

## An Easter Message of Unity?

Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn both gave an Easter Message implying the importance of “Christian values”. To be fair, neither politician actually used that dreaded phrase, and the “shared values” these politicians did name, compassion, community, and social justice— are certainly important in my eyes. So what, exactly, is my problem with Easter Messages of this type?

Firstly, I regard many religious claims as being factually inaccurate. As a result, I get distinctly uneasy when politicians attempt to ally such claims to the values that they purport to have. A satirical website called *NewsThump* nailed my personal sense of unease this Easter with the headline: [“Theresa May uses thing that didn't happen to reflect on values she doesn't possess”](#).

Secondly, although both Easter messages ostensibly appealed to shared human values, they enabled voters of any religious persuasion or none to mine mutually contradictory desired meanings from them. By assuring Christian voters that she'd learned her shared values “growing up in a vicarage”, Theresa May reassured them that *their* religion is important; by correctly noting that shared values are common to people of “other faiths and none”, she keeps Muslims, Jews and those of other faiths onboard (phew—*our religion is important too!*). And May's acknowledgement that people of *no faith can act on shared human values* chimes in with the atheist viewpoint that *religion plays no necessary role in promoting shared values*. And so a message that's supposed to be about unity is interpreted by some as underscoring the importance of religious belief, and by others as illustrating how it's not necessary! Such messages leave everyone feeling justified, whilst obscuring key differences that lie between these groups. Don't get me wrong— trying to couch your message in terms of shared human values is *useful* in political terms (precisely because shared values have such broad appeal), and admirable from a humanist perspective. But let's not kid ourselves; if shared human values are really what you're about, don't insert them in an “Easter Message”, to give the misleading impression that they can be harmonised with religious beliefs. All three Abrahamic religions describe Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his own son, and regard this example as being worthy of emulation. The story's message is clear: if religious values should conflict with the most powerful of human ones, *human values should lose*.

In her message, May said, “We must continue to ensure that people feel able to speak about their faith, and that absolutely includes their faith in Christ.” Responding to May's comments, the British Humanist Association Chief Executive [Andrew Copson](#) said, “Theresa May is absolutely right that people should be free to speak about their religious beliefs. But if her comments are construed as suggesting that this is not currently the case, then this would be a mistake. A third of our state schools are Christian, every other state school must hold daily Christian worship, and bishops continue to sit as of right in the House of Lords. And so Christianity remains in a hugely privileged position in the UK today, not marginalised from the public sphere. It is this privilege that we must be tackling.”

Theresa May also commented, “We must be mindful of Christians and religious minorities around the world who do not enjoy these same freedoms, but who practise their religion in secret and often in fear. And we must do more to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs openly and in peace and safety. So this Easter, whatever our faith, let us come together as a nation confident in our values, and united in our commitment to fulfil the obligations that we have to one another.”

Mr Copson continued, “Again Mrs May is right to speak up for the need to ensure freedom of religion around the world. But whenever one does this, it is vital not to forget the freedom of the non-religious to also openly hold and live out their beliefs. In many parts of the world it is effectively impossible to be openly non-religious, with blasphemy and apostasy punishable by death. Just this week we have seen humanist activist Mashal Khan shot and beaten to death by a group of fellow students at his University in Pakistan. It is essential that his plight and the plight of others like him are not excluded from our efforts.”

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After several media outlets falsely claimed that the National Trust and Cadbury were 'airbrushing' Easter out of their Easter Egg hunt, Terry Sanderson of the [National Secular Society](#) argued that the Prime Minister's involvement in this trumped-up propaganda exercise was the real disgrace. “The Church threw a hissy fit, claiming that Cadbury had failed to include the word ‘Easter’ in the promotional material for the egg hunts it organises at National Trust properties. In fact, the website address itself even contains the word ‘Easter’, and both the National Trust and Cadbury websites mention ‘Easter’ numerous times. It is quite clear that, like previous similar episodes (the ‘Lord's Prayer’ advert in cinemas for instance), this stunt has been carefully planned by the C of E to get itself on the front pages of the papers”. Jeremy Corbyn also weighed in, saying the decision to include Cadbury rather than Easter in the ‘Cadbury Egg Hunt’ was “commercialisation gone a bit too far”.

The Lib Dems commented, “I think we all feel poached by this whole sorry saga, but none of us more so than Cadbury's and the National Trust, who have done nothing wrong and are right to feel egg-rievd by the criticism they have received”.

The Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, said John Cadbury, a Quaker who founded the firm in 1924, was renowned for his religious beliefs, and would not condone dropping the word ‘Easter’. Sentamu, however, was left with egg on his face after Esther McConell tweeted, “I'm sure John Cadbury (my great, great, great great grandfather) is not spinning in his grave. As a Quaker, he didn't celebrate Easter”. -Robert Stovold

## Lifetime Achievement Award for Barry Duke!

[Freethinker](#) editor Barry Duke, who lived in Brighton and was a member of the *Brighton Secular Humanists* before moving to Spain, was honoured by the National Secular Society, which awarded him its "Lifetime Achievement Award" earlier this year. Barry was asked by NSS President Terry Sanderson to provide some words of introduction, and was introduced in the following manner:

"Barry Duke, who many of you will know as the present editor of the *Freethinker*, has a long and colourful back story that may not be so familiar.

"From his earliest days in journalism in apartheid South Africa, Barry has aggressively fought censorship. He wrote numerous articles in magazines and newspapers highlighting the irrational and racist decisions made by what was then South Africa's Publications and Entertainments Control Board – a strict censorship enforcer. It had a list of over 60,000 items that were banned – including the children's book *Black Beauty* and a poster with the slogan *Black is Beautiful*.

Eventually a law was brought in making it illegal to even criticise the censors.

Barry fled the country when he was tipped off that he was in imminent danger of being detained for a violation of the *Suppression of Communism Act*.

"After he was granted asylum in the UK in 1973, he immediately made contact with Bill McIlroy, then editor of *The Freethinker*, which, unsurprisingly, was also on the list of banned items in South Africa. He then began



Barry Duke (right) with fellow Human Rights campaigner Peter Tatchell. Peter will be addressing the Brighton Secular Humanists at our September meeting.

writing articles for the magazine about his experiences of censorship and apartheid and their links to the Calvinist Christianity upon which many of the laws in the country were based.

"He had no inkling at the time that he would one day become the magazine's editor, a job he has done for just over 20 years.

"Having settled in the UK, he became actively involved in humanism, atheism and gay rights. In 1979, he was a founding member of the *Gay Humanist Group*, (now the [Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association](#)) after Mary Whitehouse began a private prosecution for blasphemous libel against *Gay News*.

"He and his late partner Brian Parry then launched a magazine for the group. He also served on the NSS council as treasurer for a while. "Around five years ago, he was asked by the UK gay humanist charity, [The Pink Triangle Trust](#), to launch an on-line magazine – [The Pink Humanist](#) – on its be-

half, and also create a separate website for the charity.

"He moved to Spain in 2010, and became involved in the creation of the first Gay Pride event in Benidorm, working alongside Spanish, British and Dutch activists, and attending meetings with the city's mayor and other elected officials.

"He is now active writing for the press on the Costa Blanca as well as keeping up a constant flow of news and opinion on the *Freethinker* and *Pink Humanist* websites.

"His passion for social justice, equality and free speech burns as brightly today as it did when he first began challenging racists and bigots in his earliest days as a journalist.

"I think you'll agree that Barry deserves the recognition of this lifetime achievement award and the encouragement to keep on keeping on. I'm very pleased to say that he's come from his home in Spain to be with us today."

## The Ups and Downs of discussing the Resurrection.....

April's panel discussion was on the topic of "*The Resurrection Story – How relevant is it in Today's World?*". The discussion was something of a departure from our usual "invited speaker" format. The technical side was a bit of a disaster (newly-purchased microphones failed to gel with a mixing desk on the night). Speaking as one of the participants, however, I rather enjoyed the discussion itself. The other panellists were Pastor Anthony Bickley (Ebenezer Reformed Baptist Church, Brighton), Rev. Anthea Ballam, (Interfaith Minister), and Peter D. Williams (Catholic Voices), and we were ably chaired by Barry Miles of Brighton and Hove, Worthing and Horsham Speakers Clubs, and Brighton and Hove Debating Society.

There's always a trade-off in debates between allowing numerous questions to be asked, and in having sufficient time to follow up in detail the issues each question raises. One reason given by other panellists for believing in the Bible's account of the resurrection is that it contained embarrassing information, and so probably wouldn't have been made up; scholars call this line of argument "The Criterion of Embarrassment". The particular example given in the discussion was that the first people to see the risen Jesus were women— an embarrassing detail for Christians, because, at the time, a woman's testimony wasn't considered to be reliable. I had no time to respond to this argument on the night, so will deal with it in detail here.

On hearing this argument for the first time, my initial response was, "Well, if religious

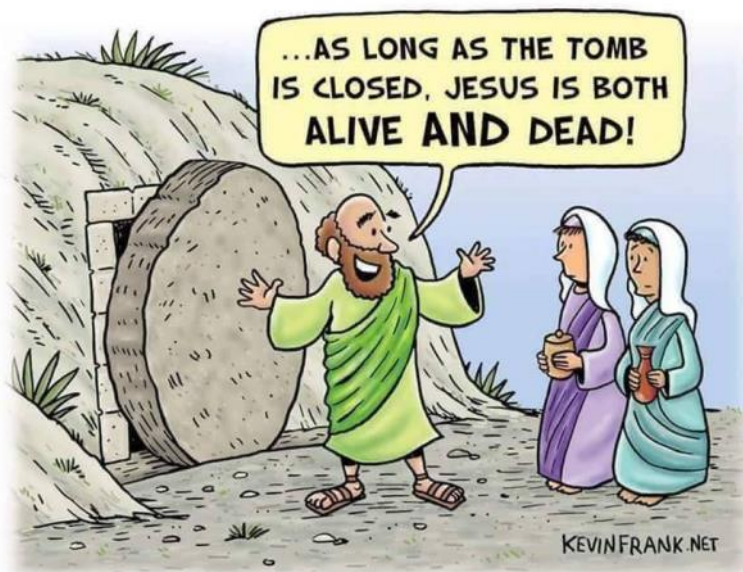
people at the time held such inaccurate views about half of the human race, why trust them when it comes to a resurrection?" Putting that *specific objection* to one side though, might there be a more general problem with the Criterion of Embarrassment? Does an embarrassing detail suggest authenticity? No. Just imagine the absurdity of arguing "Superman must have a basis in fact – why else would his biographers have mentioned Kryptonite?" "Achilles must have been real, because his biographers mentioned his heel!" A hero's weakness performs a useful function in myth, by giving the audience a figure with whom people can empathise. It's an embarrassment to the *hero*, but actually benefits the story (and those promoting the message that the story is believed to encode).

If the idea of a risen Jesus rested "only" on the testimony of women, the account would, by the standards of the time, have been an embarrassment. However, plenty of men (if the Bible is to be believed) would later confirm the accounts of the women. In that context then, the presence of the

women needn't be an embarrassment at all. The claim that the first witnesses to the resurrection were all women is *useful*, pre-empting the claim that Jesus' apostles (who were all male...) stole the body. Like the "Doubting Thomas" story, the accounts of the women sets a useful precedent from a Christian perspective: "If you hear evidence in support of a Christian idea, accept it even if it is weak. It might seem like an Old Wives' Tale, but it'll turn out to be true. Look at the Resurrection. At first it was 'only' attested to by women, but hey, lots of men would later see Jesus, so we know it must *really have happened*, right?"

Many elements in the story of Jesus appear to have been worked up from Old Testament prototypes, and, as scholar Robert M. Price notes, the vigil of the mourning women likely reflects the women's mourning cult of the dying and rising god, long familiar in Israel (Ezekiel 8:14; Zechariah 12:11). The element could have been a bridge to the familiar, not an embarrassing admission.

Robert Stovold



Saint Schrodinger, the forgotten disciple.

**Brighton Secular Humanists  
Living Without Religion.  
Challenging Religious  
Privilege.**



**Programme, 2017**

We meet in the King and Queen  
Pub, Marlborough Place,  
Brighton, on the first Wednesday  
of every month except August,  
7:30pm for an 8pm start

Wednesday 3 May 2017  
Jeremy Rodell, BHA Dialogue  
Officer:

**"The Big Change in Religion &  
Belief - A Humanist Response"**

A look at what's happening in the  
religion and belief landscape in  
Britain, and what a humanist  
response to it might be

Wednesday 7 June 2017  
John Webster: **'Percy Bysshe  
Shelley: A Humanist Out of  
Time'** A presentation followed by  
a film and discussion

**Wednesday 5 July 2017**

Annual General Meeting  
All fully paid up members of  
Brighton Secular Humanists are  
invited to attend this meeting to  
elect the officers and committee  
for the 2017/18 year, and to  
consider our vision for the future  
of the organisation.

**No meeting in August**

6 September 2017  
[Peter Tatchell](#): **"My journey from  
Christianity to Humanism"**.  
Human Rights campaigner Peter  
Tatchell describes his journey.

## White Poppies for Peace

In 1915, Brighton Branch of WILPF (Women's International League for Peace and Freedom) laid a wreath of white poppies at the War Memorial in Old Steine, on the afternoon of Armistice Day, to commemorate conscientious objectors, and all civilian casualties of war. Some WILPF members had been involved in the collective project of remaking of Picasso's painting of *Guernica* hand-stitched banner, and in carrying that banner on demonstrations as a protest against modern Fascism. At the War Memorial, members of that collective joined WILPF by placing individual hand-made poppies on the railings around the War Memorial.

The laying of white poppy wreaths on Armistice Day 2016 was a much bigger affair: The collective who had remade Picasso's *Guernica* had brought the banner along, which attracted interest and admiration. WILPF had invited Brighton Secular Humanists and the Quakers (Society of Friends) to join in a wreath-making workshop, and to see the wreaths laid at the War Memorial with short speeches from each organisation.

Our Chair, Maggie Hall, gave a moving reading of Wilfred Owen's poem *Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori* (also known as *The Old Lie*.) Those of us from BSH were mindful of the work that the late Bill McIlroy, the 'father' of Brighton Secular Humanists, had put into the creation of the Memorial to Conscientious Objectors in Tavistock Square, London.

As a participant in WILPF, BSH and the *Remaking Guernica* Collective, I am proud to have played a small part in these ceremonies, and I hope that the laying of white poppy wreaths and individual white poppies at Brighton's War Memorial on the afternoon of Armistice Day will go from strength to strength.  
—Valerie Mainstone

## Coffee Morning - Camp Quest Fundraiser

There will be a "Bring-and-Buy" Fundraiser for Camp Quest at 11am on Sunday 14 May 2017 at Valerie's (details below).

Members will remember that we have had a speaker from Camp Quest, a project which organises non-religious summer camps for children. For a number of years, your Committee has approved an annual donation to the project, enabling children to attend whose parent could not otherwise afford for them to participate. Unfortunately BSH's income has dropped, while expenses have risen. You are therefore invited to support one of

our occasional coffee mornings as a fundraiser for Camp Quest, to make up the shortfall in our donation. Please bring your gifts for our Bring-and-Buy Stall (donations by cash or cheque also welcome!)

All buses travelling east or west along Western Road will stop at Brunswick Place, near the Starbuck's on the corner (but don't go in there - they don't pay their taxes!) Valerie lives a short walking distance from there—please call her on 01273 729311 or 07765 766960 beforehand, so she knows who is coming and can provide attendees with her full address details.

### Contacts

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**Officiants:** Valerie Mainstone (Tel. 01273 729311, for partnerships, child-naming ceremonies and funerals) and  
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