

Monthly Bulletin — January 2026

RECAP OF RECENT NEH EVENTS

Secular Santa

Les Milne

'Well that's it over for another 11 months' I say out loud as I look in the mirror at my neatly trimmed beard and shorn hair, but really I know it will probably be early January when I receive my first formal request to appear at an event.

Having had a beard and predominantly grey hair for almost 40 years, it wasn't until the late 90s that I made my first Santa appearance. Long known as enthusiastic charity fundraisers, my wife Joan and I have been invited to participate in many bucket shaking activities and so it was that we found ourselves collecting in Low Fell at the roadside carol singing with the combined churches and their silver band. Dressed in red as we usually did for any for Save the Children event and wearing a red hat with a white pom-pom, we were pleased that the collection was a success, even though there were some murmurs from the choir and band that it could have been better if the sole Salvation Army collector on the opposite side of the street hadn't 'freeloaded' on their efforts.

Encouraged by the success, the following winter I left my beard untrimmed for a few weeks and acquired a cheap Santa Claus outfit. As ever in mid-December, standing around in the street for a couple of hours can be a bit chilling on the bones, no more so than on my knees. Why knees? – many children are overwhelmed by Santa Claus, especially when he is so much bigger



Les in his Santa costume with Mrs Claus at the Gosforth Civic Theatre

In this month's Bulletin:

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- *The Pale Blue Dot*
- *Refugee charities face 'culture of fear'*

than them and leans over to talk to them. The only way to avoid this whilst retaining eye contact is to squat down on one's hunkers. The collection was increased, but there were further murmurs that it would have been even better if the 'b---y Sally Anne' hadn't been there. As a humanist it gave me a fascinating insight into ecumenical goodwill.

That year was the start of my career as a Santa, raising money for various local charities. I started to get requests, leading to Joan telling me that I needed a better outfit, which of course she then found in a charity shop for a mere 50p. Resplendent in my velour, my portfolio of clients extended beyond the usual collection of schools and nursery groups to community cafes, sports clubs, Santa and parkruns, and then on to Gateshead Council as their Saltwell Park Santa – which involved being provided with a professional quality outfit.

Apart from one year at the MetroCentre, every event has been community or charity based. All fees have been gift aided to Save the Children, along with many organisations making direct donations. The satisfaction of being able to support my favourite charity is matched by the joy on the faces of the many children I see (approximately 2,000 this year aged from three months and upwards). Greatest credit, however, must go to the tireless efforts of so many dedicated professionals and the countless, passionate volunteers who give their time, energy, skill and experience to improving the lives of children.

As a humanist, there is a dilemma in being part of spreading a supernatural belief, but equally it provides an opportunity to show the core values of kindness and spending time with friends and family. Sadly, in these days of domestic abuse, with so many broken families, any reference to mother, father etc., has to be avoided and the non-committal term of 'grown ups' is the order of the day.

Whatever the first booking is for 2026 it will be entered appropriately in red and mark the start of events that will hopefully lead to another magical December.

Do you want to do more for Humanism in the North East?

The Management Committee (MC) of NEH currently has twelve Trustees who meet remotely (on the internet) once per month. Between them they manage the website, social media, public meetings, school visits, the membership, the Charity's accounts and occasional social gatherings.

For various reasons four of the Trustees will be retiring from the committee in the next 18 months. This, inevitably, will reduce what the MC can do and could lead to the eventual demise of NEH in its current form.

To ensure NEH continues to provide Humanist services in the North East we need new people to become NEH Trustees. If you would like to join us on the Management Committee or would like more information, please contact us. Details are on the back page of the monthly Bulletin.

Book club

A talented, compassionate and successful politician who deserved a better biography



Jan Mole

We met for lunch at our usual venue to discuss Julia Landgdon's biography of Mo Mowlam, a labour MP and cabinet member from 1987 to 2001. She was Secretary of State for Northern Ireland during the time of the Good Friday Peace agreement and MP for Redcar.

Two of us had the pleasure of meeting Mo, who sadly died in 2005, in person. John was involved with the mental health charity Mind when she was president of the Redcar branch. I met her when she came to open a new library in the school in Middlesbrough where I taught.

We both found her to be compassionate with a good insight into the issues involved. She was committed to her work and a very good communicator.

This was confirmed by her friends and colleagues in the book who described her as incredibly hardworking, charismatic, chaotic, effective and courageous.

In her private life she could be reckless and forthright. She battled against Labour Party tradition particularly where the role of women was concerned and she responded by formulating a career plan to which she adhered in spite of some colleagues' attempts to derail her. Gordon Brown and Peter Mandleson were two notable adversaries.

We thought that she was ambitiously ruthless on occasion, but she achieved results too.

The book, however, read like a very long newspaper article with no discernible reflection or analysis. Had the subject not been such an interesting character, some of us might have abandoned the book early on.

We will meet again in 2026 on Monday 2nd February at 12-30pm at the Duke of Wellington Durham. Our book for discussion will be *Bury the Chains* by Adam Hochschild. It is a history of the anti-slave movement.

Wish to join us? Contact Jan Mole 07804667390 janet.mole123@gmail.com

NEH NEWS Forthcoming meetings

Secular Salon:

Jan Mole will share stories from almost a decade of pastoral support work in prisons. More information will follow in the January Bulletin.

When? 18 January 2026 at 2pm

Where? Merryoaks Community Hall, Durham DH1 3QF

The Pale Blue Dot

In his talk at November's Secular Remembrance, Les Milne reminded us how insignificant our world is. He spoke of the astronomer and scientific naturalist Carl Sagan, who famously convinced NASA to turn the Voyager 1 spacecraft around for one last photograph as it departed the solar system in February 1990. The picture of a tiny sphere in the vast expanse of space – dubbed The Pale Blue Dot – profoundly illustrates our planet's fragile existence in the vast cosmos, and inspired Sagan's book of the same name.

'That's here,' wrote Sagan. 'That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives... The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena... Astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.'



Les's talk inspired NEH Trustee, academic and musician Philip Nathan to write a song in celebration of Sagan's insight.

You can listen to *Pale Blue Dot* [here](#)

Experts 'highly critical' of assisted dying Bill, committee hears

SCRUTINY in the House of Lords 'should never be conflated with obstruction', the Bishop of Newcastle, Dr Helen-Ann Hartley, wrote last week, in a joint letter with six other members of the Select Committee that heard evidence on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill

The committee heard 'vital and often highly critical evidence' from several experts, including psychiatrists, coroners, and social workers, the peers wrote, in an open letter published on 11 December.



The letter says that the majority of the experts 'indicated that the Bill, as it stands, is not fit for purpose'; further scrutiny was needed.

The Bill is being scrutinised by 'committee of the whole House', and more than 1000 amendments are under consideration. Four days of debate have been held so far, and a

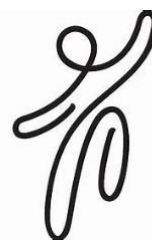
further ten are planned for the first four months of 2026.

'Our entire purpose at this stage is to take note of the concerns of experts and professionals, and to propose amendments which aim to interrogate the detail and demonstrate where improvement is needed,' the letter says.

To read more, click [here](#)

Assisted dying

Anti-assisted dying peers have been open about filibustering the Bill



Peers have been accused of attempting to filibuster the Assisted Dying Bill, essentially causing it to fail by proposing an unreasonable number of amendments and deliberately making unnecessary speeches to time it out. Opponents of assisted dying have responded by claiming the amendments are just for scrutiny and improving the Bill. However, some peers have been overt about their willingness to filibuster the Assisted Dying Bill.



There are several cases of Peers being explicitly clear that they are trying to block the Bill by means other than it being voted down at Third Reading – which may mean it fails even if a majority support it

Major Senedd vote will decide assisted dying delivery for Wales

On Tuesday 20 January, members of the Senedd will vote on a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) relating to the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill.

This vote is not about whether assisted dying should be legal in Wales. That decision to change the criminal law will already have been taken at Westminster under reserved powers, where 75% of Welsh MPs voted strongly in favour. Instead, the LCM will determine whether Wales should hold the powers to shape how the law is delivered for the people of Wales.

US state of Illinois legalises assisted dying

The US State of Illinois has legalised assisted dying, after the Governor, JB Pritzker, signed it into law. It becomes the 13th jurisdiction in the US, and the 35th jurisdiction internationally to enact an assisted dying law. Humanists UK and My Death, My Decision are hailing this historic moment and are calling on the House of Lords to constructively work on the Terminally Ill Adults Bill, so dying Brits can face the same choices as the people of Illinois.

The legislation had already passed the Illinois Senate by 30 votes to 27, and the House by 63 votes to 42. It should come into effect after 180 days.

To read more of these stories, click [here](#)

OTHER NEWS

Is the religious right on the rise in UK politics?

At recent Reform UK press conferences, two very distinctive heads can often be spotted in the front row: the near-white locks of Danny Kruger, the party's head of policy, and the swept-back blond mane of James Orr, now a senior adviser to Nigel Farage.

As well as guiding the policy programme for what could be the UK's next government, the pair have something else in common. Both are highly devout Christians who came to religion in adulthood and have trenchant views on social issues such as abortion and the family.

Kruger, an MP who defected from the Conservatives in September, and Orr, who is a Cambridge academic, also sit on the advisory board of a rightwing thinktank called the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, led by Philippa Stroud, a Conservative peer who is strongly religious.

Another member is Paul Marshall, the hedge fund millionaire who owns GB News and the rightwing Spectator magazine. Marshall is a devout Christian.

Religion – specifically evangelicalism, the movement often involving born-again Christians who push for Bible teachings to be adopted – has in recent decades been one of the defining elements of rightwing politics in the US. Its adherents form the bedrock of Donald Trump's support. Is the UK starting to head down the same path?

There are some links. Orr is sufficiently close to JD Vance that he has hosted the US vice-president at his family home. He is also involved in the National Conservatism movement, which has connections to the US religious-populism world.

But any closer parallels falter on a simple matter of numbers. Polling shows that close to a quarter of US adults are evangelicals, but the proportion for the UK is about a tenth of that at most.

There is another important factor to consider. While US evangelicals lean firmly to the right, with nearly three-quarters approving of Trump's presidency, new polling by the UK's Evangelical Alliance (EA) suggests that, for all the prominence of people such as Kruger and Marshall, the wider picture here is quite different.

A poll of nearly 1,500 evangelicals shared with the Guardian shows Labour in the lead with 26% support. Reform and the Liberal Democrats are level on 20%, with the Conservatives on 18% and the Greens 12%.

Other questions demonstrate support among evangelicals for more generous welfare payments, but concerted alarm about plans to legalise assisted dying.

To read more, click [here](#)

Revealed: Faith schools among 'least inclusive' in England

Faith schools 'overrepresented' in list of top 200 least inclusive state-funded schools, Comprehensive Future and NSS analysis reveals.

The National Secular Society has joined school equality campaigners in calling on the Government to review the role of faith schools in social division, after new analysis found faith schools are among the least inclusive in the country.

Out of the top 200 least inclusive state-funded secondary schools in England, 38% (76) are faith schools, the analysis found. This makes faith schools the second biggest group in the top 200 after grammar schools (118, 59%).

Because faith schools make up approximately 18% of secondary schools, this represents a "significant overrepresentation" of faith schools among the nation's least inclusive schools, campaigners said.

The analysis by *Comprehensive Future*, the National Secular Society, and TRAK found most (88%) of the faith schools in the top 200 operate faith-based admissions.



In response to the findings, the Church of England told Schools week that most of its schools had "no faith selection criteria".

But the top 200 list includes 17 Church of England schools which operate religiously discriminatory policies. Only two do not; these use academic selection instead.

Four schools in the list, all Catholic, use both religious and academic selection.

In a joint letter to schools minister Georgia Gould and education minister Bridget Phillipson, the organisations have called for reforms to school admissions to 'ensure school places are allocated in a way that is equitable, inclusive, and consistent with the principles of fairness the Government has pledged to uphold'.

To read more, [click here](#)

Refugees

UK charities face 'culture of fear' as threats and violence surge

A surge in death and rape threats and harassment has created a 'culture of fear' at charities serving women and refugees, and at mosques, churches and synagogues, the head of the Charity Commission has warned.

Mark Simms said he feared growing hostility towards charity staff, volunteers and beneficiaries, both online and on the streets, was becoming normalised and risked eroding civilised values and norms British society once took for granted.

His warning comes as the commission issues formal guidance advising charities on how to protect voluntary workers exposed to what it calls "unacceptable" personal risks as a result of threats, abuse and intimidation from some sections of the public.

A range of charities report being targeted by extremists amid a rise in toxic and divisive political rhetoric around immigration. Incidents of violence and vandalism – and increased security measures to combat them – are regarded by some as the new normal.

Refugee and asylum seeker charities, Muslim, Jewish and ethnic minority organisations, faith groups, women's groups, youth bodies, homelessness charities and charity shops have

reported increasing incidents of violence, threats, racism and abuse since the Southport riots in 2024.

To read more, click [here](#)

C of E responds to Tommy Robinson's carols event with 'Christmas is for all' message

The Church of England has released a video in response to a Christmas carols event on Saturday being organised by the far-right activist Tommy Robinson amid calls from a growing number of senior church figures to challenge Christian nationalism.

In the 43-second video, *Christmas Isn't Cancelled*, posted on the church's YouTube channel, more than 20 people from the archbishop of York to schoolchildren speak about the 'joy, love and hope' of Christmas. The message is 'a simple reminder that Christmas belongs to all of us, and everyone is welcome to celebrate', the C of E said.

A number of its leaders are speaking out against the dangers of Christian nationalism and the appropriation of Christian symbols to bolster the anti-migrant views of Robinson and his supporters taking part in the 'Unite the Kingdom' event.

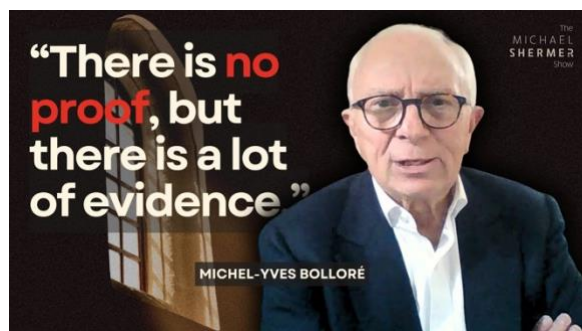
Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, warned of the potential 'weaponisation' of events such as the one planned for Saturday, and said the C of E must be 'absolutely clear' that the true Christian message was one of compassion and welcome to all.

Arun Arora, the bishop of Kirkstall and co-lead bishop on racial justice, said Christianity was being used as 'a flag of convenience by the far right; a nationalist ideology cloaking itself in religion'.

To read more, click [here](#)

Cosmology, Creation and the Evidence of God

In this episode, Michel-Yves Bolloré lays out his case for why modern cosmology, fine-tuning, and the limits of materialism point toward a creator. Drawing on physics, thermodynamics, probability, and philosophy, he argues that the Big Bang, the apparent beginning of the



universe, and the complexity of life collectively form a compelling body of evidence for God's existence.

Bolloré explains why he believes the universe is not eternal, why 'nothing' cannot produce 'something,' how moral red lines suggest a transcendent source, and how he reconciles scientific reasoning with his Christian faith, while Michael Shermer gently but rigorously

presses him with questions to elicit his strongest arguments.

Bolloré's book *God: The Science and The Evidence* sold over 400,000 copies internationally and is now available in English.

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

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 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

