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North Yorkshire Council

North Yorkshire Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE)

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday, 19th September, 2023 commencing at 5.00 pm.

Group A: Christian Denominations and such other religious denominations as, in the Authority's opinion, will appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions in the area: Professor John Adams (Humanist), Hayden Cohen (Judaism), Chris Devanny (Catholic), Nasr Moussa Emam (Muslim), and Abhijeet Kulkarni (Hindu).

Group B: Church of England: N/a

Group C: Teachers Associations: Tara Askew, Jo Colledge, and Sarah Hodgson.

Group D: North Yorkshire Council: Councillors Robert Heseltine and George Jabbour (Chair).

Officers Present: Patrick Duffy, (Principal Democratic Services Scrutiny Officer); Owen Griffiths, (Corporate Governance Officer); Julie Pattison (Principal Education Adviser - Monitoring); Heather Russell, (Senior Education Advisor); and Olivia Seymour, (Professional Religious Education Advisor).

Apologies: Councillor Alyson Baker, Tom Clayton, David Haddock, Councillor Janet Jefferson, Gil Simpson, Philippa Smith, Lee Talbot, and Councillor Annabel Wilkinson.

Copies of all documents considered are in the Minute Book

14 Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

The meeting was introduced by Owen Griffiths, in his role of Clerk, to introduce the election of the Chair and the Vice-Chair. The meeting was not quorate however, owing to no attendance from the Church of England representatives, and the item had to be deferred to the next meeting.

Cllr Jabbour stepped in as Chair for the meeting as both Cllr Baker and Sarah Beveridge, the present Chair and Vice-Chair, had both sent apologies.

15 Welcome and Announcements

The Chair welcomed people to the meeting. The Chair particularly welcomed Hayden Cohen, as the new representative for Judaism, and Julie Pattison, as the new Principal Education Adviser.

16 Apologies for Absence

Apologies were received by Councillor Alyson Baker, Tom Clayton, David Haddock, Councillor Janet Jefferson, Gil Simpson, Philippa Smith, Lee Talbot, and Councillor Annabel Wilkinson.

17 Minutes of the Meeting held on 20 June

The minutes of the last meeting could not be agreed as a true account of the previous meeting as the meeting was not quorate.

18 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

19 Public Participation

There were no public questions.

20 Member Presentation by Professor John Adams

Considered a presentation by Professor John Adams, a Humanist Faith Group Representative. By way of background, the Committee's Development Plan for 2022/2024 contains the action: Implement a programme of Member presentations at each SACRE meeting with a focus on Member work/community involvement and how it links into SACRE. This presentation was the third of these.

Professor Adams set out to share more about Humanism and his background within it. He did this in three sections:

1. How he got involved within it.
2. What Humanism is.
3. Questions and Discussion.

- 1) Professor Adams shared that many Humanists first become involved within the organisation through attending ceremonies, and that was also how he became involved, through a non-religious funeral for his father. That involvement within the organisation then became greater after retiring, and it was shared that he was now the Treasurer of the organisation.

Professor Adams then said that the organisation had more than 100,000 members and read a list of famous names who were part of it. Alongside ceremonies it was shown that the Humanists also offer pastoral care, apostate support for those fleeing religious, and working on human rights campaigns.

- 2) Professor Adams then provided insight to what Humanism actually is. Although the roots of Humanism can be seen in ancient times, with both Socrates and Erasmus being historical advocates, the modern foundation of the term is simply the conviction that it is possible to lead a good life of liberal values without superstition. This was explained in three points:

- A) The denial of the Supernatural. The world can be explained through reason and evidence. Humans, as a species, can explain the world that they live in, and these explanations continue to expand.
- B) Religion is culturally determined. Professor Adams shared that humanists would say that religion is a social construct, that mirrors the culture that it exists within in. As a result, the number of gods across anthropological time has been estimated to be around 10,000.
- C) Therefore, because of the first two points, moral precepts come from society. Reality is human and is socially constructed within the framework of what has been taught and understood.

- 3) Professor Adams provided room for questions to be asked. Nasr Moussa Emam said that it was very interesting and asked for the presentation to be shared in full. Hayden Cohen also said that it was very interesting and said that he looked forward to many future discussions over the meetings to come.

The Chair thanked Professor Adams for his presentation and said it would be good for these to continue. Hayden Cohen said that he could do one at the next meeting.

21 North Yorkshire Council SACRE Draft Annual Report 2022-23

Considered a report by the Senior Education Adviser, Heather Russell, on the draft annual report 2022-23.

Questions were asked about:

- How the data has been presented.
- Collective worship and whether it would be worth noting that it has been discussed at previous SACRE meetings.
- Whether Jewish people might be uncomfortable with how the questions have been framed in the religion and faith section, particularly with its ethno-religious element. In response to this, the Principal Education Adviser (Monitoring) said that the framing of the data for those questions was dependent on who answered the data and was reflective of that.

NOTED.

22 Update from Professional Religious Education Adviser

Considered a report by the Professional Religious Education Adviser, Olivia Seymour, informing Members of work undertaken since the last meeting, together with local and national updates regarding Religious Education. The report provided details on the following issues:

- SACRE Newsletter – the timeline of this had to be expanded so that the Agreed Syllabus Conference could help to inform the content.
- Data – The national picture from exam results was provided to the group, with the local datasets forthcoming.
- The Department for Education have been asked to address the shortage of people training to become RE teachers.

NOTED.

23 Update from the Local Authority

For the benefit of those who had not been at the Agreed Syllabus Conference meeting, ahead of this meeting, the Chair provided a quick summary. More volunteers will be needed for the launch report that will be provided to educational leaders. The Professional Religious Education Adviser shared that the launch of the Agreed Syllabus Conference will be the 14 June 2024 and it would be good for as many Members to attend as possible.

After this, a report was considered by the Principal Education Adviser (Monitoring) which updated Members on the work undertaken by the Local Authority since the last meeting.

The main point highlighted was that the methodology of how Ofsted inspections are analysed has been reconfigured towards a greater emphasis on personal development. These figures went back to March to provide a larger pool of data.

During this item Cllr Heseltine had to leave the meeting and said "God Bless" before leaving. Professor John Adams asked, "which one?" The Chair, Councillor Jabbour, told Professor Adams that his remark was not in line with the level of respect that was expected between the different Members. Professor Adams disagreed with the Chair's rebuttal.

NOTED.

24 Work Programme

The Principal Democratic Services Scrutiny Officer gave an update on the work programme for SACRE. The programme provided in the agenda provided the relevant official items and members can suggest future items that could be considered.

25 SACRE Self-Assessment Tool- Report of the Working Party

The Principal Democratic Services Scrutiny Officer, Patrick Duffy, provided information on the SACRE self-assessment toolkit. The tool kit is based on 5 criteria and allows for the SACRE to evaluate its performance and seek to improve its performance.

The first of these assessments took place on 5 September and was undertaken by the Officers and Professor John Adams, Cllr Alyson Baker, and Abhijeet Kulkarni. The focus of the first working party was around the second aim:

"How effectively does the SACRE, in partnership with the LA, evaluate standards and the quality of provision for RE in schools? How effective are the strategies to improve standards and the quality of provision?"

The feedback from the working party was that the SACRE was doing well in many of the areas highlighted by the second aim but there were areas of improvement, particularly between SACRE itself and schools.

Patrick Duffy then provided room for members who were not present at the working party to provide comment. He also shared two ways in which the committee could proceed with the other 4 criteria:

- Continue in the format of the last working party, drawing upon volunteers for each individual criterion, or;
- Can use part of the SACRE Committee meeting to discuss one criterion and split into different groups to do this.

NOTED.

26 Any Other Items

Hayden Cohen told the committee that on 27 January, the Harrogate Synagogue would be holding an event to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. All of the committee members are invited but he asked that people let him know in advance so that the number of people going could be accounted for.

There being no further items of business, the meeting ended at 6:08 pm.

27 Dates of Next Meetings

The dates of the next meetings were provided to the group.
These would be:

- 12 December 2023 at 4pm.
- 9 April 2024 at 4pm.

APPENDIX TO SACRE Minutes of 19th September 2023

On Humanism

Text of a presentation given to North Yorkshire SACRE 19.09.2023 by Professor John Adams

I will do three things in this brief presentation: tell you about myself (with regard to my involvement with Humanism and HumanistsUK); describe what Humanism is to me, and there are differences between humanists since ours is not a creed or a doctrine; and finally to respond to any questions/observations from colleagues.

Introduction

My first involvement with Humanism came, like so many people, following attendance at a ceremony, in this case a funeral. What was unusual was that the funeral was that of my father – which I had arranged. In the couple or so years before my father's death (which is now some 30 years' ago) I went to a number of funerals of my parents' friends, and they were very poor experiences. All were in crematoria, with a "rota" vicar incanting some ritual phrases: "sure and certain hope" (surely an oxymoron for all time) etc., and on one occasion getting the name of the deceased wrong. When the time came I was clear that I was not having that for my Dad. A neighbour gave me details of a non-religious organisation that did sensitive and personal funerals, and they in turn put me in touch with a local celebrant, who I went to visit. He was of my father's generation, knew of his war involvement (not in detail, of course, but what it was like to be in the War. My father was a fighter pilot and anyone who knows of such things knows that the probability of my existence is much closer to 0 than to 1). The ceremony was as good as such things can be; many attenders said it was the best and most fitting funeral they had been to (and some were the age of serial funeral attenders). I still have a clear memory of what is, after all, such a personal and affecting event. I concluded that this was an organisation that does good...and I should join.

I had little active involvement until I retired and moved to York where I was among a group who formed what became the York branch of HumanistsUK; I chaired the branch for a number of years and then was asked to join the board of HumanistsUK as Treasurer.

While the organisation has a lengthy and notable antecedence, it is in the last decade or so that it has grown rapidly in membership and influence. We have some 100,000 members and supporters and our list of patrons reads like a Who's Who of British intelligentsia. Our work involves: ceremonies (some 9,000 funerals last year and more weddings in Scotland than the Catholic Church); pastoral care, in hospitals and prisons; apostate support (in our "Faith to Faithless" section) providing care, advice and support for those leaving high-controlling religions; and, of course campaigning and representing the non-religious (that is to say the majority) view in the UK. Recent campaigns have focussed on: human rights (freedom of speech, blasphemy, gay marriage, the right to die with dignity); education (an end to discrimination in admissions and employment on religious grounds, collective worship); and constitutional matters like the presence of 26 Bishops, as of right, in the House of Lords.

What is Humanism?

Humanism, as a concept, has considerable antiquity. Socrates was put to death for, in effect, humanist beliefs (although that was not written on the indictment). Enlightenment Humanist figures

like Erasmus were extremely influential in 15th century Europe, while recently, in Dresden, I learned of the impact of Humanism on German artists like Cranach and Holbein. However a succinct modern definition might be the belief that we can lead a good, purposeful and meaningful life, based on liberal human values, without superstition.

That means (for me) that Humanism has three principal elements:

1. A rejection of supernatural beliefs. Not from prejudice or bigotry (indeed we leave that to others) but from reason and evidence. For a supernatural event to take place the laws of physics must be in abeyance, and Humanists (and others) do not think that is very likely to happen. It is not possible to prove that it cannot happen, of course, since it is impossible to prove negative propositions of this sort, but a study of physics from the sub-atomic level to the cosmological gives no reason to suggest it ever has....or ever will. Indeed the search for existential evidence of a transcendental concept is well established as itself incoherent.* The conclusion leads us to look for human explanations for the existence and behaviour of all phenomena, and in the past two or three hundred years those explanations have vastly changed our understanding of natural phenomena both on the Earth (to the level of particle physics) and also within our galaxy and beyond – and expanded it in a manner far beyond the compass and even imaginings of doctrinal books.
2. The absence (non-existence) of the supernatural generates the obvious conclusion that religions are social constructs. As such they relate to time and place displayed as obvious differences in the representational features (where that is permitted) of different deities: Indian gods look like Indians, Egyptian gods like Egyptians, Chinese like Chinese people and so on. The reason is self-evident; the communities from which these deities emerged had never seen anyone who looked significantly different from themselves. Cognitive anthropologists look back some 40,000 years to evidence of early religiosity (largely by inference from the existence of grave goods), with doctrinal religions (particularly associated with settled herding and agricultural lifestyles) perhaps less than 10,000 years.** Those communities endowed their gods with particular attributes - especially with respect to healing and predicting the future (propitious hunting or weather for crop growing). It is then a very small step to Feuerbach's famous reversal that it is not god that made man in his image but rather the reverse – mankind has invented numerous gods and worshiped their own creations (gender specificity is the author's).
The attempts to number the principal deities that have emerged geographically and throughout history have by their nature been problematic; the number of 10,000 is sometimes quoted...so there's a lot to choose from! Humanists (and others) might reasonably respond to any remark about god with the question: "Which one?"
There are also many similarities between religions. Ritual, for example, often plays an important part. They may be "low effort" rituals (obedience or genuflection), "medium effort" (regular attendance at a place of worship, repetitive actions or recitations), or "high effort" rituals involving self-harm or semi-incarceration. Synchronicity often plays a significant role, with actions or activities being performed in concert seemingly more powerful. Many Humanists are interested in religions and the role that these ritualistic activities play in their continuing appeal. Some have even attempted to emulate them...not with great success.

Many religions also promote some form of “creation” story and these are almost universally absurd. The Bible, for example has god creating light a couple of days before creating the sun (which is a very neat trick), while elsewhere in the same text people on Earth observe the sun standing still. The circulation of the sun is, of course, an illusion caused by the rotation of the Earth. At the equator the speed is a little over 1,000 mph. Were the Earth to stop (so that the sun would appear to stand still) that rotation would have to cease and billions of tons of material would be cast into the atmosphere (together with the observers). Also, creation stories present creation as a thing of the past, whereas we know that stars and planets throughout the universe both collapse and come into being. Our galaxy creates on average an estimated seven new stars each year – there may be in the order of 400 billion galaxies... and that is a lot of continuous creation. The lack of understanding of these and numerous other issues causes many Humanists (and others) to doubt the divine authorship of these texts. How could a divinity create physics and not understand it? The Bible also, famously, gets the value of Pi wrong .

3. If religions are cultural artefacts, where does morality come from? When I ask schoolchildren where they get their moral codes from they say their parents, relations, friends, the things they read, etc. It is rare, these days, to find many young people citing the Ten Commandments or some other doctrinal injunction. Morality is also, therefore, a human contrivance. It is both a very important one - for social harmony - and one which changes over time: just consider the moral stance in this country about gay sex now and (say) fifty years ago. Homosexuality has gone, in the course of my lifetime, from being a crime to being unremarkable. Our views about the position of women in society have similarly changed enormously, and would be in conflict with many doctrinal texts authored centuries ago.

So Humanists look to ourselves, to our species, for answers to questions about existence, belief and conduct. We are aware, naturally, that religious people take a different view. We are respectful of those people, of course, and most assuredly not in any sense “anti-religion”, but we do reserve the right to use our human faculties, in a free pluralist society, to examine different beliefs ...and for ours to be examined in return. To use the words of a celebrated passage from one of the most distinguished Humanists of the 20th century, we owe it to ourselves to recognise our humanity, to examine the world around us having set aside nationalism, prejudice, bigotry and selfishness. “There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge and wisdom. ...I appeal to you as a human being to human beings: remember your humanity, and forget the rest” (Bertrand Russell quoted in Bakewell***).

Not bad advice, I should have thought.

John Adams September 2023

- A J Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Chap VI
- ** Robin Dunbar, *How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures*, Chap 8
- *** Sarah Bakewell, *Humanly Possible*, Chap 11

