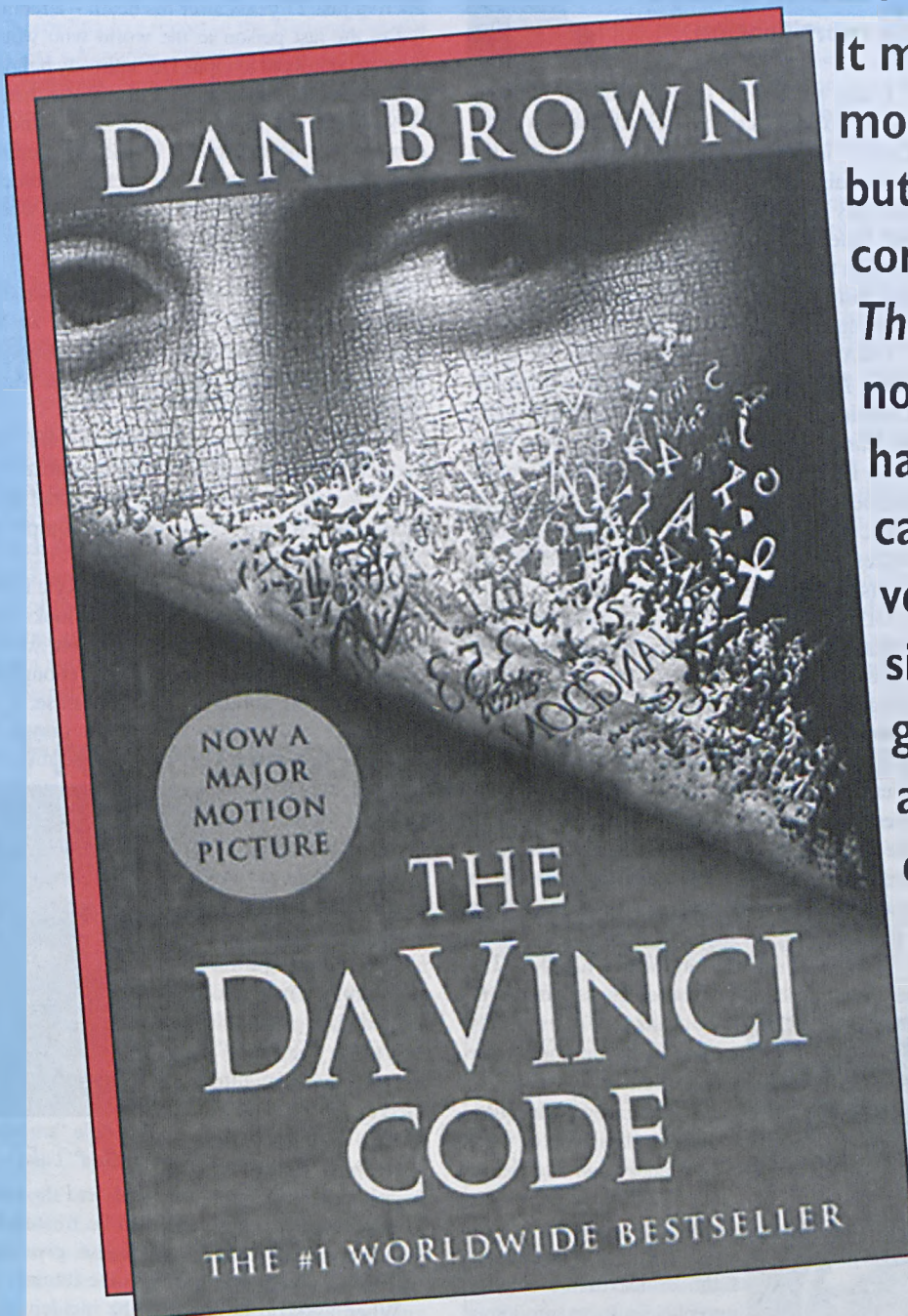


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# The **Free**thinker

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It may be nothing more than fiction, but Dan Brown's controversial novel, *The Da Vinci Code* – now a major film – has had the effect of casting light on a very real, very sinister Catholic group, Opus Dei, and the man who established it – the mad, masochistic Spanish priest, Josemaría Escrivá

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- Praying in space proves a headache for Muslims – p4
- Fundamentalism and Science – centre pages



NOT a lot of people know this, but for the past 14 months I have had a hugely satisfying part-time job as a sales assistant in a shop selling adult material.

For almost nine years, as a self-employed writer working from home, I spent virtually all my days glued to computer screens, located perilously close to the fridge. This was proving damaging to both my eyesight and to my waistline, and I had to do something to break free of the flat, and the annoyingly, cloying companionship of Smirnoff, my black Persian cat.

I am telling you this because I was approached in the store last month by a jovial, middle-aged chap who was in a state of high excitement because he had discovered a new bit of bondage kit. He flashed a photograph (reproduced below), and asked whether I had it in stock. I looked blankly at the object – a barbed wire bracelet of sort.

Now I have learned a great deal about fetish wear and accessories since embarking on my new career, and I was a tad mortified that (a) I was not able to offer the customer what he wanted and (b) did not have the foggiest idea what the object was. It did not help that he was unable to shed any light on it either, apart from saying it looked “painfully wicked and very sexy – and I want one for my next S & M party!”

“Lend me the photo, and I’ll see whether I can source it via the internet,” I promised. This was a job for Google – which came up with the goods the moment I entered the word “mortification”. Within minutes I had identified the item – a cillice – but could find no way of getting my hands on one, short of ripping it off the thigh of a member of Opus Dei, the creepy Catholic sect which counts among its members Ruth Kelly, the new Equality minister. (See page 6.)

A cillice, I learned from a website called ODAN (the Opus Dei Awareness Network), is “a spiked chain worn around the upper thigh by Opus Dei members for two hours each day, except for Church feast days, Sundays, and certain times of the year. This is perhaps the

most shocking of the corporal mortifications, and generally Opus Dei members are extremely hesitant to admit that they use them. It is a painful mortification which leaves small prick holes in the flesh, and makes the Opus Dei members tentative about wearing swim suits wherever non-Opus Dei members may be.”

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE is at pains to track down an item of corporal mortification**



I also learn from ODAN that the cillice – thanks to the recently-released *The Da Vinci Code* – is giving Opus Dei members a little more pain than they would normally enjoy – and they are fizzing with anger that their peculiar little practices were exposed to millions through the medium of Dan Brown’s controversial best-seller, and will be exposed to millions more through the film adaptation of it.

ODAN makes it clear that it does not agree with *The Da Vinci Code*’s depiction of Christianity, and does not question the divinity of Christ. “However, where *The Da Vinci Code* is accurate is in its depiction of the blind obedience of the fictional Opus Dei character, Silas, the albino monk. His behaviour demonstrates the absolute control and obedience that exists in Opus Dei today.”

ODAN claims that former members have contacted it with stories of pressure exerted by Opus Dei, which “has a culture that demands obedience in every situation”. They testify that they have been forced by Opus Dei directors to hand over their salaries, abandon past friendships, ignore dubious financial irregularities, turn over their mail to be read (without the senders’ knowledge), aggressively recruit, prepare monthly statistical reports about potential members, and are prevented from attending siblings’ weddings.

If they did not go along with what Opus Dei requested of them, in some cases dishonest acts, they were told they risked eternal damnation and some were eventually asked to leave. Members who question Opus Dei practices are re-primanded and often led to the following quote from Opus Dei’s founder, “If one of my children abandons the fight, or leaves the war, or turns his back, let him know that he betrays us all. Jesus Christ, the Church, his brothers and sisters in the work ... it would be treason to consent to the tiniest act of unfaithfulness ... in these moments.”

Opus Dei was founded by

Josemaría Escrivá, a seemingly deranged, megalomaniac priest from Madrid. Escrivá is reputed to have once flogged himself 1,000 times in the presence of his secretary, until the floor and the walls of his office resembled an abattoir!

During the organisation’s early days it had strong links to the fascist regime of General Franco and has always been seen as a conservative grouping within the Catholic church. Despite its sinister reputation, the late Pope John Paul II – saint-maker *extraordinaire* – held the group in high esteem, and canonised Escrivá just 27 years after his death – a record.

I’m the last person in the world who would want to contribute to Opus Dei’s already bulging coffers, but the thought did occur to me that, if they were to publicly market the cillice – and its companion, the discipline, a knitted macrame string used for flagellating the back and buttocks – they would send sado-masochists everywhere into paroxysms of ecstasy.

“WE are confident that Kyle is in heaven today because of his trust in Jesus Christ as his Saviour,” says a statement from the congregation of the University Baptist Church in Waco, Texas.

Wrong! Kyle was consigned to oblivion because he was too damn dumb to realise that in the *real* world – and not the religious La-La land in which he dwelt – electrical equipment and water don’t mix terribly well.

The Kyle in question was the Rev Kyle Lake, 33, first in line when boyish good looks and perfect teeth were handed out – but oh, what a pity he did not stick around long enough to collect a decent dollop of common sense.

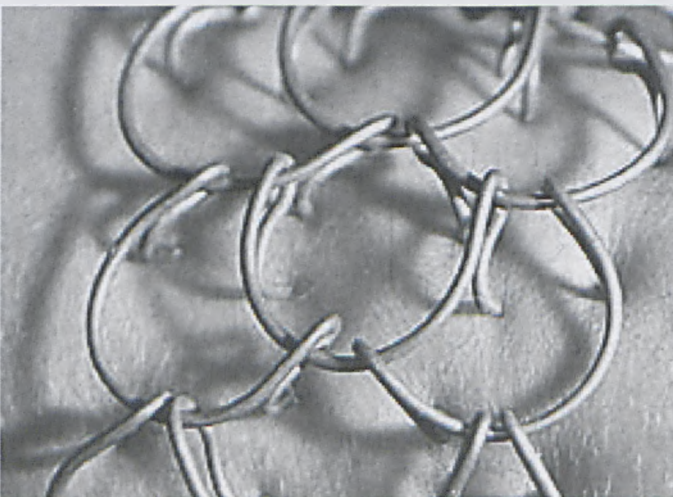
Minutes after Kyle delivered a prayer in which he beseeched God to “surprise me”, he stepped into the baptismal pool, and, while waist deep in water, reached out for a corded electric microphone.

The congregation of 800, who had joined Lake in the “surprise me, God” prayer, then saw him electrocuted.

The woman Lake was about to baptise hadn’t yet stepped into the pool, and thus had a lucky escape. But she had to be treated for shock, and will, if she has any sense, give baptism pools a very wide berth in the future.

When asked if he thought the incident was the result of Lake wanting the Almighty to surprise him, Terry Esau, author of *Surprise Me – a 30-Day Faith Experiment*, who had spoken at the service and witnessed the accident, told reporters: “I wish I could answer that. I honestly, truly don’t know. That gets you into all kinds of really, really hard questions.”

Hard questions? “Hot water” more likely!



A cillice, pronounced sy-las. They are reputed to be made exclusively for Opus Dei members by an exclusive order of Spanish nuns



The Rev Kyle “surprise me, God” Lake



# Religion? Stuff it, say British youngsters

A NEW report published last month by the Church of England indicates that contrary to its own propaganda, young people are not "on a spiritual journey", nor do they have a "God-shaped hole" that they are longing to fill. Indeed, the report shows that, generally, young people are perfectly happy without God in their lives and prefer a range of other activities to fill their Sundays (and the rest of their lives).

According to a report in the National Secular Society's *Newsline*, "their image of church ... is of cardigans, sandals and sex abuse. Other words they use to describe religion are 'corrupt', 'stagnant' and 'traditionalist'."

The C of E report, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, is based on interviews with 120 young non-churchgoers between 15-25.

As usual with these reports, says *Newsline*, the Church has issued yet another "urgent wake up call". The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, writes of a large "mismatch" between the Church and the views of those aged 15 to 25. He says: "The research suggests young people are happy with life as it is, that they have felt no need for a transcendent something else and regard the Church as boring and irrelevant."

The number of young people attending church has halved since 1979, and now fewer than 7 percent of those aged 15 to 19 and 5 percent of those aged 20 to 29 attend church. The number of children in Sunday school is less than a tenth of what it was in 1930.

The authors began their work believing that

young people with no connection with Christianity would be yearning for some kind of spiritual "fulfilment". The truth was they aren't, and nor are they disenchanted or "lost in a meaningless world". Instead the young people found the world meaningful as it was, and they didn't need supernatural props.

"The data indicated that they found meaning and significance in the reality of everyday life, which the popular arts helped them to understand and imbibe," the book says. The researchers established that young people found happiness primarily through the family. They had little sense of sin or fear of death, but they were afraid of growing old.

The mission adviser for youth and emerging Church at the Church Mission Society, Jonny Baker, said: "This book is astonishing. Putting it bluntly, it suggests that many of our assumptions about young people, their world view and the quest for spirituality are wrong. This has implications for the future of mission, youth ministry and the Church."

But the authors of the report are not giving up. They still believe they can infect these young people with their own superstitious approach to life, if they try hard enough. One of the authors of the book, Bob Mayo, said: "The people we talked to were happy with life, they were enjoying themselves but were doing this with an almost complete ignorance of Christianity – a total lack of a working knowledge. That is the alarming thing for the

Church. The positive thing is that they are not opposed to what the Church is saying, it is just that they have not been exposed to it. In many cases they seem interested but no one has ever talked to them about it before."

"This, then, explains the C of E's enthusiasm for church schools," *Newsline* comments.

The pilot interviews included a picture of Salvador Dalí's Christ of St John of the Cross but it had to be dropped from the main interviews because it only produced one response: "Oh, my grandmother has that picture." Discussions about Buffy the Vampire Slayer failed to open out into talk about "alternative spiritual realities". Clubbing, rather than being a way of "transcending oneself and touching a deeper reality", was simply a good night out. Even discussions about the September 11 attacks failed to elicit any mention of religion.

Their creed could be defined as "This world, and all life in it is meaningful as it is," translated as "There is no need to posit ultimate significance elsewhere beyond the immediate experience of everyday life." The goal in life of young people was happiness achieved primarily through the family."

The authors conclude: "We live in an instant culture, which cannot be reached by instant missionary tactics. And the desire for happiness is valid and should not be criticised by clergy. It can only be outclassed by a Christ-like way of life, for in Him alone is true happiness to be found."

## Free expression under attack in Europe, warns NSS

FREE expression is under unprecedented threat in Europe, the National Secular Society told Council of Europe Ministers last month.

Speaking in a debate "Free Expression and Respect for Religion" at the French Senate in Paris on May 18, Keith Porteous Wood, the Executive Director of the NSS, spoke out against demands from religious leaders for the introduction of a Europe-wide code to enforce "respect for religious feelings".

Mr Wood said that although blasphemy is no longer the repressive tool that it once was in Europe, it was sneaking back in a new guise: "Blasphemy has a new cloak. Its new name is 'respect'. We are told that our freedom of speech – so precious, so hard-won – must now be curtailed in the name of 'respect' for religion, respect for gods and prophets that many in Europe discarded years ago."

Mr Wood said that, following the Danish cartoon saga, the clamour for new restrictions on the press and on artists has become stronger.

"A tide of demands for censorship is now engulfing Europe. The Vatican rails constantly against films, books, TV programmes and art exhibitions which it considers 'disrespectful'.

Often it calls for them to be banned, and sometimes it succeeds – as it did in Britain with the satirical cartoon *Popetown*. Reports have just emerged that the Bavarian Premier has called

### US bookshops ban *Free Inquiry*

BORDERS and Waldenbooks stores in the US decided not to stock the April-May issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine because it contains some of the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that provoked deadly protests among Muslims in several countries.

"For us, the safety and security of our customers and employees is a top priority, and we believe that carrying this issue could challenge that priority," Borders Group Inc spokeswoman Beth Bingham said.

The magazine, published by the Council for Secular Humanism, included four of the drawings that originally appeared in a Danish newspaper in September.

Bingham said. "We absolutely support the rights of *Free Inquiry* to publish the cartoons. We've just chosen not to carry this particular issue in our stores."

for new laws against blasphemy. This comes hot on the heels of a Vatican aide telling a UNESCO conference here in Paris that the Mohammed cartoons were an abuse of human dignity and that every means possible should be adopted (presumably including new laws) to prevent this so-called abuse."

Mr Wood continued: "But sometimes religion deserves to be disrespected. The horrendous and ongoing abuse of children in the Catholic Church demands to be exposed, the exploitative, money-grubbing cults need to be examined, the manipulative political interference of religious leaders should be questioned. All these important, vital activities risk being curtailed if we allow the concept of blasphemy – or some similar privilege – to be re-introduced into Europe.

"It is in all our interests to stop this now. It is our duty as democrats, as protectors of human autonomy and defenders of artistic expression to say no, no, no to those who want 'respect' for ideas that many of us do not and will not respect."

• The full text of the address can be read on [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk).





# Muslim Council denies homophobia U-turn

THE Muslim Council of Britain earned itself a pat on the back earlier this year when the MCB's advisor of equality issues, Muhammed Aziz, endorsed dialogue with gay groups, and indicated the MCB's commitment to tackle prejudice and discrimination against gay people.

Aziz made this commitment during round table equality talks that included gay lobby group Stonewall. The talks were sponsored by the Equality and Diversity Forum of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). Aziz was named on the forum's membership list as an MCB advisor and was seen as representing the MCB at the forum.

The DTI talks resulted in agreement on a five-year plan for dialogue between Muslim and gay groups and for joint action against homophobia within the Muslim community and against Islamophobia within the gay community.

But immediately after the media extensively reported that the MCB was softening its line on homosexuality, Inayat Bunglawala, media spokesperson for the MCB, disowned Aziz, and declared "There are no talks with any gay groups anywhere."

In a letter in the *Observer* in April, Bunglawala wrote: "Your correspondent, Jamie Doward, claims that the Muslim Council of Britain has made a 'stunning U-turn' after its senior members 'ripped up' a 'five-year plan to reach out to Britain's gay community' only days after signing up to the strategy (*Observer*, April 23).

"Had your correspondent taken the elementary step of actually getting in touch with the MCB before writing his story he would have

quickly learned that there has never actually been such a strategy - it is entirely fictional.

"Our position on this issue has always been clear and remains unchanged: we believe that the practice of homosexuality is sinful in Islam."

Bunglawala also told the Islam TV Channel that the MCB rejected dialogue with gay representatives. Opposing any Muslim and gay cooperation on equality issues, he reiterated the MCB's hardline homophobic condemnation of same-sex relationships as "sinful" and "not acceptable".

"We are deeply saddened that the Muslim Council of Britain has slammed the door on dialogue with the gay community and has rejected proposals to tackle homophobia," said gay Muslim Aaron Saeed, who is the Muslim Affairs spokesperson of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender human rights group OutRage!

"OutRage! and Stonewall are willing to work with the MCB to combat homophobia and Islamophobia. Sadly, the MCB is unwilling to reciprocate our offer of cooperation and solidarity.

"We applaud Mr Aziz's efforts to promote constructive engagement between the gay and Muslim communities. It is a great pity his commendable, generous outreach has been dashed by Mr Bunglawala and the rest of the MCB leadership," said Saeed.

OutRage! spokesperson Peter Tatchell confirms that he has written to MCB leader Sir Iqbal Sacranie "many times" in the last few years, urging "mutual understanding, tolerance and respect."

"All our efforts to promote an exchange of ideas and a common agenda for equality have been ignored by the MCB," said Tatchell.

"It was a big setback when Sir Iqbal Sacranie earlier this year denounced gay people as harmful, immoral, unacceptable and diseased.

"Official news releases on the MCB's website attack gay equality and demonise same-sex relationships as 'offensive', 'immoral' and 'repugnant'. Some of the MCB's tirades against lesbians and gays echo the homophobic hate language of the BNP. The MCB opposed all the gay equality reforms of the last decade. On every issue, it supported legal discrimination.

"The MCB opposed an equal age of consent, same-sex civil partnerships and the outlawing of homophobic discrimination in the workplace. It also backed the retention of Section 28 and a ban on gay couples fostering or adopting children," said Tatchell.

He added: "One reason the MCB refuses to participate in Holocaust Memorial Day is because it objects to the ceremony including a commemoration of what it dismisses as 'the so-called gay genocide'. The MCB regards the murder of gay people in Nazi death camps as unworthy of remembrance."

Tatchell also pointed out that "this year's Festival of Muslim Cultures is being funded by the Home Office and the British Council. Its aim is to showcase the 'diversity and plurality' of Muslim communities. But the festival has banned gay Muslim events from its programme, allegedly at the insistence of the MCB."

MALAYSIA'S National Space Agency has had to convene a conference to consider how Muslims should pray in space.

The conference followed a nationwide competition in the majority-Muslim country which narrowed the field to four astronaut candidates, three of whom are Muslims.

Two will eventually be trained and sent into space by Russia, and Malaysia's space agency - Angkasa - said it had been scratching its head over how Muslim rituals could be properly carried out in orbit.

Performing ablutions for Muslim prayers with water rationing in space, and preparing food according to Islamic standards, were among issues that needed addressing, said Angkasa's director-general, Mazlan Othman.

"So far, Angkasa has not discussed these matters with Russia because the candidates have not been decided, and the needs of Malaysian astronauts have not been determined," Mazlan was quoted as saying.

The astronauts will also visit the International Space Station, which circles the earth 16 times in 24 hours, so another difficult question is how to pray five times a day as

## Muslims in a spin over life in space

required by Islam, said Othlam.

Muslims also have to turn towards Mecca to pray, and working out which direction that will be while hovering above the earth might also be challenging.

The two-day Islam and Life in Space seminar brings together 150 scientists, astronauts, religious scholars and academics.

An official from the Malaysian Astronomy and Islamic Law Association said the gathering would be the first time the Islamic world mulled life in space.

The requirement to pray five times per day would be a challenge if the "day" is the 90 minutes it takes their spacecraft to orbit Earth. "Any legal scholar advising these astronauts would simply have to pick various times that would roughly correspond to their morning, noon, afternoon, sunset and night prayers," said Alan Godlas, a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Also, facing Mecca while zooming around the planet at 28,000 kilometres per hour will be tricky. Godlas says that merely facing earth might have to suffice.

Another particularly thorny problem is that of relieving oneself in space.

Islam prohibits facing the *Qiblah* (the direction of Mecca) while defecating. The Prophet said "if you go to defecate, do not face the *Qiblah* nor turn your back toward it. Instead, you should turn to your left side or your right side ... It is something forbidden in both open and enclosed areas and it is best to refrain from doing so as much as possible out of respect for the *Qiblah*".

It is also stated in the Koran that one should enter a toilet with the left foot first while praying for protection. You are not permitted to enter a loo while carrying anything bearing the name of Allah, such as the Koran, or any book with the name of Allah in it, or jewellery such as bracelets and necklaces engraved with the name of Allah.

**Editor's note: I could find no rules on which way to face when taking a dump in Mecca itself. Can anyone throw any light on what must be a particularly tricky procedure?**



## Christian Voice defies order to remove anti-gay hate site

STAFFORDSHIRE Police last month ordered a fanatical evangelical group to shut down an anti-gay website parodying a police site established to tackle homophobia.

But, at the time of going to press, the *Freethinker* found that Christian Voice, which set up the spoof **True-vision.org.uk** site, had not complied with the police order.

Anyone logging onto the site would assume it was the real True Vision site set up by the police to encourage the reporting of hate crime.

But if one examines the site, it soon becomes clear that its intention is to pour scorn on the notion of hate crimes against lesbians and gays.

Under the section "What is the point of this site?" comes this explanation: "We see the police sucking up to homosexuals, even advertising for recruits in homosexual magazines, we see Christianity under threat from politicians and the police and we see Christian principles abandoned by our politically-correct police forces."

When confronted by the *Pink Paper*, Christian Voice's national director Stephen Green said: "You have a scoop. I have received a letter from Staffordshire police ordering me to close down the site immediately or face the threat of legal action."

"I challenge them to go ahead with that legal action," he defiantly added. He defended the site, claiming it was not homophobic, but that Christian Voice objected to gays being given priority over all victims of crime.

According to the *Pink Paper*, "with more openly gay officers joining the police, Green believes forces are 'harassing and arresting innocent Christian preachers' and that 'there is a link between the two'."

National True Vision project manager PC Peter Rigby confirmed that the organisation, supported by the Association of Chief Police Officers, was looking into the possibility of taking legal action against Christian Voice.

He said: "The ironic thing is that with the



Christian Voice's Stephen Green

real site people are also able to report whether they have been the victim of a religious hate crime, maybe because of being Christian. Yet this organisation is targeting the gay community – that doesn't seem very Christian does it?"

Bob Hodgson, co-chair of the Metropolitan Police Service's gay independent advisory group said: "It is despicable that anyone would seek to hijack the reporting of homophobic incidents for their own purposes.

"We applaud any and all attempts to stop them doing so. Anything which might deter gay people reporting crime or prevent police getting information that people thought they were giving in good faith is completely unacceptable and shows a complete disregard for the sanctity of human life."

Phil Greasley, client services manager of the anti-homophobic charity Galop said: "It is clearly wrong for an organisation's website to be copied for the purpose of propagating a totally contrary message to that of the real True Vision.

"Reading the first few lines it looked as if the spoof might even become amusing but only slightly further on it becomes clear that it is really quite vindictive and deliberately misleading, giving 'facts' which could not be further from the real truth."

The real True Vision site, supported by 40 out of the country's 43 police forces, can be found at [report-it.org.uk](http://report-it.org.uk).

## ASBO silences noisy preacher

A SELFISH and irritating street preacher who has been shouting his message through a huge amplifier in a crowded shopping street for years on end has, at last, been given an Anti-Social Behaviour Order (ASBO).

Philip Howard, 52, was ordered by a court not to use "any amplification device" in Oxford Street, London, where he has been grating on the nerves, and possibly even damaging the hearing, of shoppers for years.

Westminster City Council said that it had

been forced to bring the action at Horseferry Road Magistrates' Court after receiving numerous complaints.

All its attempts to strike a deal with Howard to curtail his activities had failed. The court was told that Howard, whose address was given as an hotel in Paddington, had used the megaphone to verbally harass individual members of the public at Oxford Circus, and on a traffic island on Regent Street. He also preached at shoppers near Selfridges.

## Priest jailed for life for nun's murder

A 68-year-old priest was jailed for 15 years to life imprisonment in Ohio, US, after being found guilty last month of stabbing a Roman Catholic nun to death as she prepared for Easter services at a hospital 26 years ago.

Sister Margaret Ann Pahl was stabbed 31 times through an altar cloth, with the punctures forming an upside down cross. Her killer, the Rev Gerald Robinson, then anointed her forehead with a smudge of her blood to humiliate her in death, prosecutors said.

Robinson, who conducted Sister Pahl's funeral, had worked closely with the nun at the Mercy Hospital chapel, where her body was discovered on April 5, 1980.

He had been an early suspect, but wasn't charged until two years ago, when police got an unexpected break. A Toledo woman came forward claiming she'd been sexually abused as a child by Catholic priests during Satanic rituals. Although her claims had not been proven, her mention of Father Robinson prompted detectives to re-open the murder case.

Prosecutors suggested that Robinson had a strained relationship with the nun, a strict taskmaster, and that he had reached a breaking point with her that day.

The jury deliberated for six hours before finding him guilty of murder, and Judge Thomas Osowik immediately sentenced him to the mandatory term of 15 years to life in prison. Robinson, who wore his priest's collar throughout the trial, showed no emotion.

The verdict came after nine days of testimony, during which witnesses linked a sword-shaped letter opener found in Robinson's room with the nun's wounds and blood stains found on the altar cloth that covered her body.

In a videotaped interview with police just after he was arrested in April 2004, Robinson said he was stunned when he walked into the chapel and the hospital's other chaplain accused him of murder.

Jurors watched the tape during the trial and also saw how Robinson, left alone in a small room for a few minutes, folded his hands and began to whisper in a barely audible voice. He whispered the word "sister" and then prayed again with his head bowed, at one point saying, "Oh my Jesus".



Sister Pahl and her killer, Rev Gerald Robinson



# Making Ruth Kelly Equality Minister 'is like putting an alcoholic in charge of the bar'

*This surely is a case of putting an alcoholic in charge of the bar. Equal opportunity is one thing, but this selection defies common sense. What is at stake is the happiness and welfare of human beings. Belonging to a religious organisation that holds extreme reactionary views invalidates this woman's objectivity.*

THIS comment, posted by Robin Bather, of Metepec, Mexico, on the *Times Online* website, was one of many similar observations that appeared following the announcement that Ruth Kelly had been made Equality Minister in Tony Blair's cabinet reshuffle last month. (She was formerly Education Secretary.)

Kelly is a member of the secretive conservative Opus Dei. After taking up her new post, she refused to deny that homosexuality was a sin, and strongly resisted pressure to give up her new job.

Another comment posted was from Bob Finbow, of Haverhill, who said:

*I am always very wary when people belonging to extreme religious groups become involved in politics. Whatever they outwardly profess, I believe that such people will inevitably involve those beliefs when making decisions which affect their public life. All religions, by their nature, are irrational, being based upon beliefs for which there is not a shred of objective evidence. I do not feel that people who strongly hold such beliefs should be in a position to influence the laws of a secular democracy. In this particular instance, for someone whose beliefs must make them judge homosexuals as "sinful", it is irrationality carried to the point of lunacy to give them control over a department making judgements on the treatment of such people.*

A devout Roman Catholic, Kelly also pointedly declined to endorse same-sex civil partnerships and adoptions by gay couples, which were backed overwhelmingly by Labour MPs.

*The Times* reported that Ms Kelly, 38, had been absent from every important vote on homosexual equality since Labour came to power in 1997.

As a member of Opus Dei, the inspiration for Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, Ms Kelly is required to extend the "holiness" of the society into her working life. Opus Dei regards practising homosexuals as serious sinners.

John Denham, the Labour chairman of the Commons Home Affairs select committee, said: "It is obvious that the introduction of civil partnerships for gay people was one of the most significant and positive things this



Ruth Kelly

Government has done. It is essential that any minister with responsibility for these issues feels comfortable with that agenda."

Asked if she regarded homosexuality as a sin, Ms Kelly declined to say. She said: "Is it possible to be a practising Catholic and hold a portfolio in government? The answer is yes. Why? Because I am collectively responsible for Cabinet decisions, I firmly believe in equality and that everyone should be free of discrimination and I will fight to the end to make sure that's the case. I think everyone in society should be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential."

When asked the question again, she said: "I don't think it's right for politicians to start making moral judgments about people; it's the last thing I want to do or want to get into." Pressed on BBC Radio 5 Live about her voting record, she said: "Everybody is entitled to express their views in free votes on matters of conscience."

Ms Kelly enraged equal rights campaigners further, when she told Sky News that she would not support civil partnerships and gay couples adopting: "As a private individual on

votes of conscience I will express my views in the way that I think fit."

Yet when she was made Education Secretary last year, Ms Kelly, a mother of four, was responsible for millions of pounds of government funding for research into stem cells, which is fiercely opposed by the Roman Catholic Church.

"I am a member of this Government and I will not only stand by the policies of this Government, but also, where I am responsible for implementing them, I will," she said at the time.

Labour MPs were scornful of Ms Kelly's move during the Cabinet reshuffle from education to the Communities and Local Government portfolio, which includes the equality brief. One minister said: "This either speaks volumes about our commitment to equality or it is another sign that the reshuffle was not thought through properly."

Gwyneth Dunwoody, the veteran Labour MP, said: "I am glad the Prime Minister has a sense of humour when it comes to appointing a Minister for Women and Equality. I look forward to developments with great interest."

Ms Kelly faced further criticism when she attended a meeting with key members of the proposed Commission for Equality and Human rights. Trevor Phillips, the chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality, and Jenny Watson, the chairwoman of the Equal Opportunities Commission, were present but there was no room for Stonewall, the gay rights organisation.

Ben Summerskill, the Stonewall chief executive, said: "It is curious, as normally we would expect to be invited to something with the CRE and EOC."

Ms Kelly will have to champion the Equality Bill, which will make it illegal for hotels and bed-and-breakfast owners to turn away same-sex couples.

## Ex-Catholic priest sentenced to five years' imprisonment for abusing boys

A FORMER Catholic brother, from the St John of God order in New Zealand, has been sentenced to five years' imprisonment for sexually abusing boys at a Christchurch school in the 1970s.

A High Court jury last month found Bernard Kevin McGrath, 58, guilty of 21 charges and not guilty of a further 23. The charges related to nine victims, who were aged between seven and 15 years, during McGrath's time as a teacher and dorm master at Maryland's School for troubled boys.

The jury, which deliberated for almost 33 hours, was told during the trial that McGrath was convicted on similar charges in 1993. In sentencing, Justice Chisholm said an aggravating feature of the offending was the vulnerability of the victims because of their particular disabilities. "You were there to be their protector but the dreadful thing is that, in fact, you were their abuser, they were trapped, they just had nowhere to turn, no one to go to," he said.



# Catholics move quickly to counter the negative impact of *The Da Vinci Code*

LEADING UK Catholics and members of Opus Dei have formed a group to counter the negative impact of the film *The Da Vinci Code*, according to a BBC report.

The Da Vinci Code Response Group, which also includes a Benedictine abbot and two priests, has condemned Dan Brown's book as "fiction trading as fact".

The group criticised its "damaging and grotesque" account of their faith, and believes the film should carry "a health warning".

The book, which has sold 40 million copies worldwide, has been attacked for portraying the Catholic Church as a shadowy organisation that has spent 2,000 years covering up Christ's bloodline.

The response group is being co-ordinated by Dr Austen Ivereigh, the director for public affairs of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, the Archbishop of Westminster and head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales.

In a statement the group said: "We believe *The Da Vinci Code* is fun and harmless in so far as it is treated as fiction. We do not believe in condemnations, boycotts or protests.

This is in stark contrast to the confrontational approach been taken by the Vatican, with senior bishops calling for the film to be boycotted. Archbishop Angelo Amato, of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, said: "If such lies and errors had been directed at the Koran and Holocaust they would have justly provoked a world uprising."

Dr Ivereigh sees things differently. "Prickliness on the part of Christians leads us into the trap laid by Dan Brown – that the church is on the defensive because it is

engaged in a cover-up.

"But we are also exasperated that many people without a good understanding of the Catholic Church and its history have been understandably deceived by Dan Brown's claim that the *The Da Vinci Code* is based on facts and respectable theories.

"That deception is likely to be reinforced by the film because images are much more powerful than words." He added in an interview with the BBC that, according to a survey done by his group, many people who read the book had come away with the idea that it was true that the Catholic Church was involved in a conspiracy to cover up the marriage of Jesus. "Furthermore, readers of the novel were four times more likely than non-readers to believe that Opus Dei has carried out murders."

Opus Dei, with 86,000 members worldwide, are particularly angry about their order being portrayed as murderous and power-crazed.

The organisation arranged special information evenings in London for the public and has asked Sony Pictures, which produced the new film, to include a caption explaining the film is fiction. Sony, and the film's director Ron Howard, have flatly refused to do so. Howard said it no more needed a fiction disclaimer than a spy movie.

Opus Dei's communications director Jack Valero, said he believed it was important to make it clear that the film was fictional.

"The book is obviously trying to present fictional things as factual, and trying to deceive people in that way," he said.

"That's why Opus Dei asked for a disclaimer at the beginning of the film just to say

this is pure fiction, and then that's fine, you can say what you like.

"But if you're trying to get people to believe it's fact when in fact it's fiction, then that's cheating really."



**Atheist actors in *The Da Vinci Code* include Paul Bettany, left and Sir Ian McKellen**

It has since emerged that at least two of the stars in *The Da Vinci Code* are atheists.

Paul Bettany, who plays the murderous Opus Dei monk, Silas, a dedicated user of the cillice – says he doesn't believe in God. In an interview with the *Sun*, Bettany (whose character has particularly enraged Opus Dei), said "I was brought up a Catholic. I'm lapsed. From the age of three I was with nuns. Now I'm an atheist."

And Sir Ian McKellen, in a laconic interview broadcast on the BBC's *Today* programme on May 16, said: "The idea that Jesus had a wife and child – to those of us who are not Christians – does not seem too remarkable. It's rather nice for him and his wife, and if that bothers some people, well, I'm sorry about that. It doesn't sound to me like a controversy, but if it appears to be, then good for us. Being controversial is always good for selling tickets."

## Cardinal Sacks Gay Aide

job he had to do. Since he was the spokesperson for the Cardinal, Murphy-O'Connor clearly felt he had to act because homosexual acts are regarded by the Church as a sin," a friend was quoted as saying.

Mr Noon is reported to have received a £20,000 pay-off and in return agreed not to speak in public about his sacking.

Noon's sacking has been roundly condemned by the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) as "sickening hypocrisy." Terry Sanderson, a columnist on *Gay Times* magazine, and spokesman for GALHA said: "Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor wrote to *The Times* only last month that homosexuals "have the same entitlement to legal rights as anyone else" and that "the Church has

consistently spoken out against any discrimination against gay persons". Yet he has presided over the hounding of one of his colleagues from his job for being gay. The sickening hypocrisy is almost unbelievable."

Mr Sanderson, added: "The Catholic Church is creating a climate of persecution for gay people around the world. Last month the Pope launched two ferocious attacks on the concept of gay partnerships being legally recognised, and now we find that gay people will not be permitted to work for Catholic organisations, even in a non-religious capacity.

This smacks of persecution. If this level of victimisation continues, there are going to be even more casualties. The Cardinal and all those in the Catholic hierarchy should stop now and ask themselves where all this hate-mongering and discrimination is leading. We fear even more for the safety of gay people in Catholic countries where their rights are not protected."

THE head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales last month sacked a senior aide because he was gay. Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor was personally involved in the dismissal of his personal press officer, according to *The Mail on Sunday*.

A spokesman for the Cardinal declined to deny the claim, fuelling controversy over the Catholic Church's position on homosexuality.

Stephen Noon, 35, joined the Archbishop's staff in 2003 on a salary of around £35,000. Mr Noon, who was previously a press officer for the Scottish Nationalist Party, was handed the brief to improve the Catholic Church's image. He held the post for less than a year.

Friends say relations with the Cardinal deteriorated after Mr Noon's long-term partner visited him at his office.

"His partner came to the office at the end of the day and was introduced to the Cardinal. Shortly afterwards the Church made it clear that his sexuality was incompatible with the



THERE has been much talk about fundamentalism of late. While most people's thought on the topic go to the 9/11 attacks against the United States, or to the ongoing war in Iraq, fundamentalism is affecting science and its relationship to society in a way that may have dire long-term consequences.

Of course, religious fundamentalism has always had a history of antagonism with science, and – before the birth of modern science – with philosophy, the age-old vehicle of the human attempt to exercise critical thinking and rationality to solve problems and pursue knowledge.

### The many facets of fundamentalism

"Fundamentalism" is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of the Social Sciences* as "A movement that asserts the primacy of religious values in social and political life and calls for a return to a 'fundamental' or pure form of religion." In its broadest sense, however, fundamentalism is a form of ideological intransigence which is not limited to religion, but includes political positions as well (for example, some extreme forms of "environmentalism").

In the United States, the main version of the modern conflict between science and religious fundamentalism is epitomised by the infamous Scopes trial that occurred in 1925 in Tennessee, when the teaching of evolution was challenged for the first time (Larson 1997; Pigliucci 2001). That battle is still being fought – for example, in Dover, Pennsylvania, where at the time of this writing a court of law is considering the legitimacy of teaching "intelligent design" (a form of creationism) in public schools. [Editor's note: On December 20, 2005 Judge Jones issued his 139-page findings of fact and decision, ruling that the Dover mandate was unconstitutional, and barred intelligent design from being taught in public school science classrooms. The current Dover school board president stated that the board does not intend to appeal the ruling.]

Yet, even in the US, creationism is certainly not the only battleground between fundamentalism and science, and in some respects, it isn't even the most crucial. The Bush administration, for example, has systematically overruled or ignored scientific findings in areas ranging from global warming to drug safety in order to affirm their ideologically-determined set of priorities (Powell 2002; Wadman 2005). Europeans have their own problems with dogmatic thinking too, albeit arising from a different historical and cultural background. Just consider the sometimes irrational positions taken by Green parties in Germany and Britain (eg, indiscriminate, as opposed to reasoned, rejection of stem cell research, or of genetically engineered crops), or the fact that Italy has become the most restrictive European country on matters of stem cell research and *in vitro* fertilisation, largely due to the still strong influence of the Catholic Church in Italian

internal political affairs.

In this essay, however, I will not focus on specific controversies, but rather on what I consider a largely unappreciated dimension of the problem. It seems to me that much of the debates surrounding the science-society-religion cultural triangle are due to the failure of scientists and science educators – and hence of the media, elected officials and the public at large – to appreciate two crucial philosophical points. These concern the distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism, and the distinction between "is" and "ought" – ie, between matters of facts and value judgments.

While I am certainly not as naïve as to suggest that simply explaining these two points to colleagues and the public will be enough to instantly "solve" the problems posed by the so-called "culture wars". I am confident that this is a good place for discussion that should be pursued in search of a long-term reconciliation. I shall therefore explore these two philosophical issues within the context of fundamentalism (religious and not) and science, with the hope of helping to provide scientists and educators with two additional, formidable, intellectual and educational weapons.

I should also warn the reader that the following treatment glosses over several subtleties of the philosophical debate that are still occupying professional philosophers. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the major points are both clear enough and highly relevant, so as to deserve a much wider presentation that has been the case so far.

### Science and religion: methodological vs philosophical naturalism

One of the basic fears of religious fundamentalists who challenge the teaching of evolution, be they "young-earth" creationists, "old-earth" creationists, or the slightly more sophisticated crowd of "intelligent design" supporters (see Scott 1977 for the differences between these and other versions of creationism) springs from the idea that the teaching of evolution starts a slippery slope that inevitably ends with atheism. Leaving aside the obvious point that atheism is in fact a legitimate philosophical position that – in a pluralistic society – ought to receive the same degree of respect as any other metaphysical school of thought, slippery slope arguments are in fact logically fallacious (Epstein 1999), and the fallacy lies in the fact that most people (including, alas, prominent science popularisers such as Richard Dawkins) don't make the subtle but crucial distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism.

Naturalism, broadly speaking, is the idea that nature, and natural phenomena, is all there is – as opposed to the supernatural realm and phenomena. As a philosophical position, this has a long history of elaboration and debate,

# Fundamentalism and Science

and it obviously characterises any individual who considers himself an atheist. Philosophical naturalism, then, is the (strong) metaphysical position that there is, as a matter of fact, no such thing as the supernatural. Methodological naturalism, however, is a (metaphysically) more modest claim, that essentially corresponds to the position that while there may be a supernatural realm, it does not enter, and need not be invoked, in any discussions of scientific findings.

The debate ignited by Daniel O'Hara's letter in the April issue regarding faith and science indicated the need for an in-depth examination of the points raised. We found an excellent essay dealing with the subject written last year by **MASSIMO PIGLIUCCI**.

For the methodological naturalist, scientific explanations are naturalistic by definition, or else science would not have a set of reliable theoretical and empirical methods to proceed with. This is why the most embarrassing question one can ask a proponent of intelligent design is: if I gave you a million dollars to set up a scientific research program, what sort of experiments would you pursue with the grant? There is no possible answer.

The crucial point here is that a scientist is, essentially by definition, a methodological naturalist; however, she does not have any specific commitment (aside from her own metaphysical views) to philosophical naturalism. In other words, science does not necessarily entail atheism, which is the fundamentalist's fear. How can we explain this to the general public? One way to go about it is to point out that most people are in fact methodological naturalists when it comes to everyday life.

Suppose your car doesn't start today: how do you react to such an annoying occurrence? Most likely you will not invoke supernatural explanations, and will not attempt to have the car exorcised. Rather, regardless of your religious convictions, you will bring it to a mechanic, assuming (methodologically) that there must be something physically wrong with it. Moreover, even if the mechanic does not find the answer, and will not be able to fix your car, you will still persist in the (reason-



# mentalism science

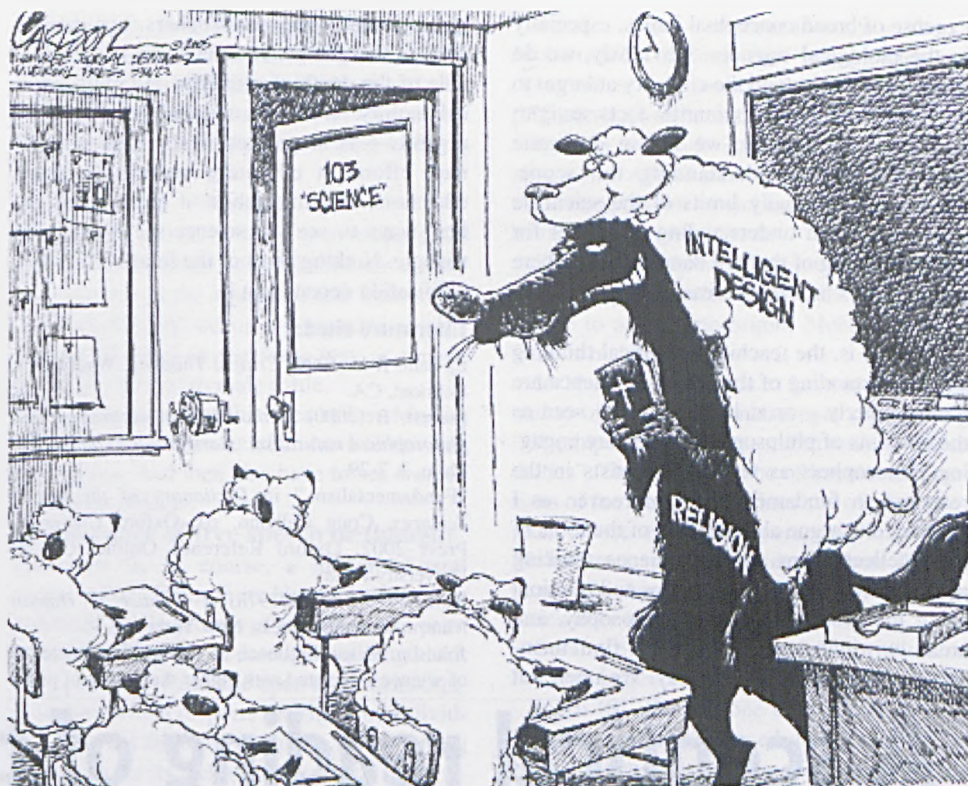
able) belief that there must have been something physically out of place, with no supernatural implications or intervention required. You will shrug your shoulders, grudgingly pay the mechanic, and go in search of a new car or another mechanic. That is exactly what scientists do, and are required to do by their profession – no more, no less.

There is, therefore, a good reason why many scientists are themselves religious (Larson & Witham 1997), and it is a mistake (both in terms of public relations and from a philosophical standpoint) to present the scientific worldview as if it necessarily leads to atheism. Science can neither afford, nor does it need, a head-on confrontation with religion. The confrontation does need to occur, however, wherever religious ideology makes (unsupported, *a priori*) claims about the natural world, as is often the case with creationism. A few-thousand-years-old-earth, a worldwide flood, or the necessity of an intelligent designer to produce bacterial flagella are, to paraphrase philosopher Jeremy Bentham, nonsense on stilts, nonsense that needs to be vigorously fought against by scientists and science educators. However, that still leaves plenty of room for a peaceful coexistence of science and religion when one recognises, and respects, the distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism.

## Science and society: the difference between “is” and “ought”

Many controversies between scientists and ideological fundamentalists (the word here indicating a broader context than just the religious one) are rooted in a second common misconception, one that philosophers often refer to as the “naturalistic fallacy”. David Hume, the 18th-century Scottish philosopher, first described the fallacy (though he didn’t name it) in his *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). Hume wrote about his puzzlement when encountering philosophical essays that began by considering matters of fact (what is) and somehow shifted to discussions of matters of value (what ought to be), without making the link explicit, or justifying it in any reasonable way.

The idea is of course not that there is no connection between facts and values, but rather to make clear that such connection is anything but automatic, and it needs to be justified. So, for example, a scientist can be intellectually interested in pursuing fundamental research on



the properties of stem cells (or of genetically engineered crops, or whatever), without this implying that the very act of carrying out such research necessarily implies certain ethical positions (ie, the scientist in question cannot automatically be labelled a “Nazi,” or an anti-environmentalist in the pockets of the bioengineering industry). By the same token, however, the scientist should be aware that it is society at large that decides what level of public funding goes to science, and most especially what sort of applications of scientific findings are acceptable from an ethical standpoint. In other words, the scientist doesn’t get to cry “anti-intellectualism” every time there is a legitimate public discussion about ethical issues in science.

A better way to conceive of the science and society relationship, instead, is that the two are connected, but in multiple and negotiable fashions. On the one hand, science should be free as much as possible to pursue fundamental research in all areas of human knowledge, both for its own sake and because of the potentially positive consequences on society. On the other hand, scientists cannot be the sole arbiters of ethical decisions about what sort of applied science is acceptable by society at large, although of course scientists do play a special dual role of both informed experts and participating citizens in any such decision. As Hume would put it, there may be a connection between what is and what ought to be, but it has to be reasonably fleshed out in every specific case.

Again, the challenge often concerns how to explain this in a way that is clear and understandable without having to mandate that everybody take a course in philosophy (though the latter isn’t necessarily a bad idea). A good

starting point is offered by obvious cases where the is/ought connection is clearly rejected by any sane person, scientist or not. To use one of many available examples, science has demonstrated that it is “natural” (it’s a matter of fact) for the males of some species of mammals (e.g., lions) to kill the offspring that a female had with another male, before taking her as a mate. This most certainly doesn’t imply that the study of behavioural ecology somehow leads to the justification of such actions for conscious beings such as humans (i.e., the “ought” simply doesn’t follow). Therefore, we should fund research in potentially controversial areas because we need all the information we can get in order to make intelligent decisions, but it ought to be clear to both scientists and the public at large that ethical decisions are simply too important to be simplistically derived by the observation of what is “natural.”

## What to do? Toward a programme of science-philosophy literacy

Scientists and science educators, when faced with the question of irrational attacks against science, usually respond by clamouring for more science education. There certainly is a need for more, and better, science education. However, there is also increasing evidence that more science literacy is not only insufficient, but may have little or no effect if it is not accompanied by efforts at teaching critical thinking and the nature of science (Walker & Hoekstra 2002; Johnson & Pigliucci 2004). The problem is that too much pre-college (and even introductory-level college) science education focuses on factual knowledge at the



expense of broad conceptual issues, especially in the biological sciences. Obviously, we do want our students (and the citizenry at large) to get some fundamental scientific facts straight; but, more importantly, we are in desperate need of people understanding the scope, power, and especially limits of the scientific enterprise. Such understanding is crucial for the functioning of modern democracies, where science plays an ever-increasing role in everybody's life.

The fact is, the teaching of critical thinking and understanding of the nature of science are more properly – or at least equally – seen as the domains of philosophy, and require engaging philosophers as well as scientists in the response to fundamentalism. Moreover, as I have tried to argue above, much of the roots of anti-intellectualism and anti-science thinking are to be found in issues of ethics and religion, again the proper domain of philosophy, and areas in which scientists usually find themselves unprepared and uneasy. We need not

turn scientists into philosophers, nor can we pretend that the general public be knowledgeable of the depth of scientific and philosophical inquiry. What we can and need to do – urgently – is to promote wide, inter-disciplinary efforts at educating scientists, science educators, and the public at large about the best ways to see the science-society-religion triangle. Nothing short of the future of modern civilisation depends on it.

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# A sceptical reading of the Koran II

## The Koran and the Bible

SOME of the stories from the Bible appear also in the Koran in a modified version, eg the escape from Egypt in Surah 2 and the creation in 39.6. A whole Surah, number 12, is devoted to the story of Joseph and the multicoloured coat, and a passage starting at 7.104 gives Mohammed's version of the Moses story. Another Surah (19) recounts the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Surah 26 gives the story of the Exodus. Many verses in various surahs relate events in the life of Moses. The fact that these stories differ in some ways from those found in the bible, raises the question of the extent of Mohammed's familiarity with, or access to, mainstream Jewish or Christian written or oral traditions. It may be he was familiar with some early variants of the traditions that finally made it into the Bible.

Surah 5.116 appears to show that Mohammed has got the impression that Mary the Mother of Jesus is worshipped alongside Jesus. This impression has been taken by many others over the centuries notwithstanding that it is contrary to Catholic theology as I understand it, although I suspect it is not contrary to much Catholic practice..

## Praise and Glorification of, and Thanks to, Allah

Surah 6.45 shows Allah, the supposed author of the Koran, praising and glorifying himself. This is one of many verses (eg the opening verses of Surahs 34 and 35, and the last verse of 36 – 36.83). If the Koran is the word of Allah, it seems strange that Allah feels the need to give praise and thanks to himself. This praise and thanks are more consistent with human authorship of the Koran.

## Sharia and the distortion of morality

Of course, for humanists, moral rules are the product of careful discussion by communities who debate the issues rationally with a view to finding solutions to social problems. Priority is given to the principles of human welfare and individual rights and happiness. Old sources of moral rules may be of interest but are likely to be unhelpful in today's social context.

## This is the second and final part of GARY OTTEN'S examination of the Koran

Claiming immutability for such old moral rules is a dereliction of our task to get these matters right now, and a surrender to precepts that are likely to be out of date or wrong, and in the worst cases actually barbaric and counterproductive. In the opinion of many, the ethics of the Koran and therefore of Islam, are in some cases barbaric.

You actually have to search for the famous Sharia laws for the barbarity of which Islam is famous. They are there but (apart from Surah 24) they are tucked away among very many verses which repeatedly and obsessively exhort belief in the one God, and insist on blind faith.

The impression given is of a god who is much more concerned jealously to protect his exclusivity than actually to deal with the social moral and legal problems that required attention at the time, much less to pronounce any

real eternal principles that could be useful or credible to later generations.

Surah 24.02 provides for the flogging of fornicators with 100 stripes, but if a married person has illegal sex the penalty is stoning to death. Sex, however, by a man with his woman slave is not illegal! (see 23.06 and 70.30). Nor is there any adverse comment made on slavery.

Surah 24.08 provides that a woman who swears innocence four times by Allah might avoid stoning to death. This provision could come in handy in Northern Nigeria today.

Surah 24.04 provides that four witnesses to the adultery or fornication are required, and anyone who makes an accusation against a chaste woman without having four witnesses gets 80 stripes! This rule is often cited as a humane rule, which, of course, it is in so far as an act of adultery is extremely unlikely to be witnessed by four people willing to give evidence.

There is room for repentance, however, which may mitigate the rigour of these rules (24.05).

Surah 24.03 goes on to provide that a believer who marries a polytheist pagan or idolator is a prostitute or a polytheist, pagan or idolator. However, a later verse provides for a divorced Muslim woman who marries a non-Muslim to repay her dowry. The Koran seems to be giving out contradictory messages here.

Surah 24 is refreshing in that it leaves off from the constant harping against disbelief, at least until verse 39.

Surah 24.31 gives rules about to whom a woman may reveal "their adornment" This term is not defined, but is it any part of their body, their private parts or genitals? An important rule is that woman must not stamp



their feet in such a way that they reveal their adornment! This suggests that ankles might be included.

Surah 24.33 shows a rule favouring emancipation of slaves.

Surah 33.59 may be the origin of the rule that women should cover themselves completely, except for their eyes.

Surah 65 deals with divorce; to a modern reader the surah appears strange as it seems overly concerned with the timing of divorce in relation to a woman's period, and so has for instance to make provision for the timing of divorce where a woman is post-menopausal.

It provides only for a man to divorce his wife and not for the woman to have access to divorce. It makes no provision for children.

Surah 65.1 provides for a man to divorce a wife only for "open illegal sexual intercourse". So clandestine adultery is not a ground for divorce nor is desertion nor cruelty. And sex with a woman slave is also permitted (70.30). Is Islam really saying that these rules have universal application?

It is also of note that Allah seems to be adopting an existing legal rule in relation to what is illegal sexual intercourse; I could not see where it is defined.

Surah 60.12 is an interesting Surah for the evidence of the social backdrop within which Mohammed was laying down rules. It provides for the conditions for approving believing women. This is if they pledge themselves:

- Not to associate anything in the worship of Allah
- Not to steal
- Not to commit illegal sexual intercourse
- Not to kill their children !
- Not to utter slander
- Not to make illegal children belonging to their husband
- To obey their husband in accordance with what Islam ordains.

While some of these rules are of continuing relevance, they are selective in a way which suggests what were the principal problems which had to be addressed at that time. They may have been a reform for the tribal society of 6th-century Arabia, but do not fully accord with any logical approach today which seeks to maximise the welfare and rights of individuals on an equal basis.

### Faith, determinism and evil

While every other verse exhorts listeners to believe in Allah, 6.125 reveals that it is Allah who decides who is to accept Islam and who will not accept it. This is confirmed in 7.186: 'Whomsoever Allah sends astray, none can guide him...'

Again in 54.49 the preordainment of Allah is referred to. So one might ask why all the effort devoted to getting people to adopt Islam? Alternatively if it's so important also that people believe why doesn't Allah cause it to happen rather than make Mohammed go to all the efforts at persuading the people?

And with God preordaining everything, Islam (in common with other religions) is also therefore stuck with the problem of evil: the question why an all-powerful and all-foreseeing God tolerates evil is one no religion has a satisfactory answer to.

### Women

Verses such as 42.11 show that Mohammed was addressing men only. Women are clearly not regarded as the equal of men; indeed this verse shows they are simply regarded as gifts to men as mates in the same way as female cattle are "given" to male cattle.

In order to accept this idea today, Muslim women who are true to Islam have to devalue themselves. And men also have to see women as inferior objects.

### Intolerance of free speech or thought

Tolerance is, of course, a modern liberal virtue; while Islam in its history has at times exhibited limited forms of tolerance, the principle of tolerance is an essential building block for a peaceful pluralistic open and democratic society which respects the rights of individuals. I do not therefore apologise for criticising the Koran for its lack of tolerance.

Intolerance permeates the text. For instance, Surah 34.5 promises severe painful torment to those who oppose Allah's *ayat*. 34.38 says something similar. The Saudi Koran suggests that *ayat* means proofs, evidences, verses, lessons, signs, revelations etc. The Koran is full of verses and alleged revelations but is short on proof or evidence for anything.

Surah 42.16 specifically condemns those who dispute Islam after it has been accepted by the people.

In many passages Mohammed relates how he has destroyed whole towns because of their disbelief (eg 22.45, and 28.58).

### Mistakes and Revealing passages

In 10.19 Mohammed makes the interesting claim that mankind were originally just one religious community, all believing in Islam, and that only later did they begin to differ. This is so contrary to known history that it is surprising it hasn't been edited out.

And in 9.36 it claims that *Allah ordained 12 months...when he created the heavens and the earth*.

Both of these claims will be news to the many generations of primitive men and women who inhabited the earth before Islam began, and who were unaware of the Julian calendar and were more likely to have followed a lunar calendar of 13 months.

Surah 5.98 shows contradictory statements within the same sentence: *Know that Allah is severe in punishment and that Allah is oft-forgiving, most merciful*. Mercy, surely, is giving punishment less than deserved while severe in punishment means at least not giving punishment less than deserved, and may mean giving greater punishment than is deserved! So the claim he is oft-forgiving and severe in punishment is incoherent.

Surah 9.85 disingenuously shows Mohammed's anxiety that his enemies are doing rather well, contrary to what he has been proclaiming will be the case:

*And let not their wealth or their children amaze you. Allah's plan is to punish them with these things in this world, and that they will die while they are unbelievers.*

Surah 5.108 shows Allah unsure of himself in promulgating rules about wills. This gives the lie to any divine origin: Mohammed, not God, is making laws!

In 16.36, Allah claims to have sent to every nation of the world a messenger proclaiming "Worship Allah alone and avoid all false deities". This claim will be of interest to historians of the Incas, Aborigines and of other peoples whose existence were not known to Mohammed, and whose descendants did not hear of Mohammed or Allah until many centuries after Islam was founded.

Surah 16.75 and 76 justify discrimination between believers and non-believers.

In 16.101, there is one of the references to Mohammed being accused as a forger of the Koran when Allah changes a verse in the Koran. Quite apart from the record of scepticism at the time, why does Allah the "All-knowing" have to change his mind? This seems a very human quality! And Mohammed was human.

In a number of places there are references to Allah creating human beings by mixing the sexual discharges of man and woman (eg 75.37 and 76.2). Does Allah the all-knowing not know better than this?

In 77.20 Allah refers to semen as a "despised water!"

### Cosmology

In common with other ancient peoples, Mohammed's understanding of cosmology was limited to the tradition that saw the sky as a canopy in which the sun and stars were lamps (41.12).

But would not the all-knowing Allah have known better if he had been the author?

### Paradise

There are references to paradise in the Koran, eg in 38.52, where the faithful are promised chaste wives. (This may be the virgins that are famously the reward of Muslims who go to heaven.) See also 44.54 where men arriving in heaven are to be rewarded with fair women. 55.72-74 makes it clear that these fair women will be virgins. 56.22 says they will have wide, lovely eyes. No mention is made of what the reward of women is to be, if anything. It is not clear whether women actually get to go to heaven.

### Allah the Creator

The Koran of course contains the claim that Allah created the earth etc (eg 36.81 and 39.5), and that he created humankind (39.6).

The creation of human beings story is a variant on the Bible's ( see 23.12ff).

(Continued on p12)



### The warlike nature of the Koran

Surah 8, entitled "The spoils of War", shows the military side of Islam at its outset. There are accounts of battles and exhortations to fight the unbelievers, eg in 8.39. This theme continues in 9.29 and 9.36.

#### Poetry?

The Arabic text is said to be poetic, a claim that cannot be judged by those who cannot read the original, although some of the descriptions, especially of paradise, reflect a poetic quality that does come through translation. But much of the remaining alleged poetic quality is sadly lost in translation, and going by the translation emanating from the Guardian of the Two Holy Mosques, the impression is gained of a "poetry" common to the religious scriptures of the ancient world.

Alternatively the description of poetry is a charitable and polite description to mask the rambling and sermonising nature of much of the text.

Some passages may well be poetry to an Arab's ear at the time, but when Mohammed goes on about the sea and the day and night, eg in Surah 35.12 and 13, the impact in translation is regrettably more banal to the modern ear.

Some of the poetic imagery is now misplaced. For instance, Mohammed regularly refers to the fact that Allah sends the rain to water the crops as showing Allah's interest in the Arabs and that they should therefore accept him. I suspect that this was not poetry or imagery then, but a daily reality. But the idea nowadays could only be understood in poetic or allegorical terms as we now know much more about how rainfall comes about, and it doesn't

include a God. Such imagery cannot now comfortably be understood to reflect truth.

#### Mohammed's little jokes?

Several of the Surahs start with an incomprehensible series of syllables the meaning of which only Allah knows. What Mohammed was attempting to achieve by such obscurantism, is hard to guess, except that Surah 20 starts with the syllables "Ta-Ha" and Surah 36 starts with "Ya-Sin" while Surah 38 starts with "Sad" and Surahs 40, 41, 43, 44, 45 and 46 start with "Ha-Mim".

These syllables suggest "Boo Sucks" might be an acceptable English translation. Is Mohammed having a little laugh at the gullibility of the believers?! Perhaps L Ron Hubbard, the fraudulent founder of Scientology who openly regarded Scientology as a money-making business, was observing an important tradition.

#### "The End is nigh"

Surah 21.01 is a classic of the "End is nigh" genre! "*Draws near for mankind their reckoning, while they turn away in recklessness.*" This theme appears again in 40.59 and again in 53.57. Mohammed comes over as a classic "End is nigh prepare to meet thy doom" merchant.

Jesus Christ clearly thought the same; we are still waiting many centuries later for the end of the world.

#### Conclusion

I have read the Koran with the critical eye of an intelligent layman who is familiar with the basic history of the origin of Islam. I am not a scholar of Islam or of religion.

My reading has thrown up the comments I

make above. It seems to me that on a fair and open-minded reading, it is impossible for any intellectually honest person in today's world who is not already committed to accepting Islam to give credence to the claims made in and by the Koran. While I accept that it is possible that some Muslims derive spiritual benefit from Islam, I believe that really good (ie moderate) Muslims are the ones who don't read the Koran too much or pay more than lip service attention to mullahs. The ones who do take it seriously and study it are likely to be encouraged by it to be extremists.

Not only does the Koran completely and plainly fail the divinely created perfection test, it is also a dangerous text: it encourages and justifies violence against non-believers; it justifies antiquated and discriminatory social practices that disrespect women and disbelievers; it promulgates immoral practices (such as condoning sex with slaves); it holds back those who take it seriously from taking advantage of the benefits of science; it is socially divisive and undermines respect for human rights by elevating Islamic ideas above the universally applicable principles of secularism.

The Koran retains its interest as an important historical document, but in today's world it remains (along with the scriptures put forward by various other religions) a divisive text which exerts damaging mind control over its adherents. Rational people need in my view to call on Muslims to free themselves from its tyranny.

For those interesting in delving deeper, I recommend the following website:  
<http://www.skepticsannotatedbible.com/mohammed/>

### 'Oklahomo' preacher busted for soliciting oral sex

AN Oklahoma preacher who virulently opposed gay rights has resigned from his congregation and the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention after being arrested for



Pastor Latham

allegedly asking an undercover male police officer for oral sex. Lonnie Latham, 60, served as senior pastor of South Tulsa Baptist Church until he left the post following his arrest.

He is an outspoken critic of same-sex marriage who urged gays to turn away from their "sinful, destructive lifestyle."

Latham was arrested earlier this year outside a gay hotel and charged by the Oklahoma City district attorney with one count of offering to engage in an act of lewdness, a misdemeanor.

Latham faces up to one year in jail and a \$2,500 fine if convicted.

He was released on \$500 bail. After his release, Latham told reporters he was set up and was in the area "pastoring to police," the Associated Press reported.

## Big Boost for Freethinker Fund

THE generosity of *Freethinker* subscribers during the 2005/6 financial year resulted in us receiving the highest amount in donations in since 2002/3. These donations totalled £5,357.00.

Donations play a significant part in keeping the magazine going, and, despite several hikes in the cost of postage in recent years, we have been able to keep the subscription price at its current level for almost a decade.

This year subscribers have again proved generous, and we would like to thank the following for their donations over the past four months:

A Abbas, B L Able, P H Albrecht, J Ancliffe, A E Ball, D Baxter, A Beeson, G R Bigley, A N Blewitt, K Bolton, F Bond, Brighton Humanists, A J Brown, A Burnett, S C Chumbley, L J Clarke, A Clunas, R W Coleman, G Colling, G Connor, Cotswold Humanists, J J Corry, N Currid, J Doorn, C Douglas, R Driscoll, F Evans, J Fawbert, C R Fletcher, P V Gatenby, I Gegan, C Govan, J R Grandidge, C L Greedus, I Griffiths, N Haemmerle, A Hamilton, A Harrison, J Hazan, M Henderson, M Hinks, J C Hopkins, J A Hood, L Horscroft, J R Hunt, D R Hutchins, D Hutchison, D Iby R Ison, H J Jakeman, M Johnson, A A Jones, P Jaques D Kirkland, B Layfield, A J Ledger, V Lelliott, D Lewis, M F Lofmark, D Lovelace, S Lucas, J N Lummis, D G Mactavish, J E McMillan, J Manley, D H N Mason, R D Massey, P G Matthew, C Matthew, G J Meaden, H L Millard, A Moliver, K Moore, M O Morley, M Morley, C Nettleton, R A Oakley, N Patterson, R H Peirce, A Perkins, G Petruczok, F Pidgeon, D Pollak, G M Punnett, J K Radford, J Rathbone, A A Rattansi, M Rochefort, R Room, D Rose, S Rose, K C Rudd, H Sadler, L Sage, M F Savage, D L Seymour, R Sharman, C A Shrivs, W H Simcock, D Simmonds, M J Skinner, J M Spargo, A Stevens, G Strang, N Thompson, R J Tutton, E S Violet, T J Ward, B Whitelaw, S Whitfield, J Witney, A J Wood.

We should point out that we lost some data earlier this year. If you sent us a donation, but have not been mentioned, please accept our thanks – and our assurance that your contribution was received and added to the fund.

We would also like to thank the estate of the late Mrs Medori of Pembrokeshire for a bequest of £100.00, received in April. Bequests have played a big role in the continued production of the *Freethinker*, and would urge supporters to consider the *Freethinker* when making a will.



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The second film is an enlightening look at why some people start off religious and then dump the beliefs they were raised with. A Christian, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness and a Hindu show that, despite the heavy pressure from their families and communities, they managed, in the end, to think for themselves.

There is then an examination of non-religious ceremonies – a baby-naming, a funeral and a wedding. It is interesting to see that in almost all cases the people involved are still a bit bewildered that they have managed these rites-of-passage ceremonies without the usual churchy trappings.

Their attitudes seem only half-formed – they just knew on a visceral level that they couldn't take the religion. Then there is a moving film about a young man living in the strictly religiously-divided city of Belfast. He explains how sectarianism impinges on just about every aspect of his life.

There follows a debate in the sixth-form classroom of a Catholic school, where an atheist challenges the students to justify their beliefs.

Finally there is an extended interview with Philip Pullman, best-selling author, and, after Richard Dawkins, probably one of the best-known atheists in Britain. He tells of his own growth into reason and rejection of supernatural explanations of the world. He also fears for the future of rationalism in the face of the fundamentalist onslaught.

Absolutely fascinating for anyone who wants to see an alternative to the relentless religious propaganda we see in our broadcast media.

Available online from [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk) or by post from NSS DVD Offer, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL (please add 50p p&p).

## 'Blasphemous' cartoon set produced to boost *Freethinker* fund

IN response to a number of inquiries we have received about the "blasphemous" cartoons published in early copies of the *Freethinker* – cartoons that played a key part in G W Foote's conviction and a year's imprisonment for blasphemy – we have produced a set comprising ten of the illustrations in postcard form.

The postcard pack is made up of 20 cards – two of each illustration, and these, we feel will make excellent alternative Christmas cards.

The back of each card gives a brief history of its origins. It explains that the card was produced to celebrate the *Freethinker's* 125th

anniversary in May, 2006, and encourages the recipient to "support secularism by subscribing to the *Freethinker*."

The set of 20 costs £4.25 inclusive of postage and packing. If you would like a set,

please send a cheque/postal order to **Freethinker Cartoon Card Offer, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4ND.**

Proceeds of card sales will be used to boost the *Freethinker* fund.

### Rabbi proposes secular marriage

A RABBI has called for a break in the Orthodox Jewish monopoly over marriage and divorce in Israel.

Naftali Rothenberg, rabbi of Har Adar in Israel, proposes two tracks for marriage, keeping the current rabbinic establishment, but creating a parallel civil option for those who choose.

He said the civil option would be available not only for couples ineligible to get married under Jewish law but also for secular couples who choose to bypass the rabbinate.



He preacheth from the Mount



## Science and Religion

MY letter published in the April issue has provoked a huge postbag, which raises many interesting points and questions, not all of which will I be able to address here.

Dr Stovold is, of course, correct to stress that scientific thinking adheres to methodological naturalism – and I completely agree that it should! But some scientists, including Richard Dawkins, go well beyond this to embrace an ontological naturalism which is in no way demanded by the scientific enterprise. There is much that is important to us as human beings – first-order substantives, such as art, music and literature, as well as second-order disciplines like politics, ethics and aesthetics – which lie outside the scientific arena and are scarcely touched by methodological naturalism. Religion belongs with these, and it is an egregious category-mistake to subsume it to science; or *vice versa*, as the creationists vainly attempt.

Dr Stovold also raises the traditional divide between “nature” and “supernature”, which many contemporary thinkers now regard as obsolete in the light of post-modernism and several recent attempts to move beyond its diktats. Perhaps the ablest Anglican thinker for several generations, Dr. Tom Wright, the present Bishop of Durham, completely rejects the dichotomy, and is not alone in doing so. He incidentally demonstrates that Occam’s razor is two-edged.

Does prayer work? Not in any scientifically measurable way, perhaps. But why not ask, does Music work? Both questions are perhaps scientifically absurd. But, though I would be hard-pressed to analyse or quantify it, I know as well as I know anything that I derive immense benefit from listening to Bach’s music. If others claim the same for prayer, who are we to gainsay them? Faith, as Dr Stovold observes, “can be defined as belief *in the absence of evidence*” (my italics); but this is tendentious, what the philosopher Charles Stevenson called a “persuasive definition”, so no one should feel bullied into accepting it!

Dr le Sueur correctly insists that religious beliefs are irrelevant when pointing a telescope at the moon, though some of the first to do so were convinced they would see evidence of human habitation! If we truly want to know about the structure, composition and history of the moon, it is, of course, to scientists that we must turn. But the moon also figures in some of our great poetry, from Sappho of Lesbos up to the present. And when Rusalka sings her great aria to the moon, who does not feel a shiver down the spine? Would any scientist be bold enough to dismiss such a thoroughly human response as despicable? Surely the truth is that even scientists are human, and subject to human emotions, hopes, fears and longings. And even if such longings are destined to remain forever frustrated, are they not as much a constitutive part of our humanity as our scientific curiosity?

Space forbids a detailed response to John Radford’s letter, though I entirely agree with

him in deploring double-think, and likewise consider scientists who embrace creationism as having made a stupid mistake, as demeaning to religion as to science.

It is, finally, good to see that Bill McIlroy has lost none of the peppery qualities that made him such an outstanding editor of this paper, though in describing me as “a former Anglican divine” he is adopting a definition which even my 1936 edition of the *Shorter OED* considered archaic. And I am ashamed of him for comparing me with his fellow Irishman, the egregious Archbishop Ussher! There was nothing very “sophisticated” about his desire to harmonise earth history with the Old Testament: he just started from faulty premises, as everyone except the most purblind creationists now considers simply too obvious for words. I therefore cannot agree with Bill that there is anything in my previous letter, or in this one, which will give the slightest comfort to fundamentalists or creationists. And if it is the “tone rather than the content” of my letter which causes Bill concern, I would urge him to look again at Dawkins’ books (I have read them all, and reviewed several in the humanist press), where he will find a scathing animosity towards all forms of religion which now seems to me so lacking in balance and discrimination as to be both unjustified and unscientific.

DAN O’HARA  
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

I SEE Daniel O’Hara notes that two Jesuit priests, Francisco Ayala and George Coyne are siding with science over religion.

I ask you though, how can you trust a Jesuit? The Jesuits are equivocators – professional liars, all in the name of defending the Catholic Church.

J HAGGERTY  
Glasgow

DANIEL O’Hara’s assertion that there are some scientists who manage to reconcile their scientific training with religious belief is to state the obvious. Many people can compartmentalise contradictory beliefs and aspects of their lives, and even scientists can pass over the requirement for proof (for the existence of god and the supernatural) so essential for the scientific method. It is not difficult to explain.

Scientists are, after all, human beings and they are no less vulnerable to the lure of religious certainty than other people. Their scientific training came long after their childhood experience of religion – if not in the home, in school and in society.

Nor are intelligent and highly educated people, even scientists, less vulnerable to the human propensity to be taken in by magicians and illusionists, as James Randi has observed. They are as susceptible to mental illness and emotional disturbance as the rest of humanity, they can be hypnotised and brainwashed like other human beings. And above all they are not immune from the

social pressures and psychological techniques that are used to inculcate religion.

Of course not all scientists are as systematically robust as Richard Dawkins, and one can see the annoyance of those who want to reconcile fact with fiction, but one has to accept that, clever as they are in their specialities, many highly educated people are sadly lacking when it comes to common sense and other characteristics in which many lesser mortals excel.

A SHAW  
Kent

I BELIEVE that Richard Dawkins is pre-eminently correct in asserting that science and faith are incompatible, and, in my view, totally irreconcilable. Science concerns itself with empirical, verifiable, demonstrable hypotheses with rational and testable deductions therefrom.

Faith on the other hand is, in the words of the great Bertrand Russell, “a firm belief for which there is no evidence”.

For me, it really is as simple as that.

MARTIN O’BRIEN  
Gwent

THE founder of this journal, G W Foote, was the only president of the National Secular Society to die in office. Ex-presidents (ex for whatever reason) have as a rule continued to support the paper and the Society. But, as life throws up exceptions to every rule, such a one is Daniel O’Hara.

He takes the *Freethinker* to task for being “perhaps inclined to give too much credence to the Richard Dawkins line that science and faith are incompatible, and to his view that no scientist worth his salt should believe in God”. In refutation, Mr O’Hara cites six Christian scientists. Now, six (or, if they are “just the tip of the iceberg”, 60) is hardly a statistically significant number. But, if there were 60 million of them, that would not justify their position.

I know nothing of the personal circumstances of those cited, and merely observe in passing that emotional, family and prudential reasons have been known to induce a religious label and that in America and elsewhere an avowed atheist might find it hard to gain scientific funding.

But I accept your correspondent’s assurance that these are Christian men of “sincere faith”, which surely implies acceptance of the Apostles’ Creed and belief in a personal God, heaven, hell, Holy Trinity, virgin birth, resurrection and Last Judgment. How scientific is any of this claptrap?

Richard Dawkins isn’t a latter-day apostate. “His kind” implicitly goes back centuries and explicitly to J W Draper’s *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* (1873). If I may descend to the *argumentum ad hominem*, in the 1930s US humanist James H Leuba found only about 5 percent of leading scientists believed in God and immortality.

DAVID TRIBE  
Australia





### Creationists

WHEN the creationists can soundly demonstrate that something can be produced from nothing, then they will have won their argument. Scarcely worth betting on.

Being is, was, and will be. There could never have been a state of non-being. Time is simply a man-made idea for measuring events. There is no space; the universe is filled with vibrating spirit energy. The term spirit is often concerned with soul, and the individual soul personality. There is a great difference. Life did not come from matter; matter came from life – Nous – the universal life force which animates matter.

Man will never conquer the universe physically, but only psychically. The moon is only a stone's throw distant cosmically, but about all we know about the moon so far is what the ancient Greek mystics knew – it's a stone. (Not exactly a goddess, as some might have it.) The universal law is action, evolution and change. Humanly change can be grievous or pleasurable, but no amount of human opinions can ever change the universal cosmic law of cause and effect. It goes on forever.

FREDERICK BACON  
Notts

### National Anthem

THE expected rationality of *Freethinker* readers has let me down.

Last month, responding to my call for a new British national anthem for use at the Olympic Games and other such international competitive events, Roy Emery suggested "an updated *Internationale*", and Terry Liddle likewise proposed "a world anthem". Every gold-medal winner would then be acclaimed, presumably, with the same tune. More boring, even, than at present! And political correctness gone mad – with the madness of Alice's dream, when every contender won.

BARBARA SMOKER  
Bromley

### Affirming in court

IN his article on religion in the *New Statesman* (April 26), Bryan Appleyard begins by stating that "British jurors are offered an alternative when sworn in. Either they can swear on the Bible or any other holy book, or they can confirm". He reports that during a recent spell of jury service he witnesses only one person out of perhaps 40 choosing to affirm while all the rest swore on the Bible (indeed, that becomes the New Testament later in the same article!) and claims that the obvious reason for this is that jurors saw themselves as cultural Christians. (What – all 39 of them?).

I wonder if I can suggest to Mr Appleyard that in fact, often enough or perhaps even uniformly, no mention of the possibility of simply affirming is offered to jurors, and certainly not in advance of the swearing in. In my opinion what ought to happen is that, prior to actually appearing in court, every (candidate) juror

should be given a paper allowing them to tick – or if necessary enter – which (allegedly) holy book, if any, they wish to swear on, thus keeping what they surely are entitled to enjoy, namely privacy for their personal religious belief or non-belief.

Doubtless the natural desire to avoid imagined disapproval, especially in the austere atmosphere of a court, would still constrain many to opt for what they feel is the alternative most acceptable to authority, but I would be very surprised if, under those conditions, anything like the same figures as Bryan Appleyard reports would be arrived at.

I should be very interested to hear of other readers' experience in this matter, as perhaps too might your MP!

ALBERT ADLER  
London

PS: Jurors would, of course, still be making a public demonstration of belief, or disbelief, but in a much less emphatic manner than is presently the case.

### Walking on water

THE Florida professor who suggested that Jesus walked on ice is showing the same purlblindness as the fundamentalist fanatics denouncing him. He and they accept gospel fairy tales as eyewitness accounts, accurate or misinterpreted, of events from history. In fact the gospel authors simply borrowed fables originally told of Elijah and Elisha and attributed them to Jesus. One of Elijah's feats was crossing a body of water without wetting his feet, by parting the Jordan river. The gospel authors dared not claim that Jesus carved a dry channel through the Sea of Galilee, since too many local residents might have come forward to deny that it had ever happened. So they wrote a parallel in which he crossed the sea by walking on the water – much harder to disprove.

WILLIAM HARWOOD  
Canada

### Shakespeare

SURELY the best evidence for Shakespeare's atheism is in the magnificent speech he gives to MacBeth in Act V Scene V, lines 19-28.

"To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow...it is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing."

This was not put into the mouth of a pagan character, like some passages in *Lear* or *Caesar*. MacBeth was a Christian king and Shakespeare did not need to have made him speak like that because of the cultural context.

It is hard to believe the speech does not reflect the Bard's own opinions.

JACK HASTIE  
Scotland

### Editors' qualities

IN your Anniversary Talk (May) you suggest that, in order to excel, a *Freethinker* editor has to be thick-skinned, tenacious, bloody-minded, argumentative and "frequently impolite".

As a former editor, I disagree with the last attribute. G W Foote and Chapman Cohen were certainly tenacious and argumentative, but they were "impolite" only when they really needed or had to be.

Your list omits two qualities which I think are also necessary in a good *Freethinker* editor: a sense of humour and a sense of proportion. Charles Bradlaugh, the founder the National Secular Society, was well known both for his debating skills and his courtesy. I particularly like the way he dealt with Lord Randolph Churchill (Sir Winston's father), who had half-denied saying something he really had said. English gentlemen, wrote Bradlaugh, "belong to a class to which I, as well as yourself, am a stranger – I from birth, and you from habit."

NIGEL SINNOTT  
Australia

## The *Free* thinker

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**Blackpool & Fylde Humanist Group:** Information: John and Kath Wayland, 13 Elms Avenue, Lytham FY8 5PW. Tel: 01253 736397

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. [www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html](http://www.stovold.v21hosting.co.uk/humanist.html). The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, June 6 Public Meeting.

**Bristol Humanists:** Information: Margaret Dearnaley on 0117 904 9490.

**Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com)

**Central London Humanist Group:** Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: [rupert@clarity4words.co.uk](mailto:rupert@clarity4words.co.uk) Tel: 02075804564.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information: 01494 771851. Friends Meeting House, 289 High Street, Berkhamsted. Tuesday, June 13, 8pm. Andrew Hoggin: *How the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture Works.*

**Cornwall Humanists:** Information: Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA. Tel: 01736 754895.

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close, Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

**Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01926 858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

**Derbyshire Secularists:** Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website [www.secularderby.org](http://www.secularderby.org)

**Devon Humanists:** Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk) Website: [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk)

**Ealing Humanists:** Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

**East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:** Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

**East Kent Humanists:** Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

**Essex Humanists:** Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):** Information: 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth CV8 2HB. Tel. 01926 858450.

**Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** Information: June Kamel 01925 824844. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester.

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.

**Harrow Humanist Society:** Meetings 2nd Wednesday of the month December to June (but not January) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information: 020 8863 2977. Next meeting June 14. Speaker: Jack Sklar from Carers UK: *Caring for Carers.*

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Lane, Gidea Park. Thursday, July 8, 8pm. Robin Greatorex: *Thoughtful Thoughts about God.*

**Humanist Association Dorset:** Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

**Humanist Society of Scotland:** Secretary: Ivan Middleton, 26 Inverleith Row, Edinburgh EH3 5QH. Tel. 0131 552 9046. Press and Information Officer: Robin Wood, 37 Inchmurrin Drive, Kilmarnock, Ayrshire. Tel. 01563 526710. Website: [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Humanist Society of Scotland – Dundee Group:** Contact secretary Ron McLaren, Spiershill, St Andrews, Fife KY16 8NB. Tel: 01334 474551. E-mail: [humanist@spiershill.fsworld.co.uk](mailto:humanist@spiershill.fsworld.co.uk).

**Glasgow Group:** Information: Alan Henness. Tel. 07010 704776. E-mail: [alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:alan@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Edinburgh Group:** Information: 2 Saville Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 3AD. Tel 0131 667 8389.

**Perth Group:** Information: [perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk](mailto:perth@humanism.scotland.org.uk)

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Sunday, July 16, 3-7pm. 65 Austhorpe Road, Cross Gates, Leeds 15. Summer Social and Garden Party.

**Isle of Man Freethinkers:** Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: [murielgarland@clara.co.uk](mailto:murielgarland@clara.co.uk). Website: [www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk](http://www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk)

**Isle of Wight Humanist Group.** Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail [davidb67@clara.co.uk](mailto:davidb67@clara.co.uk)

**Leicester Secular Society:** Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Full programme of events on website: [www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk](http://www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk)

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). Friends Meeting House, 41 Bromley Road, Catford. Thursday, June 29, 8pm. Terry Liddle: *TA Jackson, Stalinist, Marxist, English Humanist.*

**Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens.** Tel: 01553 771917.

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Jane Hibbert on 01654 702883.

**North East Humanists (Teesside Group):** Information: C McEwan on 01642 817541.

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):** Information: the Secretary on 01434 632936.

**North London Humanist Group:** Monthly meetings. Information: Linda Wilkinson. 0208 882 0124.

**North Yorkshire Humanist Group:** Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

**Norwich Humanist Group:** Information: Vincent G Chainey, Le Chene, 4 Mill Street, Bradenham, Thetford IP25 7PN. Tel. 01362 820982.

**Reigate & District Humanist Group.** Information: Roy Adderley on 01342 323882.

**Sheffield Humanist Society:** Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Public Meetings, Wednesday, June 6 and July 4, 8pm.

**South Hampshire Humanists:** Information: 11 Glenwood Avenue, Southampton, SO16 3PY. Tel: 02380 769120.

**South Place Ethical Society.** Weekly talks/meetings/concerts Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4. E-mail: [library@ethicalsoc.org.uk](mailto:library@ethicalsoc.org.uk). Monthly programmes on request.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Wendy Sturgess. Tel. 01458 274456.

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Website: [www.wmhumanists.co.uk](http://www.wmhumanists.co.uk). E-mail: [rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk).

Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.

**Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland.** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE.

Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com)

website: [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://www.nirelandhumanists.net)

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD  
Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication