

Extract from Interview with Rev. Dr. John Hunt  
Interviewer Mark Stenhoff (MS)  
Interviewee John Hunt (JH)

**29:38- 43:07**

Views on religion, de-baptism, ordination into the First Church of Atheism

Let's move on to another topic that I think is not supposed to be discussed over dinner tables, um ... beliefs and religion. I know that you've had quite an interesting relationship with religion and the church (*JH laughs*) and I thought you'd like to tell me, Reverend<sup>1</sup> Doctor Hunt, what you (*Both laugh*) have to say about that!

JH: Er, yes, well, um ... When I was six, my parents moved and I ended up going to a Church of England school er, simply because that was the, um ... not quite the nearest, but the nearest school was a Catholic one, and clearly not appropriate. Um, so I ended up going to a Church of England school which, er, meant that we also had to attend Sunday School and then in the final year Sunday School became confirmation classes, at which point I rebelled and, er, dropped out and I was never confirmed. And surprisingly my parents didn't argue at all. So ... for the remainder of my – I mean that was at the end of primary school – after that I was happily an atheist, I suppose, throughout my teens. At some point in my twenties mellowed into being agnostic feeling that perhaps it was a little arrogant to, er, say that one was an atheist, er, but then also in my twenties during the '70s, er ... there was a lot of opposition, er, from various, er, church groups to gay rights.

There was the Festival of Light. There was Mary Whitehouse. There were groups in America including Anita Bryant and ... um ... so, er, and I remember – I think it was 1979 – er, going along to my last CHE conference in Brighton ... er, which I think was about the time that GALHA – the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association – was formed. However, at that point I went off to Switzerland and there didn't seem to be much point in trying to get too involved with them then. Er ... some years later I did join GALHA, er ... the religious opposition hadn't gone away. Er, that led to me getting involved with OutRage, and with OutRage I think the first 'zap' that I went on was at St Alban's Cathedral, and this was the leaving service for the Bishop who had er, I think been offering facilities to er, the homophobic group there. Er ... So we 'did' St Alban's Cathedral. Er ... 1997, just before the election, er, we had a 'zap' in Southwark Cathedral. The following year we famously 'did' Canterbury Cathedral, interrupting the Easter sermon of George Carey and ... as it so happened, the service was being beamed live around the world, so our protest was equally beamed live.

Er ... we didn't always get that sort of coverage. Er ... then, I think it was about 2007, I happened to see a report about a man in Spain using data protection legislation to have his baptismal record stricken, and in Spain he'd been brought up a Roman Catholic. Er ... the Catholic Church weren't happy to do this, so he'd gone to court, and the court at that point had found in his favour. So 2007, I thought 'Well, this is the day of European directives. ... er ... If it works in Spain, it should work in Britain too'. So I contacted the er, Church of England

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<sup>1</sup> See comments below about The First Church of Atheism. This explains our shared humour.

and eventually got a response from them, er ... 'Oh, we don't have a central ruling: you will have to apply to the diocese where the evil deed was done'.

So in my case that happened to be, er, Southwark Cathedral or Southwark Diocese, and eventually I had a response from them 'We have taken legal advice.' Er ... 'What you could do is to contact the National Secular Society, agree with them a form of wording to use in a ... an announcement in The London Gazette, and have that printed.' The London Gazette is a rather obscure publication which dates from around the time of the Great Plague of London, er, and contains assorted legal announcements of interest to a very small percentage of the population.

Anyway, so I contacted the National Secular Society, um, and published, er, an announcement saying that I didn't wish to be known as a Christian, and the, er, Church of England apparently, er, made a note in the baptismal, er, register and said that they were keeping a copy of that issue of The London Gazette with the ... with the register. Now the National Secular Society endeavoured to get this publicised, but, er, for some year ... for some reason it actually took about a year before it got any coverage ... and, so when there was coverage it lasted for some months and then at a social do with friends, er, I was asked by another friend present whether there was still any more mention of debaptism. Well, I didn't know, so I came home and Googled. Er ... and thanks to that, I discovered The First Church of Atheism.

Um ... so I then became a, er, an ordained atheist minister and ... having done that without requiring any course of study or, er, any fee, I don't know how ... I don't know what the procedure is to become an ordained minister with the Church of England – I suspect it's not quite so straightforward – um ... but I then got my bank and credit card company, er, to recognise this and my driving licence and my passport.

Um ... So, yes, campaigning, er ... the issues haven't gone away, er the OutRage, er, interrupted the Easter sermon of George Carey who was Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, er ... Now we've moved on to, er, Justin Welby. When there was the, er, the vote in Parliament on, er, allowing same-sex marriage, he voted against it using, er, free seat in the House of Lords as one of the, er, sixteen, er, bishops there and, er, he was quoted at the time as saying that, yes, he knew that the overwhelming majority of, er, young people in this country feel that church homophobia is, er, anachronistic – and I forget what other, er, adjectives, er, might have, er, been used – but he was well aware of this, yet he still voted against it. Um ... and ... the Church of England doesn't like us ... er ... the Pope ... Fra ... Benedict certainly didn't like us. Francis, er, has come out with one of his, er, curious statements that well, yes, he does sort of like us, but the rest of the Vatican don't seem to be too convinced by this ... um, and ... then there's the whole issue of on what basis has the church founded anyway?

And the more I've read about this in recent years, um, it is – I don't know whether I'm allowed to say this on tape – it's all a load of crap. Um, but er, perhaps another time would be the occasion to expand on that in a great deal more detail.

MS: Sure.

JH: I'm just horrified that we still have a Church of England, er, given that, er, so much is known these days about the more than shaky basis on which the, er, Bible is based ... um ... words fail me.

MS: Yup. Thank you for that. Do you think that your ... er ... lack of faith is in any way moulded by or tempered ... is generated by your sense of being gay? Do you think that in a sense you were an atheist, agnostic/atheist first and then a gay man? Do you think the two things stand independently or ... in other words, were you not a gay man, do you think it's more probably that you would have a faith?

JH: No ... I ... I never had a faith. I was brought up with the supposition that I would have one.

MS: Right. Yes.

JH: But having rebelled against that at the age of eleven, um ... I have been to Damascus. I didn't have a, er ... vision on the road to Damascus there, um, and ... I find it difficult to understand people who are gay and lesbian who have faith and retain it despite being gay and lesbian, and despite all the er, the church opposition, er ... similarly with, er Islam or... I don't think there's any faith that goes out of its way to, er, to welcome us, er ... even Buddhism, er, some Buddhist groups may be relatively happy but I think it has to be said that in religious terms we are far from the ideal ... um ... Although I can't remember who it said ... who it was said, er 'The Lord is my shepherd and he knows I'm gay'. Well in my case, I'm definitely a lost sheep! *(Both laugh.)*