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Humanitie

The Humanist Society of Scotland Magazine



Fisher's Hotel HSS Conference in pictures



Convenor Jim Petherick opens the conference

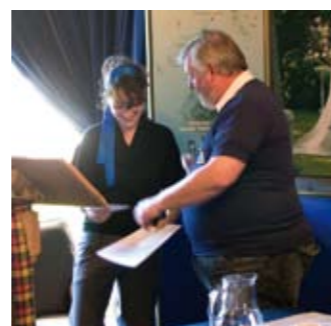
Mary Wallace, Stella Potter and Juliet Wilson at the celebrant's gathering



Tim Maguire strikes a pose as he presents the new HSS identity



Maryam Namazie leads a fascinating discussion



Magazine editor Juliet Wilson tries to coax delegates to write book reviews

Dabir Tehrani leads a lively workshop



"Go buy yourself a drink!" Jim presents joint Student Essay winner Eimear O'Casey with her £500 cheque



Verity Marshall never thought the celebrant's gathering would be so much fun!



Treasurer Gordon Ross is astounded when he sees the bar bill



The discussions keep on going...



Let's do it! Irene Conway entertains the delegates



Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the first edition of *Humanitie*, the magazine of the Humanist Society of Scotland. It may have a new name and a new look but it's still about issues at the heart of the HSS and Humanism. We chose *Humanitie*, not just because it's an old Scots form of the word for humanity that David Hume would have recognised, but because it's also the oldest word for Humanism in the English language, first appearing in John Florio's dictionary 'World of Words' of 1598.

In this issue, eminent philosopher (and HSS distinguished supporter) **A.C. Grayling** writes exclusively for us about his new book "*The Choice of Hercules*". Arts writer Mark Fisher interviews Turner Prize nominee **Nathan Coley** whose recent work poses interesting questions about religion and its place in society. Three different writers ask if **Civil Partnerships** really benefit same sex couples.

Nigel Bruce continues his Radical Reading series and we have a new columnist, philosopher **Nigel Warburton**.

As ever, the magazine contains **Society news** and information about past and future events. The letters page will be back in the next issue and we welcome your thoughts, on our articles or on Humanism in general.

The **HSS has a new look**, which we all love. You can read the touching story behind this journey on page 14.

It only remains for me to extend a warm thank you to our previous editor **Maria MacLachlan** for the imagination, inspiration and dedication she brought to the magazine.

I hope you enjoy this issue!

Juliet Wilson, *Editor*

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The Editor would like to thank: Orion Books, Nathan Coley and doggerfisher, The Fruitmarket Gallery, the HSS National Executive Committee, Martin Pettinger and all our contributors.

We warmly welcome articles from HSS members and non-members alike. If you are interested in writing for *Humanitie*, please contact the editor to discuss your idea before submitting your article: editor@humanism-scotland.org.uk
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Letters to the Editor: Writer's names and addresses will be published unless otherwise requested. All letters must include the names and addresses of their authors, as anonymous letters will not be published. Articles published in *Humanitie* represent the opinions of their authors and not necessarily the views of the Society.

Humanism is a diverse movement with ancient roots that reflects the views of millions of people around the world. Stated simply, Humanists believe that we can lead good and worthwhile lives guided by reason and compassion rather than religion or superstition, and that there are more things that unite humanity than divide it. Or, as we say in Scotland, "We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns" - we're all the same under the skin.

Front Cover: Nathan Coley; *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, 2006; Scaffolding and illuminated text 6.3 x 6.3 x 4m; Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute | **Photography:** Keith Hunter | Courtesy of the artist, doggerfisher, Edinburgh and Haunch of Venison, London

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Let's Talk About Sex



Words:
Clare Marsh

The 2007 HSS Conference Report

What do Humanists really think about sexual morality?

Convenor Jim Petherick welcomed delegates to Pitlochry for the annual conference on 28th October. The theme was "Sex Matters" and the principle guest speaker, Maryam Namazie, reported on her work for The Council for Ex Muslims. Islam, she said, is obsessed with sex and sexuality; the teachings of the prophet are aimed at controlling women. Mohammed married a six-year old girl and consummated the marriage when she was nine and this still determines the age when girls can be married; in just about every other country in the world this is recognised as child abuse. Sex outside marriage and homosexuality are both punishable by death. Women who are not veiled risk having acid thrown in their face. Recently five hundred girls died in a school fire because the firemen would not allow them to leave the building because they were not properly veiled. However women are becoming organised outside Islamic countries and are beginning to fight back. They are encouraged by the fact that the prophet foretold: "The biggest trouble will come from women." Maryam encouraged us to strive to remove barriers rather than build more, instancing the fact that when asked recently to support a "Humanist Academy" she had refused but would gladly support an "Academy for all" regardless of colour or creed.

The other guest speaker hailed from nearer home; Sharon Ballingall works in a hospice for young people with terminal illness and, in her presentation, "A life worth living" she recounted the difficulties in trying to meet all their needs including sexual. "Truly inspirational" is how one delegate described it.

There were three workshops, Sharon's, HIV and the Law, by Cathy Crawford and Sexuality Questions for Humanists, by Dabir Tehrani, all of which led to lively discussion and the unusual complaint that too little time had been allocated for this part of the programme.

The convenor then introduced our new Education Officer, Bob McKay, who claimed, "Our task is not to get converts but to provide choice." Many young parents are turning to us for advice as their five-year-old children start school and find religion to be ubiquitous. "We could become their advocates and advisers." He envisages a major onslaught on the 5-14 area of the "Curriculum for Excellence" which covers ages 3-18. "Our aim should be to determine the right thing to do and then ensure that we do it right," he proclaimed. Composed of volunteers from within the society, working groups could prepare materials, suitable for different stages of schooling, simultaneously. A major launch of our plans could take place as early as spring 2008.

Terry Martin outlined progress in the area of pastoral care. "Things are changing in hospitals," he said, as he showed us the new publication now available for hospital health workers, outlining the requirements of each belief; Humanism is centre fold between Islam and Hinduism. The demand for humanist counsellors is increasing and volunteers are urgently required.

The secretary, Ron McLaren, reported progress in the area of Equality & Human rights. We now have the first humanist chaplain at a university and will soon have a second. Many organisations are now becoming affiliated to

the HSS and we are now one of the agencies being asked by the Scottish Executive to help to define policy.

In the area of Ceremonies, Gillian Stewart reported an increase in the number of celebrants from 25 in 1998 to 68 this year. However demand continues to outstrip supply and many more volunteers are required. Two training courses for funerals are planned for the coming year and one for weddings.

Our new logo, the happy, dancing Scot together with new letter head and full corporate image was unveiled by Tim Maguire and the new web site was explored. The new editor of the magazine, Juliet Wilson described her plans for the future of the magazine, the first fruits of which are in your hands now.



At the Open Forum, the question "Are we in danger of sleeping with the enemy?" provoked lively discussion about the desirability of becoming part of Interfaith Groups.

While the celebrants had their gathering, Dabir Tehrani provided an excellent account of the attitude to sexual matters of various religions and delegates argued heatedly about the stance the HSS should take on various matters such as prostitution and pornography.

Eimear O'Casey, a lovely young lady from Edinburgh University graced us with her presence and, despite having danced the night away, appeared calm and composed to read her prize-winning essay. The first prize had been awarded jointly to two students, but Sebastian Kautz was foiled by the vagaries of the Scottish public transport system and could not be present so Tim read his contribution.

The Convenor's reception provided a great opportunity for socialising and swapping stories from around the regions. Irene Conway, a professional guitarist from the Glasgow Group, entertained us with a topical parody of "Let's Do It" and a fine Ceilidh band had us jigging and reeling until midnight on Saturday. The extra hour for sleep on Sunday morning as the clocks went back for winter was very welcome.

Despite the troubled year through which the society has passed and the unpopularity of the topic among some members, analysis of the feedback pronounced conference to be a great success.

"I did not fall asleep once," pronounced one veteran of many HSS conferences, "And that's a first!"

Sex Matters

Joint winner of our Student Essay Competition Eimear O'Casey impressed judges and conference delegates alike with her intelligent and insightful views on sexual morality. Here is her winning essay in full.

The feeling that has come to most overwhelmingly govern my perception of my relationship with sexual morality is gratitude. This gratitude has become an alarm bell. It stems from two sources. The first is perhaps inevitable in the coming of age of any modern woman: the realization of the degree to which a woman's perception of herself as a sexual being is both recent and regional. The overturning of traditional concepts of 'proper' behaviour for women, of purity, of all the various repressive and sexist archaisms which have been pervasive throughout Western history only took place in the latter half of the 20th century, after all. Until so very recently, sex had morality attached to it for purpose of control; just as religious institutions used a prescriptive right and wrong to exert influence over the masses, making sexual behaviour and more alarmingly, sexual feelings and thoughts, into something with a fabricated code of conduct attached to them was at the heart of the oppression of women, of homosexuals and all sectors of society which threatened the male hegemony.

Whilst the recency of the revolutionary changes which overturned such abusive dogma deserves attention, it need not preoccupy us too much if the change were total and complete. Indeed, I am often encouraged in a perverse sense by many young women's ignorance of the recency of female emancipation. This is because I consider it proof of the extent to which an emancipated, egalitarian understanding of sexual morality is now engrained and intuitive.

But of course, the change which brought about my position is neither total nor complete. Rather, the archaism which my position so vehemently countered remains prevalent throughout the world today. This is the second and most alarming component of my gratitude. Whilst we laugh at the hideous, absurd nature of the sexual conventions which governed Victorian Britain, for example, a 'moral code' of proportions many times more hideous and more absurd is holding sway over the lives of millions in the contemporary world. It is, once again, women and homosexuals who find themselves the victims of regimes which oversee a complete appropriation of the naturalness and tenderness of sexuality and the transformation of it into a tool for oppression and control. It is, once again, under the guise of religion that such barbarism is tolerated and justified.

This gratitude then, is infuriating. Surely something so engrained and imbibed in my identity as my right to be a sexual actor ought not be something to be grateful for? It should be taken as given. And yet it appears that for so many of my peers, their emancipated sexual identity is far from being revelled in.

In fact, what I have witness amongst them is a tentativeness and an embarrassment in voicing disgust or even disapproval of many of the abhorrent norms governing attitudes to sexual behaviour throughout the world. This reluctance to celebrate and advocate the right of all sexual actors to enjoy a guiltless sexual identity which we now enjoy comes from a confused and unsubstantiated cultural relativism. Fearful of imposing a so-called Western imperialist view of sexuality, many people refuse to stand by the progressive, positive and downright rudimentary rights that we have gained to express ourselves sexually. This is, in part, the product of a generalized complacency and disregard for the uniqueness of our own sexual identity. It is also the product of a misconstrued view that because



Student essay competition Eimear O'Casey

it happened here first, sexual emancipation is not a universal value whose merits supersede cultural or religious preference. The result is not only to undermine this hard fought-for sexual identity, but also to generate a lack of solidarity with those being oppressed and abused.

The first step in all this is to assert and consolidate our own sexuality. First and foremost, before our own emancipation can be exported, sex needs to cease to be understood in an isolated moral realm. What we need is to conceive of sex as we conceive of all other appetites and pleasures. This should encompass the adoption of a more pragmatic moral attitude towards the important and impacting consequences of sexual activity such as sexual health and pregnancy. Most crucially, we need to encourage and propel the application of basic humane contact between sexual actors. In turn, we can be more responsive to sex's associated risks and complications.

In all areas, family, friendship, professional and private life, we strive to apply the same grass-root principles of empathy, fairness and some degree of altruism. There

is absolutely no justification for sexuality and sex finding themselves under separate premises. Sex needs to be understood as an impulse, a responsibility, a consequence which is subject to the same laws which govern all human interaction. It does not and should not obey separate codes of conduct. Critically, not those codes of conduct steeped in centuries of religious instruction, guilt, gross abuse of gender roles and rights and a highly damaging misunderstanding of the anatomy of sexual desire and behaviour. What is most crucial, then, is that we fight against the relics of *sex-specific* moral principles.

This is how I understand sex in a contemporary context. I am a woman in the West, and my views are shared by the great majority of my peers. But they are taken for granted. And therein lies the problem. Perhaps more than any other sphere of human interaction and behaviour, sexuality is prey to exploitation by power hungry bodies who take advantage of its very delicate, emotional and personal nature. There exists complacency among so many men and, more alarmingly women, towards the very fragile state of our sexual emancipation. This emancipation is both recent and precarious, and it is under threat. It is under threat from a dangerous tolerance of cultural practices elsewhere in the world which are in effect completely antithetical to gender equality, to the right to enjoy and benefit from sexual activity, and to the existence of various sexual orientations and persuasions. It is also under threat from the residue of what so many consider benign 'tradition': concepts of female purity; ideas which consider that different moral codes apply for men and women; views which stress the physical differences of the sexual experience of men and women and which use these differences to support divergences in the way men and women are expected to behave in terms of monogamy and promiscuity.

The way forward is essentially to make the term sexual morality a redundant one. Sexuality must be understood as no more than another piece in the complex puzzle that is human nature, albeit a particularly sensitive and vulnerable one. As such, it is subject to the moral code which governs a progressive, secular and emancipated society. There is no question that there remains a way to go in our own Western environment in bringing about fully this conception of the relationship between morality and sexuality. But we must wholeheartedly embrace the progress which has been made, and be steadfast in our advertisement of this progress in those parts of the world that are still subject to regimes and 'customs' which abuse, manipulate and entirely misdirect sexual identity and all its intricacies.

An Orang-Utan is for Life, not just for Christmas

Whether you celebrate the Winter Solstice or join in the merriment on the 25th, you may be thinking of doing some seasonal shopping. Humanists generally reject consumerism but here are six ethical gift ideas that will leave your conscience clear and your stockings bulging with goodness!

Man of the Woods

Adopt a wild Orang-Utan for yourself, or a friend and help the **World Wildlife Fund** safeguard the future of this endangered animal. You will receive a Welcome Pack, containing: a certificate, a print of your animal, facts about the species, a greeting card, tips on a "greener" lifestyle, WWF screensavers and a



soft toy. You'll also receive quarterly updates after activating the adoption. Dolphins, Polar Bears and Tigers also need your help. **Adopt a wild Orang-Utan £29.99** shop.wwf.org.uk

Send Santa Where He's Needed

Buy toys that teach. Helping a child to develop as early as possible can have such a positive effect on them throughout their life. Learning Toys for Tiny Tots from **Plan Gifts** can be given to an infant in Bolivia so they can learn at home through play. The pack includes puzzles, puppets and interactive toys. This website also features other gifts that help improve the lives of children and their families in some of the world's poorest countries, starting from £6.00.

Learning Toys for Tiny Tots £25.00
www.plangifts.org/

No Untangling The Christmas Tree Lights This Year

The **World Land Trust** has several conservation projects you can donate to – £25 will save half an acre of wilderness forever, together with all the wildlife that depends upon it. It's a perfect and original present for a nature lover.

An Acre of Rainforest £25.00
www.worldlandtrust.org

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

Naturalcollection.com sells many energy and water-saving gadgets along with products like wind-up radios and solar powered torches – presents that are good for both the environment and for your bank balance, making a sustainable lifestyle much easier.

Wind Up Radio £23.95
www.naturalcollection.com

Eat, Drink And Be Fair

Christmas pudding, Blueberry fizz and lots of Chocolate make this **Simply Fair's** Fairtrade Hamper the ultimate Christmas treat. Wine lovers should check out **Ethical Superstore's** Fairtrade Wine selection.

Fairtrade Christmas Hamper £40.00
www.simplyfair.co.uk

Mixed case of six wines £42.94
www.ethicalsuperstore.com

Santa's Little Helpers

Not only do many of us detest trawling the high street, worrying about the working conditions where the products are made can make gift buying unbearable. **Etsy** is an online store for all things hand made. Through it you can buy direct from independent crafters, knitters and dressmakers for a truly unique gift, made with thought and love. All products are sold in dollars but you can search for local sellers to cut down the postage miles.

www.etsy.com

No Dodgy Cardies This Year

People Tree create beautiful, fashionable and ethical clothes while at the same time



improving the lives and environments of the artisans and farmers in developing countries who work to produce them. They also work hard to ensure that their pioneering methods of production are ecologically sound and minimise environmental impact. Not only is most of their cotton certified organic and Fairtrade, all their clothes are coloured using safe and natural dyes. People Tree has adult and children's ranges as well as household products.

Cable Knit Hat £15
www.peopletree.co.uk

For more present ideas, see our new HSS merchandise on the back cover!

Book Review



The Xmas Files

The philosophy of Christmas
by **Stephen Law**
(Paperback, Phoenix £6.99)

Review by Tim Maguire

Christmas is a tricky time of year for Humanists. On the one hand, you know that the roots of the Winter Solstice festival are widespread and ancient; on the other, you loathe the consumerism, and long to say "Bah, humbug!" to the whole affair. It's a dilemma and one that is thoroughly explored in Philosopher Stephen Law's slim but elegant volume, "*The Xmas Files*", that explores the many conundrums packed around the base of the Christmas tree.

As Law points out, Christmas is one of the last great traditions shared by believers and non-believers alike in the West and while other religious traditions wane, Christmas is the great exception. Law's genius is to use Christmas as a spectrum through which to examine a wide range of moral dilemmas, trivial and profound over fourteen entertaining and provocative essays.

He starts with a commonplace. What should you do when Aunt Gertrude gives you the most appalling Christmas tie, complete with dancing snow flecked-kittens wearing bowler hats? She is looking expectantly into your eyes, waiting for some sign of approval. What do you do? Tell her it's absolutely gorgeous and that it will go perfectly with your new shirt? Or tell her she clearly has no idea either about you or about fashion and that it's the most hideous thing you've ever seen? Do you go with Immanuel Kant and tell the truth at all costs? Or do you follow John Stuart Mill and think of the consequences? As a good Humanist, Law suggests you should behave towards others as you would wish them to behave towards you, but acknowledges that it's a tough call.

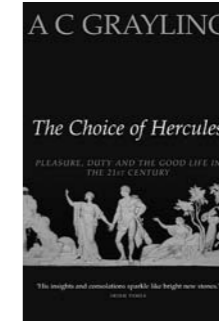
Law ranges widely across his 150 pages, switching effortlessly between humour and seriousness while scoring palpable hits on targets high and low, from the Divinity of Christ and the perils of authoritarianism to the gullibility of Malcolm Muggeridge and the morality of eating turkey. He asks us to think about how we discriminate between animals and mentally impaired human beings, examines the theory of the 'Just war' in the shadow cast by Iraq and posits the perennial undergraduate examination question about Santa's beard.

While acknowledging the need to remain sceptical in the face of the supernatural and miraculous, he concedes that the spirit of Christmas has been responsible for some truly inspiring episodes, like the spontaneous and unofficial truce that broke out on Christmas Day 1914, when British & German troops played football on the frozen ground between the trenches, turning mortal enemies into friends for an extraordinary day.

Law is a non-believer, but he is no triumphalist; on the contrary, he draws on Wittgenstein to attest to the power of ritual to console and inspire and reminds us that the burning of the Yule log and the coming together of communities have great emotional value and are an important part of being human. Buy a copy, and give one to *your* Aunt Gertrude this Winter Solstice.



Tim Maguire is
Convenor of the Edinburgh Group
of the HSS.



The Choice of Hercules

A.C. Grayling
(Hardback, Weidenfeld & Nicolson £12.99)

Review by Sandy Edwards

From the definition of the title; "pleasure, duty and the good life in the 21st. century", A.C.Grayling's book "*The Choice of Hercules*" indicates the promise of a good read; not least because, as those who have read anything by him know, it will be well written, concise and of course fascinating. The other clue as to the type of book is the contents page. This shows that it is not a heavy tome of philosophy but sectioned into parts that can be read in isolation; a book to dip into. Having said that, once started I did not stop until the end!

There are three sections: The Individual Good, Practical Morality and Society. Each has its own sub-sections with titles that should appeal to all.

The choice of Hercules was between Duty and Pleasure, which Grayling redefines as The Good Life and the good life. His thesis is that there is no need for this dichotomy; taking the best of both is a good recipe for how we should live. He makes the point that if enjoyment and fulfilment were not an essential part of a good life, living it would be a negative enterprise and would be less use to others. He clearly differentiates between the humanistic outlook, of life between birth and death, and the religious, of including life after death. (Hercules chose duty as he was concerned with the fate of the soul).

There are wise words on autonomy, (enlightenment and thinking for yourself), as well as on the value of friendship and our duties to others. The section "When Darkness Falls" is a particularly brilliant piece about grief and how to live with it. As he writes, "...to live is to contract for loss".

He considers the great moral questions not to be sex, dugs and unmarried mothers, but war, genocide, arms trade, poverty, inequality and injustice. It is a moral scandal that the former preoccupy debate in the comfortable corners of the world, while real atrocities go unchecked elsewhere. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights appears in many of the chapters and he delightfully remarks that the suggestion that human rights are not universal because of differing standards and traditions is "nonsense on stilts!"

There is a useful section on the difference between ethics and morality, something about which I'm sure many of us are unclear. His chapters on family values, drugs, sexuality and death and dying contain ideas that really made me think – which is perhaps a philosopher's job – about the value of divorce, the legalisation of drugs, the fallacy of the nuclear family and euthanasia. All are eloquently and concisely discussed, though not always with an answer. Running throughout is the idea (and evidence) that religious and conservative attitudes do not contribute to a happy society. In fact he pronounces that "religion is irrelevant to moral questions, or immoral ones."

His definition of humanism is well worth reading, but it is a tribute to his economy of words and excellent style that he packs so much about so many topics into a mere 172 pages. This is certainly a recipe book for living.

Sandy Edwards
is a member of the Dundee Group
of the HSS



Uncivil Partnerships?



Words :
Gerrie Douglas -Scott

"I do..." These are the words denied to same-sex couples when they wish to declare their lifelong commitment to love and support each other. Marriage Law, which applies to male/female couples requires a verbal commitment but Civil Partnership Law doesn't. So, you can run in to the Registrar in your everyday duds, hear your legal requirements from the Registrar, sign the schedule and you're out the door. Actually that's all the registrar needs to do, there is no compulsion to give people a ceremony at all and some local authorities refuse to do so because it is 'against their moral code'. Cold, legalistic, perfunctory... this is the disappointing experience of some people on what they intended to be the biggest day of their lives.

Susan and I were very lucky. We went to Park Circus in Glasgow, having written our own vows, chosen our readings, primed the weans (all 5 of them) and given stiff drinks to certain older members of the family. We had low expectations, having attended some other Civil Partnership 'ceremonies' like the ones described above. Fortunately our Registrar was warm, respectful and gave us a lovely ceremony, talked about love, referred to our readings and our family. We were so impressed that we phoned the next day to thank her personally, only to find out that she had retired that day and my plans to recommend her to some couples were quashed!

We have heard different stories from around Scotland. The Registrar in Lochgilphead was so delighted for one couple that she bought them chocolates and flowers for her first Civil Partnership Registration. Others have come out of the Registrar's Office weeping, feeling cheated and disappointed because there was little or no ceremony and certainly not one that reflected their own humanist or humanistic beliefs. Some had waited 40 years or more for this moment. They wanted a ceremony that reflected that level of commitment, that depth of love, the joy of being recognised socially and legally, but have been left heart sore.

I have performed about 60 legal marriages since April 2006. For every ceremony I spend at least 10 hours work – sometimes 6 times longer if I have to travel overnight: meeting the couple, finding out about them and their lives, what is important to them, what love means to them, why they want to make this public declaration of their love. Before Civil Partnership was made legal I performed 10s of same sex weddings a year – I rarely

charged, because many were for couples alone in their living room or in a small, informal setting. Occasionally there would be the big celebration, but they were rare. Now I have two in my diary for the next year. Most couples are full of expectations and hopes that they will have a wonderful ceremony at the Registrar's Office. Not all are as lucky as we were. People want ONE ceremony – not TWO.

Susan and I fought for many years for Civil Partnership: the legal rights and responsibilities were important to us, but we also wanted a romantic, meaningful and public ceremony for ourselves and for our children. We were featured widely on TV and newspapers in December 2005 when the law was enacted, which was a mixed 'blessing'. We wondered at one point if we were the only gay people in Scotland! So many hundreds of others are still frightened. The Humanist Society can support people and help them celebrate their love and relationship by conducting a ceremony that means everything to the couple and that will be remembered in 40 years time as they sit with tartan rugs in front of the fire....

An excerpt from Susan and Gerrie's Ceremony March 25th 2006

Adrienne: *Gerrie and Susan dedicate themselves, in your presence, and with their children as witnesses, to the continued happiness and well being of each other. Anne, Marie, Elaine, Jamie and Jillian, do you all give your blessing and support to your Mums?*

Children: *We do*

Adrienne: *Although Susan and Gerrie signed the legal register earlier this week, this ceremony tonight has most meaning for them and signifies their lifelong commitment to each other. They have been together for 9 years and throughout that time have had a depth of love and friendship that is a rare and wonderful thing. As a close friend of theirs I know how loving and equal their relationship is and that it is one I am sure will continue to grow and deepen over the years.*

The beauty of the 'verbal' declaration

S: *I, Susan, now take you Gerardene*

G: *I, Gerardene, now take you Susan*

S&G: *to be my love*

S&G: *in the presence of our family*

S&G: *and before these witnesses*

S&G: *I promise to be loving, faithful and loyal to you*

S&G: *For as long as we both shall live*

Gerrie Douglas-Scott is an HSS celebrant



Words : Donald Reid

As Richard Holloway, the then Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus (presiding bishop) of the Scottish Episcopal Church once pointed out in frustration, clergy are often wheeled out to bless all sorts of things - such as warships or nuclear submarines. So if that is acceptable, why should anyone question them blessing two people making a life-long loving commitment to one another, just because they are the same gender?

Does the church affirm war? Or love?

Over recent years quite a few same-sex couples have sought a religious ceremony and in my experience ministers in the Scottish Episcopal Church generally responded positively, offering 'blessings'. But no one pretended that the couple's legal status was changed (as it does when a minister officiates at a wedding). Rather, the church was keen to support people whose mutual commitment was still not recognised by the secular authorities.

But now civil partnership *is* now officially available. But people who want to enter a civil partnership still cannot do so using a church minister (or any other officiant such as a humanist) other than a state registrar. They would still have to seek a separate unofficial 'blessing'.

In the case of the churches, part of the problem for this is the churches themselves. The Roman Catholic Church and conservative Protestants are hostile to the concept of same sex relationships so there is an inherent barrier to them agreeing to anything which officially involves them in partnership ceremonies.

Throughout the consultation for the proposed legislation, these voices in the churches argued that the proposals for civil partnerships would undermine marriage. I never understood this argument and wonder if they also feel that registering a birth undermines baptism?

The analogy is, of course, not exact, since registering a birth and baptism are not theologically equivalent. Moreover, registering a birth involves no ritual at all, so those who want to celebrate the occasion have to go through either conventional religious rites or seek alternative 'officiants' such as those of the Humanist Society.

Nevertheless would it not be more logical to say that far from being undermined by civil partnership, marriage is better served by people having options – meaning that those who opt for marriage, particularly marriage in church, do so for *positive* reasons rather than because there are no alternatives? Now there is, quite rightly, a range of options.

One step forward, two steps back – why the struggle for equality must continue



Words : Brett Lock

What did surely undermine 'the sanctity of marriage' was the practice of churches denying the very fact that gay people existed and advising all and sundry to get married. Until recently, most gay men were married, presumably as a consequence of such cynical advice from churches, or general social pressure. Was this not an abuse of marriage and a cynical cruelty for those involved, where both the state and the churches have swept gay people under the carpet of conventional marriage?

So we have moved forward. Social attitudes have changed and civil partnership is now possible for gay people. But because of the sensitivities of some religious people demanding the right to 'protect' marriage, civil partnership and marriage remain different in law, with church ministers only able to operate *officially* in the sphere of marriage.

Unofficially, the same private arrangements for blessings will be offered, as before. But I assume the day will come when church ministers and officiants from other groups will be able to conduct 'civil partnership' ceremonies. For some gay people, equality will only have arrived when all options are open to everyone, irrespective of sexual orientation. Other gay people disdain the model of conventional marriage anyway, and may always wish to distinguish the nature of their commitment from marriage.

I imagine a visiting Martian – or indeed a reasonable man on the fabled Clapham omnibus - watching an official registrar conduct first a marriage and then a civil partnership would not find the difference obvious. But conservatives in the churches are clearly neither Martians nor 'Clapham omnibus' types and whilst, in the past, they have been able to turn a blind eye to what has gone on unofficially, as soon as the law and *samizdat* liturgies threaten to make it possible for gay people to tie the knot in church, we cross a boundary which reveals the splits in the church on this issue.

Now I know why it's easier to bless bombs than gay couples. The bombs are not intended to blow up our own house. The answer, in my view, is to see not gay people as the problem, but the churches. I say this with heaviness of heart but noting that there are signs of positive change.

Rev Donald Reid is the Associate Rector of St. John's Church, Edinburgh and the Director of The Festival of Spirituality and Peace

Association argues that the legislation was ill-conceived, flawed and likely to entrench some inequalities between hetero- and homosexual people while alleviating others.

Indeed, together with many other gay rights groups, we argued that what the government was proposing amounted to sexual apartheid. To some extent, we have been proven right.

Systems can never be "separate, but equal". If white people can travel on red buses and green buses are reserved for black people, the fact that both run on time and have comfortable seats spectacularly misses the point. Similarly, we live in a society that is encouraged to say "police officer" (and even "waitron") instead of gender-specific terms, and yet many seemed quite comfortable to create separate laws governing the unions of gay people and straight people and to call them by different names.

When the notoriously homophobic Christian Institute attempted to derail the debate by introducing the curve-ball: "What about two aging spinsters who share a house", GALHA took the wind out of their sails by agreeing with them, observing that a Humanist (or any rational person) would recognize any relationship of mutual care and commitment whether or not there was a romantic or sexual component to it. To this end, we proposed that both marriage and civil partnerships be open to all, and to allow couples – whether gay or straight – to choose which model best suited their circumstances.

However, we know that this all fell on deaf ears. The government was bending over backwards to reassure the religious lobby that it wasn't creating "gay marriage" or suggesting that the institution of marriage was anything but a religious affair, despite the fact that over 70% of weddings are now secular affairs. This of course makes no sense because registry office wedding have no religious component and the government wasn't proposing to downgrade these to civil partnerships in the interests of logical consistency.

In fact they did the opposite. They downgraded the legal marriages of gay people conducted abroad (where marriage laws have been equalized – and the universe hasn't come to an end) to "civil partnerships" in the UK instead. Clearly, the law is not only irrational, it is homophobic.

To further reassure the religious lobby, under the fake premise of "balancing" the rights of the religious with the rights of gays and lesbians, it is forbidden to conduct a civil

partnership in a religious building (or even a former or faux religious structure) or to include any religious content (or apparently anything that 'sounds' religious – like Robby Williams's 'Angels').

This, we are told, brings Civil Partnerships into line with Civil Marriage and protects "religious freedom". Well, firstly, heterosexuals have the option of a religious wedding if they want it, and secondly, what about the religious rights it tramples on? For example, Quakers would like the right to celebrate same-sex weddings, as would Unitarians and the Metropolitan Community Church, and indeed, the many mainstream gay & lesbian Christians and Jews. But somehow their "religious rights" aren't as important as the religious-right.

And where does this leave Humanists. Well, in a very strange place. One of the anomalies is because in Scotland, Humanists fall into the "and/or belief" category, they are allowed to conduct marriages. But it seems this same concession is now cutting off gay humanists. Why? Because Humanist celebrants may conduct heterosexual marriages, they might now be ineligible to conduct gay ones because of the "religious" prohibition. Ironically, Humanists now have to find common-cause with marginal religious groups (like Quakers) to fight this prohibition, while the absurdity of a Humanist ceremony having been designed in the first place to be an alternative to a religious one, might legally be defines as the very thing it seeks to replace – a "religious" ceremony.

To add to this uncertainty, while the English and Welsh may have a Humanist wedding in Scotland which is legally recognized, it can't legally be performed in England or Wales. Those who say the law is an ass, certainly know their livestock!

Still, even if the British Humanist Association's campaign to have the law extended to England and Wales (and presumably Northern Ireland) is successful, it is uncertain if there will be any benefit in it for gay and lesbian people – unless the prohibition on religious ceremonies is also successfully challenged.

But instead of seeking common purpose with churches, we ought to be arguing that Humanists are uniquely placed to conduct civil weddings (same- and opposite-sex) because we have the ceremony without the superstition, the ritual without the risible.

Brett Lock is the editor of Gay Humanist Magazine

If you would like to campaign with the HSS on these issues please contact: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Ceremonies are Up!



HSS National Ceremonies Coordinator reports and asks: could you celebrate a life?
Words: Gordon Ross



Ceremonies work continues to increase at a stupendous rate; funerals are heading for 2,200 in 2007, and legal weddings for 650. This puts both funerals and weddings on a prediction of 3,500 each by 2010!

Currently we have 62 celebrants. Each does an average of 40 ceremonies a year, but that varies from one celebrant who does ONE to one celebrant who does over 200 ceremonies! We also have 5 new celebrants very close to the end of their training, and 10 just starting their training; but those predictions will mean that by 2010, we will require 125 celebrants. So we need to recruit 40 - 50 more over the next two to three years.

Could you be one of them? Prospective celebrants should share the secular humanist life stance, have well rounded inter personal skills and good empathy is important.

Previous experience of public speaking is not essential, but would be a major advantage. But you have to be in a position to make yourself available at short notice to conduct a funeral - sometimes working under the pressure of limited time. It will especially suit you if you are self-employed or retired or have a job with flexible hours in your control.

Along with funeral and wedding ceremonies we also officiate at naming and same sex affirmation ceremonies. Our work is very rewarding, not only because we offer a thoughtful, personal service at times of great difficulty but also because we get to share in some of the happiest days of people's lives.

If you think this sort of practical humanism is for you, contact the HSS National Ceremonies Co-ordinator: Gordon Ross 0141 636 6633

thoughtfortheworld.org

On Darwin Day 2007 the HSS launched thinkhumanist.org to podcast secular thought for the days. Contributors included A.C. Grayling, Stewart Lee, Nigel Warburton and Julian Baginni.

The BBC may not think that humanists have anything to say on morality and ethics in their morning slot but we disagree!

We are changing the name of the site and inviting you to contribute your thought for the world.

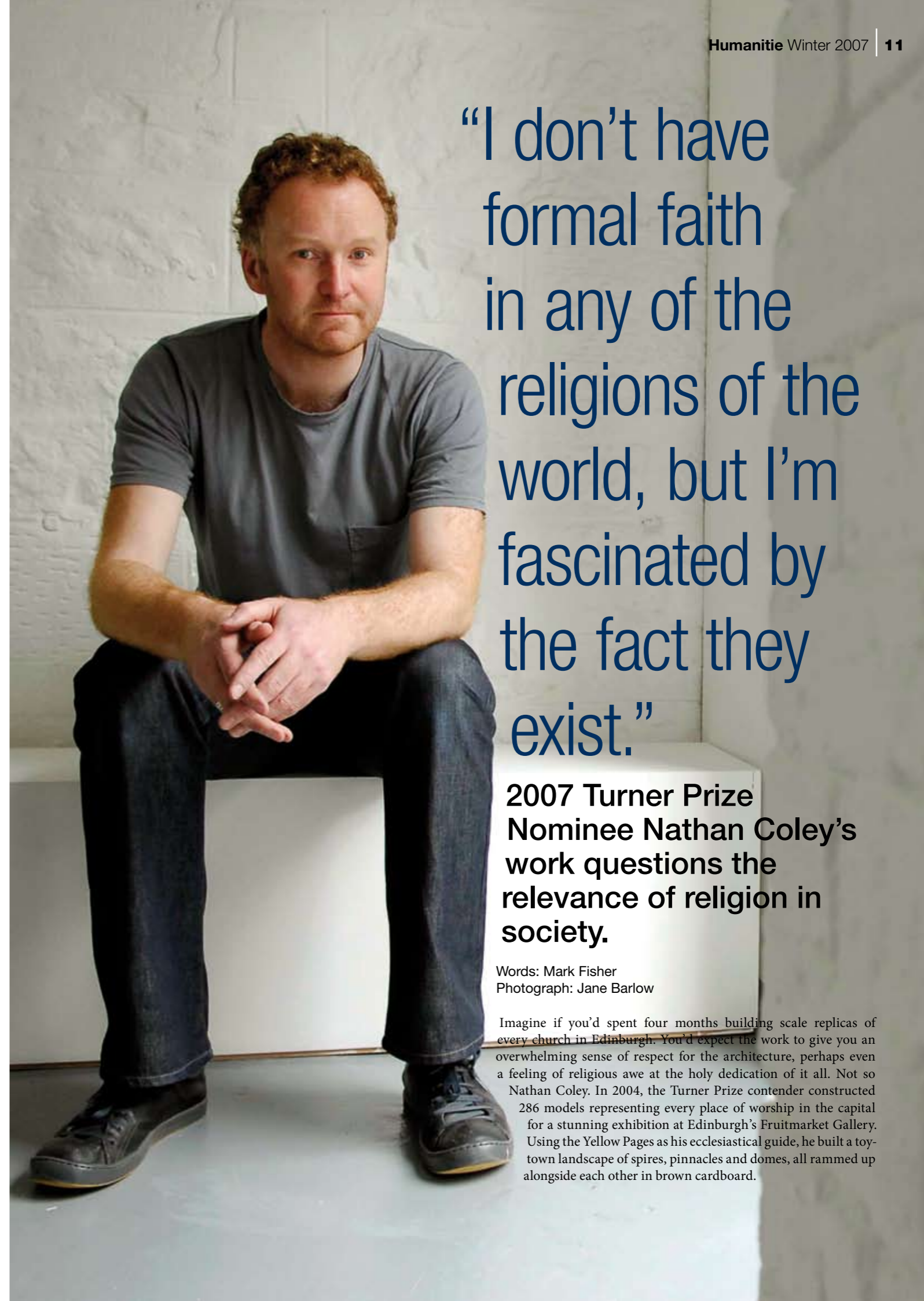
To take part please email media@humanism-scotland.org.uk

“I don't have formal faith in any of the religions of the world, but I'm fascinated by the fact they exist.”

2007 Turner Prize Nominee Nathan Coley's work questions the relevance of religion in society.

Words: Mark Fisher
Photograph: Jane Barlow

Imagine if you'd spent four months building scale replicas of every church in Edinburgh. You'd expect the work to give you an overwhelming sense of respect for the architecture, perhaps even a feeling of religious awe at the holy dedication of it all. Not so Nathan Coley. In 2004, the Turner Prize contender constructed 286 models representing every place of worship in the capital for a stunning exhibition at Edinburgh's Fruitmarket Gallery. Using the Yellow Pages as his ecclesiastical guide, he built a toy-town landscape of spires, pinnacles and domes, all rammed up alongside each other in brown cardboard.





Above: Nathan Coley; The Lamp of Sacrifice, 286 Places of Worship, Edinburgh, 2004 | Photo: Ruth Clarke | Copyright: The Fruitmarket Gallery and The National Galleries of Scotland



Right: Nathan Coley; Camouflage Mosque, 2006; Enamel paint on hardboard 85 x 82 x 69cm; Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute | Photo: Keith Hunter | Courtesy of the artist, doggerfisher, Edinburgh and Haunch of Venison, London

Far Right: Nathan Coley; Camouflage Church, 2006; Enamel paint on hardboard 92 x 52 x 33cm; Series of 5 / each unique; Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute | Photo: Keith Hunter | Courtesy of the artist, doggerfisher, Edinburgh and Haunch of Venison, London

He had already completed a similar feat in 2000, building a miniature village of 161 places of worship in Birmingham, so he knew what he was letting himself in for. His purpose was not some spiritual quest, but an attempt to take a sober look at the place of religion in our society. However accomplished the final exhibition, putting it together was a gargantuan chore in which he took little pleasure. Inspired by John Ruskin's argument that our understanding of architecture is bound up with the sacrifice involved in building it, Coley really did suffer for his art.

"It was a perverse undertaking to remake things that already exist," says Coley, 40, back in Scotland after a gruelling fortnight in Liverpool under the Turner Prize spotlight. "It's like a Biblical fable for me to sacrifice my time and energy to these places of worship – to make them mine as opposed to theirs. There was nothing beautiful or exciting about it. After two weeks it became total drudgery."

For the devoted, it was possible to see that exhibition, *The Lamp of Sacrifice*, as a celebration of religious achievement. For residents, the congregation of miniature churches made you see the city in a fresh way. But for the artist, who prefers his work not to be judgemental, it was a way of representing the insidious hold religion has on our society.

"The Lamp of Sacrifice was so not about the architecture in terms of the way it looks," says Coley, resembling a younger Rory Bremner with his tight curls of ginger hair as he tucks into a lunchtime sandwich in an Edinburgh delicatessen. "It's about what it means. I'm interested in why was this made, who made it and what does it signify? Religious architecture is fascinating because the conditions in which

we are looking at a 19th century Protestant church now are not the conditions in which it was built. Ideas of the church have changed and society and architecture have changed. For everyone who reads *The Lamp of Sacrifice* as a celebration of these pieces of architecture, there's another person who understands it as a critique: they are meaningless and collectively have no power."

For Coley, who played volleyball for Scotland but turned down a sporting scholarship in the USA in favour of a place at Glasgow School of Art, his job as an artist is to raise these questions. "I deal with the relationship between private and public space, state and church, and personal and political morals because I'm not prepared to leave those discussions and decisions to the government or the church. I don't think they're best placed to deal with it. The role of culture is to deal with those issues."

If you take a trip with Coley around Glasgow's Southside, where he lives with his partner and baby daughter, he'll point out to you which pub is regarded as Catholic and which Protestant. Like the churches that form the furniture of our urban lives, the pubs carry echoes of the religious traditions that have divided communities for centuries. In this way religion occupies an "invisible" space, something he tries to make visible in his work.

"I don't have formal faith in any of the religions of the world, but I'm fascinated by the fact they exist," he says. "Religion is the issue of our time. Nothing defines space more than a disagreement about where my space ends and your space starts. That space might be moral, physical or religious. It's what terrorism is about and, in Scotland, you don't have to go very far to find arguments about communal playgrounds within the

same [Christian] religion. My work is not a homage, a celebration or a condemnation, it's a spotlight bringing it in for discussion."

Born in 1967 to a middle-class Glasgow family of no religious persuasion, Coley is a life-long atheist, although even he will admit to inheriting the Protestant work ethic that keeps him busy all day. He's a nine-to-five kind of artist who went to a Protestant state school, but delights in owning a Celtic season ticket, ironically aware of the football club's Catholic history. "My dad was taken in 1972 when he was a young father by his friend who just happened to be a Celtic fan," he says. "I was the only kid in my school who followed the other team. But it wasn't a badge of honour and I didn't get beaten up in the playground – I've been 6ft 2in since I was 14!"

Upon the death last May of that same father, Coley and his siblings opted for a humanist funeral. "He never stipulated his wishes but he wouldn't have wanted a religious service," he says, adding that his girlfriend's father was also given a humanist sending off. "The humanist burial was fantastic. It made it possible for the day to be about his history rather than some notion of the afterlife or the supernatural. We found it very comforting and, interestingly, a very obvious thing to do. It was not special, normal, almost every-day."

Although human beings feel a need to come together to mark the key stages in life – birth, marriage, death – Coley sees no reason to hand over such ceremonies to the church. "It's foolish to imagine moral guidance can't be decided outwith the institutions of religion," he says. "We live in a time of moral uncertainty. The last thing we want to do is ask the church how to solve that. Their track record isn't very good. We have to look to ourselves. We gather ourselves in cities, we don't seek independence, we seek community,



whereas my personal history with religion is that it defines difference. It puts divisions between kids who are six years old."

Like his father's death, the birth of his daughter had huge emotional significance for him but brought out no latent religious feeling. "It reaffirmed my strong attitude towards humanity," he says. "It didn't feel like it was a gift from God. It felt absolutely natural. I feel a big responsibility to her upbringing and I'm not going to give that over to some institution. It made me responsible for my own actions rather than deferring my actions to somebody else."

It would be reductive to describe Coley's work as simply a commentary on religion, but it is an area of life that fascinates and angers him in equal measure. More broadly, he is concerned with social spaces, the way we shape our built environment and feel comfortable in some settings and not others. Had Edinburgh been a banking city, he says, he would have remade the banks not the churches in *The Lamp of Sacrifice*.

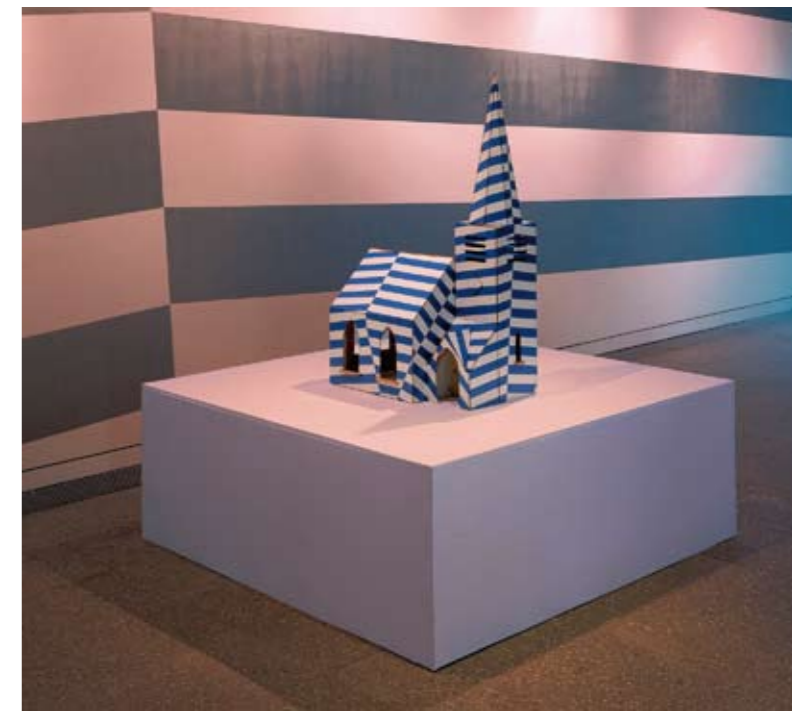
"I'm not someone who makes work about religion, I make work about how our values illustrate themselves in public or private space," he says. "The work deals with how architecture can symbolise the community's beliefs. I've long been interested in how we occupy space. The reason we feel comfortable in this room is to do with scale, temperature, music, how we're sitting, the fact we're familiar with it being a public space but intimate at the same time. These things haven't accumulated by accident – this is Georgian design that has evolved from the idea that as human beings we want to gather publicly. I make work that is really about the human condition."

To read some of the critics, you wouldn't think the human condition had much to do with his *Untitled Threshold Sculpture*. Seen

in his Tate Liverpool show and at Edinburgh's Doggerfisher gallery earlier in the year, this much misunderstood piece is a beam of oak lying at the entrance to the exhibition, forcing gallery-goers to step over it – or trip up. In Edinburgh, it was his way of drawing attention to his own artistic space, distinct from the artistic overkill of the festival, while in Liverpool, it set his area apart from the spaces occupied by the competing Turner Prize artists.

"The stupid argument would be, 'It's just a piece of wood, how does it mean anything?'" he says. "But that ignores the fact that it's in the loaded, conditional space of a gallery. Architects for thousands of years have tried to deal with this issue of the threshold: when does the outside world stop and this particular space start? In classical Roman architecture, the columns and the portico are about easing the transition and blurring the boundaries. Hanging canopies are the same. I wanted something that was both soft and man-made like oak, which also has connotations of being the spiritual tree and has been taken on by the church in Christian furniture."

Also attracting attention in that exhibition was *There Will Be No Miracles Here*, a 6m-high sign in illuminated light bulbs supported on scaffolding like some Las Vegas hoarding and seen previously in the grounds of Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute. The slogan, which he has been using in different ways since 1998, refers to an incident in 17th century France when the number of miracles reportedly taking place in the village of Modseine started to get out of hand. The solution was a notice from the highest authority in the land: "There will be no miracles here, by order of the King." It's a funny story that encapsulates Coley's interests in church, state, the public space and the nature of belief. If miracles were taking



place, did the king have the authority to stop them? And would a sign be all he needed?"

Also seen at Mount Stuart was his *Camouflage Mosque*, a scale model of the Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade that's doing its best to disappear by the use of dazzle camouflage sprayed in purple enamel paint. He has applied similar techniques to a *Camouflage Church* and a *Camouflage Synagogue*, making familiar pieces of architecture visible as art and invisible by their disguise.

The question of space extends to the places in which human beings gather and from there, he has inevitably been drawn to the question of belief. Nowhere is the combination of religion and religious space more intense than in Jerusalem, home to three major belief systems. That's why Coley journeyed to Israel in 2005 to make his film *Jerusalem Syndrome*. It focused on a rare psychosis affecting around 20 Christians and Jews a year who are so hypnotised by the Holy City they start acting like biblical characters.

"I travelled to Jerusalem not because I wanted to 'find' myself or 'find' faith," he says. "It was because I'm fascinated by the fact there's this one place which is the centre for the three main religious institutions. It confirmed my belief that they're all as bad as each other. Jerusalem is the most unholy city I've ever visited. There is something magical and fascinating about the discourse and attention manifested by the Wailing Wall, but it's not worth killing each other over."

The result of the 2007 Turner Prize will be announced on 3 December.

Look to the Future

How celebrating a life led to our new identity
Words: Tim Maguire



As you can see, the HSS has a new visual identity, and it came to be in a slightly unusual way. In April 2006, I was asked to visit a man who was terminally ill with cancer and wanted to talk about his imminent funeral ceremony. I'd never done this before, and I found it very moving to be with someone so calm and courageous in the face of his own mortality. Kenneth Shepherd and his civil partner Derek Green spent more than two hours telling me about his life, and Ken's ceremony, which took place the following week, was one of the most complete, tender and rounded celebrations of a life in which I have participated.

Derek is a graphic design lecturer in the School of Visual Communication at Edinburgh College of Art and in the course of our conversations in the weeks after the funeral agreed to the suggestion that his third year students take part in a competition to design some postcards to promote wider awareness of the Society. With what I've come to recognise as his customary energy and imagination, he expanded the brief, and set the students the additional project of redesigning the HSS identity. The NEC enthusiastically approved the idea and authorised a prize of £1,000 to be split between the three winning designers.

14 students took part and over a period of three weeks came up with a total of 42 designs for postcards, seven of which were printed and 50,000 copies were given away over the summer and autumn of last year by Boomerang, whose free postcard racks are to be found in cinemas, health clubs, bars and cafes around Scotland. This was a great success, contributing to an upsurge of visits to our web site and many members have told me of their surprise and delight to find one dropping through their letterbox.

But the real bonus to the Society was the creation of the new HSS signature that now graces our stationery, web site, leaflets, banners and of course this magazine. The simple modernist logotype is clean and contemporary, while the dancing figure boldly proclaims our national identity.

The entries were so strong and so full of wit and imagination that the judging panel – Ivan Middleton, June Maxwell, Juliet Wilson and I – found it hard to decide on single winner, so the decision was made to award the prize to the entire class. They used most of it to pay for the printing of a book on the theme of 'Evolution', which they gave away at their degree show; the rest, they spent the rest on a party to celebrate – a fitting conclusion to an exciting and successful project.

As celebrants, we often speak about the way in which a person lives on after their death, and say that "their influence in the world remains and will continue to flow as a consequence of their character and actions". To me, the new HSS identity will always be a tribute to Ken Shepherd.



Duty or Pleasure?

AC Grayling's describes his new book THE CHOICE OF HERCULES

In the inflamed debates between those who espouse and those who object to religion, there is one large missing element: the fact that a broadly humanistic outlook is associated with what is arguably the richest and deepest vein of ethical thought in human history, the Western philosophical tradition stemming from classical antiquity.

This claim is consistent with recognition of the value of other non-religious ethical traditions such as Buddhism and Confucianism, the former with its compassionate embracement of all nature, and the latter with its attention to the social bonds that underlie harmonious political order. One might add the equally secular Mohist school, antedating Christianity by centuries, which preached brotherly love and primitive communism. But all three are frankly limited in comparison to the treasury of debate and insight in the great classical and post-classical schools of ethics and in their modern application.

Familiarly enough, between the ancient and the modern flourishing of this debate there was a caesura, which cynics might regard as the irruption into Western thought of Oriental religion – in the form of Christianity, a syncretist offshoot of Judaism that formed in that part of the world which haemorrhages religions and their proliferating sects as if it were the severed artery of superstition. (I write these words just days after returning from Syria, which one is forcibly reminded is part of a region where the modern and historical multiplicity of religions and their numberless competing internal sects astonishes the mind.)

But even during the fifteen hundred years in which the church required people to believe that all the questions of ethics had been answered, and there was nothing left but to obey, the humanist tradition survived among the educated and reflective; and when the Reformation broke the hegemony of a single church over theology, it unwittingly did so over ethics too; and the insights and suggestions of great tradition revived.

I sought to say something about the historical aspect of these matters in a book called 'What is Good?' (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2002). In this new book I seek to address the question of what a broadly humanistic ethics is, using as a starting-point a commonplace trope of Renaissance and Reformation times, the story of 'the Choice of Hercules'.

When he was a youth Hercules worked as a shepherd, and while he tended his flocks one day he was visited by two women, one of them dignified and handsome, the other beautiful and voluptuous. The former was Duty (or in

some versions Virtue), the latter Pleasure (in some versions Vice). Each sought to persuade Hercules to accompany her into the way of life she represented. He wavered, but finally chose Duty; and as with almost all heroes fathered by a god on a mortal woman, the result was that he gained heaven – in the form of Mount Olympus.

My argument in response is that the 'duty-pleasure' dichotomy is a false one, and that a good life – in both senses of this ambiguous term, which can mean either 'an ethical life' or 'a pleasurable and satisfying life' – requires attention to both. And this in turn means questioning what passes for conventional morality as taught by the conventional authorities, and handed unconsciously down from a religion-dominated past with many prejudices and taboos (not least about sex) intact.

In the first part of 'The Choice of Hercules' I argue that it is a mistake to think that there is one view of 'the good life' that applies to everybody, and that since there are as many possible good lives as there are people to live them, one has to focus on the general characteristics that any life describable as 'good' typically displays. Obviously, good lives are fulfilling and satisfying for those living them for at least three reasons: first, because they are meaningful, their meaning being a function of the purposes and endeavours that shape them, secondly, because they have good relationships at their core, and thirdly, because they are lived in circumstances that enhance both the pursuit of those purposes and the nourishing of those relationships. A key aspect of these ideas is that the purposes and relationships in question are chosen ones, not ones dictated by other peoples' (usually one-size-fits-all) ideas about what is best for us.

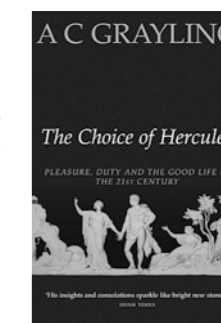
In the second part of the book I look at the typical over-concentration of conventional morality on such topics as homosexuality, drugs, the family and prostitution to illustrate how the possibility of autonomously-chosen good individual lives requires a liberal and open-minded society, and how the lack of the latter conforms to the one-size-fits-all ambition of conventional moralities to dragoon everyone into their preferred corner.

This latter point is a political one, and it reasserts Aristotle's conviction that ethics and politics are seamlessly connected. But this in turn raised the question of how, in a world divided along so many lines of conflict and disagreement, individuals can be protected from interference in their ethical choices. In the third part of the book, therefore, I argue that



a universal basis for ethical variety is needed, and that it is provided by the idea of human rights – a subject given (despite appearances) far too little proper attention in thinking about how our vexed world should best try to manage itself. (At the risk of making this too much of a commercial break: the question of liberty and rights is the topic of a book I published in September, 'Towards the Light' Bloomsbury).

The main aim in the 'The Choice of Hercules' is to describe the general character of a humanistic ethics; it is not to say what any such ethics should be. That, as for all matters humanistic, is for the individual to decide.



THE CHOICE OF HERCULES A.C. Grayling

(Weidenfeld & Nicolson) November 2007

We have two copies of
The Choice of Hercules to give away.

To win a copy send the answer to this question: Who was the mother of Hercules?
To the Editor's address or email (on page 3).

Competition closes 21st December and the winners will be picked at random.

Radical Reading No.48



EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Words : Nigel Bruce

I have a good humanist friend who, when I introduced him to the term 'emotional intelligence', laughed and said it was an oxymoron. Oxymoron is a grammatical term, often gleefully employed by letter-writers in the press, denoting a phrase in which two concepts appear to contradict one another. For instance, some humanists, though not all, regard the term 'religious humanism' as an oxymoron. (In ancient Greek, *oxys* meant 'sharp', and *moros* meant 'foolish'.)

However, emotional intelligence is not an oxymoron because the concept of intelligence has to be seen as a mental faculty or skill which can be deployed in several areas of mental activity, including, in this instance, our emotions, our feelings, and in the language of **David Hume**, our passions. Hume's youthful masterpiece '**A Treatise of Human Nature**' was presented in three major parts: Book I. Of the Understanding, Book II. Of the Passions, Book III. Of Morals.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the wisdom which the young Hume displayed by situating the emotions between rationality and ethics, where it forms a vital bridge. His designation of reason as 'the slave of the passions' now features in philosophy courses all round the world. (But remember in this context that natural curiosity and the love of truth are both regarded by Hume as human passions).

Reason and Emotion

Over many centuries, theologians and philosophers have wrestled with the perceived conflicts between human reason and human emotions and with the power relationship between the two. The basic problem is that it would be absurd to require men and women to act rationally unless they have the ability, the will-power, to control or moderate their instincts. The emergence in recent years of neuroscience has thrown fresh light on this continuing debate. We now find the polymath **Steven Pinker** telling us that *self control is a tactical battle between parts of the mind*. And we find the neurologist **Joseph LeDoux** forecasting that our expanding knowledge of how the brain works opens up the possibility of a more harmonious integration of reason and

passion in the human brain, which will allow future humans to better know their true feelings and to use them more effectively in daily life.

Keeping a Balance

We have to be grateful to the psychologist **Daniel Goleman** not only for coining the term 'emotional intelligence' but for exploring and explaining its many-sided psychological content. This embraces both the ways in which we learn to understand ourselves and the ways in which we can learn to understand the motives of other people. Emotional intelligence is the aptitude which we all have, in greater or lesser degree, for keeping a balance between different parts of the brain. This balance is the key to reaching wise decisions and taking wise actions. *I can foresee a day*, writes Daniel Goleman, *when education will routinely include inculcating essential human competences, such as self-awareness, self-control and empathy, and the arts of listening, resolving conflicts and cooperation.*

Humanists, take heart! The neuroscientists are producing real hope that we can understand human nature better and offering informed suggestions as to how this might be achieved. Teachers and parents alike need to look again at how best to educate the young.

Daniel Goleman
Emotional Intelligence : why it matters more than I.Q.
Bloombury (1996)
ISBN 0-7475-2830-6

David Hume
A Treatise of Human Nature (1739)
Penguin (1969)

Steven Pinker
How the mind works
Penguin (1999)
ISBN 0-1402-4491-3

Joseph LeDoux
The Emotional Brain
Weidenfeld & Nicolson (1998)
ISBN 0-297-8410-8

Nigel Bruce is the president of the Edinburgh Humanist group

National Executive Committee News



Secretary Ron McLaren

Following an excellent series of presentations about conference and other key activities, we addressed the subject of our volunteers, without whose time, effort and skills none of our constitutional objectives would be met.

More than 20 members are poised to engage with Spiritual Care as it rolls out in the NHS, and new opportunities for action are emerging both in the development of our Education Strategy and the formation of the new Equality and Human Rights Commission, in which we are invited stakeholders.

The E & HRC consultations are bringing us into contact with many organisations like Help the Aged, Young Scot, Stonewall, the Refugee Council, Amnesty, ACAS and Save the Children, to name but a few, and all are reminded, by yours truly, of the "Common Humanity" baseline of Humanism. Although some have previously never heard of us, that message resounds, loud and clear! As the consultation rolls out, with substantial funding in place, opportunities will arise for our Local Group members to get involved, and I'll make sure you know about them when they do. If you want to volunteer now, please write to me at secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Thanks!



Letter From the HSS Convenor Jim Petherick

My report begins on a deeply sad note. We were at Conference when news broke that the grandchild of one of our newest celebrants, Bill Bedborough, died in a dreadful accident. We can only express our deepest sadness to Bill's family and assure them of our continued thoughts and, wherever possible, our constant support.

I visited Inverness on 9th September for a fascinating talk on the solar system by Pauline Macrae of the Highlands Astronomical Society and was delighted to see an expansion in membership and attendance at the meeting. We're going from strength to strength in

Highland Region, thanks to the efforts of our office bearers in the north. As always, I was made most welcome and enjoyed speaking with the members whose enthusiasm was most encouraging.

Our Annual Conference at Fishers Hotel, Pitlochry was well attended – you can read Clare Marsh's report on page 4. Our striking new identity was unveiled, members of the NEC spoke with real commitment on their areas of expertise and we heard about our progress as an organisation onto the "list" of those to be consulted by the Scottish Parliament on issues that affect our lives. This advancement is truly remarkable, and my congratulations to all those involved.

We also heard our Student Essay competition winner Eimear O'Casey deliver her essay before receiving her prize, ably demonstrating that our young people have both the commitment and the intellect to secure the future of Humanism.

Perhaps the most inspiring speaker was Maryam Namazie whose personal experience of Islam gave an extraordinary insight to the damage and danger that forcing religion upon people can cause. Her talk, full of passion and commitment left us with much to ponder.

All in all, Conference was most successful and feedback from delegates has been very positive. A sincere and heart felt thank you on all our parts goes to Clare Marsh, whose organisational skills and tireless efforts made the conference the success it was.

Thank you all for attending and for giving us on the NEC your continued support. I am delighted to welcome to our ranks Bob McKay as education officer and Juliet Wilson as magazine editor.

As we approach the winter solstice I wish all of you, and your families, peace and happiness.

Membership Secretary Alan Richardson

We had some glitches with our membership details and renewals earlier this year, for which I apologise. In May and June we totally rebuilt our database and inevitably encountered a few problems. It was a massive undertaking, carried out by entirely by volunteers and we are especially grateful to Allan Cairns and his wife Doris for the time and dedication they gave to this task.

Part of the problem is the great leap in membership that the Society has recently enjoyed. It wasn't long ago that we celebrated our 1000th member. Now we have over 3000, with many more joining each month.

In the past renewal notices were sent out with the magazine and, if the subscription was not paid promptly, it was quite possible for someone to be in arrears for over six months. If

the magazine appeared late, as was sometimes the case, the situation was even worse.

Now, reminders are sent out independently a month before falling due. A final reminder is sent out in the month after, and members are removed from the list if no reply is received within the stipulated period. This gives us more control and – crucially – much more accurate membership data.

Our teething problems with the new database are behind us, and I hope those who were caught up in them have forgiven us for any inconvenience caused. I can't promise problems will never occur again, but we now have a robust system to cope if they do!



Education Officer Bob McKay

As the newly appointed Education Officer of HSS my first task is to propose a strategy which builds on achievements to date and which addresses the challenges and actions required to place Humanism in Scotland on a firm and proactive position in Scottish Education.

I hope to provide the shared focus and informed perspective that will allow me to act as the catalyst for your contribution. For both principled and practical reasons, the aims, strategy and key tasks cannot be realised by any one individual. It will be a team effort drawing on a range of skills and I look forward to leading that team.

I bring to the job not only my work as a professional educator but also the welter of experience gained as a pupil, student and teacher, father, grandfather, uncle and friend. If we are to address all ages and abilities and involve all of the partners in learning, we need a wide range of talents to participate in the creation of appropriate materials and a successful strategy draw on the range of skills and expertise within HSS.

My ultimate wish is to see a secular society within a secular state. At present we remain citizens of a 'quasi-religious' state as reflected in education provision and legislation. Our aim, therefore, must be to place humanism as a validated and approved part of the curriculum.

The current development of a Curriculum for Excellence for All aged 3 – 18 offer a unique opportunity but it exists within a limited time frame and the result of the current process is likely to shape the Scottish curriculum for decades. If we are to take this opportunity, we must act now to develop a role for Humanism within Religious & Moral education, contribute to Philosophy and Human & Citizen Rights, inform the debate on Science Education and exclude 'Intelligent Design' from any science classroom.

In such a context, a tolerant, reasoned and reasonable approach should allow the humanist perspective to be accepted and endorsed as a bone fide contribution. Our commitments to human rights and social responsibilities, a tolerant society founded on moral & ethical principles and the maximising of human potential cohere fully with the aspirations of a Curriculum for Excellence with its emphases on successful learners, confident individuals and contributing citizens. Our promotion of observation, research, evaluation, review, analysis and critical thinking reflects best learning practice. We have a great deal to offer and a duty to do so.

Many humanist parents face a difficult dilemma. Reluctant to see their children exposed to regular religious activities, they are equally reluctant to request withdrawal with all the potential consequences of separation, alienation and targeting.

The 2006 legislation confirms the rights of the non-religious, but it is seriously short on practical options, leaving many secular parents feeling powerless and disenfranchised. The HSS can be their representatives and advocates, providing informed, constructive and practical advice. Given that most 'education' takes place outwith school, we can offer alternative materials as well as considered responses to the religious views presented in schools.

At the heart of our strategy is the right of young people to consider, question, criticise and choose. An approach that has no creed and no doctrinal straightjacket will, I am certain, be attractive to many young people. An education system that recognises the different sources of ethical values will better reflect the nature of our diverse society. There will be opposition founded on absolutism, fear and exclusivity. We must meet it with genuine reasonableness and a tolerance of diversity that should be reciprocated.

All of this has to be taken forward with the key players in education, from politicians to national bodies to professional and parent bodies to schools, colleges and Higher Education.

Since "none of us is as smart as all of us" we will achieve our goals through collective action. We need volunteers from all sectors of education, from parents and other professionals (e.g. lawyers) and from those with expertise in related issues. If you would be interested in participating in the work of the groups who will take forward these essential tasks, I am most keen to hear from you. r.mckay10@ntlworld.com

Local Group News

There's lots going on in our Local Groups all round Scotland and you are very welcome to join in. Contact their Honorary Secretaries for more information.

Aberdeen & Grampian

Words: Marion Richardson

Two Summer meetings concerned journeys; in one, a young Yemeni member from a fundamentalist Muslim childhood evolved into a freethinking student in Scotland; in the other, a retired consultant psychotherapist travelled from obedient son in a straight-laced Buchan manse to rationalist student, and was influenced by Aberdeen University lecturers like Margaret Knight and older students back from the war. The two subsequent meetings comprised first a Humanist Academy presentation from June Maxwell and colleagues and then resulting discussion and reactions. On November 21st several members will present thoughts on the topic of Intelligent Design as a basis for discussion.

Meetings: 3rd Wednesday of every month
Venue: The Skene House Hotel, 6 Union Grove, Aberdeen AB10 6SY
Honorary Secretary: Marion Richardson
 aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 01888 562 237

Dundee

Words: Ron McLaren



This year's Dundee programme began with a combined picnic with our neighbours the Perth Group. Much fun was had by all and hopefully this will set a trend for the future.

The programme proper began with a talk on how animated computer graphics can enhance general learning of the evolutionary process and how its selection process can give rise to spirituality as a human trait. Next came a fascinating expose of what is known about parent/child bonding and its importance in child development, reflecting the great pity that good 'parenting know-how' doesn't automatically arrive with birth. Our next event, 'Woodland Sustainability', to be followed by 'Sustainable Energy' reveals the variation of interest that DG's programme provides. Our latest initiative is to support and donate to the building of an orphanage project in Bangladesh, a country with strong resonance to Dundee's Jute trade of old. Our membership hails from North Angus, Dundee and Fife and a warm welcome is assured for all who enjoy lively debate on all sorts of Humanist matters!

Meetings: 6pm, on the third Monday of every month
Venue: Dundee Voluntary Action, 10 Constitution Road, Dundee DD1 1LL
Honorary Secretary: Ron McLaren
 dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 01337 842 352

Edinburgh

Words: Cathy Crawford

'The Trouble With Science...'
 Talk by Jack Gold at the Edinburgh Group 5 November 2007



It was appropriate that the meeting was held on Bonfire Night, as Jack Gold sent up a few rockets of his own when he launched his review of the history of science since the beginning of time.

It would be impossible to condense into a few words the ideas of science to which we were introduced, but it may mean something to those with a science background to say that we met, among others, scientists Alan Turing, Jim Lovelock, Albert Einstein and John Wheeler in our very personalised tour through science discovery. Jack had produced an attractive, colourful set of slides to go with his presentation. Not to mention a cartoon character, Doctor Quantum, who explained to us in a short DVD the difficulties of quantum physics and the possibility that consciousness through observation actively builds or alters

the Universe. It was this dilemma that had led Jack to question whether science could be the support we could rest upon as Humanists. In the discussion which followed, a consensus emerged that while we had to accept that science did not have all the answers, it is, to quote EHG member John Wiltshire, 'the best model of reality we have.' There is still much to be learned, and in the meantime, the philosophy that underlies Humanist ideals is not too drastically undermined by this fact. In fact there is not such a lot of trouble with science and we can look forward to all manner of new, useful scientific discovery.

Meetings: Start at 7.30 pm unless otherwise stated.

3 December – Rabbi David Rose on Judaism
 7 January – Joan Gibson on Confucius
 4 February – Adam Nicholson of Edinburgh University on Adam Smith

Venue: The Quaker Meeting House, Victoria Terrace, Edinburgh EH1 2JL (just off the Royal Mile).

We also sponsor a monthly screening and discussion at The Filmhouse on Lothian Road. Please check the HSS website or The Filmhouse programme for more information.

Honorary Secretary: Cathy Crawford
 edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 0131 620 0552

Philosophy Group: The Edinburgh Group of the HSS invites you to join the philosophy group. For more information, please contact: Ray Newton, 10 Buckstone Way, Edinburgh EH10 6PN.

Glasgow

Words: Clare Marsh

Glasgow Group debates at Glasgow University

As Richard Dawkins' book *"The God Delusion"* had occupied a spot in the top ten best sellers list for most of the year, the Glasgow Group thought that the theists might welcome an opportunity to answer the assertion. Mandy Evans Ewing, a member of the group and the first Humanist Chaplain at a university in Scotland, invited her fellow members of the Chaplaincy to debate the motion *"God is no delusion"*. Stuart MacQuarrie, the Church of Scotland Chaplain accepted with alacrity and suggested that the proceedings should take place in the famous memorial chapel at GU. Thus it was that on the afternoon of Sunday 21st October a large number of Humanists found themselves seated in very strange surroundings, listening to Kevin, a Catholic student, and an Imam from a local mosque proposing the motion. Jim Drummond and I opposed and many members took part in the lively open period, as did a group of students who had come through from Edinburgh University. Summing up I asserted that,

considering the actions of the Conquistadors in South America and the ultimate horror of the twin towers, "Not only is god a delusion, he is a dangerous delusion."



From left : Clare, Jim (seated), Kevin, Stuart Macquarrie and Imam (seated)

Meetings: 1.45 for 2.30 pm
 16 December – Yuletide Party 2.00-5.00pm
 20 January – A Celebration for Darwin's Day (12th Feb) "Evolution versus Intelligent Design." C. Marsh

17 February – "The Ethics of Stem-Cell Therapy." Hugh McLachlan, Glasgow Caledonian University

9th March – "The Trouble with Science." Jack Gold (*Note this is a change of date*)

Venue: Glasgow Pond Hotel (formerly Jury's Pond), Great Western Road, Glasgow G12 0XP

Honorary Secretary: Clare Marsh
 glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 0141 633 1378

Highland

Words: Irene Gillespie

Our meetings during past months have been very interesting! The Summer Social held at the home of Gale Chrisman was on a sunny afternoon with lovely food and drinks provided by group members.

The meeting on September 9th heard an excellent talk given by Mrs Pauline Macrae, Convenor of the Highlands Astronomical Society 'A Brief Tour of the Solar System'.

On Sunday 11th November Vicky Fraser, a 4th generation Funeral Director told us about the changes that took place in the funeral profession since the 2nd World War - a very interesting and at times humorous record. IG

Meetings: The second Sundays of every second month at 2 pm

13 January – Next Meeting

Venue: Marriott Hotel (shortly to revert to the original name 'Kingsmills' Hotel), Culcabock Road, Inverness IV2 3LP

Honorary Secretary: Irene Gillespie
 highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 01343 831 326

Perth

Words: Terry Martin

Perth is a thriving group of about twenty members. Our programme is always varied and we have a spread of Club Nights when

members and visitors discuss current affairs and ideas and engage in lively exchanges of views. We want to bring in more of a social calendar in which visits and outside activities are included in our programme.

At our August meeting a speaker from the Woodland Trust gave a vibrant slide show that was enlightening and persuasive in presenting the Scottish forests as places of tremendous interest and in need of our support.

In September we heard from historian, Professor Callum Brown of Dundee University about the post-WW2 revival of Evangelicalism spearheaded by Billy Graham and his crusades in Britain, and how these faded through the Swinging Sixties to be replaced by a different kind of religious fervour promoted by the Religious Right. New Age spiritualities are becoming widespread and present a different point of interest for both the churches and secular thinkers in Scotland today.

We welcome visitors - if you find yourself in the Perth area, our club is your club.

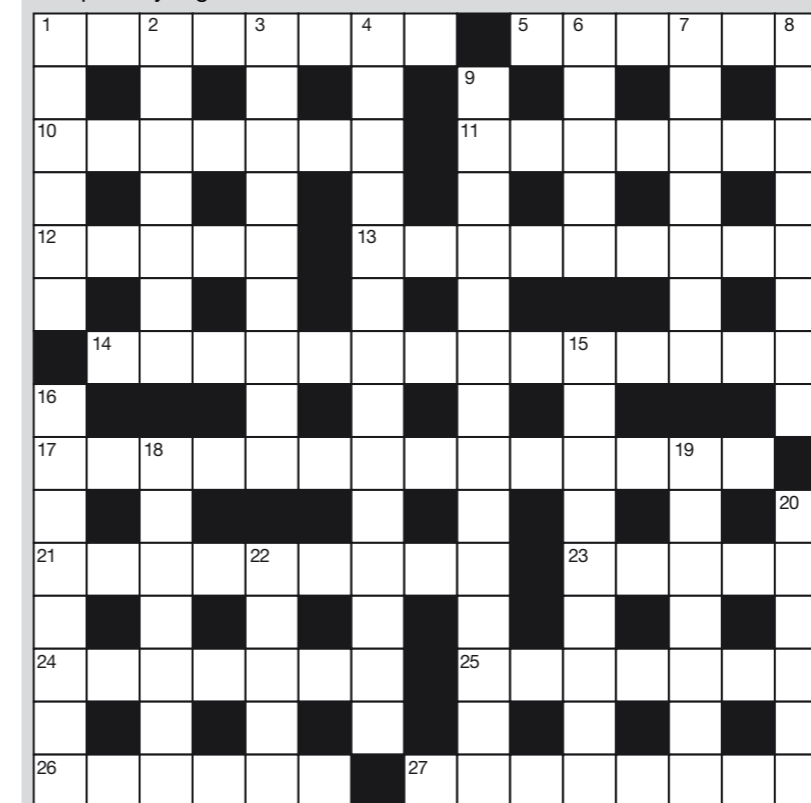
Meetings: 7.30 pm to 9.30 pm on the fourth Thursday of each month (except for December and January).

Venue: The Gateway, North Methven Street, Perth PH1 5PP

Honorary Secretary: Margaret Sutherland
 perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk
 01786 461 379

HUMANIST CROSSWORD

Compiled by Nigel Bruce



ACROSS

- 1 Stress, which in Army slang came between 'ell for leather and enfilade. (8)
- 5 Jarred the feelings, or pared the cheese. (6)
- 10, 11. Biologist, humanist, polemicist, publicist. (7,7)
- 12 Herb well-known to cooks. (5)
- 13 One who seizes the lands of the natives. (9)
- 14 Large rural properties. (7,7)
- 17 Sisters and brothers of mothers and fathers. (5,3,6)
- 21 Assam maybe, or Darjeeling. (6,3)
- 23 Gods who gave us Tuesday and Wednesday. (5)
- 24 Hero to Rosalind in As You Like It.. (7)
- 25 The grim task of the coroner. (7)
- 26 Deserved a reputation or an income. (6)
- 27 Turned upside down, as often happens to commas. (8)

DOWN

- 1 Put on vestments (6)
- 2 World-famous Spanish artist. (7)
- 3 Muslim territories, formerly part of the Turkish Empire. (4,5)
- 4 The injection of false religious dogma into young minds. (14)
- 6 Native mountain ash. (5)
- 7 Matching jacket and skirt (pearls optional!) (4,3)
- 8 Emotional suffering. (8)
- 9 A level of learning at which Humanism should find a valuable place. (5,9)
- 15 Artistic, scientific or engineering skill. (8)
- 16 Rich male voice, between tenor and bass. (8)
- 18 Knotty or lumpy. (7)
- 19 Nearest version, deemed important by Oscar Wilde. (7)
- 20 Given honourable dress, or dishonourable punishment. (6)
- 22 Charismatic Governor of California, to his fans. (5)

Solution on page 22

What is Secular Humanism?

Humanism is the outcome of a long tradition of free thought that has inspired many of the world's great thinkers and creative artists and gave rise to science itself.

The fundamentals of modern Humanism are as follows:

- Humanism is ethical.** It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.
- Humanism is rational.** It seeks to use science creatively, not destructively. Humanists believe that the solutions to the world's problems lie in human thought and action rather than divine intervention. Humanism advocates the application of the methods of science and free inquiry to the problems of human welfare. But Humanists also believe that the application of science and technology must be tempered by human values. Science gives us the means but human values must propose the ends.
- Humanism supports democracy and human rights.** Humanism aims at the fullest possible development of every human being. It holds that democracy and human development are matters of right. The principles of democracy and human rights can be applied to many human relationships and are not restricted to methods of government.
- Humanism insists that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.** Humanism ventures to build a world on the idea of the free person responsible to society, and recognises our dependence on and responsibility for the natural world. Humanism is undogmatic, imposing no creed upon its adherents. It is thus committed to education free from indoctrination.
- Humanism is a response to the widespread demand for an alternative to dogmatic religion.** The world's major religions claim

to be based on revelations fixed for all time, and many seek to impose their world-views on all of humanity. Humanism recognises that reliable knowledge of the world and ourselves arises through a continuing process of observation, evaluation and revision.

- Humanism values artistic creativity and imagination** and recognises the transforming power of art. Humanism affirms the importance of literature, music, and the visual and performing arts for personal development and fulfilment.
- Humanism is a lifestance aiming at the maximum possible fulfilment through the cultivation of ethical and creative living** and offers an ethical and rational means of addressing the challenges of our times. Humanism can be a way of life for everyone everywhere.

Amsterdam Declaration 2002

The HSS Today

Faith groups increasingly demand to be heard in public life. They want to influence our politics, our schools and our cultural life. But who represents the interests of the growing number of ethically concerned but non-religious people in Scotland? The Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS) does.

Humanism is a diverse movement that broadly represents the views of millions of people around the world. The HSS represents the views of people in Scotland who wish to lead good and worthwhile lives guided by reason and compassion rather than religion or superstition. Humanists aim to create an open and inclusive society, so we campaign for a secular state and for secular education. At a local level, our groups provide an opportunity to attend talks, film nights and lectures and discuss moral and ethical issues with other free-thinking people.

Our network of trained, registered celebrants provide a range of dignified, personal

ceremonies to mark life's main events that are civil, legal and extremely popular. Humanist weddings have been legal in Scotland since June 2005, and people now travel from all over the world to marry in one of our ceremonies.

The HSS is a registered charity, run by a National Executive Committee elected from among its membership. Membership (currently over 3,000) is open to all those who share our life stance and support our aims.

Distinguished Supporters

Iain Banks
Professor Richard Dawkins
Stephen Fry
Professor A C Grayling
Sir Ludovic Kennedy
Professor James Lovelock
Claire Rayner OBE
Polly Toynbee
Iain McWhirter

Joining the Society

Membership of the Humanist Society of Scotland is open to all individuals who share our Secular Humanist life-stance and support our aims. It is either direct or through one of the HSS local groups. Group membership entitles you to attend meetings where you can engage with other members – if you wish to attend any meeting before joining you will

be warmly welcomed. All members receive our quarterly magazine, Humanitie, and other benefits. Simple fill in the form below and return it with your subscription.

For further information please visit our website at www.humanism-scotland.org.uk or contact the Society at:

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Individual Life (£450) Individual (£20 per annum)
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If you wish to also join a local Group please tick the appropriate box (Note: there is no extra cost involved):

Aberdeen Dundee Edinburgh Glasgow Highland Perth

Magazine subscription only

UK (£10 per annum) Overseas (£12 per annum)

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Please consider giving an extra donation to our funds (all donations are anonymous): £ _____

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Membership Cards are sent with the next issue of the magazine, but if you wish a separate receipt please tick here:

If you have any interests or skills (e.g. in education, fund-raising, public speaking, journalism) that we can call upon please note them here: _____

Please indicate where you heard of the Humanist Society of Scotland: _____

Please return this form, with a cheque or PO made payable to 'Humanist Society of Scotland', to
The Membership Secretary, The Humanist Society of Scotland, 272 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4JR

For HSS Use Only

Database Updated

Expires





Virtual Philosopher

Words: Nigel Warburton

Can Humanists Appreciate Religious Art?

Many of the great works of visual art are religious. But when an atheist like me looks at, say Duccio's painting in the Sainsbury Wing of London's National Gallery of the 'miracle' of Jesus healing a blindman, I do not believe in the literal truth of what is depicted. David Hume gave excellent reasons for being sceptical about believing reports that such miracles have occurred in his famous essay on the topic. Nor do I believe that Jesus was the son of God (nor that there is such an entity as God). Does this mean that I can't adequately appreciate this picture?

In *The God Delusion* (p.86), Richard Dawkins mentions that when he appeared on *Desert Island Discs*, the interviewer was surprised that he chose a track from Bach's *St Matthew Passion*...Dawkins' comment:

The interviewer was unable to understand how I could choose religious music without being religious. You might as well say, how can you enjoy *Wuthering Heights* when you know perfectly well that Cathy and Heathcliff never really existed?

But surely the situation isn't directly analogous. *Wuthering Heights* was intended to be read as fiction. Religious art is typically intended as depicting or expressing truths, often literal truths that religious people hold as core beliefs (though some 'religious' artists may have been responding cynically to the demands of wealthy religious patrons). In my example above Duccio's painting was meant to be read as an interpretation of an actual event, one that would inspire and enthuse a religious believer through its subject and through its beauty and through the skill in the way the subject has been depicted, itself a celebration of God. Even decontextualised from a larger panel of paintings and taken from the church where it was originally sited, it presumably retains some of this power for religious Christians. If I as an atheist appreciate the painting it is not quite as fiction, but rather as a beautiful painting of a biblical story, one made for sincere yet misguided viewers. I admire it for its formal qualities, for its slightly quirky 'before and after' images of the blind man, and so on.

Clearly atheists and agnostics can and do appreciate such paintings as art and the experiences it inspires are significant, profound sometimes. We can delight in the artistry, the depiction of humanity, the beauty and so on. What we lack is an experiential appreciation of the extra-artistic significance religious art can have as the targets and stimulators for religious emotion, awe and meditation. But we should acknowledge that this in some ways distances us from the original purposes of such art, and pushes us in the direction of aestheticism.

We can imagine what it would be like to be a religious person viewing such a painting (or, remember even, if we have been religious and lost faith). But the in-the-moment experience is as different as when I look at a photograph of a friend rather than looking at a similar photograph of a complete stranger. The Christian presumably experiences the religious painting as of someone who is living and with whom they have a continuing relationship. When I look at a photograph of a friend I see my friend - the experience isn't adequately encapsulated by what appears as my retinal image. My thoughts and feelings are imaginatively about my friend. It is this that we as atheists and agnostics cannot achieve in the presence of religious art.

Fortunately for us, most of the great religious artists were either superb formally or astute observers of humanity as well as able to satisfy their religious clients. But the fact remains that some part of the intended experience of religious art can't be available to us experientially. Let's not kid ourselves that this is just like reading a novel knowing that the characters didn't exist or didn't do the things the author said they did. Humanism shuts us off from a range of ways of relating to the world that religious painting invites. Our experience of it is necessarily non-religious. There is no place here for religious awe, reverence, and the sense of the sacred.

www.nigelwarburton.typepad.com

HUMANIST CROSSWORD SOLUTIONS

ACROSS 1 Emphasis 5 Grated 10, 11 Richard Dawkins 12 Basil 13 Coloniser 14 Country estates 17 Aunts and uncles 21 Indian tea 23 Norse 24 Orlando 25 Inquest 26 Earned 27 Inverted
DOWN 1 Enrobe 2 Picasso 3 Arab lands 4 Indoctrination 6 Rowan 7 Twin set 8 Distress 9 Adult education 15 Technique 16 Baritone 18 Nodular 19 Earnest 20 Belted 22 Arnie.

50:50 CLUB WINNERS:

50/50 Club Autumn 2007 Winners 1 Dennis Clamp, Derbyshire – £141.00 2 Angus MacDonald, Aberdeen – £71.00 3 Janet Whittington, Ross-shire – £23.63

The 'Society' Page

Here are some of our Humanist Society of Scotland celebrants in action



1 Celebrant: Jess Fitzgerald
Couple: Rhona & Alex Ayres
Photographer: littlephotocompany.co.uk

2 Couple: Monica Griesbaum and Andrew Oldroyd

3 Celebrant: Jane Bechtel
Couple: Poppy and Daniel Cenaccie
Photographer: [Brendan Murphy](http://BrendanMurphy.com)

4 Celebrant: Tim Maguire
Couple: Phil and Jude Bancroft
Photographer: [Louis De Carlo](http://LouisDeCarlo.com)

5 November 2007 Naming Course was attended by Verity Marshall, Tim Maguire, Linda Britton, Pat Robertson, Larry Gibb, Alan McLellan, Peter Macdonald, John Gordon, Erica Von Boltenstern, Dawn Fuge, Gillian Stewart and "baby" Annabelle!

6 Celebrant: Juliet Wilson
Family: Mum Emma and dad David and with baby Chloé Louise Murphy.

HSS Merchandise

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See page 14 for sample illustration

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students of the Edinburgh College of Art.

Photography: Martin Pettinger. All our models are HSS members



Happy T-Shirt group



Peter Macdonald and
Elaine Campbell



Nan Byers and
Ross Wright



Sandy Edwards

Please complete this form and then return it with a cheque made payable to 'Humanist Society of Scotland' to:

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