

## Monthly Bulletin — April 2026

### RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

#### *Fadia Faqir at the Secular Salon*

The Secular Salon recently welcomed Fadia Faqir for a fascinating talk reflecting on her life, writing, and the importance of freedom in intellectual and creative work.

She spoke about her early education, where she learned to question authority and navigate patriarchal constraints, and her journey to the UK on a scholarship—granted on the condition that she travel with her brother. Arriving from Amman, she recalled the striking contrast of the British landscape -its greenness-and her formative experiences at university where, she noted, ‘Marxists make great teachers.’

Faqir read from her novel *Willow Trees Don't Weep*, which follows a journey from Jordan to Durham. Her vivid descriptions of Durham resonated with the audience, who recognised familiar settings.

A key theme of the talk was that ‘freedom is a precondition of reading and writing,’ a principle she illustrated through her own experiences of being unable to write when she lacked freedom.

The event concluded with a lively and engaging discussion, reflecting the strong connection between speaker and audience.



#### *In this month's Bulletin:*

- There has been no ‘quiet revival’ of Christianity in Britain
- US troops were told war on Iran was ‘all part of God’s divine plan’,
- Can a sceptic believe in God?

## *A Sunday Breakfast celebration.*

Our March Sunday breakfast will be remembered as an extra special one. Along with the usual convivial get together, with much chatting and laughing, came an announcement from one of our regular 'breakfasters' Anne Baxter and her friend Brian Thompson that they had become engaged. As it was a bit early for champagne, cups of tea and coffee were raised in a toast to the couple.



Congratulations Anne and Brian.

The next Sunday Breakfast will be on May 10<sup>th</sup>.

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## **Book Club**

Jan Mole

**F**ive members discussed *Tomb of Sand* by Geetawali Shree. For some of us, and for a variety of reasons, it had not been possible to complete the 748-page book.



Part One was long and focused on the grief and subsequent behaviour of the elderly mother of the family. The style and lack of narrative was the reason some of us stopped reading although Alice and Glen did finish and were able to provide an overall good review of the book which I think, has encouraged the others to persevere and finish it.

Both agreed that it took a while to get into the story which is more developed in Part Two when the main protagonist, develops a friendship with Rosie that introduces her to a wider circle of friends, beyond her immediate family who themselves are having difficulty in understanding her behaviour.

There are elements of magic realism, and some parts are very drawn out such as detailed descriptions of saris. But there is also humour and the translation plays upon words which become quite poetic.

Part Three also develops a theme of contrast between Pakistan and India, particularly during the period of partition, and between the societies themselves.

It was agreed that the book was worth a second chance with more time for reflection on the writing.

The book we have chosen to read during April and May is by Fiona Hill called 'There is nothing for you here'. Described as a memoir for readers interested contemporary political science offering personal and historical perspectives and for those seeking a deeper understanding of socio-economic trends affecting the US and the world.

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## NEH NEWS Forthcoming meetings

### *Newcastle Meet-up and Social: Books I would recommend/My favourite books*

Join us for an engaging, and interesting evening where NEH trustees and members will show, talk about and recommend their favourite books.

Attendees, should you choose, will have the opportunity to contribute and talk about books you would recommend. Books do not have to be specifically Humanist but could be just something you believe is worthwhile or enjoyable to read.

NEH member John Sargent will illustrate his thoughts with a full-size facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels which everyone will be free to examine and enjoy.



Our resident troubadour, Philip Nathan, will also regale us with one or two Humanist songs from his recent album of Humanist music.

FREE and open to all – everyone is welcome. Refreshments provided. Donations are welcome to help cover costs.

We look forward to seeing you there for what promises to be a pleasant and social evening.

**When:** Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> April 7:00pm (Doors open 6:45pm)

**Where:** Newcastle Literary and Philosophical Society Building, 23 Westgate Road, Newcastle, NE1 1SE

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### *Secular Salon: Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, a talk by Simon Webb*

Simon will be speaking about Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, the remarkable Black British composer who rose to international fame in the late nineteenth century before falling into relative neglect, and whose work has more recently been rediscovered and celebrated. His story offers a fascinating insight into music, race, and cultural history in Victorian Britain



**When?** Sunday 19th April 2–4pm

**Where?** Merryoaks Community Hall, Park House Road, Durham DH1 3QF.

The event is free, and refreshments will be provided; donations to cover costs are welcome.

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### *Ray Wood – Humanist pioneer*

With sadness, we announce the death of Ray Wood on March 11th aged 79. Ray was a Humanist Celebrant for twenty-five years, conducting thousands of funerals as well as weddings and baby-namings.

He was a pioneer in the field, leading the development of Humanist funerals, initially on behalf of The British Humanist Association (now Humanists UK). When Ray began, Humanist ceremonies were barely known, while now, they



are now common practice. The organisation Ray founded – known today as Tyne Wear Celebrants - conducts over 2,500 ceremonies a year in our region.

In the past, he was an active member of North East Humanists.

Joy for Ray was a walk in the Lake District, a pint of real ale, and above all his family. Our thoughts are with his wife Margaret, his children and grandchildren.

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## HUMANISTS UK NEWS

*There has been no ‘quiet revival’ of Christianity in Britain.*

The Bible Society has retracted its claims based on a faulty and unreliable YouGov survey. For nearly a year, Humanists UK has called on them to do so and provided factual evidence that shows the decline of Christianity in the UK amongst all age groups.



Last year, headlines across the UK, and beyond, claimed that Britain was experiencing a ‘spiritual revival’, driven especially by younger people. Those claims were based on just a single piece of polling which *appeared* to show a sharp rise in churchgoing. The claims were then repeated widely and for the large part uncritically, shaping public debate and even informing decision making.

From the outset, we were clear that this sensational headline didn’t stand up. The findings were not just surprising; they were wildly out of step with every other reliable source of data we’d seen.

To read the full report, click [here](#)

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HUK has launched a brand-new animation explaining what secularism is and why it matters in an increasingly diverse society.

Made for schools but accessible to everyone, the animation introduces secularism in clear terms as a practical way of organising society that people with different worldviews can share. It explains that supporters of secularism – including humanists – believe everyone should be free to hold their own beliefs and be treated equally, whatever their identity or worldview. No belief should be privileged in public institutions, and the state should remain impartial so that everyone can meet on equal terms.

To watch the film, click [here](#)

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## OTHER NEWS

*US troops were told war on Iran was ‘all part of God’s divine plan’, watchdog alleges*

US military commanders have been invoking extremist Christian rhetoric about biblical ‘end times’ to justify involvement in the Iran war to troops, according to complaints made to a watchdog group.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) says it has received more than 200 complaints from service members across all branches of the armed forces, including the marines, air force and space force.

One complainant, identified as a non-commissioned officer (NCO) in a unit that could be deployed 'at any moment to join' operations against Iran, told MRFF in a complaint viewed by the Guardian that their commander had 'urged us to tell our troops that this was "all part of God's divine plan" and he specifically referenced numerous citations out of the Book of Revelation referring to Armageddon and the imminent return of Jesus Christ'.

'He said that "President Trump has been anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth"', the NCO added.

To read more, click [here](#)

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### *Praying for Armageddon*

*Praying for Armageddon* observes American believers as they prepare for what they call the



Holy War and exposes the powerful megachurch pastors who call for the 'final battle' that they believe will trigger the Second Coming of Christ. Completed before the current crises in Israel, Gaza and the Middle East, it also unveils how politicians driven by faith embrace the State of Israel as the key to their prophetic vision for the end of days.

To view the documentary, click [here](#)

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### *UK rare in its lack of religious majority*

THE UK is one of only seven countries in which no religious group makes up the majority of the population, a new study has found.

The study by the US-based Prew Research Centre's Global Religious Futures project measured, in 201 countries and territories, how evenly seven religious categories — Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, other religions, and the unaffiliated — were represented.

Only one European country is among the ten most religiously diverse: France, whose population is largely Christian (46 per cent) and religiously unaffiliated (43 per cent), but with a sizeable (nine per cent) Muslim minority. France, as well as the UK, is among the seven in which no religion holds a majority. The others are South Korea, Australia, Singapore, Mauritius and Ivory Coast, as well as the UK.

The most religiously diverse countries are in the Asia-Pacific area, with Singapore at the top, with the most even spread of faith groups, with the exception of Suriname, in South America, which comes second.

In UK census data from 2021, Christians account for less than half the population of England and Wales — only 46 per cent said they were Christian, down from 72 per cent in 2001. Thirty-

seven per cent said that they had no religion, the second largest group in the UK. Other faith groups had very small populations. Overall, the UK ranks 12th in the index of religious diversity.

To read more, click [here](#)

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### *Fewer Britons giving to charity, study says, with donations down by £1.4bn*

Britain is rapidly losing the charity habit, with public donations to good causes plummeting by more than £1.4bn last year and millions of people saying they can no longer afford – or do not want – to give, according to an analysis.

The Charities Aid Foundation (Caf) said in its annual report that, while the British remained generous at heart, society was witnessing a big transformation in attitudes towards charitable giving. Just half of people gave to charity in 2025, down from 61% a decade earlier.

Charity giving was no longer a ‘deeply embedded cultural norm’ amid rising living cost pressures, and a more sceptical society, said the Caf managing director, Mark Greer: ‘Charities can no longer depend solely on habitual generosity or goodwill from the public,’ he said.

The consequences have been felt across the voluntary sector in recent months, with even some of the UKs biggest charities – including MacMillan Cancer Support, Samaritans and Oxfam – making big cuts to staff and budgets.

To read more, click [here](#)

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## **Death and dying**

### *Scottish parliament votes against legalising assisted dying*

The Scottish parliament has voted against legalising assisted dying after critics and religious groups led a concerted campaign to block the measures.

MSPs voted 69 to 57 to reject the proposals in a late-night vote – a larger margin than expected, despite a series of last-minute amendments designed to placate critics of the private member’s bill.

The bill’s defeat followed four days of intensive debate at Holyrood last week about whether disabled and infirm people were properly protected from coercion. In May last year, Holyrood had voted to allow the bill to go forward for scrutiny by 70 votes to 56.

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### *More than 100 Labour MPs call on PM to stop assisted dying bill being blocked*

More than 100 Labour MPs have called on Keir Starmer to stop the House of Lords from blocking the assisted dying bill and give it more time to return to the Commons, with the legislation now certain to fall owing to lack of time.

The private member's bill, sponsored by Labour's Kim Leadbeater, will fall when the parliamentary session comes to an end in May because peers have used multiple amendments and lengthy debates to prevent it from being put to a vote.

A number of ministerial aides – parliamentary private secretaries – are also believed to have written to the prime minister separately. Ministers have told the Guardian they have also made the case to Starmer, saying it would be a moment to show some leadership on an issue popular with the public as well as a way to demonstrate he will not allow the Lords to block the will of the elected House of Commons.

Opponents of the bill, who have submitted more than 1,200 amendments, say they are not deliberately filibustering and that it is unfit for purpose. In a private letter to Starmer, the Labour MPs wrote that he should ensure it returns to the Commons in the next session after the king's speech.

If it passes the Commons again, it would mean supporters could use the Parliament Act to bypass any further blocking by the Lords. It would be the first time the 1911 Parliament Act has been invoked for a private member's bill.

To read more, click [here](#)

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### *Scotland becomes first UK country to legalise water cremations*

Scotland has become the first part of the UK to legalise hydrolysis, an environmentally friendly alternative to cremation or burial, reflecting increasing demand for more sustainable funeral arrangements.

Also known as water cremation or aquamation, the process is already available in many parts of the world, and regulations approved by the Scottish parliament on Monday mark the most significant change to funeral law since cremation was introduced in 1902.

To read more, click [here](#)

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### *Graves in England and Wales could be reused after 100 years*

Graves more than 100 years old could be reused across England and Wales under Law Commission proposals that also include the reopening of some burial grounds closed under Victorian-era legislation.

The changes would create a national framework for the first time, aiming to reduce pressure on burial space and modernise a system largely unchanged for more than 170 years.

'Our proposals would modernise and simplify burial and cremation law in England and Wales, and provide clearer, more consistent safeguards for bereaved families and friends,' said Prof Lisa Webley, the law commissioner for property, family and trust law.

Grave reuse is limited to some London cemeteries and Church of England burial grounds. Under the proposals, this could be extended more widely, but only after local consultation and government approval.

To read more, click [here](#)

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*Janis Chan has stage four cancer – there will be no cure, but death isn't necessarily imminent: she describes how it feels to live in the 'long middle'.*

Here's an excerpt from her account, published in The Guardian:

I have always been fascinated by how we 'wear' time. Most of us live by chronos: the quantitative time of the clock, the five-year plan and the corporate calendar. It is a predator that treats every passing second as a theft. But the long middle demands migration towards kairos: a qualitative time. Kairos is not measured by the accumulation of minutes, but by the 'rightness' of a moment, it is a frequency shift: moving from a life lived for the next milestone to one lived for the morning light of the kitchen table or the depth of a single conversation. In this state, time is no longer a resource to be spent, but a medium in which to dwell.

To read the full piece, click [here](#)

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## Kindness to strangers

*Friendships, fishing and community clean-ups: the unseen kindness of life on the Bibby Stockholm barge*

The Bibby Stockholm barge, which was moored off Portland, Dorset to accommodate asylum seekers, attracted many negative headlines – from evacuation after the discovery of legionella bacteria, to the suicide of Albanian asylum seeker Leonard Farruku and angry far-right protests.

But a new exhibition reveals a less reported side of life on the barge, where enduring connections between asylum seekers and members of the local community were forged and continue long after the last group of asylum seekers left the vessel in November 2024.

'Bibby Boys', a photographic exhibition, documents experiences of the men who lived on the former asylum seeker vessel.

The barge divided the local community, and far-right activists from groups such as Patriotic Alternative arrived from other parts of the country to try to amplify discord. Facing the asylum seekers were many local residents who came with welcome packs and flowers for the newly arrived men. They formed Portland Global Friendship Group (PGFG) and changed Portland's slogan 'Keeping Portland Weird' to 'Keeping Portland Kind'.

To read more, click [here](#)

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## *Why some people still believe that aliens shaped ancient civilisations*

Could ancient humans really have built the pyramids without extraterrestrial help? Or do such questions reveal more about modern anxieties than the past itself?

The idea that aliens assisted the builders of ancient monuments was promoted by the Swiss author Erich von Däniken in his bestselling book Chariot of the Gods – published in 1968. Von Däniken died in January 2026, but his vision of ancient astronauts still captivates millions.

The author had pointed to ancient structures such as the pyramids, along with enigmatic ancient artefacts, as supposed evidence that beings from beyond Earth shaped the civilisations of the past.



Though these ideas have been repeatedly debunked, television shows such as the History Channel's Ancient Aliens continue to air similar narratives.

The reason some people feel able to believe in completely unfounded theories relates to the nature of archaeology itself. The discipline works with fragmentary evidence, layered deposits, and interpretations that rarely yield simple conclusions. Sites such as Giza in Egypt, Gobekli Tepe (a Neolithic settlement in modern Turkey known for its monumental pillars decorated with sculptural reliefs), and Troy – also in Turkey – are not unsolved enigmas but the result of decades of systematic excavation and analysis.

To read more, click [here](#)

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## Evolution

### Archaea

Misha Glenny and guests discuss one of the most remarkable scientific discoveries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the archaea microorganisms. In the 1970s the American microbiologist Carl Woese (1928 – 2012) realised that the tiny bacteria-sized organisms he was studying were not actually bacteria but from an entirely different branch of the tree of life. It became clear that archaea, as he named them, shares aspects of the cells in all plants and animals even if they often live in places where other life struggles including salty lakes, acidic pools, under the seabed and in the gut. While aspects of what followed from Woese are still under debate, further discoveries suggest that life on Earth has been a journey of separation and reunion: that the first cells developed bacteria and archaea billions of years ago and that some of those later combined to form the complex cells from which we are made.

To listen, click [here](#)

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### *Can a sceptic believe in God?*

Christopher Beha grew up Catholic in Manhattan, walked away during the New Atheist era, and spent years trying to build a secular worldview sturdy enough to live inside. It didn't hold. So he kept reading—Hume, Kant, Russell, the existentialists—and kept chasing the questions that don't let you sleep: what counts as evidence, what belief even is, and what you do when reason can't answer the things you still have to decide.



In this conversation with Michael Shermer, Beha makes the case that scepticism and belief aren't enemies—and that some debates go nowhere because people are arguing about the 'branches' while standing on totally different foundations.

To watch/listen, click [here](#)

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### *How do we improve the lives of women and girls in the North East?*

Ahead of this year's local elections in May, One Million Women and Girls is bringing together candidates and representatives from across the political spectrum and inviting them to say what practical steps they would take to improve the lives of the women and girls living in their local authority area.

There are events in Gateshead, Sunderland, Newcastle, South Tyneside and North Tyneside. These events will be chaired by the independent journalist Jacqui Hodgson and filmed by the Young Women's Film Academy. Women and girls are invited to ask the questions which are important to them ahead of the debates. These events are free and open to everyone, but you need to please register for a ticket to attend [here](#)

*Gateshead* – 6.30-8pm on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> April at St Mary's Heritage Centre

*Sunderland* – 6.30-8pm on Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> April at Sunderland Minster

*South Tyneside* – 6.30-8pm on Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> April at WHIST, South Shields

*North Tyneside* – 6.30-8pm on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> April in Burnett Hall at Linskill Centre, North Shields

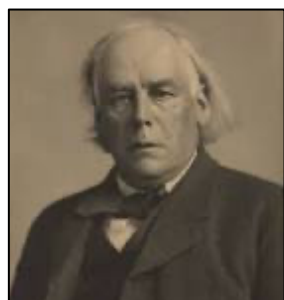
*Newcastle* – 6.30-8pm on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> April at Northern Stage (Stage 2), City Centre

To find out more about One Million Women and Girls, and sign up to be involved, click [here](#)

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### *Freethought History Webinar: Bradlaugh and India: A Trans-Imperial History of Freethought and Republicanism.*

Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) was a gifted speaker and a committed Republican who played a central role in shaping the freethought movement in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1866, he founded the



National Secular Society (NSS) in London. To propagate the messages of freethought and republicanism, he travelled widely throughout his life. Despite poor health, his only visit to India in 1889 cemented his status as a genuinely international thinker. Long before this visit, Bradlaugh had argued that Indians should be treated not as colonial subjects but as fellow citizens of the empire. When Bradlaugh died in 1891, his funeral was attended by a young Mohandas K. Gandhi, who would later become a central figure in India's struggle for independence.



However, while Bradlaugh's political commitments attracted widespread admiration among Indian thinkers and activists, his religious, or more precisely, anti-religious, orientation generated considerable unease.

*About the speaker:* Barathy M.G. is a doctoral candidate in History at Ashoka University, India. His research focuses on the intellectual history of religion and unbelief in colonial South Asia,

with particular attention to the evolution of modern rationalist thought in the Tamil country between 1870 and 1930.

To watch/listen. Click [here](#)

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*Newcastle Skeptics In the Pub are proud to host Robin Ince!*

### ROBIN INCE: A Monkey Escaped

What happens when a monkey escapes the Infinite Cage? Robin Ince - multiple award-winning presenter, poet, and a stand-up human - will delight us for an afternoon of stories, interesting science anecdotes, introspection, and general monkey business.



Robin Ince is a comedian, actor and writer. He was a presenter of the BBC Radio 4 show The Infinite Monkey Cage with from 2009 to 2025.

**When:** Saturday 11 April, 3pm

**Where:** 1867 cafe bar (Tyne Theatre & Opera House) 117 Westgate Road, NE14AG, Newcastle

Click [here for tickets](#)

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## 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 via [Facebook](#) or [X \(formerly Twitter\)](#). Interacting with us there is a great way to help spread the news about Humanism.

Please consider a membership with us if you do not already have one. Our fees are very low, but they really do support so much local grassroots work, as we hope you see in these bulletins.

The monthly bulletin is free for members and supporters of North East Humanists. If membership is more of a commitment than you can make, you can be a supporter if you 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 on 07740 427132 to arrange this if you need it.

### *Durham Secular Salon*

This local group is run by Susan Walker. Contact her at [susan.walker@northeast-humanists.org.uk](mailto:susan.walker@northeast-humanists.org.uk) if you would like more information.

### *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](#) group on Facebook run by Terry Waites and Ben Collier.

### *Humanist Funerals:*

The death of a close relative or friend can be traumatic, the feelings of shock and loss deep. The funeral is an opportunity to reflect on your feelings with love and respect. Also, to celebrate the life of the person you have lost, to express gratitude and appreciation, to say goodbye with care and dignity.

While acknowledging the sadness, a Humanist funeral ceremony celebrates life, for we believe that life itself is the greatest cause of all to celebrate. Our ceremonies are non-religious and based on the life-affirming values of love and concern for others.

We also offer support for *Baby Namings, Weddings and Vow Renewals*

We can provide celebrants through the Tyne Wear Celebrants Group, those accredited by Humanists UK, and other individuals serving the North East region.

*For more information, please contact Ian Hunter on 07969165024, [ian.hunter@northeast-humanists.org](mailto:ian.hunter@northeast-humanists.org)*

