



PICTURED: PROFESSOR SAIFUL ISLAM

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*Saiful Islam is Professor of Materials Chemistry at the University of Bath, a Royal Institution Christmas Lecturer, a patron of Humanists UK, and a proud dad of two.*

### **Is it essential that all children receive a good science education?**

Yes! But not all children need to study science at a high level. It's important that children understand how science works. In doing so you can find out about the world and universe through rational investigation, observation, and evidence, and that science can be full of beauty and exciting discovery. Modern civilisation has been largely built on science working. Literary and artistic education are also crucial. Indeed, science and art often share a similar spirit of wonder. It's also important that a true education system is inclusive of children of all backgrounds.

### **What continues to fascinate you about your research?**

Low carbon energy is one of the most urgent challenges of our time in tackling climate change. The next generation of greener energy technologies depends on new materials and greater understanding. Not all chemists wear lab coats. My research uses powerful computer modelling techniques to help develop new lithium battery materials for electric cars and a new type of solar cell compound called perovskite. So when people ask me what I do, I sometimes say 'I model!'

### **When did you become a humanist?**

I grew up in a Muslim household as my name suggests. My mum was religious and my dad much less so. I don't recall ever having a strong faith and I was probably an atheist or

humanist since my late teens, before I even knew what the terms actually meant. I couldn't see how following a supernatural deity added anything to my understanding of the world around me. I went to a multicultural school in north London with a variety of faiths. But I couldn't see how everyone's religion was right! Through science at school I discovered the beauty of gaining knowledge through evidence and reason. I try to be optimistic and always look on the bright side of life.

### **Which Humanists UK campaign is closest to your heart?**

Repealing blasphemy laws. Such laws are used to discriminate against religious minorities and the non-religious. It's incredibly sad and disturbing that blasphemy or apostasy is still punishable by death in 13 countries (including Pakistan where I was born), and a person can be imprisoned in a further 47 countries. Closer to home, blasphemy remains a criminal offence in Northern Ireland.

### **Tell us about your Royal Institution Christmas Lectures.**

I was hugely honoured to present the prestigious Christmas Lectures in 2016 for BBC TV on the theme of energy (titled *Supercharged: Fuelling the Future*). It's a real privilege to be part of a long line of scientists like Sir David Attenborough, Richard Dawkins, and Carl Sagan. One of our demos achieved a Guinness World Record for the highest voltage (1,200 V) from a lemon battery using more than 1,000 lemons!