

Monthly Bulletin — February 2026

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Secular Salon: Humanism Behind Bars

Susan Walker

At our January Secular Salon, we were delighted to welcome Jan Mole, who spoke movingly about her work as a Humanist prison chaplain and offered a rare glimpse into everyday life inside prison.

Jan described the lengthy process of training and security clearance she had to complete before being allowed onto a prison wing, including months of preparation and extensive paperwork. When she finally began the role, she was immediately struck by the sensory intensity of the environment. One of her strongest early memories was the pervasive smell of the drug Spice, mixed with the ever-present odour of cabbage and what she described as ‘testosterone’.

She spoke frankly about the prevalence of drugs in prison, noting that availability fell sharply after scanners were introduced — suggesting that substances had previously been entering the prison through staff as well as visitors. Jan also highlighted the poor quality of prison food, with cheap white bread and large quantities of baked beans due to severe budget constraints.



Much of Jan’s work involved one-to-one conversations with prisoners, and she explained how persuasive some people could be, particularly when asking her to pass messages outside the prison. At times, these requests involved contacting individuals with whom they were not permitted to communicate, making clear boundaries and adherence to rules essential.

In this month’s Bulletin:

- The genetic age: who shapes evolution now? Darwin Day Lecture
- Did humans evolve to prefer religion?
- Put your phone down and engage in boredom

Jan explained that she did not usually tell prisoners she was a Humanist unless they asked. Her role, she said, was to offer support to anyone, whatever their beliefs or worldview, with a focus on shared humanity rather than doctrine.

The event also celebrated an extremely practical act. The recent clothing collection for the women's prison was a great success, filling two car-loads of clothes and toiletries, all of which were very gratefully received by HMP Low Newton.

Jan's talk was both unsettling and inspiring, reminding us of the harsh realities of prison life — and the importance of compassion, dignity and human connection within it.

NEH NEWS Forthcoming meetings

Secular Salon: The Power of Permaculture Principles

We're very pleased to welcome back Wilf Richards of Abundant Earth. His previous talk was thoughtful, practical and hugely well received and we're delighted to have him return.

This time, Wilf will be drawing on ideas from his new book, *The Power of Permaculture Principles*, the talk will explore how permaculture thinking can help us respond creatively and ethically to the challenges we face in our gardens, our communities, and the wider world.

Wilf has a gift for making big ideas feel grounded, hopeful and genuinely useful, whether you're an experienced grower or simply curious about living more sustainably and thoughtfully.



As always, the Secular Salon is a space for conversation as much as listening, with plenty of time for questions and discussion.

Refreshments are provided

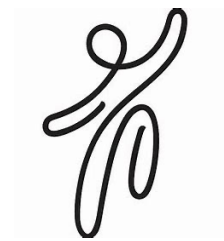
Everyone welcome: please do come along.

When? Sunday 15th February 2pm

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

HUMANISTS UK NEWS

The genetic age: who shapes evolution now? | The Darwin Day Lecture 2026, with Professor Matthew Cobb, chaired by Janet Ellis MBE



Like all species, humans have been inadvertently shaping the genomes of other species – predators and prey – throughout our history. And with the development of agriculture, we began to specifically, deliberately alter plants and animals through selective breeding. But in the second half of the 20th century, that ability has taken on a new form. Not only do we have a far more precise understanding of how selection and heredity interact in agriculture, but the invention of genetic engineering in the 1970s has changed things completely.

We can now change species at will. Not only has this transformed the pharmaceutical industry – allowing the cheap manufacture of drugs like insulin – it has also altered agriculture and now, in the 21st century, threatens to change ecosystems and even humanity itself.



*Professor Matthew Cobb,
Manchester University*

Evolution appears to be under our control, but – as the molecular biologist Leslie Orgel warned us – evolution is smarter than we are. Looking at the past, present, and future of genetics, we can glimpse both the promises and perils that await us.

To register, click [here](#)

Assisted dying

If the assisted dying bill is killed off by the Lords, let that be the end for this unelected chamber

An Opinion piece by The Guardian's Polly Toynbee

The assisted dying bill is about to die, killed off by a small coterie of peers against the will of the House of Commons and voters who have supported the right to die for decades. Can the government let this happen? Keir Starmer, who voted in favour of the legislation, needs to summon the spirit of Harold Wilson's 1960s reforms. He has the powers to push it through, whatever it takes.

If the Lords block this, it should be their last gasp. Their outrageous behaviour illuminates everything grotesque about the upper house. There is no telling with any certainty how the vote would go among this eclectic parade of 844 who range from good to very bad indeed, but plainly opponents of the bill think they would lose as they filibuster to prevent a vote at all. Back in the Lords tomorrow and then for seven more Fridays, at this pace there is no chance it will get through in time, unless the blockers give up immediately.

The Tories plotting against the bill are a gleeful Lords reunion of the old Brexit gang – Michael Gove, David Frost, Mark Harper and Thérèse Coffey – reprising the same dirty tricks with the same cunning. They know the loss will humiliate Labour and Starmer, who gave time for this private member's bill. Absurdly, opponents deny this is a filibuster, but watch them in the Lords

and see them talk very slowly, making identical speeches on identical or crass amendments. Last week, they piled into the preceding debate on the agenda to waste maximum time before assisted dying came up. I've never seen any of them show any interest before in a bill on rare cancers, but suddenly they grew loquacious.

Some chief filibusterers, such as Ilora Finlay, are at least driven by religious belief. Tanni Grey-Thompson also fiercely opposes the bill, fearing ill treatment of those with disabilities, though research suggests a similar proportion of disabled people want the right to an assisted death as most voters. Despite never-ending negotiations and near-impossible conditions, opponents make zero compromise.

To read more, click [here](#)

OTHER NEWS

Did humans evolve to prefer religion? Research shows many atheists intuitively favour faith

Will Gervais, Reader in Psychology, Brunel University

Many atheists consider themselves to be highly rational people who rate evidence and analytical thinking above religion, superstition and intuition. They might even argue that atheism is the most rational worldview.

But that doesn't make them immune to having intuitive beliefs themselves. Science suggests the link between rationality and atheism is far weaker than is often assumed.

A study my colleagues and I conducted, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, suggests that even avowed atheists in some of the most secular countries on Earth might intuitively prefer religion to atheism. We argue this new evidence challenges simplistic notions of global religious decline and the beginning of an 'atheistic age'.

A consideration of religion's deep history gives us hints as to why belief in belief might exist among atheists in secular countries today. One prominent theory holds that religions may have helped unlock their species' cooperative potential, allowing us to expand from our humble origins to become our planet's dominant species.

As religions reshaped our lives to boost cooperation, people increasingly came to view religion and morality as largely synonymous. Over cultural evolutionary time, the association between religious belief and moral goodness has become deeply culturally ingrained. This has left its trace on individual intuitions – as illustrated in the recent study by me and my co-authors and those by other researchers.

Because religions have exerted tremendous influence on our societies for millennia, it would be genuinely surprising if some latent religious trace didn't culturally linger as overt expressions of faith decline. Our newest results are consistent with this possibility. Belief may be wavering



in many countries, but belief in belief persists, complicating any conclusion that we've truly entered an 'atheist age'.

This is an edited summary; to read the full article, click [here](#)

Lifetime trends in happiness change as misery peaks among the young – new research

Alex Bryson, Professor of Quantitative Social Science, UCL; David Blanchflower, Professor of Economics, Dartmouth College; Xiaowei Xu, Senior Research Economist, Institute for Fiscal Studies

For years now, research studies across the world looking at happiness across our lifetimes have found a U-shape: happiness falls from a high point in youth, and then rises again after middle age. This has been mirrored in studies on unhappiness, which show a peak in middle age and a decline thereafter.

Our new research on ill-being, based on data from 44 countries including the US and UK, shows this established pattern has changed. We now see a peak of unhappiness among the young, which then declines with age. The change isn't due to middle-aged and older people getting happier, but to a deterioration in young people's mental health.

A closer look at data from the US shows this clearly. We used publicly available health data, which surveys more than 400,000 people each year, to identify the percentage of people in the US in despair between 1993 and 2024. Those we define as being in despair were the people who had answered that their mental health was not good every day in the 30 days preceding the survey.

Across most of the period, among both men and women, levels of despair were highest among the oldest age group (45-70) and higher for the middle-aged (25-44) than the young (18-24). However, the percentage of young people in despair has risen rapidly. It's more than doubled for men, from 2.5% in 1993 to 6.6% in 2024, and almost trebled for women – from 3.2% to 9.3%.

To read more, click [here](#)

Put down your phone and engage in boredom – how philosophy can help with digital overload

Mehmet Sebih Oruc Phd Researcher in digital media and philosophy, Newcastle University

It feels like there are so many things constantly vying for our attention: the sharp buzz of the phone, the low hum of social media, the unrelenting flood of emails, the endless carousel of content.

It's a familiar and almost universal ailment in our digital age. Our lives are punctuated by constant stimulation, and moments of real stillness – the kind where the mind wanders without a destination – have become rare.

Digital technologies permeate work, education, and intimacy. Not participating feels to many like nonexistence. But we tell ourselves that's OK because platforms promise endless choice and self-expression, but this promise is deceptive. What appears as freedom masks a subtle coercion: distraction, visibility, and engagement are prescribed as obligations.

As someone who has spent years reading philosophy, I have been asking myself how to step out of this loop and try to think like great thinkers did in the past. A possible answer came from a thinker most people wouldn't expect to help with our TikTok-era malaise: the German philosopher Martin Heidegger.

Heidegger argued that modern technology is not simply a collection of tools, but a way of revealing – a framework in which the world appears primarily as a resource, including the human body and mind, to be used for content. In the same way, platforms are also part of this resource, and one that shapes what appears, how it appears, and how we orient ourselves toward life.

Digital culture revolves around speed, visibility, algorithmic selection, and the compulsive generation of content. Life increasingly mirrors the logic of the feed: constantly updating, always 'now' and allergic to slowness, silence and stillness.

To read more, click [here](#)

Think society is in decline? Research gives us some reasons to be cheerful

Paul Hanel, Senior lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Exeter

Talk to a random member of the public and they're likely to say that people's behaviour is getting worse. From brazen shoplifting, to listening to music out loud on public transport, to violence against retail workers, there are plenty of reasons we might feel bleak about other people.

This perception is backed up by research: a study published in June 2023 found that people in over 60 countries believe that basic decency is declining. A 2025 poll of 9,600 Americans found that 46% believed that rudeness is overall increasing, whereas only 9% found it was decreasing compared to pre-pandemic levels.

But people's perception can be inaccurate. In my research, I investigate how accurate people's perceptions about other people are, the implications of inaccurate perceptions, and what happens when those misperceptions are corrected.

And it's clear that there are some misperceptions at play here. If we look at people's values, those abstract ideals that guide our behaviour, there are reasons to be positive about society.

In a 2022 study of 32,000 people across 49 cultural groups, the values of loyalty, honesty and helpfulness ranked highest, while power and wealth ranked lowest. The results offer little support for claims of moral decline. An interactive tool, developed by social scientist Maksim Rudnev using data from the European Social Survey, shows that the pattern remained consistent between 2002-23 across over 30 European countries.

Further studies show people's values are broadly similar across over 60 countries, education levels, religious denominations and gender (there are exceptions of course). That is, there is substantial overlap between the responses between both groups.

Even the values of 2,500 Democrats or Republicans in the USA in 2021-23, or of 1,500 Leave and Remain voters of the Brexit referendum in 2016-17, are remarkably similar. This suggests an alternate narrative to perceptions of countries being divided and polarised.

To read more, click [here](#)

How Us v Them Takes Hold: Tribalism in Byzantium, Sri Lanka and Modern America

Jens Heycke, for Skeptic

Sixth-century Byzantium was a city divided by race hatred so intense that people viciously attacked each other, not only in the streets but also in churches. The inscription on an ancient tablet conveys the raw animus that spawned from colour differences: ‘Bind them! ... Destroy them! ... Kill them!’

The historian Procopius, who witnessed this race antagonism firsthand, called it a ‘disease of the soul,’ and marvelled at its irrational intensity:

‘They fight against their opponents knowing not for what end they imperil themselves ... So there grows up in them against their fellow men a hostility which has no cause, and at no time does it cease or disappear, for it gives place, neither to the ties of marriage nor of relationship nor of friendship.’

This hostility sparked multiple violent clashes and riots, culminating in the Nika Riot of 532 CE, the biggest race riot of all time: 30,000 people perished, and the greatest city of antiquity was reduced to smouldering ruins.

But the Nika Riot wasn’t the sort of race riot you might imagine. The race in question was the chariot race. The colour division wasn’t between black and white but between blue and green—the colours of the two main chariot-racing teams.

The teams’ supporters, who were referred to as the Blue and Green ‘factions,’ proudly wore their team colours, not just in the hippodrome but also around town. To help distinguish themselves, many Blues also sported distinctive mullet hairstyles, like those of 1970s rock stars. Both Blues and Greens were fiercely loyal to their factions and their colours.

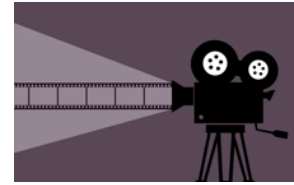
The chariots and drivers were a secondary concern; the historian Pliny asserted that if the drivers were to swap colours in the middle of a race, the factions would immediately switch their allegiances accordingly.

Modern sociological research helps explain the phenomenon. Decades of studies have demonstrated the dangerous power of the human tribal instinct. Surprisingly, it doesn’t require ‘primordial’ ethnic or tribal distinctions to engage that impulse. Minor differences are often sufficient to elicit acute ingroup-outgroup discrimination.

To read more, click [here](#)

Gods, monsters and scripture: interview with Gavin Evans

Gavin Evans is a writer and lecturer, whose most recent book *Bible Stories: Fact, Fantasy and Fiction in Scripture* is the subject of an interview with Daniel James Sharp, editor of the *Freethinker*. In this wide-ranging conversation, they cover matters diverse as the origins of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy texts, the development of the ideas of heaven and hell, the varieties of Zionism and the dangers of fundamentalism today and the New Atheists.



Watch [here](#)

You only have one life...

American rock climber Alex Honnold climbed the 508-metre (1,667ft) Taipei101 skyscraper on Sunday without any ropes or protective equipment.

Known for his ropeless ascent up Yosemite National Park's El Capitan, he climbed up one corner of Taipei 101 using small L-shaped outcroppings as footholds. Periodically, he had to manoeuvre around and clamber up the sides of large ornamental structures that jut out from the tower.

A large crowd witnessed the feat: 'Often they'll watch something like this and it's a reminder that their time is finite and they should use it in the best way, the most meaningful way that they can. If anything, I hope that that's what people take from it,' he said.

To watch Hannold reach the tower's top, click [here](#)



Newcastle Skeptics In the Pub present: 'The Woo of Wee' with Heidi Mounsey.

Learn of the benefits of drinking your own urine! Marvel at how it treats conjunctivitis if you pour it in your eyes! Discover if you really should be peeing on your jellyfish sting! This talk considers whether there is any scientific evidence for the benefits of urine therapy (spoiler: there isn't), what might lead people to believe in it, and contains horrible pictures of the results caused by indulging in this practice.

Heidi owns many cats, all of which prefer to use the high-class facilities of the indoor litter trays rather than the slum of the garden flower beds, and therefore she thinks about the best way to dispose of urine quite a lot. None of these ways has yet involved drinking it, strangely enough. She likes science fiction conventions, singing, and is currently trying to learn more than four chords on the ukulele.



When: Saturday 14th February, 3pm

Where: 1867 cafe bar, 117 Westgate Road, NE14AG, Newcastle

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. This month, we are excited to welcome **Helen Hill** and **Christina Mircescu** as new members. Thanks for joining!

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 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 (Secretary, North East Humanists) on 07969165024, ian.hunter@northeast-humanists.org.uk

