

Ethical Jury – LSH meeting 20 June 2012

This was Lancashire Humanists' attempt to follow West London Humanists' initiative in secular morality development by forming, at our monthly meeting, an Ethical Jury to consider moral dilemmas drawn from the personal experience of those attending.

A format for the event, a "dilemma resolution process", had been flagged up in our monthly newsletter, with a "toolbox" of the moral principles we might apply.

Guy Otten, from Greater Manchester Humanists, was in the chair as we first considered, then decided against, limiting the jury size to 12-15 of the 25 present.

Having chosen to be all in this together, we then submitted, by written notes, a total of eleven dilemmas for discussion.

None was excluded as Guy's helmsmanship and sum-up skills steered us into, and briskly through, our responses, dispelling initial uncertainty about whether such an over-sized jury could "work".

There wasn't time to call a vote on solutions, as the format had proposed, but to this participant at least, it was enough to hear the issues, varying views and *possible* solutions aired.

The first dilemma to be addressed was that of *an atheist parent, feeling it necessary, but hypocritical, to attend church to justify her child's attendance at a C of E school.*

The second was also school-centred: Parents' dilemma *in choosing a secondary school when a grammar school is available, but ...*

Two random, early assertions may serve to illustrate the vigour and frankness our exchanges quickly achieved:

- *"For my child's benefit, I'd be the best churchgoer in the village"*
- and
- *"Children can handle cognitive dissonance".*

Our conclusions on education matters appeared to permit hypocrisy in some circumstances, but never to abandon pressure to change the system.

Next:

What do you, as an atheist, say to a desperate man, bent on suicide, who pleads: "Pray for me"?

Next:

A man decides he must leave a wife he no longer loves, but before he has told her, she is disabled in an accident and will require full-time care. Does he have a moral duty to stay with her?

Such dilemmas are painful to discuss; others, less daunting, are still provocative.

- Would you be a godfather to my child? What's an atheist's response?
- A man witnesses a petty theft, but doesn't challenge the thief or report it. Should he have done so?
- Was Jimmy Carr morally wrong to avoid tax? And was the PM morally wrong to attack him personally?
- Was it right to hide a copy of Rushdie's "Satanic Verses" from a Muslim visitor?

We had a variety of views to offer on all these issues and reached less than consensus on most. But it was always interesting, challenging and, for me, this Ethical Jury served its declared purpose of secular morality development (amply demonstrating that more is required!).

Ken Hayes