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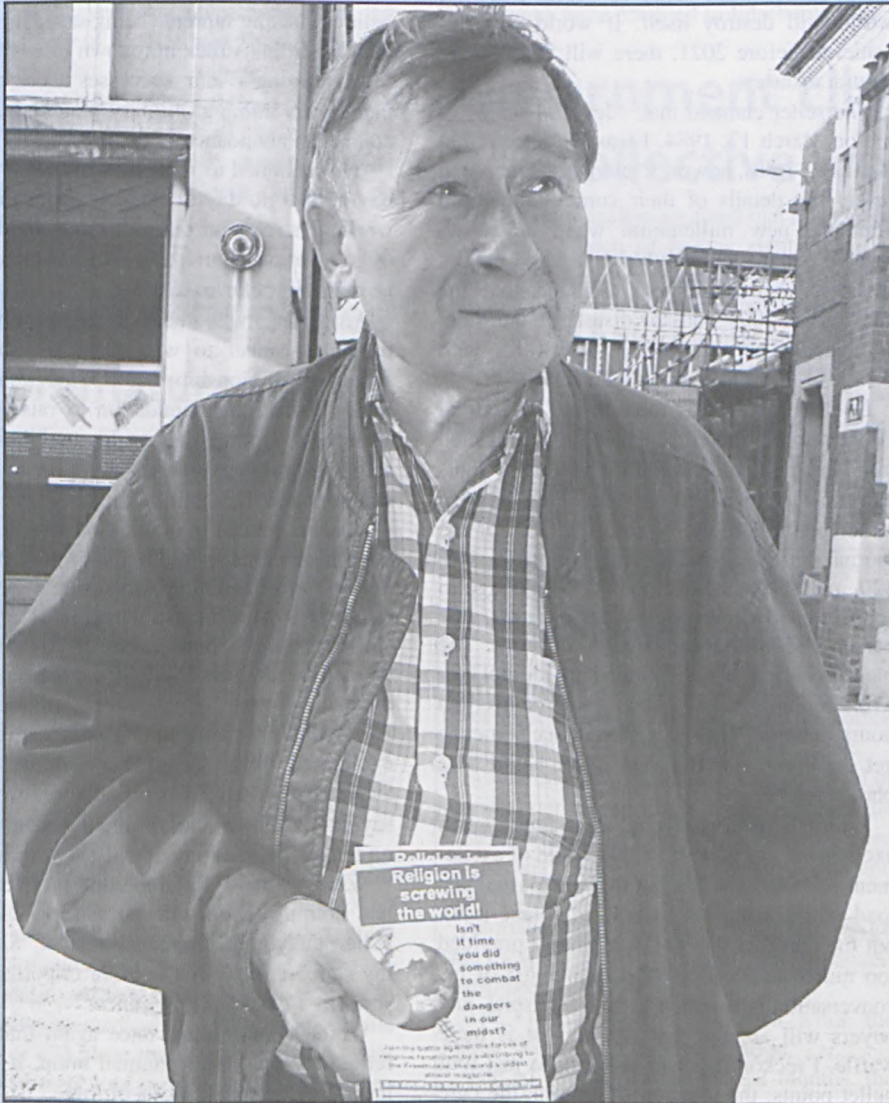
The

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# Freethinker

Secular Humanist monthly founded by G W Foote in 1881

## Brighton atheists support controversial musical



Jerry Springer, the Opera ended its UK run in Brighton last month, with theatregoers showing their contempt for the Christian protestors who had used despicable tactics in their attempts to shut the show down. Among those who turned out to lend their support to *JSTO* – and hand out leaflets promoting the *Freethinker* and the National Secular Society – was Bill McIlroy, of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Association.

– see centrepage report

### Also in this issue:

Gay police group under investigation over a newspaper advertisement linking the Bible with violence – p3

Government climbs down over school worship for over 16s – p3

How the Catholic Church is chipping away at our rights – p7

A E Housman: Poet, Scholar, 'High Church atheist' – p12





THE first rule of flogging information, or a product, is to dangle a carrot, not hand over the entire bag of root vegetables, to your prospective buyers. Unfortunately, this very basic rule went under the radar of a dotty Christian who last month attempted to sell his hand-written account of his meeting with Jesus.

Using the trading name Xilliontherockopera, the man who allegedly came face to face with Jesus in 1984, turned to eBay, the international internet auction company, to market his journal. Asking price: £8,000 or nearest offer.

What does one get for all this dosh? "The four messages of JESUS CHRIST WHO APPEARED TO ME!! (Why do the religious always deploy capital letters, which denote shouting, followed by a crop of exclamation marks? Don't they realise HOW BLOODY ANNOYING THAT IS!!!!)

The seller, in describing his journal, claimed that when he met Jesus, the Son of God "revealed four specific things to me:

- 1 The precise location of Heaven
- 2 The cure for cancer
3. The solution for the achievement of world peace
4. The future."

He went on: "I will briefly discuss each of the four revelations now. HOWEVER, I HAVE DISCUSSED THESE AT GREATER LENGTH IN THE JOURNAL.

1. THE PRECISE LOCATION OF HEAVEN: When we die we will become stars... Literally stars! When we die and become stars we, too, will be blessed by wonderful special planets which orbit us and bring us great happiness. God the Creator is also a star... The first and the greatest ...

2. THE CURE FOR CANCER: The cure for cancer is actually the knowledge of the precise CAUSE OF CANCER. We already know the cures for cancer, mainly prevention and early detection. Also chemotherapy, radiation, surgery and alternative medicine. We also are acutely aware of the roles of carcinogens, environment, heredity and diet. But what is the PRECISE AND SOLE CAUSE OF CANCER? CANCER OCCURS WHEN WE EAT OUR OWN FLESH. (Two very simple examples of eating our own flesh are biting our cuticles or biting our lips.) When a piece of our own flesh is digested, microscopic fragments of our own DNA enter the bloodstream. If a piece of this DNA enters a vulnerable cell, the nucleus of the cell identifies the 'food' as 'self' and this causes a 'circuit' to be blown in the nucleus. When (and if) that cell goes to divide, it does so in a haphazard fashion, dividing into four instead of into two and the mutation continues. There is an interesting correlation to Christianity here. Jesus told us to "take His flesh and eat it." Now he wants us to know not to eat our own flesh in any way because it is deadly.

3. THE SOLUTION FOR THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WORLD PEACE: This is so sim-

ple! According to Jesus, the way to achieve world peace is this: An AMERICAN president has to set a goal for WORLD PEACE BEFORE 2021. (President Kennedy did something similar when he set a goal for the USA to land a man on the moon in the 60's.)

**Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE gives a lesson in marketing to a man who met Jesus**



4. JESUS REVEALED THE FUTURE TO ME: The future will go one of two ways: If world peace is not achieved before 2021 the world will destroy itself. If world peace is achieved before 2021, there will be no more natural disasters.

The seller claimed that "Jesus appeared to me on March 17, 1984. I was 28 years old at the time." Jesus, however, instructed him not to reveal the details of their conversation until after the new millennium when he would receive a sign: this would be "a huge natural disaster". Xilliontherockopera assumed that the tsunamis of 2004 were the disaster in question, and decided to "go public" afterwards with details of his conversation with Jesus.

But taking the eBay route to sell his journal is not proving much of a success. I contacted him via email, and asked him how many journals he had managed to shift. This was his rather plaintive reply: "I sold a COPY of the journal. I had received SO many offers for \$10, \$20, and \$50 that I decided two weeks ago to sell five handwritten copies of the journal. One person bought a copy. I made no profit. The blank book into which I copied my journal cost \$10. Shipping cost \$20 and it took me over ten hours to copy! But I was glad to see someone get the copy. Has the man never heard of a photocopier?"

Xilliontherockopera's failure to ignite much excitement – or at least £8,000 worth of excitement – is obvious. It's not that his journal is a load of old ballcocks (which, of course it is), but the fact that the man has simply provided too much information. The entire gist of his conversation is revealed in his sales spiel, and buyers will assume that all the rest is mere waffle. I reckon that had he stuck to just four bullet points: the location of heaven, the cure for cancer, world peace and the future, he would now be laughing all the way to the bank.

Which brings to mind an apt quote from the author Christian Nestell Bovee: "The more gross the fraud, the more glibly will it go down and the more greedily will it be swallowed, since folly will always find faith wherever imposters will find impudence." Or, as P T Barnum more pithily remarked: "Every crowd has a silver lining."

WRITING earlier this year to *Cycling Weekly* magazine, a clearly confused Christian named Paul Granger suggested that world

champion cyclist Lance Armstrong had survived testicular cancer as a result of his faith.

This brought an immediate response from Alan Stuart, a *Freethinker* subscriber who had this letter published in the magazine:

"I was surprised to read Paul Granger's 'Thought for the Day' in your letters page (May 18). He asks us to worship a character whom he claims made us and died for us.

"He is, of course, entitled to his opinion, but I am at a loss to understand why he quoted Lance Armstrong as an example. Perhaps he had seen pictures of Armstrong wearing a cross around his neck.

"Now that puzzles me, as Armstrong is on record stating that he is an atheist, and does not believe that any supreme being saved him from the cancer that struck him down in 1996.

"Armstrong's tour successes were due to meticulous training, military planning and, of course, an abundance of talent.

"He reminded us recently that on Christmas day he had no day of rest, but spent the day-working hard on his bike. He made no mention of going into a church to worship someone that he does not believe exists."

Armstrong, who recovered from advanced testicular cancer to win the 1999 Tour De France championship, set up the non-profit Lance Armstrong Foundation to raise cancer awareness around the world, and has been active in bringing a message of hope to cancer sufferers and their families.

But his refusal to credit God with his cure has alienated many – particularly in the United States. On researching Armstrong's views on religion, I came across a report of a young Christian man – once a fan of Armstrong – who, on reading an article about the renowned cyclist, found a passage alluding to Armstrong's atheism. "That's terrible", he exclaimed, and ripped his yellow cancer awareness wristband off, and threw it away, saying that now he knew about Armstrong he no longer wished to be identified with him.

When a friend explained that the wristband had nothing to do with Armstrong's lack of belief, the young Christian retorted: "Showing my support for Christ is more important than showing my support for cancer."

Which demonstrates once again that when religion lodges in the human brain, it almost invariably evicts all forms of logic.

Armstrong was quoted in *ET Magazine* as saying: "If there was a God, I'd still have both nuts." And, in an interview with *The Times Online*, he said he thought it was possible to be a good person without believing in God.



Lance Armstrong



# A miracle? More an insult to the medical profession

THE Catholic Church is investigating reports of a miracle at a Scottish hospital after it was claimed that a nun's relic helped a premature baby to live.

According to a report last month in the *Scotsman*, doctors had given up hope of the infant surviving, but after the relic of the Venerable Margaret Sinclair, a former Edinburgh factory worker who died in 1925, was placed in the incubator, the infant, who weighed just 1lb when born, recovered.

Those hoping to see the nun canonised took it as proof of a miracle, but secular groups have reacted with cynicism. Terry Sanderson, the vice-president of the National Secular Society, condemned the claims, saying: "This is a shocking insult to the dedication of the doctors and nurses who work selflessly to take care of the sick. To have their efforts ascribed to some relic is a sad and superstitious throwback to pre-scientific days.

## Religious relic placed in premature baby's incubator

"And what if the outcome had been different? Whose fault would it have been then? The poor old doctors, who probably did the work that saved this child, can't win either way."

The event is now undergoing rigorous examination by Church officials.

If "proven", it would put the nun on route to becoming a saint and boost a campaign to see her beatification and ultimate canonisation in Rome, which has been growing in Scotland in recent years.

Among those to have credited her with working miracles is Sir Jimmy Savile, who claims she saved his life when he was a child after his mother prayed for the nun's help.

The family of the unnamed baby was given permission by medical staff to open the sterile incubator and place the relic next to the infant after they were told there was no hope of survival. The baby is now five months old and said to be doing well.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the head of the Catholic Church in Scotland, said: "Pope John Paul II told me when we were discussing the cause of Margaret Sinclair to ask the people to pray for a miracle and this has been happening.

"Although it is exciting news we must tread cautiously – there is a lot of research and investigation to take place by the Church authorities before any miracle claim can be declared genuine. It does show, however, that there is a strong growing awareness of Margaret Sinclair and her life not just in

Scotland, but throughout Britain and even in America."

The Church investigation will centre around the maternity ward where the baby was born.

Doctors and nursing staff will be asked to give detailed medical statements to officials.

There have been claims of miracles through intercession to Sinclair in the past but none has stood up to examination.

Sinclair, a committed trade unionist, was declared Venerable by Pope Paul VI in February 1978. After her death in 1925 her body was buried in London, but two years later her remains were returned to Edinburgh.

## Government climb-down on over-16 collective worship in schools

THE Government has accepted that it is almost certainly a breach of human rights to force pupils of 16 and over to attend collective worship in schools if it is against their conscience. It now intends to amend the law accordingly.

At present, collective worship is mandatory in all schools, religious and otherwise, right up through sixth-form colleges, unless parents specifically request their children to be excluded.

In the House of Lords last month, Lord Adonis – Government spokesman for

In 2003 they were moved from Mount Vernon cemetery, Edinburgh, to her shrine in St Patrick's Church, Cowgate, Edinburgh, close to where she lived as a girl.

In this scientific age, the *Scotsman* pointed out, the church has a difficult job in convincing a cynical public of the existence of miracles. It has therefore made life a little easier for itself. The number of miracles needed for sainthood has been reduced from three. While miracles must be scrutinised, the church has eliminated the so-called "devil's advocate" – a churchman charged with challenging the evidence – from proceedings.

Education in the Lords – accepted the principle of allowing 16-year-olds and over to exempt themselves from worship in schools.

The amendment to the new Education Bill was proposed by Baroness Walmsley, who argued that 16-year-olds can pay tax, get married, fight for their country and are, by most measures, adults – yet they cannot refuse to worship, even if they are atheists or members of another religion.

The amendment was suggested by the National Secular Society, who had recently written to the Education Secretary Alan Johnson and to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights about the issue. Mr Johnson saw no reason then to change the rules on collective worship, but since then, the JCHR had concluded that the NSS argument had merit.

Now Lord Adonis has promised that he will introduce an amendment to the Education Bill at the next stage of its passage through parliament.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society – which has been campaigning for this for over 30 years – said: "This is very good news indeed. It has seemed intolerable to us that young people are being forced to worship at school, sometimes against their will.

"It is self-evidently a breach of their human rights. Indeed, it can be argued from a human rights perspective that the age limit for self-exemption should be lower. The church is quite happy to allow 14-year-olds to confirm their commitment to Christianity, yet it will not accept that other children of that age can feel equally certain that they don't believe."

Mr Wood pointed to a front-page report in *The Times Educational Supplement* which showed that some young people are prepared to take the matter into their own hands when religious enthusiasts use school as a place of indoctrination rather than education (*see page 4 report*).

## Gay police in anti-religion probe

THE Gay Police Association (GPA) is being investigated after it claimed a rise in homophobic attacks was due to religious belief.

An advert, showing a Bible next to a pool of blood under the heading "in the name of the father", appeared in the *Independent* on June 29, two days ahead of the Europride gay and lesbian parade in London.

Scotland Yard, according to a BBC report, said the inquiry "centres on whether the advert constitutes a faith crime."

The GPA refused to comment while the matter was still under investigation.

The ad stated: "In the last 12 months, the GPA has recorded a 74 percent increase in homophobic incidents, where the sole or primary motivating factor was the religious belief of the perpetrator."

The GPA was formed in 1990 and has members in all 52 UK police forces.

Scotland Yard said the inquiry was prompted by a complaint by a member of the public.

A GPA spokesman said they were aware police have received a complaint in relation to the advert.

"Until that investigation has been completed we're unable to comment further on this matter," said a spokesman.





## 'Weird' sisters lose Second Coming insurance cover

THREE dotty virgins who got it into their heads the one of them might spawn another baby Jesus, took out an insurance policy that would cover the cost of the Second Coming.

According to a BBC news report, the insurers withdrew the cover on their virginity taken out in 2000 because of objections by the Catholic Church.

Essex-based Britishinsurance.com confirmed it had provided the £1m policy, but said it was reviewed following complaints from the Catholic Church.

The cover was meant to pay for the cost of bringing up Christ if one of them happened to have a virgin birth.

Britishinsurance.com managing director Simon Burgess said it had not been the company's intention to offend anyone, but "the Catholic Church is up in arms about what we've been doing. We have withdrawn the cover because it was causing a furore".

The company, which is based in Braintree, specialises in accident and unemployment insurance.

Mr Burgess said: "The people were concerned about having sufficient funds if they immaculately conceived. We sometimes get weird requests and this is the weirdest we have had."

The burden of proof that a virgin birth had taken place, and that the baby was in fact

Jesus, rested with the three Inverness women, said Mr Burgess, adding that the premium on the insurance was donated to charity.

The siblings had paid £100 annually since 2000. If they had secured a payout, they stood to receive £1m.

The women, who have not been identified, are believed to be members of a Christian group in Inverness.

Britishinsurance.com said it was authorised and regulated by the Financial Services Authority and is a member of the Finance Industry Standards Association.

The Catholic Church in Scotland declined to comment.

## Head of Catholic school suspended after pupils revolt

THE Catholic sixth-form college principal who invited a radical pro-life campaigner from the US to lecture students and excluded teenagers for skipping Mass has been suspended.

The local council has now launched an investigation into St Luke's college in Bexley, south London, following a revolt by students who accused it of being "more concerned about religion than education" and criticism of teaching standards by Ofsted (See *Freethinker* report, July).

According to a report in *The Times Educational Supplement*, the suspension of Maria Williams brought to a head a troubled few months for the college, only formed last year following the closure of two school sixth forms.

Earlier this year more than 100 teenagers signed a petition protesting at a decision by Williams to invite Barbara McGuigan, an American evangelist, to lecture students about Christian family values.

It is claimed students were forced to attend a series of talks by Ms McGuigan – founder of Catholic charity, Voice of Virtue International, about abortion, sex outside marriage and homosexuality.

One 18-year-old girl, who has just finished exams at the college, told *The TES*: "It was just disturbing and went too far. We were shown pictures of foetuses aborted after 12 and 20 weeks – it was met with disgust. Some people were crying and walking out."

Students also complained after taking part in a procession, in which they were asked to carry a statue of the Virgin Mary around the college while singing hymns.

Last month Mrs Williams excluded 17 students for a day after they refused to go to mass and then called them into college for a "re-entry" interview.

This week Alan Johnson, the Education Secretary, confirmed that the Government has no plans to relax the laws on compulsory worship and, although parents have the power to pull children out, that right will not be extend-

ed to pupils themselves.

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, said: "Legal advice we have indicates that the inability in law of older pupils to withdraw themselves from collective worship contravenes their rights under the Human Rights Act."

Mrs Williams told the local press that students at St Luke's had "signed up" to attending Mass, one of only two compulsory acts of

worship a term, and had been suspended for being "openly defiant".

But last month Mrs Williams herself was suspended on full pay by the college's governors after an inspection by Ofsted found standards at the college to be "inadequate", and criticised teaching. It has now been given a "notice to improve" after inspectors judged it to be "performing significantly less well than it could be reasonably expected to".

### School sued for pulling the plug on pupil's religious speech

A HIGH school valedictorian who had the plug pulled on her microphone as she gave an address referring to Jesus Christ has filed a lawsuit against Las Vegas school officials, claiming her rights to religious freedom and free speech were trampled.

Brittany McComb, 18, was giving her commencement address to about 400 graduates of Foothill High School and their family members when the sound was cut. "God's love is so great that he gave his only son up," she said, before the microphone went dead. She continued without amplification, "...to an excruciating death on a cross so his blood would cover all our shortcomings and provide for us a way to heaven in accepting this grace."

McComb's lawsuit, filed in the US District Court of Nevada, names the principal, assistant principal and the employee of the school in Henderson who allegedly pulled the plug.

McComb said she was warned that her speech would be cut off if she did not follow an approved script that deleted references to Christ and invitations for others to join the faith. She memorised the deleted parts and said them anyway. She says "what inspired me to keep going and what motivated me involved Jesus Christ, period."

### Defence claims 'Islamophobia' in Muslim sex abuse case

A DEFENCE claim that the trial of a 37-year-old man from Saudi Arabia on charges of kidnapping and sexual assault was the result of "misconstrued cultural differences, and cynical Islamophobia" was rejected by a Colorado jury last month.

Homaidan Al-Turki, 37, of Saudi Arabia, who lives in Aurora, was initially charged with kidnapping and sexual assault, but after a day of deliberation, the jury convicted Al-Turki on reduced charges of false imprisonment and unlawful sexual contact, as well as charges of theft and criminal extortion.

Al-Turki, a linguistics doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder, now faces up to life in prison at his sentencing on August 31.

The prosecution said that for four years Al-Turki kept the 24-year-old Indonesian woman as a slave in the family home, forcing her to cook and clean and take care of the family and their five children with little pay. Al-Turki eventually intimidated the woman into sex acts that culminated in her rape in late 2004. The trial ended in drama in the courtroom, with as many as nine sheriff's deputies trying to keep peace while Al-Turki's supporters howled protests at the verdict.



# NSS argues for disestablishment at high-profile seminar

THE National Secular Society put a strong case for the disestablishment of the Church of England last month at a seminar convened by the Constitution Unit of University College. The C of E fielded a "top brass" team at the private event, led by their constitutional expert, the Bishop of Winchester, Dr Michael Scott-Joynt. Other religious organisations were also represented, generally by their most senior staff. Academics and lawyers were also out in force, and the Prime Minister's Appointments Secretary was one of the delegates. The meeting was addressed by Lord (Douglas) Hurd

The NSS prepared what was probably the most comprehensive paper – and the most controversial – tabled by any of the delegates. The paper shows how the needs and opinions of the large numbers of non-religious people in Britain are routinely disregarded by official bodies while religious organisations are consulted at almost every turn.

Considerable evidence is offered to support the contention that, numerically, the C of E has declined drastically in the last 50 years, and was projected to decline even more dramatically in the next 35 years. The NSS questioned how, or even whether, it could survive. The constitutional positions of archbishops and bishops were examined, as were relevant aspects of the head of state, the coronation and the coronation oath.

The report also carries a section on laws which the NSS believes need to be repealed to eliminate religious privilege. The paper con-

cludes with a brief commentary on education, chaplaincy and Parliamentary prayers. A table, prepared for the NSS by academics, sets out the religious characteristics of the constitutional governments in leading western democracies. Information is also given on disestablishment moves in Sweden and Norway. In all, the NSS makes 20 recommendations in the report.

The most fundamental of these recommendations is that the Church of England should be disestablished. The NSS also stresses that the Church should not be allowed to cherry pick those aspects of the disestablishment which would appeal to it, while leaving privileges such as the 26 bishops in the House of Lords untouched. It warns against the worst possible outcome, something towards which the government seems perhaps unconsciously to be nudging: some kind of new establishment based on a multi-faith model rather than a single faith. In this scenario the only people whose rights and needs are disregarded are the non-religious.

Predictably, the C of E stonewalled, maintaining that they were not convinced by the statistics the NSS had quoted (all of which came from cited Christian or independent sources). Regardless of the figures, the Church considered the nation could not operate without some religious ethical basis from which to proceed. The church representatives seemed to think that if they were not directly involved, any activities carried out by the government would be, in effect, "unprincipled".

In practical terms, the Government has made clear it will not initiate any disestablishment process unless the Church itself signifies its willingness. The NSS maintains, however, that the Government has a duty to act in the best interests of the electorate as a whole and should not delegate resolution of the issue to an organisation with the biggest vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*.

There is no realistic prospect of the present Government taking an initiative, so there does not seem any prospect of a beginning to the disestablishment process in the short-term, says the NSS. The NSS report also warns the Church that if it does not take the initiative, it runs the risk of being forced by some crisis into a much less advantageous settlement which might need to be implemented with undesirable haste. Some academics shared this view. The paper is now in the hands of significant opinion formers, and as a work of reference for the Constitution Unit for its future work. You can see the 60-page report at <http://tinyurl.com/gw2ta>.

The creation and presentation of the paper was a major undertaking for Keith Porteous Wood, who was ably assisted by Tim Boyce and Joel Clompus. If you would like to make a contribution towards this work the NSS would greatly

appreciate it. Each donor who gives £25 or more will be sent a printed copy of the paper.

Please send a cheque payable to "NSS" to NSS Paper, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R or make your donation by credit card on the website <http://www.secularism.org.uk/join.html> and select one of the donation options. Click on the "Add Items to Basket" button and follow the instructions to make your payment; please ensure that you enter "Church and State report" in the comment box on the payment page.

## Secular readings replace prayers at Stafford council meetings

THE new mayor of Stafford Borough Council, Mike Shone, has scrapped prayers before council meetings and replaced them with secular readings. Mr Shone says he has opted for "reason and logic" over "faith and scripture".

A council spokeswoman told the local paper: "As a humanist, the Mayor believes that human issues should be approached with reason, not faith. He looks to logic and evidence to guide him, rather than relying on scripture. His decision to have readings at the start of council meetings was logically, for him, the right thing to do."

Cllr Shone said: "Each mayor has the right to choose someone of their belief to officiate at ceremonies, and to give readings in line with their beliefs before council meetings. That's the council's system, and has been so for decades. In the past, Church of England mayors have chosen C of E chaplains, Baptist mayors have picked a Baptist minister and Roman Catholic mayors have asked a priest. All I've done, as a humanist, is to pick a humanist celebrant to officiate. All mayors have the same rights, irrespective of belief."

The borough council was keen to stress that Cllr Shone had not banned all association with religion. Of the 40 engagements the mayor has attended so far, five of them have been at church services. Cllr Shone added: "I'm more than happy to represent the borough at church services, just as I'm happy to represent the borough at all other engagements."

"This year's civic service was held at St Mary's Church, as usual, and it mainly consisted of Christian hymns and readings. To reflect my beliefs, there were also a few secular readings. It turned out to be a very successful joint venture."

## Islamic fanatics kill two people for watching football

RADICAL Islamic militia fighters in central Somalia last month shot and killed two people at the screening of a banned World Cup soccer broadcast while dispersing the crowd of teenagers watching it.

The Islamic fighters, who have banned such entertainment, opened fire after the teenagers defied their orders to leave the cinema that was screening the Germany-Italy match. The dead were a girl and the cinema owner.

Islamic fighters who wrested control of the Somali capital from warlords in June forbade movies and television entertainment in line with their strict interpretation of Islam. The Supreme Islamic Courts Council, originally called the Islamic Courts Union, has expanded its control to other parts of southern Somalia.

Somalia has been without an effective central government since the warlords turned on each other, carving much of the country into armed camps ruled by violence and clan law. This has allowed Islamic fundamentalists to step into the vacuum, projecting themselves as an alternative military and political power.



'Human nature, Mr Allnut, is what we were put in this world to rise above!'

THUS Katherine Hepburn's missionary, Rose Sayer, rebuked Humphrey Bogart as he hauled the *African Queen* through the jungle swamps. Of missionaries and their messages there is no shortage. All recorded human societies have been largely religious, and some of the earliest human artifacts appear to have some kind of ritual, magical or possibly religious, significance. It is reckoned that around 80 percent of the current world population have some religious allegiance.

Most religions have supposed themselves to have divine or supernatural origins. Christianity comes from God via the Bible, Islam from Allah via the angel Gabriel, Mormonism through the angel Moroni and the gold plates translated by Joseph Smith (which then so oddly disappeared), and so on. But if one does not accept these accounts, there is only one alternative. It must, as Mr Allnut might have said, be human nature. At least, it must have human, natural, origins.

There have been many offers of natural explanations for religion, anthropological such as Frazer and Tylor, sociological such as Durkheim, psychoanalytical (Freud) or economic (Marx). They have tended to make the same mistake as politicians, to suppose that human behaviour is a simple matter with a straightforward answer. (More money! A new law!). This is very seldom the case and certainly not for religion. Religion must be taken as a whole: doctrines, practices, buildings, organisations; saints and suicide bombers, snake-handling and vicarage tea parties, Quakers and *jihads*. Many and various factors contribute to producing each of these. Some of the factors are, I think, beginning to be understood, though many puzzles remain.

Most human behaviour has both underlying and immediate causes. In the case of religion, it seems that at least the following are important. First, the underlying or more permanent. There is currently great interest in patterns of thinking that have evolved since the human race emerged, often now termed "modules". The notion of innate ideas goes back to Plato, and more recently such concepts as the "archetypes" of C G Jung, and even "instincts" have been used. The emphasis now is on the adaptive nature of evolution. What increases the chances of survival will tend to persist. But it will not necessarily be what is theoretically

## It's only human nature!

best, nor useful indefinitely. And it may have unwanted spin-offs. Human beings are fond of salt and sweet things. This served well when we were hunters and gatherers, and food contained little of either. But now manufacturers pack their products with them, with the result that we eat far too much of both. Similarly, it is argued, for millennia we made sense of the world by assuming that it operated rather like what we know best, ourselves.

### We can and must rise above our human nature, says Professor JOHN RADFORD

Thus deities of various sorts were responsible for everything in nature. This is not true, but the old way of thinking is still powerful. (Even the most rational of us can say "It's been trying to rain all day", or swear at a recalcitrant computer.) Again, death, especially of those close to us, has physiological effects such as lowering resistance to infection. Virtually all religions assure us that we do not really die. Uncertainty has similar effects, and if there is anything that religions offer it is certainty. Anything that reduces these effects is advantageous from an evolutionary point of view. It seems reasonable to suppose that there are built-in patterns that underlie religious thought and behaviour. (Two widely reviewed books, *Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast* by Lewis Wolpert, and *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel C Dennett, have recently pushed this line.) Alongside such suggestions is the exploration of brain processes that seem to underlie "religious" feelings. There are claims to have found "the God Spot", some saying that it proves God exists, otherwise he would not have a Spot, others that it shows he is nothing but a quirk of the nervous system.

Another long-term aspect is personality. It is

well-established that there are both genetic and environmental components, and this has been found specifically for "religiousness" as a personality trait. All this does not mean that we "inherit" religion. What is built in is a range of possibilities and tendencies. How they develop depends on experience. However, some aspects of this also tend to be long lasting, such as laws, institutions and culture. If religion is established by law, or by prevailing social norms, most people will conform, and it becomes difficult and dangerous even to think outside a religious framework, let alone speak out. This was so in mediaeval Europe, and is now in some Islamic countries and in the United States.

Of immediate influences on the individual, research shows the family to be easily the strongest. Peer groups, and doctrinal education, are less effective. On the other hand, education in general is negatively related to religion, particularly to the more fundamentalist. Intellectual argument leads a few individuals to religion (though probably more away from it), but most religionists accept reach-me-down arguments, or simply take their faith for granted. Much more powerful are personal experiences, of conversion and/or religious ecstasy or the like. Conversion is often related to feelings of depression, unworthiness, unsolvable problems and tension, and it is tempting to see it as largely an escape. The solution may not be true, but psychologically it works, in some sense. Jesus saves! It is reported that up to a third of people have some experience that they label "religious" at some point in their lives. For some, it is the most important event of their lives, though very difficult to describe, rare, fleeting, and hard to replicate.

Indeed, this is one aspect of religion that is still hard to comprehend in terms of well-established mechanisms of behaviour. It doesn't seem to obey any systematic rules, and it is not at all clear even whether it is the same thing in different religious traditions. Another still very puzzling aspect is extremism. Most attention has recently been on the more violent aspects. Some individuals, who appear to differ in no significant way from their fellows, and to have no more serious grievances, take the drastic course of (in particular) killing themselves, with the aim of also killing as many other, entirely unconnected, people as possible. There is also less dangerous extremism that leads to (for example) self-mutilation, or more beneficially, devotion to human causes at great personal sacrifice. Neither the positive nor the negative seems to be satisfactorily explained as yet. Another puzzle is the "sacred": places, objects or ideas that are inviolate. They cannot be criticised, abused, or sometimes even spoken of or touched (or represented in cartoons!). To do so is heresy or blasphemy. They arouse intense emotions for or against, and we do not really know why – at least I don't.

But the general story of science is that, sooner or later, puzzling and mysterious phenomena

## Secularist of the Year tickets on sale

THE presentation of the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year 2006 will be at a lunch-time event on Saturday 7 October in central London. Tickets are now on sale, and are strictly limited. The nominees were listed in last week's *Newsline*. Price includes a three course meal with fine wine, entertainment and the presentation. Tickets cost £45. Please send a cheque, and indicate whether you have special dietary requirements (we need to know this in advance), to NSS Tickets, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL. You can also book securely online at the NSS shop at [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk).



become amenable to explanation, and are seen to fit into a pattern of natural events, as with lightning, static electricity, and magnetism. When this is achieved, we can hope to control and modify them in ways that benefit and do not harm humanity. Of course, we are not always successful. Scientific knowledge can be used for ill as well as good. But without it we are at the mercy of nature. So it is with human behaviour, and so it is with religion.

## How the Catholic Church is chipping away at our rights

IF you are squeamish, read no further. What the RC Church is hoping to introduce into Britain is not pretty. Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor has recently made the first move by urging the government to lower the current 24-week abortion limit. His spokesman admitted that "how you get from A to B is a step-by-step process", but did not elaborate. [*Guardian*, 22.06.06]

That is because his plan is to gradually tighten up abortion laws, place bureaucratic restrictions on abortion clinics, turn doctors who offer abortions into social outcasts and ridicule the human rights which bolster health care for women internationally.

In the US all these moves are already well underway, though it will take time for the plan to be completely implemented there, as this is being done piecemeal at the state level, where it is easier to push through quietly. However, if we want a preview of the final stage, we can look at what has already happened to the little Central American country with the Christian name: El Salvador. In this tiny, war-torn land the Church has been able to get through all the stages of its plan in less than a decade. The Vatican only had to wait until the civil war ended in 1992. At that point the country was finally able to address social issues, and the religious lobbying began in earnest. The next year conservative members of the assembly proposed that December 28th, the Catholic Feast of the Holy Innocents, be declared a "National Day to Remember the Unborn". Then in 1995 Pope John Paul II appointed a new Archbishop for San Salvador, Fernando Sáenz Lacalle. The Archbishop was a member of Opus Dei and his aim was to use national legislation backed up by police and the courts to enforce the Catholic ban on abortion on everyone. Accordingly, in 1997 conservative members in the assembly introduced a bill to forbid abortion in all circumstances. The Archbishop campaigned actively and the law was passed.

Two years, and one emotional papal visit later, the final piece of legislation was put in place, a constitutional amendment. Today Article 1 of El Salvador's constitution declares that the prime directive of government is to protect life from the "very moment of conception". This is efficiently enforced by the Church-inspired penal code, as follows:

- Any abortion provider, whether back-alley

which is a part of that behaviour and needs to be understood in the same way. There seems to be a pervasive if often vague feeling that religion has some special status, demanding general respect and justifying foolish and even dangerous practices.

Religion has no special status. It is in no way exempt from investigation, or from explanation in purely naturalistic terms like all other behaviour. We have natural tendencies which

practitioner or medical doctor, faces 6 to 12 years in prison.

- Anyone who provides any other help to the distressed women can get 2 to 5 years.
- The woman herself can get 2 to 8 years, if she manages to seek help soon enough.

However, if judges have ruled that the foetus

### MURIEL FRAZER sounds a warning about Vatican tactics

was viable (their rule of thumb is that it weigh at least 500 grams, a little over a pound), she can be charged with aggravated homicide. The penalty for this can be 30 to 50 years in prison. Yes, she can actually be gaoled for the rest of her natural life.

- Because any woman with unexplained vaginal bleeding or a damaged uterus is suspected of being a criminal, she can be handcuffed to her hospital bed, with a police officer standing outside the door.
- Meanwhile the police attempt to procure criminal evidence by visiting the woman's home to interrogate her family and neighbours. They also question the people who work with her.
- They talk to the doctor who treated her at the hospital. Even if he wants to, he cannot decline on grounds of patient confidentiality. Furthermore, he knows that the prosecutors have already seized her medical records and may also have questioned other hospital staff. The doctor is afraid that the nurses will report

can lead to the mistaken views and harmful practices (as I consider them) of religion. Similarly we have natural propensities for aggression, hatred and greed, as well as for love, compassion and benevolence. Rose Sayer was right. We can and must rise above our human nature, foster the good and reduce or eliminate the bad.

• *John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.*

him for not reporting her.

- The police must also visit the scene of the crime, which, following the logic of the law, often means the woman's vagina. Accordingly, doctors from the Forensic Institute may be called in to do a pelvic examination.
- And if the woman's illegal abortion went badly and the doctor had to perform a hysterectomy, then the uterus is sent to the Forensic Institute, where the government's doctors analyse it and retain custody of her uterus as evidence against her. This is what the Cardinal is planning for Britain, too. Naturally, he won't expect this country to succumb in less than a decade like El Salvador: as they say, "the Vatican thinks in centuries". The Church realises that in Britain they must try to stay under people's radar until they have changed public opinion enough to make their bolder moves. If you want to deprive people of their rights, it's best to do it by inches. The Nazis realised this, as well. As one of their bravest victims observed [Dr. Rudolf Vrba, *I Cannot Forgive*, 1963, p. 21]: "*I am surprised that I, too, accepted so much so quietly. I can only conclude that it was because the laws curtailing our rights were introduced discreetly, falling almost imperceptibly around us like gentle snow.*"

(This article is a summary of Jack Hitt's "Pro-Life Nation", *New York Times*, 9 April 2006).

- See "*Is the Catholic Church an organised crime syndicate?*", p10.

## 'Islam is not about turbans and beards'

MALAYSIA'S opposition Islamic party, PAS, has accused a top judge of insulting Islam by ruling that a Muslim boy need not wear a turban – as the Prophet Mohammed did – to prove his faith. The case began when three Muslim boys sued the government because their state school expelled them for refusing to remove their turbans. The boys lost their case, and appealed – but a Federal Court dismissed the appeal.

Judge Abdul Hamid Mohamed said in the ruling last month that it was not necessary for Muslims to do exactly as the Prophet did. "Islam is not about turbans and beards. The pagan Arabs wore turbans and kept beards. It was quite natural for the Prophet, born into the community, to do the same," the judge said, adding that even in Malaysia, very few religious clerics and hardly any Shariah Court judges wear a turban. "The Prophet also rode a camel, but does that make riding a camel a more pious deed than traveling in an airplane?"

PAS said the judge should have been more restrained in his comments since he is not an expert on Islam. "Parts of what he said insults and belittles Islamic teachings," PAS youth chief Salahuddin Ayub said. "We want the Federal Court judgment to be reviewed. According to our religious teaching, wearing a turban is part of the Islamic way of life."



In the same week that marked the first anniversary of the London bombings perpetrated by Islamic fanatics made mad by their belief in God, Brighton saw an influx of another brand of religious zealot.

Supporters of Christian Voice came to the city in the vain hope of persuading theatregoers to boycott the last performances of *Jerry Springer – The Opera*. But many local residents had already read an appeal by Polly Toybee in the *Guardian* to support JSTO, and they gave short shrift to Stephen Green, Christian Voice's Grand Ayatollah, and his grim band of purse-lipped dupes who picketed the Brighton Dome.

This is what Toybee wrote:

Jerry Springer the Opera reaches the end of its noisy tour next week with a grand finale at the Brighton Dome. It will have made a hefty loss for its producers, who toured it despite knowing that trouble would dog it and that it would lose money. But they were determined not to let the evangelicals win.

This will be the last chance to see it, as its co-author Stewart Lee says glumly that he doubts it will ever be performed again. It shows how insidiously the tentacles of religious zeal invade every sphere of national life, despite the very small number of religious practitioners in this most secular of nations.

This year the dark side of religion conspired to stop a dignity-in-dying bill that would have allowed the terminally ill to choose how their lives should end. Now they plot yet more restrictions on abortion. Meanwhile, free speech is increasingly squeezed by the demands of Muslims for more religious protection, silencing most of the usual voices who

# Free speech support Jerry Springer, the Opera

should defend the right to cause offence. The Jerry Springer story is small potatoes in comparison – but it's the harbinger of a cowardly culture shift that lets religious intimidation win.

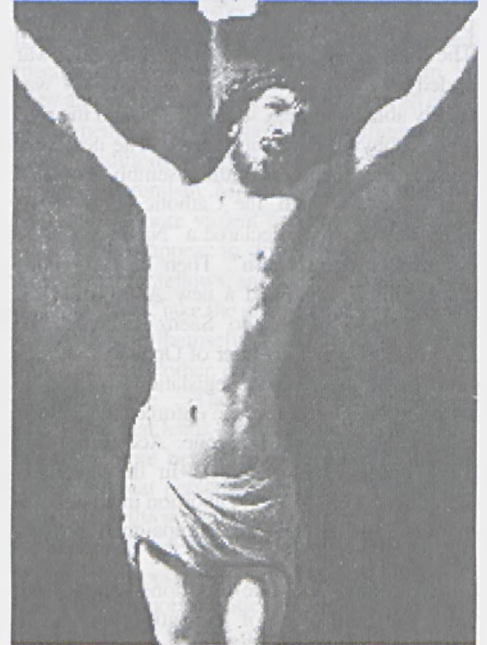
First, let me declare my interest. I am an honorary associate of the National Secular Society and chair of Brighton Dome and Festival, the charity that runs the venue where the Springer show will close. The Dome eagerly booked the show long ago. The musical is garlanded with awards, including four Oliviers. Starting out small, as a cult show in Battersea, it was the toast of the Edinburgh Festival before being snatched up by the National Theatre and greeted with rave reviews. "The best thing to happen to British musical theatre for ages," wrote the *Telegraph*. The *Guardian's* Michael Billington compared it to *The Threepenny Opera*, calling it "as funny as anything in *The Producers*" with "music that has echoes of the sublime". In London it triumphed as coachloads of all kinds came in, the fans of the Jerry Springer TV show alongside the super-sophisticated, because it is very funny, touching and musically astounding.

Watching it again this week, I saw it as a redemption of the humanity of those rejects,

freaks and lowlife misfits paraded on reality TV shows. It elevates sad lives to tragicomic heights: it could be Big Brother the Opera, avenging all TV exploitation of the desperate and daft. It defies description: see it for yourself, before it's too late.

For 552 performances in London it was a smash hit with no controversy. It even had good reviews in the *Church Times* and the *Catholic Herald*. It wasn't until the BBC broadcast it that the evangelical extremists of Christian Voice saw their chance. Rude, lewd and raucous the show certainly is – but not enough to stop Cherie Blair taking her children to see it. Blasphemous it barely is. It is just not true that Christ is presented as a coprophiliac – but then the protesters never bothered to see the show. Even if it *were* blasphemy, outrage has to be tolerated. But Christian Voice got more than 60,000 people to protest to the BBC and put the home addresses of BBC executives on the internet, attracting death threats requiring police protection.

The tour was planned for 39 cities, but the furore panicked many venues, especially those run by local councils. Christian Voice wrote to every theatre, warning of prosecution if they put the show on. If it wasn't the blasphemy law then it would be the new, untried "incitement



"There is little doubt that JSTO is motivated by hatred of Christianity," says Christian Voice. "Every character gets a change of clothes from Act 1 to Act 2, except Jerry Springer – and the mincing Jesus. Jesus Christ, God the Son who lived a perfect life, suffering and dying on the cross for the sins of the world, is the pervert with an infantile complex, clad in a nappy – albeit a smarter one this time. The Saviour of the world has a foul-mouthed exchange with Satan, and He sings "Talk to the stigmata". So even His wounds are ridiculed. Finally, Springer says: "Jesus, grow up ... and put some ... clothes on". With expletives. In short, JSTO could hardly be more blasphemous and more offensive to God and to Christians". The pictures above expose how CV cynically misrepresented the facts regarding Wills Morgan's two roles in the musical. In the first, he does wear an outsize nappy, but in the second he has a loincloth very similar to the one shown in the traditional painting of Christ. The "nappy-clad" Jesus allegation played a large part of CV's strategy to whip up opposition to the show.



# Porters win the day as opera ends its UK tour



A scowling Stephen Green tries to face down a free speech supporter outside the Brighton Dome on the last night of Jerry Springer, the Opera

to religious hatred" bill then progressing through parliament. After more than a third of the theatres pulled out in panic, only 23 weeks of bookings remained – too few to have any chance of recouping costs. The authors waived their royalties and the producers decided to take the loss; the Arts Council tipped in a little so that people in the regions could see something they regarded as excellent.

Stewart Lee says a thousand Christian protesters turn up on the first night in big cities. In Leicester some of the cast were turned out of their B&Bs. The Archbishop of Wales tried to get the show stopped at the Wales Millennium Centre. The Scottish cancer charity Maggie's Centres dared not accept the money from a gala performance when Christian Voice told it doing so would "upset Christians all over the world".

Far from all publicity being good publicity, it put off the usual audience for musicals, who assumed this show must be all filth, shock and schlock. Fear of running the gauntlet of rabid zealots also kept many away. Most local reviews were raves, but too late for ticket sales. No wonder evangelicals gloat on their websites that they have won and that the production is

"under a curse" financially. Censorship has many weapons.

Have you noticed how few are now ready to

## 'Respect the religious' motion heavily defeated in JSTO debate

ON the final night of JSTO, Polly Toynbee chaired a debate at the Dome Theatre. The motion was "Artists have a responsibility to respect the sensibilities of religious groups and avoid gratuitous blasphemy."

Speakers at the debate were Richard Thomas, co-author of the musical, and David Hilborn, head of theology at the Evangelical Alliance.

Among those who attended were Wills Morgan, who played two roles in the opera – a nappy-clad coprophiliac, and a loin-clothed Jesus – and the man who orchestrated nationwide protests against the musical, Stephen Green, the voice of Christian Voice.

In a heated discussion, Hilborn claimed that Christianity appeared to be "singled out" in the UK for contempt of a kind that would never be

offend the religions and defend free speech? The government only just failed to pass the "incitement to religious hatred" bill because Blair himself accidentally failed to turn up to vote. The way some imams outrageously misused the Mohammed cartoons to stir global riots has been highly effective in paralysing mockery or even criticism of Islam. Well-meaning guidelines on hate crime, issued by the Association of Chief Police Officers, are being bizarrely interpreted by some to suggest that anyone can go to the police to say they feel offended about just about anything.

Of course an elderly couple of evangelicals shouldn't have had the police summoned by the council for expressing homophobic views. Of course Sir Iqbal Sacranie should be allowed to say homosexuality is harmful without getting a call from police under the Public Order Act: thanks to Blunkett, if a public-order breach is "religiously aggravated" it can get a seven-year sentence. Not satisfied with blasphemy laws, the Vatican wants a new offence of Christianophobia. Sikhs want the right to ban the play *Behzti*, militant Hindus want naked pictures of a goddess banned. At a free-speech rally recently, an Iranian dissident was charged for holding a placard with one of the Danish cartoons.

Now the Council of Europe proposes to appease religions with a "code of conduct" or even a law to protect believers' sensitivities. Only the National Secular Society doesn't blench; other rights groups have been muted. Threats against anyone are banned in every civilised country, but protection against being offended should never trump free speech.

The odd thing about the Jerry Springer saga is that the show does not offend anyway and is not really about religion. It is very funny and abundantly affectionate. So come and see it for the very last time – and beat the bigots.

shown to Islam or Hinduism.

But he stressed that, unlike ChristianVoice, the Evangelical Alliance had never campaigned for the banning of JSTO. The Evangelical Alliance, he said, had opposed the Government's proposed incitement to religious hatred legislation because it would prevent groups such as his to denounce other religions, such as Islam, that denied the divinity of Jesus.

During the course of the debate, one delegate asked the audience to remember that it was taking place just one year after religious fanatics had committed a terrorist atrocity in London in the name of Allah. Green, who had interjected several times, shouted out that "Allah was not God".

The motion was heavily defeated.



# Is the Catholic Church an o

JULIUS and Ethel Rosenberg were executed in the USA on June 19, 1953. "What evil deeds had the Rosenbergs done that could bring such a harsh punishment? Had they sold our secrets to the Soviets for the lust for money and expensive gifts? No, the Rosenbergs were driven by naive idealism. Apparently this is worse than doing it for money."<sup>1</sup> Judge Jerome Frank ruled that the Rosenbergs' actions could be "used ... to the advantage of any foreign nation. No distinction is made between friend or enemy...Whether [the beneficiary] was an ally or friendly nation during the period of the alleged conspiracy is immaterial."<sup>2</sup>

The Rosenbergs' convictions have never been overturned (although many believe that they should be). That means that behaviour that contributes "to the advantage of any foreign nation ... either to our hurt or another's gain" is, by precedent that the Supreme Court has refused to reverse, a capital crime. So why is a conspiracy to create an enclave called Ave Maria in the state of Florida, to the advantage of Vatican City and the hurt of the United States (since residents will be deprived of their basic rights as American citizens), not being prosecuted under the same law used to execute the Rosenbergs?

A millionaire named Tom Monaghan, a

brainwashed Catholic (there's another kind?), is contributing \$250 million toward building Ave Maria, a town of 11,000 homes, a Catholic cathedral and a Catholic university, 30 miles east of Naples, Florida. Even the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) does not dispute his right to do that. But Monaghan has made clear that the laws of Ave Maria will be those of the foreign nation of Vatican City, not those of the United States of America. Zoning laws will be used to prevent retailers from carrying magazines such as *Playboy* that offend the sensibilities of sex-hating masochists.

Pharmacies will be "asked" not to carry contraceptive pills or condoms – but before any pharmacy is allowed to do business in Ave Maria, it will be required to indicate whether it will conform to that "request". And of competing applications, space will be made available to "the one that honoured that request". Also Naples Community Hospital has agreed to open a clinic in Ave Maria that will refuse to prescribe birth-control pills to persons legally entitled to such prescriptions under American law.<sup>3</sup> In what way does Monaghan's conspiracy to aid a foreign power to the detriment of

the United States of America differ from that of the Rosenbergs? The only answer is that the Rosenbergs had no intention of harming America by imposing foreign domination – and Monaghan does.

The Roman Catholic Church in America is a subsidiary of a foreign power. That is not in itself a crime. As John F Kennedy made clear, one can follow Catholic teaching in his own behaviour without imposing that teaching on Americans who disagree with it. Similarly presidential candidate John Kerry and other Catholic politicians many times voted against legislation that would have imposed religion posing as morality on Catholics and non-Catholics alike – in defiance of orders from the Catholic Führer and his American Quisling cardinals.

## WILLIAM HARWOOD poses the question

England's Protestant Queen Elizabeth I executed 300 Catholic priests for treason, not because being Catholic, or a priest, was considered treasonous, but because instructing citizens of England to ignore English law and obey the laws of a foreign power was treason. In contrast, Florida's Catholic governor Jeb "Fat Boy" Bush attended the groundbreaking ceremony of Ave Maria, and expressed his full approval for the establishment of a Vatican satellite state within the borders of the USA. Bush III is fortunate to be living at a time and place in which treason laws are not strictly enforced (or he would have already been executed for his role in overthrowing the Constitution and appointing the loser of the presidential election of 2000 to the office he had lost by almost a million votes). The people of Florida are rather less fortunate.

A majority of Catholic laymen and a percentage of Catholic priests are willing to observe the laws of the USA even when they contravene the teachings of their Führer in Rome. Cardinals and bishops are almost without exception part of the Vatican conspiracy to abolish secular law and subject America to Catholicism's theofascist *sharia*. And how could they not be, when they received their promotions precisely because as priests and Monsignors they had demonstrated unquestioning obedience to Vatican orders that violated America's freedom of religion?

The current Pope, as his predecessor's Grand Inquisitor, wrote a letter to American bishops instructing them to deny communion, in other words threaten with eternal torture, in the Catholic hell, Catholic politicians who supported a woman's right to choose for herself whether to have an abortion, even though the uttering of death threats is a felony under American law. Most observers saw that letter as an attempt to blackmail and intimidate

## 'Virtue and Vice' police set to return to Afghanistan

THE Afghan government has alarmed human rights groups by approving a plan to reintroduce a Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, the body which the Taliban used to enforce its extreme religious doctrine.

The proposal, which came from the country's Ulema council of clerics, has been passed by the cabinet of President Hamid Karzai and will now go before the Afghan parliament.

"Our concern is that the Vice and Virtue Department doesn't turn into an instrument for politically oppressing critical voices and vulnerable groups under the guise of protecting poorly defined virtues," Sam Zia Zarifi of Human Rights Watch said. "This is specially likely in the case of women, because infringements on their rights tend to be justified by claims of morality."

Under the Taliban, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice became notorious for its brutal imposition of the Taliban's codes of behaviour.

Religious police patrolled the streets, beating those without long enough beards and those failing to attend prayers five times a day. Widows suffered particular hardship because of the *diktai* that women be accompanied by a male relative when out of their homes, an impossibility for thousands of women widowed during decades of war.

The Ministry was also charged with the imposition of the Taliban's interpretation of sharia punishment. Executions at Kabul football stadium, which included female prisoners shot in the centre circle, did much to fuel the Taliban's international isolation.

However, the Minister for Haj and Religious Affairs, Nematullah Shahrani, defended the new body. "The job of the department will be to tell people what is allowable and what is forbidden in Islam," he said. "In practical terms it will be quite different from Taliban times. We will preach ... through radio, television and special gatherings."

He denied that the department would have police powers but said it would oppose the proliferation of alcohol and drugs and speak out against terrorism, crime and corruption. It would, he added, also encourage people to behave in more Islamic ways.

Nader Nadery, a spokesman for the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, said: "It will remind people of the Taliban. We are worried that there are no clear terms of reference for this body."



# organised crime syndicate?

Senator John Kerry, and force American Catholics to vote in favor of retaining a theofascist president whose unmistakable conspiracy to violate the First Amendment's prohibition of any establishment of religion coincided with Ratzinger's determination to reduce America, and



**Tom Monaghan, the Domino's Pizza tycoon who conceived Ave Maria**

indeed the whole world, to the status of a Vatican satellite, as obedient to a foreign dictator as the satellite states of the late unlamented Soviet Union. If Vladimir Putin had ordered American socialists to work toward making America a Russian satellite, such an order would have been denounced as unacceptable interference in American internal affairs, and any socialist obeying such an order would have found himself on trial for treason. But because the foreign power trying to subjugate America was the Vatican, President Bush lapped it up, for the logical reason that he is himself consciously plotting to overthrow the separation of church and state and turn America into a Christian equivalent of the Taliban's Afghanistan.

In 1992 a newsletter from the Catholic campaign for a theocratic America declared that, "The separation of church and state is a false premise that must finally be set aside." It also confessed (not the word its authors would have used) that "American Catholics under the orders of their hierarchy have the religious and moral duty to undermine, by all means, the American system of religious freedom and equality of all religions before the law, and to bring about a union of the Catholic Church and the state in this country."<sup>4</sup> But while the Catholic Church's Quislings are pushing that treasonous agenda, "It is important to note that the hierarchy and the Republican [political] candidates misjudged the Catholic vote, which is far more progressive than the Vatican's."<sup>5</sup> And the biggest reason 80 percent of Catholics considered rejecting their church's ongoing demand for get-out-of-hell-free bribes was the awareness that their contributions were being used to pay off the victims of paedophile priests, a payoff that by 2005 had passed \$1 billion.<sup>6</sup>

Like the fanatics currently ruling Iran, who have announced their intention of exterminating a member of the United Nations and are conspiring to build nuclear weapons to achieve that purpose, the Vatican similarly has a depraved indifference to world opinion. That

is made clear by the determination of Pope Ratzinger and his predecessor to deify (the word they use is canonize, which means the same thing) persons recognized by the rest of the world as some of the greatest criminals who ever lived, including Pope Pius IX, who pronounced all non-Catholics hell-fodder,<sup>7</sup> Pope Pius XII, who was Hitler's full partner in the Final Solution,<sup>8</sup> Mother Teresa, a lying, thieving hypocrite who raised millions of dollars by pretending that it would be used to feed the hungry, then left it in a bank to collect interest for the Catholic Church while the hungry continued to starve,<sup>9</sup> the founder of Opus Dei, an ultra-reactionary splinter cult that even the Jesuits have denounced as a throwback to the horrors of the Inquisition, and the feeble-minded Pope John Paul II, whose paranoid campaign against condoms, for the purely political purpose of avoiding the embarrassment of his supposedly infallible church reversing its dogma, caused 60 million deaths, making him the most prolific serial killer in human history.

The Vatican's American Überreichsführers are Quislings, willing to enforce the dictates of a foreign head of state in violation of the laws of their homeland. They are also hypocrites who engage in covering up the crimes of paedophile priests while simultaneously denouncing the sexual peccadilloes of everyone else. As John Cornwall observed,<sup>10</sup> "How much clearer a signal could the Roman Catholic Church send to the faithful that it administers justice in two tiers, one for the laity and another for its clerics?" In other words, "Do what I say, not what I do." George La Piana compares the tactics of the Catholic Church with those of the Soviet Union: "This striking parallelism of claims and policies of a totalitarian state and a totalitarian church is not a casual coincidence."<sup>11</sup>

Covering up the crimes and taboo violations of enforcers of Catholic tyranny goes right to the top. When Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston was being universally denounced and urged to resign for covering up priestly paedophilia and assigning guilty priests to other parishes with not so much as a reprimand, Pope John Paul II ordered him not resign.<sup>12</sup> When public indignation proved insurmountable and Law was forced out of Boston, the Catholic Führer rewarded him for his obstruction of (American) justice by appointing him to an influential sinecure in Rome. And when a biographer of Cardinal Francis Spellman planned to include four pages in his book, *The American Pope*, that spelled out Spellman's status as a compulsive, voracious, practising homosexual, the Diocese of New York was able to intimidate the book's publisher, the *New York Times*, into deleting those pages.<sup>13</sup>

When agents of a foreign power intimidate a major American publisher into surrendering a freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment, that is treason.

To popes, cardinals and bishops, "When we do it, it's not a sin." Al Capone had a similar philosophy. As the Mafia boss put it, "I have spent the best years of my life giving people the lighter pleasures, helping them have a good time, and all I get is abuse, the existence of a hunted man."<sup>14</sup> Al Capone operated a crime syndicate that deemed itself above and outside the laws of the United States of America – and so does the Catholic Church. A victim of priestly sexual abuse filed a lawsuit against the entire Catholic Church, under RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations) legislation aimed at the Mafia, declaring that, "the Catholic Church was such a body, and all its bishops part of the conspiracy."<sup>15</sup> And the fact that the AIDS death rate among Catholic priests is at least four times that of the general population<sup>16</sup> assuredly cannot be attributed to priests having a much higher than average rate of blood transfusions.

A similar lawsuit named the Roman pope as a co-defendant.<sup>17</sup> A judge ruled that, as a head of state, the Pope has diplomatic immunity, but the plaintiff is challenging that ruling on the ground that America's recognition of a religious organization as a sovereign state, even though it is not recognized as such by the United Nations, is a violation of the First Amendment. The Catholic Church is as much a Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organization, in other words a branch of organized crime, as the Mafia.

There should be no law prohibiting any American from being a Catholic – or from believing in Islam, astrology, Scientology, tealeaf reading, psychics, mediums, alien abductions, hypnotism, demon possession, or any other superstitious hogwash. Catholics are and ought to be free to believe anything they wish. But their only allegiance must be to the United States of America. Anything else is treason.

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- 9 Aroup Chatterjee, *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict*. Meteor Books, 2003.
- 10 Cornwall, 2004, p. 234.
- 11 La Piana, p. 21.
- 12 Cornwall, 2004, p. 228.
- 13 [www.signorile.com/articles/nyp145.html](http://www.signorile.com/articles/nyp145.html)
- 14 [www.inplainsight.org/html/hitler\\_and\\_mother\\_teresa.html](http://www.inplainsight.org/html/hitler_and_mother_teresa.html)
- 15 Cornwall, 2004, p. 223.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 227.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 225.



**T**hough his poetry comprises but four slender volumes – *A Shropshire Lad* (ASL), *Last Poems* (LP), *More Poems* (MP), and *Additional Poems* (AD) – Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936) belongs to the pantheon of English poets. Born in Worcestershire, in the environs of the Shropshire hills, Housman liked to amble through field, dale, and highland. As he wandered, usually alone, lines of poetry spontaneously welled up within him. Fleshed out, these lines sprouted into haunting poems about nature, death, love, youth, aspiration, disappointment, betrayal, transience, oblivion. Written in spare, simple language, the poems include such popular pieces as “Loveliest of Trees,” “When I Was One-and-Twenty,” “With Rue My Heart Is Laden,” “To an Athlete Dying Young,” “Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff,” and “Is My Team Plowing?”

The poetry is suffused with a brooding fatalism. Sometimes chided for his pessimism, Housman defended his bleak canvas in “Terence, This Is Stupid Stuff.” Grousing that Terence’s poetry “gives a chap the bellyache,” a friend tells Terence he should “pipe a tune to dance to”, not rhyme his friends to death with dark musings on the human condition. In retort, Terence-Housman says his verse provides a better antidote than ale and song to the pricks and stings of fortune:

*Therefore, since the world has still  
Much good, but much less good than ill,  
And while the sun and moon endure  
Luck’s a chance but trouble’s sure,  
I’d face it as a wise man would,  
And train for ill and not for good.  
'Tis true, the stuff I bring for sale  
Is not so brisk a brew as ale;  
Out of a stem that scored the hand  
I wrung it in a weary land.  
But take it—if the smack is sour,  
The better for the embittered hour;  
It should do good to heart and head  
When your soul is in my soul’s stead;  
And I will friend you, if I may,  
In the dark and cloudy day.*  
(ASL 62)

Housman’s own life was a proving ground for ill. His mother and beloved confidante died on his twelfth birthday, and, in a close-knit family, four of his six siblings died long before he did though he was the eldest. His father, a wastrel and impractical schemer, squandered the family fortune, compelling Housman to help support the family. The poet was also a victim of unrequited love. A latent homosexual, he fell in love with a fellow student, Moses Jackson, at St. John’s College, Oxford. After Jackson, a heterosexual, had rebuffed Housman and moved abroad, the disconsolate poet spent years mourning his loss. His poetry contains veiled references to the unhappy plight of homosexuals in Victorian England, where, as the Oscar Wilde case vividly dramatized, sodomy was a felonious offense. Housman, it seems, channeled his sexual

# A E Housman: Poet, Scholar

desires into his scholarly work, which was prodigious.

As an adult, Housman was subject to bouts of nostalgia for his childhood, a serene period when he was unassailed by the slings and arrows of time. In several poems, he vents an unappeasable longing for yesteryear. Here is one:

*Into my heart an air that kills  
From yon far country blows:  
What are those blue remembered hills,  
What spires, what farms are those?  
That is the land of lost content,  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.*  
(ASL 40)

Notwithstanding the buffets of fortune, Housman flourished as both scholar and poet. After a ten-year stint in the London patent office subsequent to obtaining a pass degree from St. John’s College, Housman was appointed professor of Latin at University College, London, in 1892. Later, in 1911, he was named professor of Latin at Cambridge, a position he retained until his death. Endowed with rare intellect, capacious memory, and adamantine stamina, he became the foremost Latinist of his era. Ironically, given his international fame as a poet, Housman prized his Latin studies more than his poetry, which he scanted. For each hour spent on poetry, he devoted ninety-nine, he said, to his classical studies. In his university lectures, he was all scholar. The Shropshire lad never emerged.

By both students and colleagues, Housman was generally perceived as aloof, daunting, and enigmatic. Yet, as his friend Dr. Percy Withers noted, the foreboding exterior belied an inward warmth: “His chiseled speech, his stern and rather obdurate physiognomy in repose, his sardonic quips, his biting satire, his easy resort to mockery and scoffing: of such was the outward vestment composed. And it was a grim deceit. Underneath beat as warm and as generous a heart, as willing for self-sacrifice, if the cause were true, as I have ever known” (Richard Perceval Graves, *A E Housman: The Scholar-Poet*, p. 243). Housman’s displays of arrogance and sarcasm cloaked native shyness and insecurity. Among intimates, he was convivial, witty, and unpretentious.

Because he outwardly conformed to the idols of the tribe, few contemporaries knew Housman was an atheist. Only in his waning years did he divulge the fact and, then, but to a handful. In 1934, two years before his death, as he and his brother Laurence discussed religion while revisiting their childhood haunts, Housman averred he was an atheist, not an agnostic (Graves, p. 258). In a letter to his sister Katharine, a devout Anglican, written six

months before he died, Housman wrote: “I abandoned Christianity at thirteen but went on believing in God till I was twenty-one, and towards the end of that time I did a good deal of praying for certain persons and for myself. I cannot help being touched that you do it for me, and feeling rather remorseful, because it must be an expenditure of energy, and I cannot believe in its efficacy” (Henry Maas, ed., *The Letters of A E Housman*, p. 381). The proxim-

## GARY SLOAN examines the life of this influential English scholar-poet

ity of his renunciation of Christianity and his mother’s death (she died of breast cancer) is no coincidence. During her long illness, he prayed earnestly but fecklessly for her recovery. The Christian god, he concluded, did not exist, or, if he did, he reneged on promises.

Although Housman left the church when he became an atheist and, later, refused to attend chapel at Cambridge, he remained, says biographer Richard Graves, “emotionally attached to a past in which he had believed in God, but the intellectual break with any form of religious faith was complete” (p. 51). Geoffrey Grant Morris, the classical tutor of Corpus Christi, recorded a comment by Housman that underscored his ambivalent attitude toward the religion of his boyhood. When in 1920, at a college dinner, Morris mustered the courage to ask the formidable scholar-poet about his religion, Housman replied: “I think I should describe myself as a High-Church atheist,” and explained that the qualification ‘High-Church’ was a tribute to his mother’s memory and his own early upbringing” (Graves, p. 187). His upbringing included regular church attendance and family Bible readings, befitting this scion of a string of clerical ancestors.

While Housman left no explicit defense of atheism, his poetry and his prose teem with observations palatable to atheists. Examples follow.

In his introductory lecture at University College, London, Housman limned a human race stripped of its cosmic centrality, divine provenance, and grand inheritance, a species shrunk to Lilliputian proportions:

“Man stands today in the position of one who has been reared from his cradle as the child of a noble race and the heir to great possessions, and who finds at his coming of age that he has been deceived alike as to his origin and expectations; that he neither springs of the high lineage he fancied, nor will inherit the vast estate he looked for, but must put off his towering pride, and contract his boundless hopes, and begin the world anew from a lower level.” (Graves, p. 80).

In *Last Poems* no. 40, Housman muses on



# olar, 'High Church Atheist'

the pitiless indifference of nature to human life. After his death, nature will not care a jot who treads the fields he once trod:

*For nature, heartless,  
witless nature,  
Will neither care nor  
know,  
What stranger's feet  
may find the meadow  
And trespass there and  
go,  
Nor ask amid the dews of morning  
If they are mine or no.*



**A E Housman**

In several poems, Housman denies immortality of the soul. In "The Immortal Part," in a wry twist, he says our bones alone are everlasting. When flesh and soul and thought have passed away, the bones, once "sullen slaves" to the will, shall remain:

*Therefore they shall do my will  
Today while I am master still,  
And flesh and soul, now both are strong,  
Shall hale the sullen slaves along,  
Before this fire of sense decay,  
This smoke of thought blow clean away,  
And leave with ancient night alone  
The steadfast and enduring bone.*

(ASL 43)

In step with his rejection of immortality, Housman adopted a *carpe diem* philosophy. Like the author of Ecclesiastes, his favorite book of the Bible, he was preoccupied with the passage of time. He tried to live each moment to the full since "there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave". Natural beauty was an inexhaustible fount of pleasure to this self-professed Cyrenaic:

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now  
Is hung with bloom along the bough,  
And stands about the woodland ride  
Wearing white for Eastertide.  
Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
Twenty will not come again,  
And take from seventy springs a score,  
It only leaves me fifty more.  
And since to look at things in bloom  
Fifty springs are little room,  
About the woodlands I will go  
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

(ASL 2)

Housman wrote two poems on Jesus. In Easter Hymn, he juxtaposes a human Jesus with a heavenly Saviour. If mortal, Jesus is now supremely oblivious to the sectarian animosities he unwittingly fanned. If divine, he should get off his celestial haunches and act on his promises:

*If in that Syrian garden, ages slain,  
You sleep, and know not you are dead in*

*vain,  
Nor even in dreams behold how dark and  
bright  
Ascends in smoke and fire by day and night  
The hate you died to quench and could but  
fan,  
Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.  
But if, the grave rent and the stone rolled  
by,  
At the right hand of majesty on high  
You sit, and sitting so remember yet  
Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat,  
Your cross and passion and the life you  
gave,  
Bow hither out of heaven and see and save.*

(MP 1)

In "The Carpenter's Son," slyly blasphemous, Jesus is unequivocally human, shorn of all divinity. As he awaits execution, he tells his disciples he should have "left ill alone". Paradoxically, the ill is love, probably homosexual love. Before he dies, he exhorts his disciples not to do as he has done:

*Comrades all, that stand and gaze,  
Walk henceforth in other ways;  
See my neck and save your own:  
Comrades all, leave ill alone.  
"Make some day a decent end,  
Shrewder fellows than your friend.  
Fare you well, for ill fare I:  
Live, lads, and I will die.*

(ASL 47)

In "New Year's Eve", Housman offers his own rendition of the twilight of the gods. Acknowledging their obsolescence and accepting their demise, the gods worship the secular ideals of the West:

*"We are come to the end appointed  
With sands not many to run;  
Divinities disanointed  
And kings whose kingdom is done.  
The peoples knelt down at our portal,  
All kindreds under the sky;  
We were gods and implored and immortal*

*Once: and today we die."  
They turned them again to their praying,  
They worshipped and took no rest,  
Singing old tunes and saying  
"We have seen his star in the west."  
Old tunes of the sacred psalters,  
Set to wild farewells;  
And I left them there at their altars  
Ringing their own dead knells.*

(AP 21)

Influenced by Epicurus and Lucretius, Housman attributed his existence to the fortuitous configuration of randomly moving atoms. Death was a dispersal of particles. Though fleeting, life was meaningful:

*From far, from eve and morning  
And yon twelve-winded sky,  
The stuff of life to knit me  
Blew hither: here am I.  
Now—for a breath I tarry  
Nor yet disperse apart—  
Take my hand quick and tell me,  
What have you in your heart.  
Speak now, and I will answer;  
How shall I help you, say;  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way.*

(ASL 32)

Despite occasional nostalgia for the religion of his childhood, Housman abhorred illusions. Like Sophocles, whom he admired, he saw life steadily and saw it whole. "The house of delusions", he said, "is cheap to build, but draughty to live in, and ready at any instant to fall; and it is surely truer prudence to move our furniture into the open air" (Graves 82). Housman preferred the spacious abode of science to the ramshackle dwelling of metaphysics and mysticism. In an annotation to a book on Greek philosophy, he wrote: "Plato's doctrine of Forms or Universals is useless as a way of explaining things—it is up to Science to show what is the reality of the world (Graves 48).

In a poem he wrote while still a student at St John's College, Housman noted that reason and science, properly exercised, lead to atheism (Graves 45-46). To his credit, our Shropshire lad declined to prostitute reason to the allure of desire.

## London Bangladeshis vow to stop filming of Brick Lane

A NEW assault on free expression was signalled last month by a group of Bangladeshi Muslims in the Brick Lane area of London, who vowed to stop the filming of Monica Ali's Brick novel, *Brick Lane*. The novel is a fictional story about Nazneen, a Bangladeshi woman who is sent to London for an arranged marriage, but later cheats on her husband with a younger Muslim man.

A community action group in Tower Hamlets has been launched by Abdus Salique, chair of the Brick Lane Traders' Association, to halt the film for what he called was a "despicable insult". He has threatened the company, Ruby Films, with protests and blockades, hinting there may be violence if the filming continued to take place. However, other Bengali residents from the area claimed the controversy was being blown out of proportion by "a minority".

Salique told the *Guardian* that "nobody can come with a camera and make a film about that book here", adding that Monica Ali was "not one of us" and had "insulted us".

Salique said: "Young people are getting very involved with this campaign. We had more than 100 people attend one protest meeting. They are willing to blockade the area and guard our streets. Of course, they will not do anything unless we tell them to, but I warn you they are not as peaceful as me."



### More on science and religion

I AM so glad you re-printed Massimo Pigliucci's fine article *Science and Fundamentalism* in your June issue, though the crude and offensive cartoon is clearly no part of it. Readers will note that he and I entirely agree in criticising Richard Dawkins for his failure to "make the subtle but crucial distinction between methodological and philosophical naturalism." Pigliucci also draws attention to David Hume (1711-1776) for his work on what became known as the "naturalistic fallacy". But there is another generally unnoticed though insidious fallacy abroad, first described and answered by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), known as the *Cosmogonical Fallacy*. There is a valuable recent elucidation by Dr Michael Tkacz of Gonzaga University.

To oversimplify grossly, there are four basic positions on the science and religion issue:

1. The Bible is true, therefore Darwin is wrong (the view of ID and Creationism).

2. Darwin is true, therefore the Bible is wrong (the view of Richard Dawkins, etc).

3. Darwin and the Bible are both true, but they exist in separate boxes or "non-overlapping magisteria" (the dualistic view of Stephen J. Gould).

4. There is only one truth, and it can fully embrace both modern science and the God of classical theism (the view of Aquinas and neo-Thomists like Michael Tkacz).

The first two commit the cosmogonical fallacy, and the third would spell the death of both science and religion – Dawkins is quite right to reject it! The fourth option seems to me the only one with real prospects.

One of your correspondents in June expressed an outrageous slur on the Jesuits, and it is sad to think that such ill-informed prejudice still lingers on. One really should examine the evidence more carefully before voicing such a disreputable opinion. The Jesuits include some of the most outstanding intellects and scholars in the world today. An example is the President of Gonzaga University, Dr Robert Spitzer SJ, a world-leader in Business Ethics who has also produced one of the best overviews of modern cosmology, comprehensible even to those without a degree in mathematics.

My main criticism must, however, be levelled at David Tribe. Not content with his own willful ignorance of those I mentioned in April (a few mouse-clicks could have brought him plenty of information), he also seems intent on systematically misleading your readers on matters of fact. He falsely claims the authority of James H Leuba for the statement "Only about 5 percent of leading scientists believed in God and immortality." Now Leuba's findings were published in 1916, not "in the 1930s", and they revealed that almost 42 percent of leading American scientists then believed in God and just over 50 percent in immortality. Leuba's survey was re-run a decade ago by Professors Edward Larson and

Larry Witham and their findings were published in *Nature* on April 3, 1997, widely reported in the world press, and reviewed by me on page 2 of *The Freethinker* for May 1997 (my opinions may have changed since then, but the facts haven't!). This more recent survey showed a small drop in those believing in God (down to just over 39 percent) and a larger drop in those believing in immortality (down to 38 percent). So whether we are talking about the beginning or the end of the last century, the number of scientists claiming belief in God hovers within 2 percent of the 40 percent mark: *eight times* what David Tribe would have us believe! He has made it clear he wouldn't give a bean if the figure were almost 100 percent ("if there were 60 million of them that would not justify their position").

Well, he would be correct if he were merely claiming that the majority is not always right. As is now widely known, when Alfred Wegener proposed the theory of continental drift in 1915, hardly anyone accepted it, and his views were often ridiculed by fellow-scientists, right up to the early 1950s. Then along came the now-universally-accepted theory of plate tectonics, which showed Wegener had been right all along!

Mr Tribe has a rather different agenda: it is to impute dishonourable motives and ridicule the beliefs of anyone who dares to call his bluff. I do not know of any believer who imagines that the doctrines he disdainfully calls "claptrap" are *scientific* (or for that matter *unscientific*). They just do not accept that truth is exhausted by the natural sciences (vitaly important though they are). In other words, they differ on the range of what can (in different circumstances) properly be held to constitute evidence, and therefore knowledge. Thus they do not subscribe to scientism. And nor should anyone who has ever been in love, or benefited from (for example) the music of Bach and Beethoven, the poetry of Hopkins and Eliot, the art of Michelangelo and Leonardo, the plays of Shakespeare and Chekov, the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, the philosophy of Bernard Lonergan and Sir Roger Penrose, or the writings of St Paul and St John (properly understood).

On a different subject, I must also disagree with Jack Hastie's letter on Shakespeare's alleged atheism. The epitome of his own beliefs, in my view, is that he puts into the mouth of Hamlet (Act 5, Scene 2): "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

DAN O'HARA  
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

WHILE not wishing to prolong the argument, I would like to add a few more comments. Dan O'Hara gives us a definition of scientism and apparently expects us to be dumbfounded by its alleged efficacy as a put-down to those who advocate the scientific world-view – as do other religious critics of science. Personally, I find the use of science, even scientism, to be

entirely reasonable. Non-scientific methods have contributed nothing to human knowledge. Philosophy is stuck in the doldrums and has advanced little in 2,000 years, except where science has helped it along by contributing to the unravelling of Nature – and I say that as a Convenor for the Philosophy section of U3A (Jersey).

I agree that Dan Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* was over-optimistic and premature, but the only way in which consciousness will ever be explained is through more and better science. The gurus and holy men have had their chance and produced nothing much of interest.

Then there is the numbers game, the *ad numeram* fallacy of counting up who have converted or de-converted.

Finally there is the oft-quoted Shakespeare "There are more things in Heaven and Earth" etc. Well, of course we realise that – which is why scientists keep looking, and finding out more and more about our universe. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the ultimate origin and secrets of the universe will be for ever beyond the range and scope of our instruments, and even our understanding – but we can make a reasonable inductive inference, that so far as the universe appears logical, rational and material, then its further extension beyond our range will continue to be more of the same; or should we resort to God-of-the-gaps arguments and accept that logically necessary causation suddenly gives way to magic? I don't think that is what J B S Haldane had in mind.

DR REGINALD LE SUEUR  
Jersey

### The paranormal

JACK Hastie is in urgent need of a spell in a scientific purgatory (*Points of View*, July). According to Jack the occurrence of such psychokinetic phenomena as "the movement of heavy furniture", levitation etc., is well established and beyond dispute. Established by whom, and when? To make such extraordinary claims surely requires some extraordinary proof. Yet no evidence is mentioned, never mind chapter and verse. The occurrence of telepathy and ESP is also "beyond reasonable doubt", and reports from 1902-1915 are used as evidence that we can communicate with the dead. There have been innumerable studies claiming to have proved ESP and the like over the last hundred years. However, what appear to have been break-throughs in poorly controlled tests, invariably turn out to be blind alleys when proper experimental procedures are followed and possibilities of experimenter bias eliminated.

James Randi, an American conjuror (well worth a google), has invited anyone to try and win a million dollars by demonstrating any paranormal abilities whatsoever (psychokinesis, telepathy, dowsing etc). Those accepting the challenge agree beforehand what the criteria of success should be, and so cannot afterwards accuse Randi of making it too difficult. Many hundreds have





tried for the prize, but all have failed.

For the sceptical or "scientific" counter arguments I should like to refer any interested readers to the following books: James Randi, *The Supernatural A-Z*, Brockhampton Press, London, 1997; Simon Hoggart and Mike Hutchinson, *Bizarre Beliefs*, Richard Cohen Books, London, 1995. Or please e-mail me for further literature, web-sites etc.

DAVE SIMMONDS

London

(david76@ntlworld.com)

### The National Anthem

I ENJOYED the on-going correspondence on the theme of a new National Anthem. What none of your correspondents have mentioned is that the 19th-century freethinkers published a number of collections of readings and songs that provide a treasure trove of ideas.

My favourite is J M Wheeler's *Freethought Readings and Secular Songs* published in 1892. He includes William F Denton's (1823-1883) *The Freeman's Resolution*.

I will not bow to a titled knave,  
Nor crouch to a lordly priest;  
A martyr's torments I'd rather brave,  
Than be of my manhood fleeced.

I'll bend my knee to no fancied god,  
I'll fear no ghost so wan,  
Erect and free I'll stand on the sod,  
And act as becomes a man.

I'll pin my faith to no bigot's sleeve;  
I'll swallow no griping creed;  
I'll ask my Reason what to believe,  
And ever my answer heed.

I'll hide no truth in a coward heart,  
The world would be blest to know;  
My boldest thought as it will impart,  
Nor check the mind's onward flow.

I'll love the true, I will do the right,  
Ruled only by Reason's sway,  
Let all do so; and the world's dark night  
Will melt into rosy day.

Some of the expressions do not sound very PC, but the sentiments are as relevant as ever.

BOB FORDER

Hants

I HAVE followed the debate over Barbara Smoker's idea for a modern replacement for our national anthem with interest. But, let's face it, the resulting suggestions for a "world anthem" or a "European anthem" or an updated "Internationale" are just too remote or too off-puttingly socialist for the average Joe and Joanna to identify with.

Personally, I doubt that we can improve on the national anthem we already have, even though it's all about a monarchy we don't necessarily care for and a Christian deity increasing numbers of Brits have no allegiance to. Any new anthem would necessarily have to pander to the multiculturalist lobby and pass muster with committees full of "representative" transgendered one-legged Welsh

Muslims, so we'd end up having umpteen deities to contend with in our national anthem, instead of just the one.

The comedian Billy Connolly once suggested the Archers' theme tune would be a jolly replacement, and this is not as daft as it sounds. Mix in a bit of drum-and-bass, a sitar or two, some bagpipes and a male voice choir and you've kept everybody happy. Unfortunately, come the 2012 Olympics, all our athletes would deliberately lose in order to spare themselves being subjected to such a cacophony!

A much easier project would be to update the Union Flag, which for many has (undeserved) associations with white racism and machismo, while excluding the principality of Wales altogether. This could be rectified at a stroke, simply by super-imposing a photo of Shirley Bassey smack-bang in the centre of the flag, making it instantly inclusive of women, ethnic minorities and Welsh people. Why has nobody thought of this before?

P T LACEY

London

### Fundies and bananas

THE botany lesson about bananas in the July *Freethinker* was both instructive and entertaining; but I think it requires a couple of comments.

First, if the banana was manufactured by an Intelligent Designer, he, she or it is likely to be hauled before the courts for (1) not giving the Lord's name and business address on the banana, (2) not printing a contents list of percentage ingredients in decreasing order, (3) not printing the weight and use-by date on each banana, and (4) not printing a prominent health warning about the danger of ingesting banana peel if you are taking certain drugs (eg monoamine oxidase inhibitors).

Secondly, the fundamentalists claim: "To say that the banana happened by accident is even more unintelligent than to say that no one designed the Coca Cola can." Sounds authoritative and impressive – but it is simply wrong! Reason: the cultivated banana is *sterile*, the result of a chance mutation, so it never sets seed, unlike most of its wild relatives. Perhaps Intelligent Design has created sterile bananas to remind us miserable sinners of the minds of most fundamentalists.

NIGEL SINNOTT

Australia

### Respect, and the pork-eating Jew

I LIKE to eat pig and I like to eat shellfish. Both are forbidden to superstitious Jews, under laws known as *kashrut*. These laws are not binding on anyone other than those born of a Jewish mother.

When I complain that I am being denied a pleasure, I am met with a reply that I may indulge my depraved taste provided I do so surreptitiously, and show respect to the large minority of superstitious Jews by not doing so openly.

It must be said that these Jews, even rabbis, eat in public restaurants where forbidden food is being consumed. But this is not disrespect-

ful, since the ban only applies to those born of a Jewish mother.

Presumably, the same applies to eating beef in the presence of a Hindu, or chicken in the presence of a Gujarati, although I do not know whether these taboos apply to non-Hindus or non-Gujarats.

So before ordering pig, shellfish, beef or chicken in a restaurant, one should make solicitous inquiries of the company present to show respect.

My secular humanist beliefs are extremely strong. So should not an orthodox Jew or rabbi show respect to my feelings by ordering pork in a restaurant? Are my feelings less important than a rabbi's?

In fact, it is difficult to see how one can eat in a restaurant without committing blasphemy.

DEREK WILKES

London

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## Events & Contacts

**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Summer programme available.

**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 September 5, 7.30pm. Connie French: *Living without Religion*.

**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. Summer programme available.

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

**Cotswold Humanists:** Information: Philip Howell, 2 Cleevelands 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 Kameel 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.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Lane, Gidea Park. Thursday, September 7, 8pm. Christine Bondi: *My Humanistic Past – how One Thing Led to Another*.

**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. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Square, Leeds. Tuesday, October 10, 7.30pm. Joyce Miller: *Values in Education*.

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

**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. Summer programme available.

**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