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Welsh Marches Humanist

Summer
2009

Newsletter

No. 52

Previous Meetings

At The Summer Social gathering on 14th June more than 20 members enjoyed excellent weather and good company. One hundred pounds was raised for the 'Mustard Seed' Humanist school in Uganda.

Future Meetings

On 1st **September** (please note **first** Tuesday of the month on this occasion) there will be a **poetry evening** (Quaker's Meeting House), fronted again by Trevor Innes.

On 13th October we are meeting at a yet to be confirmed venue in Hereford with a view to setting up a new local group. (See Hereford Group Consultation below).

Hereford Group - Consultation

Bearing in mind its rural location the Welsh Marches Humanist Group has been gratifyingly successful but the problem remains that travelling distances prevent many members from attending monthly events.

For this reason the group's steering committee has given some thought to the possibility of establishing a satellite group, centred on Hereford. The argument goes that if a group in the Ludlow catchment area can thrive then Hereford, with a population more than six times as large, must also be a viable proposition.

It has now been decided to test the waters and a Hereford based meeting has been scheduled for Tuesday the 13th October.

It is not obvious what form this meeting should take and that is why I am sending out this consultation to ask for input and suggestions addressing the following questions:

- What would be a suitable venue in Hereford for the meeting ?
- The group has a budget of approx. £ 300 to advertise the initiative. What would be the most effective way of publicising the event ? Are there any Hereford area humanists able and willing to play an active role in the project ?
- Should we aim for a separate, autonomous group or a WMHG supplementary group, offering occasional meetings in the Hereford area ?
- There have been positive reactions from non-WMHG member Humanists to Malcolm Rochefort's letters in the Hereford Times. If an autonomous new group is envisaged are any Hereford based humanists, (members or non-members) interested in putting themselves forward as potential officers ?

- Are there any other aspects relating to the initiative on which you would like to comment?

Your suggestions please to:

Tony Akkermans, Chairman Welsh Marches Humanists
akkermans@btinternet.com or telephone 01588 660670
'Oak Lodge', Rowton, Craven Arms SY7 0PA

Thought For The Day

The BBC radio 4 'Thought For The Day' slot, ever since it saw the dark of day in the sixties, has been a major irritant to rationalists. Not so much because it is important in itself but because it represents the blatantly privileged position that religion still holds in society, even at the supposedly balanced BBC. It is interesting that hard on the heels of the correspondence quoted below it was announced that Mark Damazer is reconsidering the future of TFTD and that the BBC Trust will report on the matter in the Autumn. Over the years I have had many a go at this religious Trojan horse at the heart of a serious current affairs programme and it would be nice to think that I have played a small part in its reform or preferably its demise.

To Mark Damazer, Controller Radio 4.
Why is it that the BBC with its enviable international reputation for fair and balanced reporting blatantly abandons this position when it comes to dealing with religion?

The Thought for the Day slot normally offers anodyne religious homilies which rationalists tend to suffer quietly but it is a different matter when religious spokespeople are given platforms to give one-sided views on serious and topical issues without opportunity for rebuttal. A case in point was Bishop Tom Butler's polemic against assisted dying on 9th June. It is outrageous that his statements about palliative care and the slippery slope should go unchallenged. Would you allow a Humanist to attack a Church of England position without riposte? And please don't side-step the argument by claiming that TFTD is part of religious broadcasting and not a current affairs item. In that case have the honesty to call it 'RELIGIOUS Thought for the Day'. That would also make it easier to eject the slot from the excellent 'Today' programme where it has no place.

Sincerely,
Tony Akkermans,

Chairman
Welsh Marches Humanists

Dear Mr Akkermans
Thank you for your e-mail to Mark Damazer regarding 'Thought For the Day' with Bishop Tom Butler on Radio 4, 9 June.

It is always good to receive correspondence from listeners, and to be challenged by it. 'Thought for the Day' is set within the Today programme, and has the remit of commenting from a religious perspective on a current news issue. It follows therefore that it is supposed to say something of substance, and that its contributors - speaking from a variety of distinctive faith positions - can stimulate, challenge, provoke, irritate, and sometimes comfort.

There are 360 Thoughts a year, and 30 or more contributors, from many faiths and many denominations - and a balance of view is maintained over a period rather than within every script.

In the midst of the three-hour 'Today' programme devoted to overwhelmingly secular concerns - national and international news and features, searching interviews and sometimes heated debate on issues of public policy - the BBC judges it appropriate to offer a brief, uninterrupted interlude of spiritual reflection, at a point in the morning when most of the audience are embarking on their day.

At its best the short talk plants a seed of thought, a spark of spiritual insight that stays with listeners during the day. At times of national event or crisis it also has the capacity to catch the mood of the nation and speak to it.

Although the number of UK church-goers has dwindled in recent decades, the policy remains in place because a significant majority of the UK population (around 70 per cent), including increasing numbers from non-Christian faiths, claim a belief in God or describe themselves as "spiritual." Also, the level of attendance in religious activities among the Radio 4 audience is higher than the national average.

'Thought for the Day' has been a regular feature on BBC Radio for nearly 40 years and therefore the programme's remit and approach is very well known by listeners and we therefore feel the programme's title is appropriate and should remain.

The BBC believes that all licence fee payers have the right to hear their reasonable views and beliefs reflected on its output. Within 'Thought for the Day' a careful balance is maintained of voices from different Christian denominations and other religions with significant membership in the UK. Speakers are expected to make brief references to their faith and its scriptures, but are not permitted to proselytise on behalf of their religion or to disparage other religions.

'Thought for the Day' speakers are not questioned or interrupted on air, but their choice of subject and the content of their scripts are subject to careful scrutiny and frequent re-drafting in collaboration with an experienced producer working to strict BBC guidelines on impartiality. In addition, the mix of regular contributors to the slot represents a wide range of theological, social and political views to ensure further balance across a period of time.

Non-religious voices are also heard extensively across the general output. Occasional programmes give voice to atheist and humanist viewpoints. The vast swathe of general programmes makes little reference to religion, but approach the world from an overwhelmingly secular perspective: news, current affairs, documentaries, talks, science, history; which includes, of course, the other 2 hours 57 minutes of the 'Today' programme. Outside 'Thought for the Day', the BBC's Religion & Ethics output maintains a balance of religious and non-religious voices, through programmes such as 'Sunday', 'Beyond Belief', 'Moral Maze', and

'Belief'. In these programmes, atheists, humanists and secularists are regularly heard, the religious world is scrutinised, its leaders and proponents are questioned, and the harm done in the name of religion is explored. We do not suggest that the only people with anything worthwhile to say about morals or ethics are religious people but that does not mean that the 'Thought for the Day' brief is not a legitimate one for listeners of all faiths and those of none. Some of the programme's strongest support and most positive feedback comes from people who begin, "I am not a religious person but I do enjoy 'Thought for the Day'..."

Nevertheless, I would like to assure you that we've registered your comments on our audience log for the benefit of the programme makers, channel controllers, and other senior management within the BBC. The audience logs are important documents that can help shape decisions about future programming and content and ensure that your points, and all other comments we receive, are circulated and considered across the BBC.

Thanks again for contacting us.

Regards, Stuart Webb

Dear Stuart Webb,

Thank you for your remarkably good defence of the TFTD slot. So good in fact that it almost convinces..... but not quite. The unanswerable fault with TFTD is that it offers the religious an unopposed platform in the middle of a flagship current affairs programme, something the BBC would (rightly) never extend to the non-religious. This carries with it the unavoidable corollary that good thoughts are the exclusive domain of the religious. You make the point that the remaining 2 hrs 57 mins. of Today are largely devoted to secular issues but you must know that when it comes to discussing such issues you always make sure that non-religious viewpoints are fiercely contested, often with the religious spokesperson being given the last word. If the TFTD content were restricted to exhortations for moral living that would apply to people of all faiths and none it would still look out of place within Today but it might be more acceptable. But when speakers such as Tom Butler take blatant advantage of their Trojan horse like privilege to give a one-sided and unanswered take on a contentious issue such as 'Assisted Suicide' then it is bound to raise the hackles of any listener with a sense of fairness. Surely the purpose of TFTD is to spread reflection and goodwill, not to offend consistently a large proportion of listeners as you must be aware it does.

Best regards,
Tony Akkermans