

Monthly Bulletin — August 2021

A BRIEF MESSAGE FOR A (SLIGHTLY) BRIEFER BULLETIN

We've taken a break in July and August from running any public lectures, but our lineup for the autumn and winter are shaping up nicely and we should be poised to announce those next month. For now, that means we don't have any talks to recap or immediately prepare ourselves for, but that doesn't mean that Humanism is far from our minds. Many of us are taking some well-deserved holiday breaks and looking for some good reading to sink our teeth into. With that in mind, this month's bulletin is focused on just a few of the things you might like to consider. Enjoy!

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Outreach to the Public by Kate Hinton

We continue on our travels to reach out to the public. On July 10th we were in Durham Market Place along with other market stalls. We were made very welcome by the market managers after they had managed to leave us off their list! As luck had it, they were able to give us a covered stall that was not in use that day and which kept off a slight drizzle in the early morning.



We had conversations with about 23 people, not quite as many as in Newcastle, but all had a real interest in Humanism and one man had recently joined NEH and was keen to know more about us. We had a long conversation with a family of a mother and two daughters who were vegans and were very much in sympathy with Humanist beliefs. And another long conversation with a young man, a graphic designer, who was interested in Eastern philosophies.

It showed that Durham is quite a tourist destination as there were people from London and West Yorkshire as well as several on a coach tour from Glasgow. So, none of those people were going to join NEH but they may well follow up with local Humanist groups in their own areas or consider joining HUK. *(Editor's note: we have had two new members join us this month—welcome Helen Abernethy & Julie Ray!)*

There was no kit drummer to contend with this time, only an ice cream van nearby but also a very good coffee stall. By the afternoon it was warm and the sun was out. So, a pleasant day was had by all as we do enjoy talking to members of the public and really like talking to each other!

Many thanks to Susan, Moira, and Mike for putting in the hours as well as Irene who joined us in the afternoon.

***** Next stop Sunderland, outside The Bridges, Saturday August 7th *****

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

UPCOMING NEH ACTIVITIES

North East Humanists 2021 Summer Social and Lunch

NEH is delighted to be able to host a Summer Social this year. It will be held at the home of Liz and Ron Armstrong — 73 Grosvenor Avenue, Jesmond, NE2 2NQ — on 15 August 2021 between 12:00 noon and 3:00 pm. As usual, if you can bring a contribution to the feast, that would be much appreciated.

Continued caution needs to be taken because of the Covid pandemic and we would like to reassure you that we are aware of the responsibility to keep everyone as safe as possible. We hope that the weather will be kind to us, and that the majority of the time will be spent in the garden. If not, we will keep the house well ventilated and will enable as much distanced seating as we can.

We will have sanitizer available and masks for those who wish to wear them. Of course, it will be preferable if those coming have been 'double jabbed' too.

In order that we can make appropriately safe plans could you let us know if you are coming by contacting Liz Armstrong by **Tuesday 10 August** at the very latest.

Many thanks. We look forward to seeing you.

Email: liz_armstrong2000@hotmail.com
Tel: 07553951454 / 01912812923

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.

OTHER HUMANIST NEWS

Humanist Values Bind Us Together by Ed Gibney

A few weeks ago, I was talking with some friends about what we'd all been up to. When I mentioned some of the work I had been doing with North East Humanists, one of them asked, "Is Humanism a religion?" I was stumped at first for a proper response, but then quickly said the short answer is probably no. For a longer answer, however, it might depend on what you mean by a religion.

I've been reading a lot lately from David Sloan Wilson who gave us our Darwin Day Lecture back in February. David is an evolutionary biologist who (among many other things) helped to pioneer the study of religion from an evolutionary perspective via his book [Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society](#). My answer to my friend was shaped by [an online essay](#) about this topic where David noted the curious fact that there is not one but two major definitions of religion. One is based on belief in supernatural agents. The other is Emile Durkheim's definition:

A system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things — that is to say, things set apart and forbidden — which unite into one single moral community all those who adhere to them.

So, if you are using the more widely known definition of religions as being concerned with supernatural agents, then Humanism is definitely not a religion. But then again, neither is Buddhism or any other belief system rooted in naturalist views of the world. This, however, might make those worldviews seem less important, or like something is missing compared to those who [got that old time religion](#). It's perhaps too easily misconstrued to simply declare to the general public that we Humanists are a religion, but we are indeed "a moral community united by beliefs and practices about things that are set apart or forbidden."

When I answered my friend, this was as far as I got—that if you were a real sociology geek, you might technically be able to consider Humanism a religion. But I wish I had remembered something from the history of Humanist organisations which would have made this clearer. And that is that for the first 70 years of its existence, Humanists UK was called [The Union of Ethical Societies](#) (see the article below for more on this). I think this makes it clearer to outsiders like my friend as to what draws Humanists together and binds us as a group. We want live together in vibrant ethical communities. Traditional religions may well fit into this larger category of "ethical societies" too, but we sadly disagree with where they get their ethics from and what some of their resulting moral choices are.

Humanist ethics are not revealed to us in any sacred scriptures which cannot be questioned. They are drawn from a myriad of sources. And these values are continually being developed and challenged. Recently, the team publishing the monthly online magazine *Humanistically Speaking* put together another list of values for Humanists to consider, which is contained in their free publication called [From](#)

[*Atheism to Humanism: A compact guide to 8 humanist values*](#). I plan to share this with my friend soon, but here is a brief passage from its introduction:

Humanist visitors to schools often get asked by students, “What’s the difference between atheism and Humanism?” Atheism simply means not having a belief in any god whether it’s the Christian God, the Muslim God, the 300 million gods of Hinduism, and so on. By itself, atheism says nothing about how you are going to live your life. It reveals nothing about your values.

Humanism, on the other hand, is all about values. It starts from non-religious premises. Humanists do not believe that our ethics and morals come from God or religion. Humanists believe that morality is a natural human capacity which has evolved to enable us to live together co-operatively in groups.

Humanist morality has not been written down in any scriptures or on blocks of stone. But that does not mean that individual Humanists can just make it up for themselves. Many humanist thinkers have suggested alternative versions of the ten commandments, but these should be understood as thought experiments to stimulate our own thinking rather than authoritative lists. The latest example is the American Humanist Association’s Ten Commitments, which can be found in the further resources section.

The idea for this booklet came from a meta-analysis of these various lists of commandments and value statements. If we shake them all together, can we extract a broad and balanced statement of humanist values for today? I think we can, and our attempt is presented to you in the following pages. It’s not the last word on humanist values, but we hope you will find our selection informative, helpful, and inspiring.

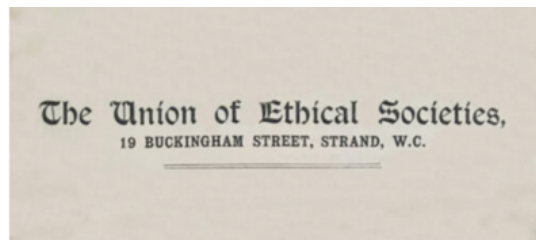
	CITIZENSHIP: be a well-informed citizen who upholds liberty, justice, equality, democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the common good
	ENVIRONMENT: live responsibly within the resources of the planet embodying respect and consideration for all living things
	KNOWLEDGE: think for yourself and think critically using information, evidence, analysis and evaluation
	PERSONAL INTEGRITY: be a person of integrity, honesty, and authenticity whom others can trust
	CHALLENGES: cultivate courage, fortitude, resilience, and perseverance in the face of life’s difficulties
	RELATIONSHIPS: practise love, care, respect, compassion, kindness, benevolence, generosity, forgiveness, tolerance, acceptance and understanding
	MEANING AND PURPOSE: contribute your skills, effort and ideas to building a good society in which everyone can flourish
	HAPPINESS: enjoy life and take care of your own wellbeing, promoting a healthy lifestyle and a fair work/life balance

[<<< Click here to read the full booklet *Atheism to Humanism* >>>](#)

Humanist Heritage — The Union of Ethical Societies

As we mentioned in the [June bulletin](#), 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.

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. In June, we highlighted [Margaret Kennedy Knight](#). In July, we focused on [Harriet Martineau](#). And now, for a final entry in this mini-series, we turn to the [Groups](#) page for a look at [The Union of Ethical Societies](#) in order to learn more about the origins of Humanist organisations.



Humanist Heritage

The Union of Ethical Societies (now Humanists UK) was formed in 1896, joining together existing ethical societies for fellowship and the furthering of their shared aims. The focus of the Union, as it had been for all of the ethical societies formed since the UK's first a decade earlier, was the promotion and practice of morality without reference to theological ideas, emphasising a “purely human and natural” basis for ethics and action. The Union would later become the Ethical Union, and later still the British Humanist Association, but its central humanist values of reason, compassion, and living well have remained the same since those earliest days.

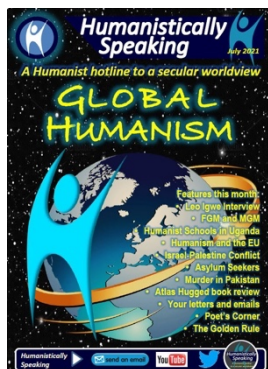
From the creation of the West London Ethical Society in 1892, the intention to create a union of ethical societies “for the more effective carrying out of objects common to them all” was written into the group's aims. On 12 November 1895, at the invitation of the East London Ethical Society, delegates from the North, South, West, and East London Societies gathered at Devonshire House Hotel to discuss the notion of a federation. Four further meetings resulted in a “Scheme of a Constitution for an Ethical Federation”, which the Societies approved, and the first meeting of the Council of the Union of Ethical Societies was held on 30 April 1896.

The Union adopted for its aims, with minor adjustments, those of the West London Ethical Society. These were:

1. By purely natural and human means to assist individual and social efforts after right living.
2. To free the current ideal of what is right from all that is merely traditional or self-contradictory, and thus to widen and perfect it.
3. To assist in constructing a theory or science of Right, which, starting with the reality and validity of moral distinctions, shall explain their mental and social origin, and connect them in a logical system of thought.

[<<< Click here for more on The Union of Ethical Societies at Humanist Heritage >>>](#)

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 [July](#) issue has a particular focus on global issues of interest to Humanists and includes features on Leo Igwe, FGM & MGM, Humanist Schools in Uganda, Humanism and the EU, the Israel-Palestine conflict, Asylum seekers, Murder in Pakistan, and a book review of *Atlas Hugged* by D.S. Wilson (NEH's 2021 Darwin Day speaker).

New Humanist Q&A with A.C. Grayling

In the latest issue of New Humanist, Niki Seth-Smith talked to the philosopher and Vice President of Humanists UK about his new history of philosophy, and what the discipline can teach us today. Professor A.C. Grayling is a philosopher, author, and master of New College of the Humanities. He is Vice President of Humanists UK and an honorary associate of New Humanist. He has written around 30 books on the history of ideas, and his latest is [The History of Philosophy: Three Millennia of Thought from the West and Beyond](#).



***The History of Philosophy* takes the reader on a global journey that spans from before the time of the Buddha to today. What drew you to undertake such an epic task?**

The last comprehensive single-volume history of philosophy is of course Bertrand Russell's, which brings the story of western philosophy up to the beginning of the 20th century. That century itself was incredibly rich—both in philosophy and the study of the history of philosophy—so bringing that up to date is worthwhile. But also, it's interesting and valuable to look over the garden fence to other great traditions of philosophy, to the Indian and Chinese in particular.

What does philosophy have to tell us about the grand sweep of history?

[In the book] I try to give the big picture about this great story of the last 2,500 years, of people trying to tackle all the questions that it's most difficult to answer, in the hope that when we find ways of answering them, they can become separate pursuits and their own special discipline. So, I make the point that out of philosophy has come science, social sciences, linguistics, cognitive science, AI, and all these things. Philosophy is very consequential; it's always trying to give definition to our problems so we can make progress with them. I wanted to tell that story in a way that is very clear and accessible.

What about the relationship between philosophy and humanism?

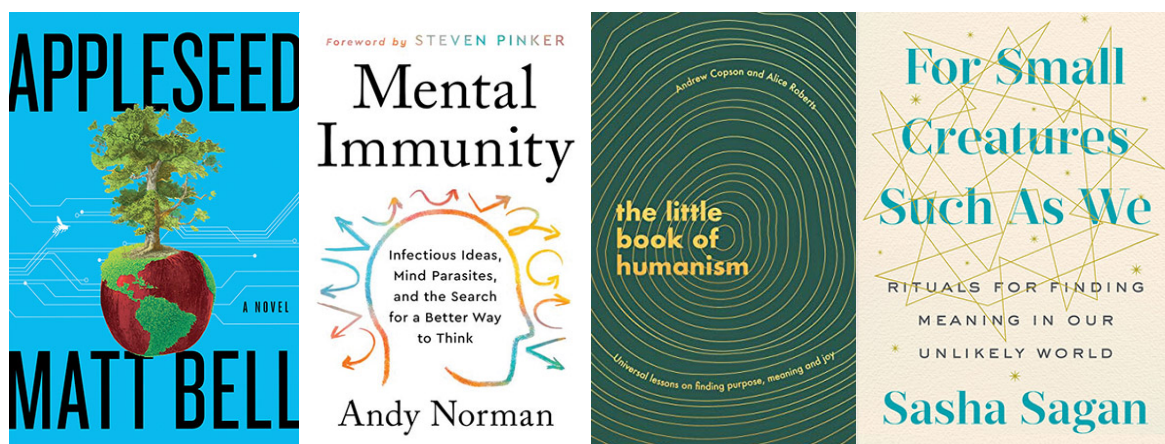
I've always said that humanism is an ethical outlook, which has its roots in Classical antiquity and which pretty well all reflective people have held close, right the way through the history of philosophy. Hume, for example, in the 18th century, said he wished he'd been given Cicero to read rather than the catechism – that's just one little indication. There are many repetitions of that view.

So, in the book itself, I make clear that, while most other histories of philosophy tend to include theology, my really rather hard-line point is that this is a history of philosophy—not of theology, or of science, which are neighbouring areas on both sides. And that therefore questions of ethics discussed in the book are always humanistic in character.

[<<< Click here to read the rest of the Q&A >>>](#)

American Humanist Association's Summer Reading List

Looking for still more to read? The American Humanist Association published their summer reading list in the latest issue of *The Humanist* magazine. As they say, "Summer always seems to be the perfect time to lose yourself in a good book. So, the *Humanist* is here to help! We highlight nine recent books that focus on a wide range of humanist values. Whether you want to challenge your mind with humanist philosophy, explore the foundations of our nation, graze through pithy quotes, relax with a novel at the beach, or read something to the kids—this list has it all.



[<<< Click here to read the AHA's Summer Reading List >>>](#)

Humanists International's Campaign to Protect Humanists at Risk

On 29 June, Humanists International launched its annual fundraising campaign to raise £25,000 needed to assist humanists who risk their lives to defend humanist values in their countries.

Humanists International works to protect humanists at risk all around the world, wherever they are. In the last 12 months the organization has received 200 requests for help from humanists facing persecution all around the world.

"This corresponds to a request for help every two days", says Emma Wadsworth-Jones, who works at Humanists International as the world's only Humanists At Risk Coordinator. Emma started working in this position in April 2020 and since then the casework management capacity of the organization has increased dramatically.

"Each month, we receive, on average, 16 requests for help from individuals across the globe who are at direct threat for their humanist identity or activism," continues Emma. "We are talking about activists who advocate for human and scientific progress, social reforms, and a culture of tolerance and freedom. In this regard, they are often at the forefront of many progressive battles: secularism, critical thinking, democracy, women's rights, LGBTI+ rights, freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, anti-racism, and so on. We need to support them."



That's why on 29 June, for the fifth year in a row, Humanists International launched its annual fundraising campaign "[Protect Humanists At Risk](#)" with the target of raising £25,000 to assist individuals at risk all around the world.

"In the last 12 months we managed to assist 72 individuals and spent a total of £26,790 in emergency grants", adds Emma. "We helped activists at risk to cover their medical expenses, legal fees, relocation costs, and general subsistence, including rent and food. A big part of this fund has been allocated to assist Mubarak Bala, the President of the Humanist Association of Nigeria who has been detained arbitrarily without charge for 428 days."

To support Emma's work to protect humanists at risk, Humanists International invites all of its Members, Associates, and Supporters to contribute to the campaign with a donation on the dedicated fundraising page: justgiving.com/campaign/protect-humanists-at-risk

"We are experiencing a paradox", says Emma, "because the better we get at assisting humanists at risk, the more other individuals come to know about our work and contact us. To help them, we need more resources. That's why we need the support of the global humanist community: without them, we would not be able to assist the less fortunate humanists amongst us."

ALWAYS LEAVE 'EM LAUGHING

May your sleepy summer time smell better than this.



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.