freedom of Opinion, Information and Expression. Together they provide protection for inner life (Forum internum). These are absolute rights to protection but...

Digital technologies are increasingly undermining this core freedom. Social media feeds can be manipulated to 'get into your head' and feed you mis-information or distracting information. Many people get their ideas from YouTube and that can send one down a 'rabbit hole' of conspiracy theories. So having searched on one, you get sent others etc. Such 'conspiracy theories' take root, with an increasing global movement now that believes the earth is flat and moon landings fake.

Big data is being used to profile and categorise us and then 'feed' certain types of information to us. In a mass scale emotional contagion experiment, Facebook feeds were massaged – happy versus sad feeds. It changed how people felt by end of the day. 'Brain washing' can, it appears, be achieved quite readily. Algorithms based on psychological categorisations (eg Ocean assessment) attribute 'liking' to personality or voting types. Such use of data risks undermining democracy, with evidence that specific marginal groups were 'fed' disinformation in the recent US election, which impacted on whether they voted or how they voted.

There are issues with big data out on the open market, eg a 'virtual gaydar algorithm' that infers your sexual orientation. If shared, it would be very dangerous if traveling to a country where being gay risks prison or death. Susie cited a case where a gay priest in USA was 'outed' and lost his job because journalists used data available to see he had a Grindr account and used geolocation data showing he was visiting gay bars.

Traditionally, we have taught that you need three independent sources to ensure validity of the information but... now we get so much from online sources, combined with new digital tools and Artificial Intelligence, deep fakes will be impossible to tell. It is vital that our UK government looks at the human rights in the UK Online Safety bill going through parliament. Individually we must be aware and... just step away from our IT for parts of the day!

*Helen Warner (HW)*

## **The Future of Humanism in Politics**

Clare Delderfield (Lib Dem), Neill Garrett (Conservative), and Tommy Sheppard (SNP) explained the reasons behind their Humanist and political views.

## **How religion evolved and why it endures**

*Speaker: Robin Dunbar, professor of evolutionary psychology at University of Oxford. Latest book: 'How religion evolved: and why it endures'*

Professor Dunbar took us back to the start of doctrinal religions when humans moved into village communities. So all modern religions, with their moral codes handed down from a 'higher authority', started around the same time in the tropical zones.

To the question: Why are people religious? They are generally born into their faith (prevailing culture) or have some kind of emotional engagement in their lives which draws them into a religion. The rituals give a sense of belonging and satisfy a deep need for a “mystical sense”. So, religion [is/can be] good for you! Religion enhances community bonding by providing friends and a trust and engagement in a community, (so long as the group is a manageable size, no more than 150). It can make people feel life is worthwhile, so they feel happier and tend to live longer. 150 is typical a natural community size (known as the Dunbar number) because studies have shown a person can maintain a relationship with up to that number. (It’s typical for US weddings and the size of villages in the Doomsday book!) But at the same time, religions fragment over time, often leading to a rise of cultish, stricter groups.

HW

### **Liverpool’s Humanist Heritage**

*Speaker: Madeleine Goodall, historian, educator and Humanist Heritage Coordinator at Humanists UK*

Liverpool has a long and noble tradition of free thought. Maddy highlighted three buildings that exemplify this:

1. The Hall of Science, set up in Lord Nelson Street in 1839 by John Finch, an active member of the temperance movement and prominent follower of Robert Owen. This was one of several Halls of Science established in the 1830s and 40s around the country. Although very active for a few years, it did not survive and was sold in 1843.
2. Liverpool Ethical Society was founded in 1904 and got its own premises, the Positivist Hall or Church for Humanity in Upper Parliament Street, in 1913. This was home to a tradition of secular worship, led by Rev Harry Youlden (1867-1916). The society was dissolved in 1924. Ironically, the building is now a Roman Catholic church.
3. Meyerbeer Hall in Hardman Street was opened in 1868 as a concert hall, then became home to the Liverpool Ethical Society before it moved to the Church for Humanity and subsequently became Liverpool College of Music.

TB

### **Who cares: the hidden crisis in caregiving and how we solve it**

*Speaker: Emily Kenway, writer, researcher and social justice activist. Latest book: ‘Who cares: the hidden crisis in caregiving’*

1. Emily wrote her book following her experience of caring for her dying mother. She interviewed carers in other countries and found that in Norway, for instance, people could care for an elderly or disabled relative and still maintain their professional work and lifestyle. In the US, in contrast, it often meant giving up work and coping with a lower income.
2. She compared parenting, which is difficult but rewarding, with caring, which she said is also difficult but less rewarding.
3. She pointed out that the job of caring, unfairly but predominantly, falls on women. Women’s roles and expectations have changed greatly in recent years, and to be landed, suddenly, with caring responsibilities can come as a great shock.
4. Family carers, who receive very little professional support, represent a hidden crisis.
5. Caring is not a role that can easily be ‘professionalised’. The carer must be permanently available, since the caree’s needs are unpredictable, personal and often idiosyncratic. Carees generally prefer to be cared for by a member of their own family, rather than by a visiting professional. A family carer is caring for a ‘loved one’ not a mere patient.

6. Despite all these requirements, the modern nuclear family is no longer a viable option for care giving.
7. She said that if in society we talk honestly about the needs of our families and the needs that we have or will one day have for care, and think of being cared for, and being a carer, as a normal part of everyday life, then we can shape our own lives and vote for policies that support carers.
8. Emily also recommended that families with care responsibilities should develop 'kinning' skills, to create small groups of like-minded people who would accept caring responsibilities on behalf of their members.

*TB*

### **Humanist UK changing society**

*Speakers: Steve Bowen, Chair of Kent Humanists, and Kathy Riddick who is Coordinator of Wales Humanists and Campaigns Manager at Humanists UK*

1. Steve described his successful appeal to the High Court against the decision by Kent County Council to exclude him from the Kent religious education committee, known as a SACRE: Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. The implication of this decision is not only that Steve is now be free to become a member of the Kent SACRE, but that SACREs throughout the country should now admit Humanist representatives.
2. Kathy Riddick and Karen Wright, Humanists UK Public Affairs Manager, described other campaigns being led by Humanists UK including demanding the government to give legal recognition to humanist marriages in England and Wales. In Scotland and Northern Ireland, humanist celebrants can legally marry couples; in England and Wales they still can't.

*TB*

## **A history of black freethought**

*Speaker: S I Martin, historian and author specialising in Black British history and literature who has worked with numerous museums and archives including the V&A and Tate Britain to bring diverse histories to wider audiences.*

Black atheist voices have been silenced throughout history. For example, AR Randolph was a key organiser for Black Rights with Martin Luther King but he's been written out of the 'story' because he was an atheist. James Baldwin, both gay and an atheist was sidelined. S I Martin gave us a number of examples. We are more likely to have heard of those that fought for human rights, who present the conformity of Christianity, for example Oludah Equiano.

Christianity is used as a weapon in many black communities, for example currently in Uganda. Evangelical churches are on the rise, promising status or miracles, and promote extremist views. Gbenga Adewoyin, a Nigerian debunking such pastors on YouTube, is now under a death sentence. So, why are there not more black humanists? Why are humanists in the UK mainly white? It's complex but partly because church has provided an identity and community to black people in the UK, so when an individual comes out as atheist it is taboo and often leads to the individual being ostracized.

*HW*

*Tony adds:*

1. There are many black free thinkers in the history of the abolitionist movement but they are rarely acknowledged by either white or black historians.
1. An explanation might be that they questioned the role of the Christian Church in plantation life, whereas the Church tended to urge slaves to accept their lot and so did little to end slavery.
2. Digital technology has now provided access to an almost universal forum for free discussion. Human rights are now being discussed and actioned by black activists.

## **A short history of family trees**

*Speaker: Adam Rutherford, scientist, broadcaster and President of Humanists UK. His books include 'A brief history of everyone who ever lived' and 'How to argue with a racist'.*

Trees are a main metaphor we use for life on Earth. We are familiar with Darwin's 1837 sketch of tree of life but Adam says it's a terrible analogy! Picking up the idea, 1.8-2 million species was presented so it too looked like a 'tree of life' but in reality there are 1.3 million species of bacteria alone and they can swap their genes, so it's actually a tangled mess!

The famous image the 'March of progress of man' is wrong in so many ways. It assumes – direction, steady progress and increased sophistication all of which are not so. And it definitely doesn't end with a white man! In reality, there were multiple 'streams' of hominids through time. From 9/10 species to the 1 of modern man and those 9/10 species interacted a lot! Neanderthals with Denisovans and both with modern humans and geneticist think there is probably a 'phantom species' from over a million years ago – we just haven't found the evidence!

Cross breeding to expand the gene pool is important. Adam cited the example of the Hapsburgs. Charles 11 of Spain 1661-1700 was the end of the line as he died young with no heirs. He had a swollen tongue which meant he couldn't eat and swallow easily – he was profoundly disabled. This 'Hapsburg jaw' had been purposefully in-bred, as a sign of their divinity, in order to maintain power. In a regular family tree there should be up to 256

people if go back 7 generations. His only had 29. Loads of loops. It is the worse example of in-breeding to retain power. Species need to breed out to deal with recessive genes that are not advantageous.

He then looked at family trees. Focused on the Danny Dyer episode of Who do you think you are? In that they went back 22 generations to say that Danny was 'related to' Edward III of England (1312-1377). But what is the real probability? Looking at the maths – Edward III had 321 great, great grandchildren and by 1600 he had at least 20,544 descendants. So, based on the English population of 1600, 1 in 210 were descended from Edward III. When you then model further for the number of ancestors since 1600 (31,768) there is a 0% chance that we are not descended from Edward 111 if white! In reality there are not direct genealogical lines. "Family trees are not family trees but tangled bushes". We share ancestors. If everyone's family trees were separate, there would have been more people on the planet than actually have ever existed! In reality, all branches of all families' trees cross through all individuals.

Adam took the example of Charlemagne, first European Roman Emperor (742-814) and looked at his descendants. Modelling numbers, he ascertained that people alive in the 10th century, who had children, are the descendants for all people alive today. So we are all descended from Charlemagne! He's our 40x grandfather! You may be sitting next to / married to your 4th cousin! We are a closely related species but even so 4th cousins are a huge genetic difference away. We can't take kudos for being 'related' to historical figures.  
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### **Inequality: the enemy between us**

*Speakers: Kate Pickett OBE, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of York and Richard Wilkinson, Emeritus Professor of Social Epidemiology at University of Nottingham Medical School. Together they wrote 'The Spirit level' and 'The Inner level'.*

"Individual differences may explain *who* falls but the height of the hurdles explains *how many* fall."

Despite how 'wealth' varies across the globe, the experience of poverty is the same across the world. Life expectancy no longer related to national income per head. It's the gap between rich and poor within a country that is significant.

Those in poverty despise poverty and despise themselves / husband / children. It comes with a sense of shame. The more unequal a country is the worse are health and social problems. USA most unequal with UK up there in around 3<sup>rd</sup> spot depending on the measure, with Japan and Scandinavian countries best. This works across so many measures:

- UNISEF index data on child welfare gives the same pattern.
- Covid incidence and mortality greatest in countries with greater inequality
- In more equal countries loss wallets returned 80% against 15%
- Higher school bullying
- Participation in local groups and voluntary organisations (civic participation) lower in unequal societies. Social cohesion declines people and people trust each other less, moving from 70% to 40%
- Homicide rates higher in more unequal countries (eg 150 per million people in US states to 15 in Canadian provinces)
- Mental illness / eating disorders etc higher.

Feelings of disrespect and feeling subordinate lead to violence. Extreme in places such as South Africa and Mexico where people scared of each other – differences by street. Higher income inequality leads to more 'guard labour' ie security guards / gated communities.

Material differences between us leads to wider distances and more anxiety about status - looks / if boring / unattractive i.e. worried about how we are seen and judged. So tasks with social evaluation threat causes higher cortisol response (anxiety hormone). Stress raises death rates / more rapid aging. Anxiety and depression are related to subordination to submissiveness.

Reducing inequality must be tackled to save the planet. It's now a goal for the world. We need fair sharing of the burden of change for how we deal with the climate emergency otherwise actions won't work. The environmental impact of the richest has to be flattened. In the UK, we need at least 10 years of consistent policy and unfortunately we aren't getting the actions we need from this government.

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*Tony adds:*

1. Picket and Wilkinson published their well-known book on inequality *The Spirit Level* in 2009. They have now followed that by a second - *The Inner Level*. The former argued that less equal societies fare worse than more equal ones across everything from education to life expectancy. The latter explains how inequality affects us individually, how it alters how we think, feel and behave.
2. Using the Gini coefficient as a measure of inequality, they illustrated that the USA, Portugal and then the UK are the most unequal Western societies and have the worst health and social problems.

### **In conversation with Adam Rutherford and Andrew Copson**

*Award-winning journalist and broadcaster Samira Ahmed interviewed the President, Adam Rutherford, and Chief Executive, Andrew Copson of Humanists UK*

In this final session Samira Ahmed chaired an amusing and pertinent discussion of a range of issues relevant to Humanists UK. These included Humanist representation at the recent coronation of King Charles III, the role of the Church of England, the unwillingness of the UK government to ratify the law on Humanist marriages in England and Wales, religious schools, the role and composition of the House of Lords and assisted dying.

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