

Feeling Better

The Festive meal this year was held as last year at Blubeckers at Hare Hatch on the A4. 15 members gathered with more than eating on their mind.-A small tribute to the staying power of David and Ann Williams in running BH for more than 30 years. Arline delivered a poem which extolled David in his roles as barbecue chef and now



Persuading David to take a free meal

President. He also received a certificate of insurance for his digits which he always uses to good effect in emphasising his debating points in strong, structured thinking. Also confirmation of his place in BHA archives. Entertainment included betting on when Pam and David would finish calculating everyone's discount. (.....they did get one!!)

Bad news from the IHEU

(We do feel obliged to report bad news as well as good -this is taken from BHA member's forum)

On 18 December 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution "Combating Defamation of Religions" by 108 votes to 51 with 25 abstentions. Similar resolutions have been adopted for the past seven years by the old Commission for Human Rights and by the new Council. This is the first time however, that such a resolution had been passed by the General Assembly. The resolution expresses "deep concern about the negative stereotyping of religions and manifestations of intolerance and discrimination in matters of religion or belief". But the only religion mentioned by name is Islam. The resolution also notes with deep concern, "the intensification of the campaign to defame religions and the ethnic and religious profiling of Muslim minorities in the aftermath of the tragic events of 11 September 2001". It emphasises that whilst everyone has the right to freedom of expression, this should be exercised with responsibility - and may therefore be subject to limitations, inter alia "for respect for religions and beliefs".

The Western delegations stood firm, however, in their opposition to this resolution. The Portuguese delegate, speaking for the EU, explained clearly why:

"The European Union does not see the concept of 'defamation of religions' as a valid one in a human rights discourse. From a human rights perspective, members of religious or belief communities should not be viewed as parts of homogenous entities. International human rights law protects primarily individuals in the exercise of their freedom of religion or belief, rather than the religions as such."

Notwithstanding these objections, those opposing the resolution found themselves on the losing side of a two-to-one majority in

favour. The implications of this resolution for freedom to criticise religious laws and practices are obvious. Armed with UN approval for their actions, states may now legislate against any show of disrespect for religion; however they may choose to define "disrespect". The Islamic states see human rights exclusively in Islamic terms, and by sheer weight of numbers this view is becoming dominant within the UN system. The implications for the universality of human rights are ominous.

What should BH do about Interfaith Groups?

Increasingly as the LDP volunteers begin to find their feet more, more local Humanist representatives are joining in with interfaith groups as a means of dialogue. It is also the case that more local SACREs (Standing Advisory Committees on Religious Education) are granting full membership to Humanists as opposed to co-option (which is still the case in Reading). It could be that these two changes are connected.

'RE inspired' the faith based trust run by a group of churches in Reading (see January Newsletter) has sent us an invitation to a meeting on February 12th at the RISC centre in Reading to discuss how to "Help schools to understand their faith". Whilst we shall point out that they should be talking about "Faith AND Beliefs" and incorporating Humanism in every school syllabus, it remains to be seen whether they will want us to fully participate. The meeting also reaches out to "colleagues in Greater Reading and Wokingham" - a much wider remit than usual.

The Editor's view is best summed up with a passage from the BHA policy on this.

"We should seek to identify how humanists and non-religious people might contribute effectively to the work on equality, diversity and social cohesion issues in their locality. This means engaging with the structures and procedures which already exist for this kind of work. It does not mean joining structures which would be inappropriate or counterproductive just to gain influence. Neither does it mean defining ourselves as a 'faith based organisation' to fit into existing structures. What it does mean is working with these structures to encourage our inclusion in consultative processes and to make sure our voice is heard in relevant discussions".

Please share your views to David William (0118-978 0944) or David McKnight (0118 9476477)

The Holt school Conference

There has been minimal response to the call for a conference at the Holt school. We have reluctantly had to cancel the conference called for March 15th. The March BH meeting will now be a chance to discuss the place of Humanism in schools (in particular the Holt School 'Philosophy of Religion Course') and plan alternative strategies.

Mightier Than The Sword

Alan Stuart - our Press secretary has been writing to the Press and Radio for quite a number of years. He has now donated copies of some of his important work to a presentation folder which can viewed and discussed at meetings. Please talk with him (and let us know). If you plan a letter about something which concerns you, it could well improve effectiveness to talk it over.

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