



North East Humanists

Monthly Bulletin — June 2021

MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

We have a few announcements to kick off the bulletin this month. First, with our evenings getting brighter, and with vaccinations making outings more possible, we have decided to suspend our monthly online quiz nights. Thank you to everyone who attended these—we really hope you enjoyed them. But please join us in saying a HUGE thank you to Irene Wilkinson for taking the time to organise these fun and inventive events! They really did brighten our evenings during the pandemic.

Second, we would like to extend a warm welcome to four new members of NEH: Pasquale Foglietta, Rebekka Hill, David Wright, and Geoffrey Nash. It's truly great to see people continuing to join us after such a tough year.

Finally, after much hard work behind the scenes by the management committee, we are very excited to unveil our newly designed website. We have added several new pages now to tell the world [About Us](#), about [Humanism](#), and about the many [Activities](#) that North East Humanists coordinate, which makes a [Membership](#) so helpful and worthwhile. Please take a moment to look it over. And [Contact Us](#) if you have any questions or suggestions — particularly if you have any nice photographs from our events that you would like to contribute.

See the new look at www.northeast-humanists.org.uk.

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Tolerance and Free Speech

On the 20th of May, John Roberts gave us a talk about issues pertaining to freedom of speech. John is a political sociologist currently based at Brunel University who has researched and written about voluntary activity in local communities, social and political movements, digital culture, and free speech activism.

John structured his talk using a very clear outline. First, he went over his own free speech background, which included extensive experience with [Speakers' Corner in Hyde Park, London](#). Next, he showed us a group of pictures for us to consider and asked, "Should we 'tolerate' these images of free speech?" What do you think?



Even the last example of burning a cross by KKK members has been permitted by an astonishing case in America in 1992 known as [R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul](#). In that case, Robert A. Viktora and his friends taped broken chairs together to form a crudely built cross and then proceeded to burn the cross inside the fenced yard of a black family. At the time, this was a clear violation of St. Paul, Minnesota's "Biased Motivated Crime Ordinance" which stated:

"Whoever places on public or private property a symbol, object, appellation, characterization, or graffiti, including but not limited to, a burning cross or Nazi swastika, which one knows or has reasonable grounds to know arouses anger, alarm, or resentment in others on the basis of race, color, creed, religion, or gender commits disorderly conduct and shall be guilty of a misdemeanor."

However, after several appeals, the conviction of Viktora under this law was unanimously thrown out by the U.S. Supreme Court. You can read the Wikipedia entry linked above for their full arguments, but the Court concluded, "Let there be no mistake about our belief that burning a cross in someone's front yard is reprehensible. But St. Paul has sufficient means at its disposal to prevent such behavior without adding the First Amendment to the fire."

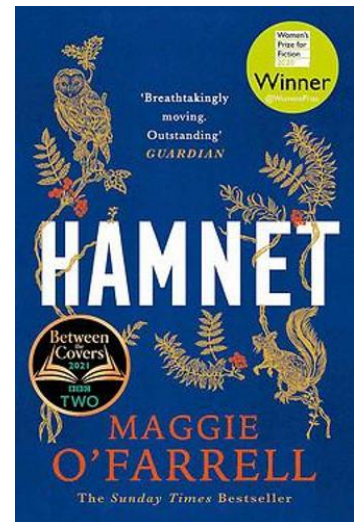
Our speaker John used this example to argue that there is no such thing as free speech or toleration. He also claimed there was currently no free speech crisis at universities because a review of UK data showed that only 50 or so events had been cancelled via deplatforming out of 60,000+ scheduled events. His concluding slide said, "In reality, free speech is rarely, if ever, undertaken in a society where everyone is equal. The examples highlighted demonstrate that free speech is always mediated through power relations between specific social groups, social identities, and the authorities. It is therefore vital to explore the history of free speech and popular struggles to gain free speech by ordinary people. In addition, we need to consider how public spaces are changing, in particular how they allow different 'publics' to exist within them while they exclude others."

The Q&A featured discussions on topics like: Donald Trump's ban from Twitter, deplatforming over Trans issues, woke and cancel culture, the potential banning of "critiques of capitalism" in British universities, recent government proposals to limit public protest, and a recommendation for the free book [How the EHRC Got It So Wrong: Antisemitism and the Labour Party](#). For a range of other views on this topic, the Moral Maze on BBC Radio 4 had a recent discussion on [Free Speech at Universities](#) that can also be recommended.

Virtual Book Club by Jan Mole

Eight members of NEH book club met on Zoom on Tuesday the 18th of May for a discussion about the book *Hamnet* by Maggie O'Farrell. This book won the Waterstones Women's prize for Fiction in 2020. Having read and been enthralled by it, I was keen to hear the opinions of my fellow bookworms.

This book is a novel based on the story of William Shakespeare's son Hamnet, who died aged eleven from the plague. The story also follows Shakespeare's own life from his childhood to becoming a successful playwright. It begins with Hamnet looking for someone in the family to help his twin sister Judith, who has become rapidly ill. This storyline runs in parallel with William's own life history, which is told from Hamnet's mother Agnes' perspective.



Our entire group endorsed the book and some of their comments and observations follow: "Fantastic writing", "really enjoyed reading it", "no unanswered questions", "atmospheric", "brought Tudor times to life", "glad we are alive today", "wonderful, rounded characters", "loved the magical realism".

A discussion ensued about the way in which John, William's father, was portrayed as a bully and an abusive character and whether it was fair to assign him to history as such, as there is very little actual evidence to prove it. Ultimately, we accepted that all historical novelists must do this (e.g. Hilary Mantel in *Wolf Hall* and others).

The group agreed to hold our next meeting on the 15th of June when we will discuss Alice's choice, [Thinking Again](#), the last of Jan Morris's diaries. We will then adjourn for July and August when Moira has offered [The Goldfinch](#) by Donna Tarte as a good two months' worth of reading, and which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2014. Our monthly meetups will resume in September to discuss that book.

UPCOMING NEH ACTIVITIES

Public Lectures & House Groups

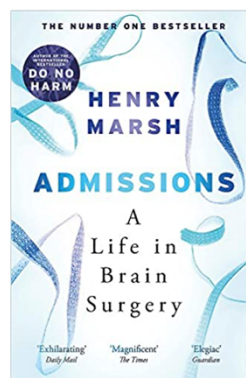
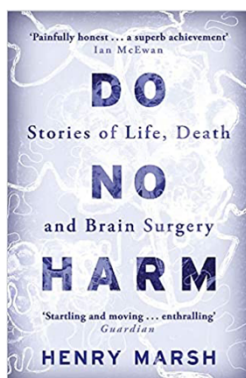
All of our in-person events are still cancelled. This policy will remain in place until government guidelines change and we feel that we can protect everyone who attends our events. If you have any questions or concerns about this, please send them to contact@northeast-humanists.org.uk.

Virtual Event — Death and the Surgeon

In this event, we will hear from the esteemed doctor Henry Marsh. Henry says, "I spent forty years as a surgeon involved with death, but this did not help me much when I was diagnosed with advanced cancer myself. But the diagnosis reinforced my conviction that Assisted Dying should be available in a humane and civilised society. I will concentrate in my talk on countering the arguments presented by the opponents of Assisted Dying."

Henry Marsh was the Senior Consultant Neurosurgeon at St George's Hospital in London UK until 2015. He continued to work abroad as a neurosurgeon in Ukraine, Nepal, and Albania until 2020. He was the subject of two major BBC television documentaries, one of which won an Emmy, and the other the Royal Television Society Gold Medal. His memoir [*Do No Harm*](#) has been an international best seller, was shortlisted for numerous awards, winning the PEN Ackerley and Sky Arts prizes, and was translated into 37 languages. His subsequent book [*Admissions*](#) was a *Sunday Times* No 1 best seller. He was made a CBE by the Queen in 2010.

"Death and the Surgeon" by Henry Marsh



Presented by  North East Humanists

Who: Dr Henry Marsh CBE

When: Thursday June 17th at 7:00pm (Zoom opens at 6:45)

What: 45-minute online lecture plus plenty of time for interactive Q&A afterwards

How: Register using the Eventbrite link: <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/death-and-the-surgeon-tickets-156225355243>

If you prefer not to use Eventbrite, you can send an email to Susan Walker at northeasthumanist@gmail.com and she will send you a Zoom link directly.

You don't need to be a member. All are welcome to this free event! Whilst we do not charge for these online events, we are a registered charity that you may donate a few pounds to by using [the link on our homepage](#). All amounts are greatly appreciated.

Recurring Virtual Events

- Virtual Book Club — Discussing a variety of books, this club meets every month on the third Tuesday. If you are interested in joining, please contact Jan Mole at 0132 535 6029, 0780 466 7390, or janet.mole@ntlworld.com.
- Current Affairs Discussion Group — Once per week, a curated email of recent news is sent to this group along with comments from other members. For an invitation, email Beryl Downing at beryldowning@icloud.com.

OTHER NORTH EAST HUMANIST NEWS

Outreach to the Public by Kate Hinton

June 12th at Newcastle Monument

In our recent strategic planning efforts, NEH set the following long-term aspirations: “We want as many people as possible in the North East of England to have awareness, understanding, and acceptance of Humanism as a purposeful and moral basis for leading a happy and fulfilling life.”

So, we are starting to take our message into public places. The first of these will be at Newcastle Monument on Saturday June 12th, which is just in advance of World Humanist Day on June 21st.

We will have a table displaying a new set of posters summarising Humanism, which you can see on our new website under [Education](#). We will also have a good range of handouts from NEH and HUK. We hope to get into conversation with members of the public, encouraging them to learn more about Humanism and possibly become members of NEH.

Please come and visit us or join us sometime on that day if you can. Also, we will be planning other such occasions in different parts of the region, so please make suggestions for venues or events in your locality.

OTHER HUMANIST NEWS

Humanist Heritage

Friday, April 30th marked 125 years for Humanists UK. In celebration, they have launched a new in-depth resource called [Humanist Heritage](#). This is a new website that charts the UK’s rich and storied history of the humanist movement. It uniquely catalogues hundreds of Humanist people, ideas, organisations, and innovations.

The Humanist Heritage project aims to bring to life an often overlooked but historically influential aspect of our heritage – Humanism and the impact it has had locally and nationally on art, literature, and social, political, and ethical culture throughout UK history. On the website, you can search through lists of [people](#), [places](#), or [groups](#). You can explore Humanist history using a [map](#). Or you can focus on [themes](#) such as the arts, atheism, ceremonies, education, the ethical movement, freedom of belief, freedom of speech, healthcare, human rights, peace & pacifism, philosophy, politics, science, secularism, and social reform.



There is so much history here, we thought it would be worthwhile to spotlight a few items over the next few issues of the NEH bulletin. As a start, maybe you could read the full entry for [Margaret Kennedy Knight](#) (1903-1983).



Margaret Knight was a psychologist and prominent Humanist, who gained the nickname 'the unholy Mrs. Knight' following a series of BBC broadcasts in which she advocated scientific, Humanist education for the young. She eloquently defended her position, strengthened by the formation of the Humanist Broadcasting Council, of which she was a leading member. As the editor of the *Humanist Anthology*, Knight was also influential in helping to establish the Humanist canon, striving to remove 'the illusion ... that love and human brotherhood are purely Christian conceptions' by following the thread of Humanist thought from the ancient to the modern world.

A Passage from Humanist Anthology by Mike Turner

I am currently reading a book called *Humanist Anthology*, which was originally put together by Margaret Knight. It covers many historical figures who have contributed to Humanist thought. I particularly liked the following extract as it is still relevant.

The following is from the book Good Sense written in 1772 by Paul Henry Thiry D'Holbach otherwise known as Baron D'Holbach. (Please note the historical usage of masculine pronouns would all be re-written today to be fully inclusive.)

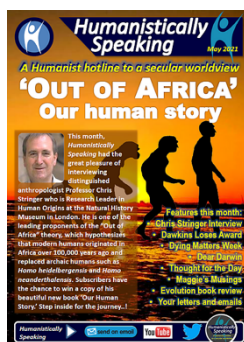
Atheism and Morality

It is asked what motives an atheist can have to do good. The motive to please himself and his fellow-creatures; to live happily and peaceably; to gain the affection and esteem of men, whose existence is much more certain, and whose dispositions are much better known, than those of a being by nature unknowable. "Can he who fears not the gods, fear anything?" He can fear men; he can fear contempt, dishonour, the punishment of the laws; and he can fear himself, and the remorse felt by all those who are conscious of having incurred or merited the hatred of their fellow creatures.

It is asserted that the dogma of another life is of the utmost importance to the peace and happiness of societies; that without it men would have no motive to do good. What need is there of terrors and fables to make every rational man aware of how he ought to conduct himself upon earth? Does not everyone see that he has the greatest interest in earning the approval, esteem, and benevolence of those who surround him, and in abstaining from everything by which he may incur the censure, contempt, and resentment of society... If life is but a passage, let us strive to make it easy; which we cannot do, if we fail in regard for those who travel with us.

Religion, occupied with its gloomy reveries, considers man merely as a pilgrim upon earth; and supposes that, in order to travel more safely, he must forsake company and renounce the pleasures and amusements that might console him for the tediousness and fatigue of the road. A stoical and morose philosopher sometimes gives us advice as irrational as that of religion. But a more rational philosophy invites us to spread flowers on the road of life, to dispel melancholy and panic terrors, to connect our interest with that of our fellow travellers, and by gaiety and lawful pleasures to divert our attention from the difficulties and hazards to which we are often exposed; it teaches us that, to travel agreeably, we should abstain from what might be injurious to ourselves, and carefully shun what might render us odious to our associates.

Latest Issue of Humanistically Speaking



North East Humanists are affiliated with *Humanistically Speaking*, which is a monthly magazine that has been published since 2019 by members of the South Central England Humanist Network. You can subscribe to this free magazine and view all previous issues at [their website](#). Their latest [May](#) issue includes features on anthropologist Chris Stringer, Richard Dawkins losing an American Humanist Association award, Dying Matters Week, Dear Darwin, a review of Robin Dunbar's book *Human Evolution*, plus a Thought for the Day, and letters and email from readers.

News from the National Secular Society — Religious Threat to Global Human Rights Must Be Taken Seriously

The United Nations recently asked NGOs with whom it works about the legacies of colonialism that still had adverse implications for human rights. Some of the worst systemic human rights abuses codified in the law of [around 70 states are those criminalising consensual sex between adults of the same sex](#).

About 40% of these are in Africa, which was [almost entirely colonised](#) by European empires. Such acts were also potentially subject to life imprisonment in India, introduced under British rule. Even after British rule, there is a possible death penalty in Pakistan and ten years' imprisonment in Bangladesh. In India criminalisation persisted until 2018.

These remnants of colonialism are implied by the title of [this article in The Independent](#), which refers to "LGBT+ rights across the Commonwealth" and "Britain's colonial legacy of homophobia." The article also notes that "half of the 70

countries that criminalise homosexuality worldwide are (UK) Commonwealth members.” Details of the position in individual countries are [here](#).

...

Anyone who cares about upholding human rights should be concerned. Many decades after former colonies declared independence, laws which persecute gay people and severely restrict freedom of expression and women's rights continue to cause widespread misery. Meanwhile, rather than being in retreat, religious conservatives are seeking opportunities to push draconian restrictions across new parts of the globe.

And in both cases, groups who wish to impose religious dogma on others are introducing or upholding serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law. In response to the UN's call for evidence, the National Secular Society has urged it to consider this.

<< [Click here to read the entire article from the National Secular Society](#) >>

ALWAYS LEAVE ‘EM LAUGHING

I promise there are none on our new website!



CONTACT US FOR MORE

North East Humanists

All of the latest information about North East Humanists is available on our [website](#). You can also follow us on social media on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#). Interacting with us there is a great way to help spread the news about Humanism so we can grow and accomplish even more.

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. Join NEH for as little as £6 per year by visiting [the membership page of our website](#). If that's more of a commitment than you can make, just [sign up to our email list](#). For NEH members without email, the bulletin is printed by Mike and Moira Turner and sent by post. Contact them at 0191 272 8376 to arrange this if you need it.

Durham Humanist Group

This local house group is run by Susan Walker. Contact her at 0191 384 1432 or susan.humanist@gmail.com if you would like to attend events here.

Teesside Humanist Group

If you would like to join this group, please [contact us](#) for more details. You can also follow them on Twitter [@Teeshumanists](#) or like the [Teesside Humanists Facebook Group](#) run by Terry Waites and Ben Collier.

Humanist Funerals, Baby Naming Ceremonies, and Weddings

Anyone who wants advice on how to organise these should contact Les Milne at 0795 267 1533 or go to www.northeast-humanists.org.uk/ceremonies.html.