



# GALHA NEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE GAY & LESBIAN HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

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## A Journey to GALHA, via Australia and Japan

By Tyrone Curtis, GALHA's new Membership Secretary

Religion never had much of a chance with me. Growing up in fairly irreligious Australia, the only time religion played much of a role in my life (other than the purely cultural celebrations of Easter and Christmas) was when Mum would make us hide so that the Jehovah's Witnesses wouldn't know we were home. By the time I'd completed a science degree in 2006, the only remnants of the minimal religious education I'd been given at school were slight beliefs in some vague concept of God and heaven.

My "spiritual awakesin" came in early 2008, a year into my 18-month stay in Tokyo, when I read Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*. By the time I'd finished it, what little belief in God I'd had was now gone. After some more reading (I highly recommend Christopher Hitchens' *The Portable Atheist* for a large selection of agnostic/atheist/humanist writings), I developed a strong desire to campaign for an end to the influence of religion in society, especially after seeing George W. Bush (and more locally for me, John Howard) use religion as an excuse to oppose gay rights.

When I moved to London in October 2008, I was itching to meet like-minded people and to get involved in some way in the



campaign for a secular society. Despite initially not really knowing what a humanist was, I attended a couple of GALHA events, and soon realised I pretty much ticked off all the humanist boxes, and now proudly wear the label.

As someone fairly new to the humanist fold, the GALHA monthly events are not only informative (and always entertaining!), but also provide a way of meeting others of my way of thinking. More importantly, with membership of GALHA I feel I'm supporting two causes I feel very passionately about - LGBTI rights and the campaign for a truly secular society.



## Stephen Fry receives GALHA award

The GALHA Lunch in November 2009 was a spectacular success. Over 100 members and friends gathered at Brown's Bar and Brasserie in St Martin's Lane, Covent Garden, with guest of honour, Stephen Fry, who received GALHA's annual award for services to Humanism and LGBT rights.

Introducing the guest, Andrew Copson, Chair of GALHA said: "Both as a public figure and in his professional career as an actor, writer, comedian and broadcaster, Stephen has exemplified the best of humanism. His thirst for knowledge backed by intellectual rigour, laced with wit, erudition, moral seriousness, compassion and a willingness to go against the grain if he has to, are all qualities that humanists prize and promote."

Stephen was clearly genuinely pleased and touched. He accepted "with as much humility as I can muster, which frankly isn't much at all."

In his reply Stephen took the example of E. M. Forster and pointed out that the great man had done rather more than "provide Messrs Merchant and Ivory with a range of screenplay opportunities". Apart from his reputation as a novelist, Forster was in some ways the exemplar of humanism. In particular, Stephen quoted his famous dictum that "if I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country" as encapsulating the vital role of friendship and fellowship that lies at the heart of humanist ideals. He stressed too that he saw humanism as a positive set of beliefs, not merely a denial of religion.

He referred also to Oscar Wilde. Of course, for many people familiar with his memorable film interpretation, Stephen Fry almost is Oscar Wilde. His own use of wit and irony recall Wilde too. He remembered being in Manhattan and noting how the Empire State Building only really looked its full size once you move away from it. Similarly with

Wilde, we were only now getting a full measure of the man.

Less honoured in the Fry pantheon was Ms Ann Widdecombe, who, together with Archbishop Onaiyekan of Nigeria, had recently combined bad luck and poor judgement in taking on Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens in open debate, proposing the motion that "The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world." The resulting rout for the Church could be attributed in part to Stephen's passionate objections to the Church's stance on everything from AIDS prevention to gay rights.

Our guest spent a good few hours with us, chatting and posing for photographs - and barely touching his phone in response to about one million Twitter followers that day. He had announced: "Nice people of GALHA are giving me an award at a lunch today. I shall wear a red woollen tie with pleasant spots on it, just because." And so he did.

We are grateful for Stephen's support of the event and of GALHA and are proud to announce that he has consented to become a vice-president.



Lunch Photos by Chris Bland

## GALHA NEEDS YOU!

2009 has been a brilliant year for GALHA with record-breaking meetings, growing membership, stalls at eight Prides, powerful campaigning and scintillating 30th Anniversary events.

But none of this happens by itself. We need more members with energy, skills and ideas to make 2010 even better.

You might like to join the committee or perhaps simply do something that inspires

you - recruiting new members, speaking for GALHA, fundraising, web development, organising events... or things we haven't thought of.

Whatever your skills, age, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disabilities, location or available time, there's a role for you!

For more information, please contact David Christmas, secretary@galha.org, 0844 800 3067.

## Editor's Notes

In this issue of GALHA NEWS we look forward to the New Year - with a backward glance at one of the most successful events of 2009, the Lunch. There could be no clearer indication of GALHA's standing than that someone of Stephen Fry's prominence should choose to be associated with us as our guest, and now Vice-President. For 2010 and beyond, Mike Rickwood writes about the Action Plan, which commits the Association to a structured approach to realising its aims of promoting humanism and LGBT rights.

We are effective already but there can be no resting on laurels - and we want help on the committee if we are to do all we intend. We already needed another member, but following Andrew Copson's resignation upon his promotion to his new post as Chief Executive of the BHA, on which we heartily congratulate him, we shall now have two vacancies. So if you think you can help please get in touch with the Secretary, David Christmas.

We also remind ourselves this New Year that GALHA is an international organisation with members in many countries: in Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Malta, Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan and the US. Our new membership secretary, Tyrone Curtis, has

recently arrived from Australia, via Japan, and writes of the appeal GALHA has for him. And one of our members in France has sent us some of his poetry, an example of which we publish below. It's about hiding one's sexual identity. Fortunately in the West we have to do that less these days.

Not so in Islamic countries, where homosexuality remains a cultural taboo, subject to often savage legal penalties. It is also the case in former colonies, the legal systems of which were shaped by the prejudices of their masters. There, LGBT rights may hardly exist. As we go to press, we await with foreboding the outcome of the vote on the Anti-homosexual Bill before the Ugandan parliament, a measure which has the enthusiastic support of the Anglican Church in Uganda and various US evangelical interests. The bill's provisions are horrific, prescribing lengthy prison sentences and even the death penalty in some cases. Belatedly, international outrage has shamed condemnation of the proposed legislation from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, the latter Ugandan himself. GALHA members have supported protests and a strongly worded letter has been sent to the Ugandan ambassador.

Malcolm Trahearn

 **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](http://www.facebook.com) and search for "GALHA".

# GALHA PUBLIC EVENTS 2010

All meetings will now be held with disabled access on the ground floor of Conway Hall. Except for the March meeting, which will take place in the Bertrand Russell Room, meetings will now be held in the Brockway Room. Please also note that the March meeting is on a Wednesday. (March 10th).

## FRIDAY 8TH JANUARY. 7.30PM. GALHA ANNUAL FILM EVENT: THE POWER OF HARMONY.

Introduced by Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society. Through the personal experiences of a gay men's chorus, *The Power of Harmony*, set in the US Bible Belt, explores controversial issues of the day: coming out, gay marriage, religious views on homosexuality and gay adoption. Dallas Morning News: "A lovingly crafted and deeply moving documentary".

## FRIDAY 12TH FEBRUARY. 7.30PM. THE VINYL CLOSET. A SPECIAL LGBT HISTORY MONTH EVENT.

An exploration of gay and lesbian themes in popular music, from early blues, through musicals, to rock and roll ... with songs and chat, presented by Gay Liberation Front veteran, Ted Brown, and LGBT Activist, Brett Lock.

## WEDNESDAY 10TH MARCH. 7.30PM. FAMILY AFFAIR. A TALK BY DR MATT COOK, SENIOR LECTURER IN HISTORY AND GENDER STUDIES, BIRKBECK, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON.

Drawing on new research, Dr Cook looks back at the past century to consider the relationship between homosexuality and family life-and more particularly-parenting.

## FRIDAY 9TH APRIL. 7.30P.M. PLAY: CAPTAIN STORMFIELD'S VISIT TO HEAVEN.

Fire and Brimstone Productions marks the 100th Anniversary of Mark Twain's Death, with a play based on one of his many satirical writings on religion. "Still blasphemous after all these years." -Bill Maher, "Politically Incorrect".

## FRIDAY 14TH MAY. 7.30P.M. SPECIAL IDAHO MEETING. BEWITCHED IN NIGERIA: LGBT Rights, Religion and Superstition.

Marking the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, we warmly welcome Leo Igwe, the West Africa representative of IHEU and the Director of Nigeria's "Centre for Inquiry", to talk about his experiences of fighting for human rights in Nigeria, including his recent confrontation with witchcraft. Over the next two years IDAHO will campaign to form an international alliance to combat homophobia and transphobic violence based on religious beliefs. Other events over the IDAHO weekend will be organised with our kindred societies. (Details on [www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org) as soon as they are confirmed).

## FRIDAY 11TH JUNE. 7.30PM. CULT STATUS?

Sarah Harvey, Research Officer of "Inform" talks about new Christian movements and cults and their attitudes to LGBT Rights.

## FRIDAY JULY 9TH. 7.30PM THE BATTLE FOR DOVER SOUL.

A play by Fire and Brimstone Production based on the 2005 court challenge (Kitzmiller v Dover Area School Board), in the United States federal courts against a public school district that required the presentation of intelligent design as an alternative to evolution as an "explanation of the origin of life".

## AUGUST

NO MEETING.

## SEPTEMBER-GALHA WEEKEND, BRIGHTON.

(Details to follow).

## FRIDAY 8TH OCTOBER. 7.30PM. FREE THOUGHT AND CENSORSHIP. A TALK BY JULIAN BAGGINI, EDITOR OF THE PHILOSOPHERS MAGAZINE.

November and December meetings to be confirmed.

## ANDREW COPSON STEPS DOWN - AND UP

After fronting their work in education for four years, Andrew Copson has been appointed the BHA's new Chief Executive, succeeding at interview against a record number of applicants. We warmly congratulate him.

Andrew's appointment has unfortunately led to his resignation from the GALHA committee, where his considerable skills have been of enormous benefit to the Association. The committee will miss his energy, his professionalism and his good humour. He goes with our sincere thanks.

In a message to GALHA Andrew said: 'I have enjoyed the years I have spent on the GALHA committee and my time as GALHA chair tremendously. Although it has not always been an easy ride, I want to thank all the members of GALHA who have so

stalwartly supported our vital work and brought such warmth and bonhomie to all the events I have been lucky to attend. I also want to thank all the GALHA members who have got in touch to wish me luck as Chief Executive of the BHA. In that role I look forward to working closely with GALHA's new chair, who will have the support of a strong and dedicated committee to take the Association forward to further success.



## GALHA'S ACTION PLAN

By GALHA's Treasurer, Mike Rickwood

On the first of January this year, GALHA started to implement its first ever Action Plan. The plan, which was discussed with members at our Weekend Conference in Newcastle last autumn, is intended to ensure that we focus all our efforts and resources on achieving our two key objectives:

- ⊙ advancing humanism especially, but not exclusively, in the LGBT community; and
- ⊙ promoting equality for the LGBT community and people with non-religious beliefs

In practice this means our existing work in organising public events and securing media coverage on humanist and LGBT issues as well as appearing at Pride events in various parts of the country will continue.

But it also means finding new ways and developing new materials to get our unique combination of messages across to our particular target audiences and, of course, to the public as a whole.

These will include:

- ⊙ developing new messages to relate humanism to the issues that concern people most in the early 21st century UK;
- ⊙ using those messages in new leaflets for stalls at Pride and other events, on our own website and other web-based facilities, and in briefing notes for GALHA representatives undertaking speaking engagements, writing to the press, and appearing on radio and TV;
- ⊙ putting greater effort into defending human rights, particularly of those suffering religious persecution because of their sexuality; and
- ⊙ securing a greater presence, including invitations to speak, at external events as well as more exposure in the media.

So there'll be projects to:

- ⊙ write, design and produce new literature;
- ⊙ develop our use of the internet; and
- ⊙ train and brief members to speak at external meetings and represent us publicly in other ways, and then get them engagements;

In addition, we will be appointing a Public Affairs Officer to develop and sustain relations with officials in public bodies who can help us achieve our objectives. We also intend to improve our links with kindred organisations in this country and internationally to help meet our human rights objectives.

One of the many imaginative suggestions put forward in Newcastle was that we should work with like-minded bodies to organise public debates about more philosophical issues of current concern. As a result we have already agreed to co-sponsor and participate in a symposium on Religion, Morality and the Law to be held later this year. Watch this space!

To achieve all this we need more money and helpers, partly by supplementing the existing committee but also focusing upon recruitment and fundraising. We also need to aim for a greater diversity of membership.

We'll be reporting progress to members at the 2010 Weekend Conference in September and that will be an opportunity to adapt the plan in the light of experience. But we're also keen to involve and get feedback from members who, for whatever reason, can't be at the conference. Whether or not you can offer us practical help, we'd also welcome your ideas about how to deliver this programme and how we should develop it. Send them to David Christmas, Secretary by email or at 1 Gower Street, LONDON, WC1E 6HD.



## A member living abroad sends GALHA NEWS a poem ...

For some years Alan worked as an English-language teacher for the British Council Bahrain, where he was also a newsreader for the national TV and radio. During his time in the country, he also helped to set up a branch of the Samaritans, known overseas as Befrienders International. He is now retired and happily living in Royan, France, having taught at a language school running courses for French business people.

## THE PIN-UP

I'd seen him play on several occasions; watching him hug his mates when goals were scored - saw him leave the field to soap and shower away from prying eyes.

Had he been Kylie, or someone like her, he'd have been up there on the wall to inspire, admire, incite desire.

The team itself, of course, was there with Westlife and a poster of Sri Lanka that I particularly liked.

But he himself was pinned down in the pages of a ragged book and only saw the light of day at night when the house was quiet and I was sure to be alone.

Alan Gates  
Royan, France