



GALHA NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GAY & LESBIAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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GALHA condemns Equality and Human Rights Commission intervention

In a recent press release, following an EHRC report, press officer Henry Lawson wrote:

The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) has expressed its bafflement that the Equalities Commission is intervening in the appeal of Lillian Ladele – the Registrar dismissed after refusing to conduct civil partnerships, and of Relationship Counsellor Gary MacFarlane also dismissed for declining to counsel gay couples.

The Equalities Commission has advised that it will be looking to establish a principle of 'reasonable compromise' to accommodate people's religious beliefs.

GALHA Chair Adam Knowles commented: 'It is simply wrong for people to claim that if they are not allowed to discriminate against gay people then they themselves are somehow being discriminated against. However the real implications of the case transcend questions of gay rights or religious rights.'

'The whole issue of "reasonable compromise" will be a highly subjective one. If, for example someone is exempted from providing services to gay couples because of their religious objections, then anyone with a deeply held belief on any subject would on the face of it be entitled to make a similar claim. For example a public sector employee might have a conscientious objection to religiously run schools and refuse to deal with them. Members of the public may also in turn not wish to be served by people who they saw as practising discrimination, further reducing the effectiveness as well as the fairness of the services. The result would be chaotic and divisive as we tried to sort out which objections and compromises were 'reasonable', and which were not.'

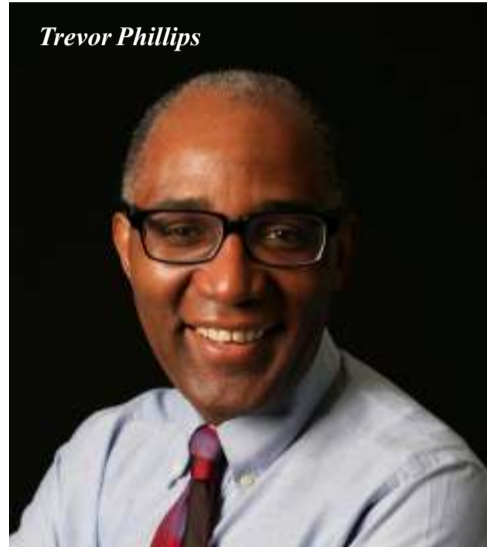
'As Humanists we believe passionately that everyone should have the freedom to express their beliefs, including ones that Humanists or gay people may find objectionable. People also have the right to follow their beliefs in their personal lives so

long as no harm is done to others. However in providing services to the public, you either follow the rules, and treat all people equally, or else essentially you need to look for another job.'

Phillips makes "a serious mistake"

Writing from a National Secular Society perspective, Terry Sanderson, President of the Society and long-term GALHA member, was even more scathing. He asserted that the EHRC and its Chair, Trevor Phillips, had made a serious mistake. He described the report as 'a mish-mash of contradiction'. Further, he pointed out that the cases brought before the European Court of Human Rights were more about 'obdurate bigotry' on the part of the so-called victims of religious discrimination, aided and abetted by the Christian Legal Centre. Rejecting an equally confusing clarification of the EHRC's position, Terry concluded: 'This "clarification" does nothing to allay the fears of those who see their own rights about to be sacrificed on the altar of religious demands.'

Trevor Phillips



And if the European Court upholds this appeal, it will have ramifications for the whole of Europe. Religion will have taken one more step to dominating and dictating our shared culture.'

Editor's Notes

'The Love that Dares to Speak its Name'

This is the title of the poem by James Kirkup that caused such a furore among the religious in the late seventies that a successful prosecution for blasphemy was brought by the infamous Mary Whitehouse and led to the closure of the popular journal of the day, Gay News. The poem depicts a Roman centurion imagining having sex with the dead body of Christ, and its publication was certainly unpalatable for many Christians, for whom its symbolism was less apparent than its raw physicality. It is arguably not a particularly good poem, some of its lines being more banal than shocking:

*the tough lean body
of a man no longer young,
beardless, breathless,
but well hung.*

Gay News and its brave editor were martyred in court, but one outcome of this cause celebre that galvanised LGBT opinion was little noticed at the time: the birth of the Gay Humanist Group, 'born of Mary', as the founders put it. The organisation, later renamed the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, was created to assert LGBT rights and humanist values, and to challenge homophobia, particularly from religious sources. It was a time when even humanists could not be relied upon to be supportive or welcoming. In fact, one local group of the BHA was only persuaded to affiliate by the passionate pleading and threatened resignation of a very prominent member.

Now, thirty-three years later, 'speaking love's name' requires less daring and in Britain LGBT rights have become mainstream and enshrined in equality legislation. Nevertheless – and incredibly – the body which should protect our interests, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, at the moment seems bent on undermining them.

And in many countries around the world injustice and homophobia are entrenched. In our last issue we drew



attention to the plight of LGBT people in Russia. Now we learn that Nikolai Troitsky, a political commentator for the state-run RIA Novosti news agency, recently wrote on his personal blog that he dreamed of inventing a bomb to kill only gay people. 'You have to hope that this kind of abomination will never come to pass in Russia,' he wrote. 'I don't have any time for this kind of "freedom and democracy". There's no tolerance for this, you can't help but think of a powerful bomb that would only kill queers.' He was sacked for the posting, but then enjoyed public acclaim on prime-time television.

In the UK and internationally, there's as much need now for organisations like GALHA as there was in 1978.

A Farewell

This issue of GALHA NEWS will be my last as editor. Looking back over the last fifteen issues, I am struck by how active the Association has been. We have marched, conferred, consulted, news-released, discussed, argued, organised - and lunched with celebrities. Our membership has shown a modest increase, but our footprint on the Internet is much larger. It has resulted in the room-filling audiences at our London meetings, which are a good measure of our effectiveness. Crowds are not surprising when international figures like Leo Igwe and Louis-George Tin are the draw, but 'Heroes of Humanism' did well too.

Like our beginnings and our history, our present success is something to be proud of.

Malcolm Trahearn

LGBT Heroes

An Ottawa museum has created quite a stir by claiming that the famous Canadian First World War poet John McCrea was gay. McCrea wrote *In Flanders Fields* – the most widely published English-language poem of the war – during the 1915 Battle of Ypres in Belgium, following the death of a 22-year-old fellow officer, Lt. Alexis Helmer, from Ottawa, who is said to have been a lover. McCrea wrote his poem in despondency after witnessing Helmer blown to pieces by German artillery the day before. A bachelor, McCrea died of meningitis in 1918 aged 45. With posthumous fame he became the subject of at least five major biographies, none of which imply he was gay, and after he died, several women came forward to say they'd been engaged to him.

We'll never know, of course. There is the merest hint in the poem itself:

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

Nothing to build a case on there. Of more significance is the outrage of some historians at the suggestion that a war hero might have been gay, or the shame that impelled the mother of Wilfred Owen, the War's and possibly the century's greatest poet, to burn sacks of his letters and writings after he was killed in action, and for his brother to publish a sanitized biography. Owen described himself as 'a pacifist with a very seared conscience', but he was decorated for his bravery and pleaded in exquisite and moving poetry for his suffering comrades in arms.

A generation later, cruel anti-gay laws destroyed Alan Turing, whose intellectual brilliance at Bletchley Park led to a significant shortening of the Second World War. Last year an official apology from Gordon Brown made belated reparation.



Denial frequently comes from religious sources. Israeli human rights activist and Knesset member, Yael Dayan, daughter of the general, once made a passionate speech on the Knesset floor, on the need for gay rights, while quoting from the Biblical hero David's words on Jonathan: 'very pleasant hast thou been unto me; wonderful was thy love to me, passing the love of women' (2 Samuel, 1:26). The religious right are her biggest problem. Ms Dayan says her greatest joy was watching 'the religious' splutter into their beards when she brought gays and lesbians to the Knesset to promote homosexual rights. 'The religious feel very deeply that for a man to sleep with another man is as bad as sleeping with an animal. They say it deserves the death penalty.'

In the US, after a long wrangle, gays and lesbians in the military need no longer hide their sexuality. President Barack Obama has announced the US military's ban on gays will end on 20th September, in a major victory for rights advocates who overcame concerns about enacting the change during wartime. The 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' law is dead. That divisive policy over the years has led to the expulsion of more than 13,000 gays and lesbians who failed to keep their sexual orientation secret.

In the UK, LGBT people in the military have to thank the four British ex-service personnel who brought a specific case before the European Court of Human Rights – and won. The ruling said that banning gays from openly serving in the military was a violation of their right to privacy under the European Convention on Human Rights.



Join GALHA's Facebook Group

Do you have a Facebook account? If so, you may be pleased to know that GALHA now has its own virtual community online. Login to Facebook at www.facebook.com and search for "GALHA".

BHA and GALHA at Gay Pride

This item, written by new committee member **Richard Unwin**, has appeared in the newsletter of the British Humanist Association (BHA)

This year has again seen the BHA working in conjunction with GALHA - The Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association - on the running of stalls at Gay Pride festivals around the country. Successful events have already taken place in Birmingham and London, with more planned for Nottingham, Brighton, Manchester, and Cardiff later in the year. Paul Allen, co-ordinator of the joint stalls said: 'The volunteers give out GALHA, BHA, and local Humanist information and make many one to one quality contacts, investing time to offer Humanist, rationalist and secular perspectives. We have been conveying what Humanism means to us and backing this view up with written information.'

'There are various reasons for people visiting our stalls. Some are just after the freebie items like pens and postcards, nothing more. There are those who can't look at you and just "sneak" a leaflet for bedtime reading. There are many teenagers with harrowing stories of religious homophobia to

tell, as well as parents seeking information for their own children. There are those who have been to a non-religious funeral and want to ensure that they can have one for themselves. What's striking is the number of times that I've heard volunteers set out the basics of Humanism, only for the reply to be "Oh... I guess I'm a Humanist then!"'

Adam Knowles, the current chair of GALHA said: 'For me as a 'visitor' to London Pride, as well as volunteering on the day, it was great to meet the guys from the other stalls such as the Albert Kennedy Trust and the organisers of Bi-Con, as well as the BHA, Hackney Council, and a brief encounter with Ken Livingstone. It all adds up to seeing GALHA as part of a broader system of support and activity carried out by and for LGBT people. Beyond the bright floats and alcohol, it is encouraging to see this important stuff in action and very much alive and well.'

Volunteers to run the stalls are always needed. Please e-mail secretary@galha.org



Former London Mayor, Ken Livingstone drops by at the GALHA stall.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

All meetings will now be held with disabled access on the ground floor of Conway Hall.

Visit to Down House, home of Charles Darwin **Sunday, September 4, 2011, 11:00 AM**

This is a joint outing with friends from the Kent and Medway Humanist Association (KAMHA).

With its unique place in the history of science, Down House was the home of Charles Darwin for forty years. Visitors can see the study where Darwin wrote 'On the Origin of Species', still as it was when he worked here, and stroll through the extensive gardens. Details available from www.meetup.com/KAMHAGroup/events/17416025/

The film 'Agora', introduced by Terry Sanderson, **President of the National Secular Society.** **Friday 09th September 2011, 7:30pm in the** **Brockway Room, Conway Hall**

GALHA is delighted to present this Spanish film as part of the Secular Europe Campaign.

The film was critically acclaimed, yet banned from many cinemas in the US for its atheistic content. Its lead actress, Rachel Weisz, gives an outstanding performance as 'a pioneer of modern astronomy and martyr to rational thought' in fourth century Alexandria, the era in which the famous library was destroyed. The story uses historical fiction to highlight the relationship between religion and science amidst the decline of Greco-Roman polytheism and the Christianisation of the Roman Empire.

After the film there will be time for formal and informal discussion and wine.

PLEASE ARRIVE PROMPTLY. Screening will end at about 9.45 and the event at 10.30.

Annual General Meeting

Saturday 1st October 2-6pm

Conway Hall. Red Lion Square. Holborn.

During the afternoon there will be a performance of **Vinyl Closet 2**, a musical entertainment by Ted Brown and Brett Lock investigating LGBT themes in popular music - a sequel to their popular first show hosted by GALHA last year.

Annual Fundraising Lunch 2011

Saturday 12th November, 12.30pm (drinks) for 1.00pm (lunch)

Every year GALHA holds a lunch to thank its supporters, celebrate our progress and raise funds toward the next year's activity. Like all GALHA's events this is open to the public: everyone is welcome. Previous guests have included Stephen Fry and Angela Eagle (MP). Last year we welcomed the Australian singer Darren Hayes in a very successful event.

The special guest: We are currently confirming arrangements with our special guest for this year.

The venue: This year we return to Chez Gérard, Southbank, which we last visited for the lunch a few years ago with Russian LGBT activist Nikolay Alexeyev. The restaurant brings a little bit of Paris to London with the brasserie style interior complementing the food and providing a lively atmosphere. The restaurant is situated near the bustling Southbank, the London Eye, BFI IMAX cinema and Royal Festival Hall.

More information: <http://www.chezgerard.co.uk/location/southbank#details>



A 'Christian Country'? As the Law Stands...

From Bill McIlroy, veteran secular campaigner and GALHA member

I have noticed of late that the old 'England is a Christian country' chestnut is still being used to justify religious privilege and public funding of the faith. With around thirty per cent of the population non-Christian or, better still, having no religious faith, the assertion is obviously rooted in ignorance or wishful thinking.

In fact the 'Christian country' claim was quashed by a House of Lords ruling in the Bowman case (1917). Charles Bowman, a wealthy supporter of the secularist movement, left a substantial sum of money to the Secular Society Limited. The bequest was challenged by a relative. The case dragged through the courts, eventually being heard by the Lords of Appeal. The appellant's case rested on the 'Christian country' myth. During their deliberations, Lord Sumner informed their Lordships: 'The phrase "Christianity is part of the law of England" is really not law. It is rhetoric.' The majority agreed and decided in favour of the Secular Society Limited.

Commenting on the judgment, the Church Times declared: 'England is no longer, as it has ceased to be in fact, a Christian country.'

Rhetorically inclined Christians still ignore that important legal decision. But social developments confirm the law Lords ruling and what the Church Times sorrowfully admitted nearly a hundred years ago.

The case was referred to earlier this year by judges who threw out the action brought against Derby Council by the Christian foster carers who were perceived by social workers to be negative when asked how they would deal with questions about



Bill McIlroy

homosexuality or how they would deal with a homosexual child. The couple had tried Bill's old chestnut.

The judges declared:

'One of the paradoxes of our lives is that we live in a society which has at one and the same time become both increasingly secular but also increasingly diverse in religious affiliation.

'We sit as secular judges serving a multi-cultural community of many faiths. We are sworn (we quote the judicial oath) to "do right to all manner of people after the laws and usages of this realm, without fear or favour, affection or ill will." But the laws and usages of the realm do not include Christianity, in whatever form. The aphorism that "Christianity is part of the common law of England" is mere rhetoric; at least since the decision of the House of Lords in Bowman v Secular Society Limited [1917] AC 406 it has been impossible to contend that it is law.' Ed.