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# The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## Northern Ireland Assembly members are handed copies of *The God Delusion*

LAST month, at the inaugural opening of the Northern Ireland Assembly, a deputation from the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland (Humani), headed by Brian McClinton, editor of *Humani* magazine, presented copies of Richard Dawkins' best-seller *The God Delusion* to a number of assembly representatives on the steps of Stormont.

Dawkins holds the Charles Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. His book supports Robert Pirsig's observation that "when one person suffers from a delusion it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called religion."

"Humani," said Brian McClinton, "supports a humanistic world view based on interpretation of existence on the evidence of the natural world and its evolution, and not on belief in a supernatural power. Humanism is the belief that we can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs."

He added "Humani is concerned with the inherent prejudices that pervade Northern Irish society propagated by the religio-centric political institutions that are now residing in power at Stormont. During the 2001 census 14 percent of the population identified themselves as secular and, therefore, not allied to any religious faith.

"In Northern Ireland, as across Europe, this minority of secularists is growing and they have the right to equality of treatment. Humani supports issues of social equality and aims to combat discrimination based on age, sex, race and sexual orientation.

"Northern Irish politics is grossly patriarchal with only 18 out of 108 (17 percent) of MLAs being female. Our children continue to be educated in religious and segregated schools; hardly a recipe for integration. Tribal politics and constitutional issues have squeezed everyday issues such as class inequalities, education, health service closures and water charges out of Northern Irish politics. As the political institutions reassemble they face the fundamental issue about the kind of society we want in the province, and such issues now need to be tackled.

"Humani is pleased and grateful that Daithí McKay (Sinn Féin), Stephen Farry (Alliance), Thomas Burns (SDLP) and



Thomas Burns of the SDLP, right, accepts *The God Delusion* from Brian McClinton of Humani

Dawn Purvis (PUP) accepted copies of Dawkins' book and agreed that issues of equality are central to Northern Ireland's future.

The most successful countries possess diverse cultures and societies which recognise the right to be different, while at the same time cherishing the universal values we all share as part of our common humanity.

"Northern Ireland is itself becoming increasingly diverse. However, we remain a polarised and largely segregated society, with little or no space for 'the others'. It was both disappointing and ironic that the DUP's Sammy Wilson rejected our gift, saying 'I don't want any of that nonsense'. Not a promising sign for the future of our new government."

**Tony Blair's  
time-bomb**

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**Hindus in  
a lather**

– p4

**Jerry Falwell  
is dead**

– p7



WAS I the only listener to yell at my radio "They're bloody DEAD, damn it, they are NOT in effing heaven!" So loud was my outburst that Smirnoff the cat, who was snoozing on the bed at the time, gave me a look of alarm, and shot out the room. You'd think that after three years he'd be used to my habit of bellowing at the Panasonic.

What triggered my reaction was a report on Radio 4 on May 16 called *Limbo Babies*, presented by Olivia O'Leary. Central to the broadcast was the complaint that thousands of Irish parents whose infants died before they could be baptised were denied peace of mind, because they truly believed what the Church had drummed into them about unbaptised babies: that they would be trapped for eternity in a place called Limbo, and have no opportunity of joining God and his angels in heaven.

One of O'Leary's interviewees was an Irish woman who had suffered such a loss, and was now furious over the fact that the Catholic Church was on the verge of admitting that it had been getting it all wrong about Limbo for 800 years.

She felt that the Church owed people like her an apology for the emotional and psychological damage done by this barmy doctrine, and had gone so far as to express her anger in a letter to Pope Benedict XVI, who, she claimed, hadn't the courtesy to reply.

O'Leary then pushed a Catholic theologian for an answer to the question "Where are these babies now?" He replied that he believed they were now all "in heaven with God", at which point I terrified the cat.

Immediately afterwards, I Googled "Babies in Limbo" and, on a website created by Paddy Doyle, author of *The God Squad*, found this illuminating piece by an Irish commentator, John Fitzpatrick.

"The controversy over an unmarked Irish burial site for unbaptised babies should serve as a sad and chilling reminder of the heartache generated by the Catholic Church's cruel teaching on 'Limbo'.

"Up to quite recently, it was more or less Catholic teaching that babies who died before receiving the sacrament of baptism were dispatched by God to this brooding, shadowy place, a kind of Industrial School in the sky for infants who didn't qualify for Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory.

"You could pray for the souls in Purgatory to persuade God to commute their sentences or give them time off for good behaviour. But you could do nothing for babies that happened to miss out on the clerical abracadabra routine.

"Many of the hundreds of babies buried on what the Church calls "unconsecrated" ground on that stretch of land in Sligo – and other similar burial grounds throughout Ireland – received no final farewell or blessing from the Men in Black.

"What a strange and downright sadistic God we Irish were asked to believe in. At around the same time that innocent babies were being blacklisted by the Holy Men, a lot of allegedly

Unholy Women were serving their sentences in the Magdalene Laundries. They had given birth to babies out of wedlock, which was a crime in the eyes of the Church, whether the babies were baptised or not.

"The effect of the crazy Limbo teaching on parents who had lost babies must have been horrendous. I like to think that most of them refused to accept – in their hearts if not openly – this hideous stigmatisation of innocent human beings.

**Freethinker editor  
BARRY DUKE  
loses his cool  
over Babies in  
Limbo broadcast**



"The idea that an all-wise creator would punish babies is even more absurd and incongruous than the spectacle of the Pope's singing duet in Galway, preaching the One True Faith to the 'young people of Ireland.'

"I respect the right of any church or religious grouping to "preach the good news", even if the news doesn't always sound particularly good – and often doesn't appear to make any sense. But when religion causes deep psychological hurt to people who are innocent of any wrongdoing, it should be seen for the negative influence it is.

"One small way that the Catholic Church could make amends to the families who suffered during the "Limbo Era" would be to hold special services at all "unconsecrated" burial grounds.

"Such a gesture would have healing potential. It might also help us to come to terms with the downside of what passed for religion in Holy Ireland."

In a separate piece on his own website, Fitzpatrick wrote:

"I am intrigued by the findings of the International Theological Commission on the Catholic concept of 'Limbo'.

"The Commission's Secretary General has been quoted as stating, in relation to children that die without baptism; that 'we can say we have many reasons to hope that there is salvation for these babies'.

"The Pope has agreed with the Commission's assessment of an unbaptised baby's chances of being 'saved'. It refers to 'serious theological and liturgical grounds for so hoping'.

"So after centuries of frightening the living daylight out of parents who grieved the loss of their innocent children with that cruel and crazy nonsense about Limbo, the Church is at least conceding that it has 'reasons to hope'.

"I regard the long-running Limbo saga as another example of how unwise and dangerous it can be to place blind faith in ANY religious teaching or doctrine.

"The Church still teaches that people who

die without confessing a mortal sin can wind up in Hell, a perpetual abode of terror and suffering whose torments are beyond human comprehension.

"None of these teachings are borne out by any kind of evidence apart from what was stated in ancient writings, any more than the belief by another Christian sect regarding the salvation of only 144,000 souls is anything other than a faith-based doctrine."

So far, so sensible, but I part company with Fitzpatrick, a believer in life after death, when he claims that "more research" should be done to find out where our souls end up when we turn up our toes.

If anyone manages to isolate souls within the next few years, I will be among the first to donate mine to medical science. Anyone in need of a soul transplant can have it with pleasure.

I FEEL I owe it to readers to point out that Paddy Doyle's *The God Squad*, mentioned above, and written more than a decade ago, stands accused of "bringing about the collapse of the Catholic Church in Ireland".

In the book, the disabled writer details the abuse he suffered in the first ten years of his life. He was placed in an Industrial School at the age of four in the 1950s, after being convicted in a Wexford court on a charge of "not being in possession of a proper guardian".

His mum died when he was a toddler, and his father committed suicide shortly before the boy's arrest.

"I have often been asked why I wrote the book," says Doyle. "There is no simple answer to this question. I had felt for a long time that what went on in the name of the care of children should be exposed.

"There are many people who believed that because a child was put into the care of a religious order – priests, brothers or nuns – that he or she was safe and would be taken care of.

"The truth was very different. I have little doubt that there were many people in Ireland who knew of the abuses being carried out on children, but who decided that it was best to say nothing. Would anyone believe that a child placed in the care of nuns, priests or Christian Brothers by the courts of this land would ever speak out?

"More importantly, would they have been believed? The chances are they wouldn't. Ten years since the publication of *The God Squad* hundreds of cases of abuse of children in care have come to light. The silence is shattered. The fierce grip that the church once had on Irish society is nothing more than a tenuous link.

"It was never my intention to 'wreck' the Church. The Church by its own hand brought about its own demise.

"Writing *The God Squad* was at times painful for me. I relived the horrors of abuse. My motivation in writing it was to bring the truth to people."



# Blair's legacy is a religious time-bomb, says NSS

TONY Blair is leaving behind him a religious legacy that could amount to a time bomb of conflict for the future, says the National Secular Society.

Commenting last month on the imminent departure of Mr Blair – widely regarded as one of the most religious Prime Ministers since Gladstone – Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: “Tony Blair has done more to undermine the secular nature of British society than anyone in recent history.

“But many people haven’t woken up to what will be regarded by coming generations as Tony Blair’s worst legacy – encouraging single-faith schools. Perhaps people will realise the dangers of this policy for community cohesion when we have hundreds of minority faith schools in inner-city conurbations. The school system will become in effect apartheid, and bring about the progressive fragmentation of the rest of society. It is already starting to happen in northern cities like Blackburn, as last month’s *Panorama* programme illustrated.

“Under Blair the Government has addressed minority communities primarily through their supposed religion. This has had the effect of exacerbating people’s differences rather than emphasising our common humanity and building on what we have in common. This policy of Multiculturalism, or really multi-faithism, is belatedly being recognised as having been counter-productive.

“Multiculturalist policies have also almost de-franchised the many who are not practising



**Christers United: The religiosity of wannabe Catholic Blair and Methodist moron Bush is captured to perfection in this image currently doing the rounds of the internet**

a religion – especially those in minority communities and those who feel oppressed by their ‘community’ religion. Those in minority communities who do not wish to be defined primarily or at all by their religion are voiceless. Consequently, the moderate and the integrationist voices from such communities, especially the Muslim community, are hardly ever heard. They are drowned out by the voices of those – almost always men – who want *sharia* law and more veiling.

“And why has Mr Blair done all of this? To appease and bolster religious leaders, at the same time giving sometimes the more extreme

an importance quite out of proportion to their real value. By consulting religious leaders about policy-making he has emboldened them. They now regularly use their new-found power to seek to thwart socially progressive legislation and make self-serving demands, including for the suppression of freedom of expression and the restriction of the human rights of others.”

Mr Wood added that “all the statistics show that Britain is probably one of the least religious nations in the world, and yet Mr Blair had placed religion at the top of the national agenda. In doing so, he has set a time bomb of conflict that will explode in future generations.”

Mr Wood did acknowledge, however, that “the Blair administration has overseen a substantial raft of equality legislation, albeit some was required by EU directives.

“Sadly, too much of this legislation has been compromised by excessive religious exemptions – exemptions granted to those most likely to discriminate.”

EVEN though the Prime Minister once said, “I can’t stand politicians who wear God on their sleeve,” he himself has often done precisely that. Not long after becoming Labour leader he allowed himself to be photographed in church. He likes to be photographed outside churches. He enrages Conservatives by claiming that the Labour party, and in particular his own modernising faction, has some special connection with Christianity ...

– Peter Oborn, *Spectator*, April 5, 2003

## Join other freethinkers for a special theatre treat

THE National Secular Society has booked a complete performance of a new play about Jean Meslier, a figure who was incredibly influential in Freethought history, but who is now largely forgotten. Freethinker readers are invited to attend this performance and enjoy a debate afterwards with the author and producers of the production.

Meslier (1664-1729) was a French Catholic priest and author of what is considered to be the first full-blooded atheistic testament. He was a little-known hero of the Enlightenment and instigator of the socialist ideals of the French revolution. Now a new play explores the strange contradictions of this extraordinary influential man. The title of the play, *The Last Priest*, derives from Meslier famously saying he wouldn’t be happy until the last priest had been strangled with the entrails of the last king.

The story follows Jean as he leads a dual existence, conforming by day to religious fundamentalism, and then, by night, passionately composing his secret legacy. The director of the play, David Roylance comments: “Meslier did not believe a word of the book he preached from. He wrote his own book, a testament that he left us on his deathbed, having hastened his

own death at 55, after finishing the work. His testament is a vicious attack on all forms of organised religion and the divine right of kings and aristocracy. By his own admission within the testament, Meslier was a coward. Since the punishment for atheism was burning alive at the stake, this is perhaps something we can understand.”

The NSS has now negotiated a dedicated performance of the play at the Kings Head Theatre in Islington, London for those who are interested in hearing more about Meslier.

It will be on Saturday afternoon, 23 June at 3pm (play ends at 5pm, whole event ends at 6pm in order to give those outside London the opportunity to attend). This new show is an extended version of the production that garnered rave reviews when it was staged at the Edinburgh Festival.

Tickets for this extra special event – which will also give you the opportunity to socialise over a glass of wine with other freethinkers – cost £15.

Book your tickets today and avoid disappointment. Book with the Kings Head Box Office on 020 7226 1916 and mention that it is the NSS event on 23 June.

## South African churches bar gay marriages

SIX months after gay marriages were legalised in South Africa, at least four leading denominations are refusing to conduct same-sex unions, according to a report in the *Cape Argus*.

The national leadership of the Anglican Church, as well as the provincial offices of the Catholic Church, Baptist Church and Presbyterian Church, all confirmed their clergy were not allowed to officiate at or bless gay marriages.

According to the Civil Union Act, if a religious institution does not wish to conduct civil unions, it must submit a letter to Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula explaining why.

The Department of Home Affairs recently told the *Cape Argus* that six Christian denominations had submitted letters, but department spokesman Mantshele Tau could not provide updated figures.

South Africa’s largest activist group for gay and lesbian rights, the Triangle Project, said the group had received a number of calls from disappointed couples over the churches’ stance.





# Hindus in a lather over a causeway, an elder

HINDU groups have launched an international campaign to halt India's plans to create a shipping channel by dredging the sea between India and Sri Lanka.

They say that the project will destroy an ancient chain of shoals known as Adam's Bridge, which Hindus believe was built by an army of monkeys to allow Lord Rama to cross to Lanka to rescue his abducted wife. They are also protesting on environmental grounds, arguing that the 30-mile string of limestone shoals, also known as Ram Sethu, protected large parts of India from the 2004 tsunami.

"The bridge is as holy to Hindus as the Wailing Wall is to the Jews, the Vatican to Catholics, Bodh Gaya to Buddhists and Mecca to Muslims," said Kusum Vyas, president and founder of Esha Vasyam, a US Hindu environmental lobbying group. "It is an unacceptable breach of the religious rights of over one billion Hindus to destroy such a sacred landmark without even consulting us."

The £280 million Sethusa-mudram project has been mired in controversy ever since it was proposed in July 2005. The Government says that the 167km (104mile) channel through the Palk Strait will cut an estimated 400km (and 30 hours) off the journey between the east and west coast of India. The fastest current route is around Sri Lanka.

It argues that Adam's Bridge is a natural geological formation and that its plans to dredge to a depth of 12 metres will not cause serious environmental damage. It also says that the plan will benefit millions of people in the area by allowing the development of a commercial fishing industry. The project is due to be completed next year, by which time an estimated 48-million cubic metres of silt will have been removed from the Palk Strait.

But Hindu leaders appear determined to thwart those plans. In a rare show of unity, they are urging Hindus across the world to protest against the plan. Ranbir Singh, the chairman of Hindu Human Rights, said: "The Government of India is entitled to take care of the country's trade and commercial interests, but not at the cost of destroying a site that is revered by one billion Hindus in the world."

The bridge is believed by some to have been passable on foot as recently as the 15th century. According to Hindu belief set out in the epic poem the Ramayana, it was built about 3,500 years ago. Its purpose was to allow Lord Rama, one of the great kings of ancient India and an avatar of the god Vishnu, to travel from India to Sri Lanka, where he defeated the demonic tyrant Ravana and rescued his wife, Sita.

But last month a panel of Indian scientists concluded that the bridge was "a geological formation, which took place about 17 million years ago".

At least one Hindu leader has suggested that

the bridge is being protected by Lord Hanuman, the Hindu monkey god.

*Freethinker* reader Yal Alagan pooh-poohed the idea of the bridge's sacredness in a letter to the *Times* (not published). "There is no historical evidence that Rama ever existed and ruled a kingdom in North India from Ayodya. The Ramayana epic is somewhat similar to the Arabian nights fables. Ravana's aerial kidnapping of Rama's wife Sita, the acrobatic feats of the monkey god Hanuman and Rama's battle with Ravana bring back memories of the adventures of Sindbad the Sailor.

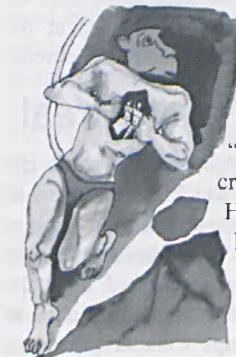
"Instead of treating it as a book of entertainment, the Hindus have given it a historical twist, religious significance and undue importance ... Now, they want to block the country's economic development and human progress by preventing the construction of the Sethu Shipping Channel. The fact is that the bridge is a natural formation, to which geologists will testify."

Further anger among Hindus erupted when the *Times* carried details of the shipping channel plans under the headline "Can the monkey god save Rama's underwater bridge?"

The term "monkey god", according to many who responded to the story, was "insensitive and insulting" and an example of gutter press reporting. Some claimed that, despite the fact that Hanuman is depicted in Hindu art as looking distinctly like a monkey, he was a "hominid" human, or a neanderthal.

One of the most recent depictions of Hanuman as a "Superman" figure was created by Maqbool Fida Husain, the 91-year-old Indian artist who outraged Hindus a decade ago by portraying revered Hindu gods and goddesses in the nude. Radicals ransacked his Mumbai home. They also attacked an art gallery that was showing his paintings and destroyed 28 of his valuable canvasses. Husain's paintings sell for around £1-million. Two other painters whose work was displayed alongside his at a different gallery in Delhi were also attacked.

When the Indian government failed to prosecute the artist for blasphemy, as thousands of Hindus wanted it to do, Hindu groups took matters into their own hands and offered a £10-million reward to



"Superman" Hanuman by M F Husain



M F Husain

anyone prepared to kill or maim Husain, who lives in Dubai and London.

Anger against Husain was re-ignited earlier this year when he unveiled "Mother India" – a naked woman in front of a wheel resembling the one used in the national flag. The names of some of India's states are written across her body.

Husain was ordered to make a court appearance in Mumbai to answer a charge of "hurting religious sentiments" by painting "Mother India". When he failed to appear in court, the authorities began proceedings to seize his home.

"He did not answer repeated summonses from one of the courts which has now issued a proclamation to attach his properties," Mumbai police official Brijesh Singh said last month. "We have pasted the attachment proclamation notice on his home and are checking if he owns any more properties."

Akhil Sibal, Husain's lawyer, said: "My client was unaware of any court summons. Now that we have come to know we are moving to the supreme court." He added: "This is a politically motivated case."

Hindus were back in the news last month when they threatened to form a human chain to prevent the slaughter of a "sacred" bull after it tested positive for tuberculosis.

Agricultural authorities said that Shambo, a six-year-old Friesian, should be slaughtered to protect public health and other livestock. But senior monks at the Skanda Vale Temple, near Carmarthen, west Wales, where Shambo lives,

## Crackpot Christian pol

A CRACKPOT Welsh Christian group is calling for the traditional Welsh dragon flag to be replaced by the cross of St David, according to a report in the *Western Mail* by Molly Watson.

The Welsh Christian Party says having a red dragon – an animal it believes symbolises the devil – on the national flag is at odds with Wales's position as a Christian nation.

It is calling for the flag, which has officially been in place since 1959, to be replaced with the black and gold cross of St David.

The party's leader, and founder of Operation Christian Vote, the Rev George Hargreaves, said, "We will not allow this evil symbol of the devil to reign over Wales for another moment.

"Wales is the only country in history to have a red dragon on its national flag. This is the very symbol of the devil described in The Book of Revelation 12:3.

"This is nothing less than the sign of Satan, the devil, and Lucifer, that ancient serpent who deceived Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. No other nation has had this red dragon as its ruling symbol.

"Wales has been under demonic oppression and under many curses because of this unwise choice. This symbol was only introduced in



## Elderly artist and a 'sacred' bull

said the killing of cows and bulls was against their religious principles.

Shambo, part of a herd of 35 cows and bullocks, is one of the names of Lord Shiva, one of the three primary Hindu deities. The bull has been placed in a shrine within the main temple.

"He would normally be grazing with the rest of the herd," said Swami Suryananda, a senior monk. "But he does not appear lonely. He is adapting to his new lifestyle as an international superstar. We have had media calls from as far away as Canada."

The swami said the temple – which is known as the Community of the Many Names of God – had begun an online petition, and would seek an injunction to save Shambo.

"The sacred life of a temple bull cannot be desecrated," he said. "If all else fails we have been assured that we will have immense support, and many thousands of people will come here to form a human chain as a peaceful protest to prevent the slaughter."

Swami Suryananda said the rest of the herd, and other animals and birds, including 15 water buffalo, an elephant, deer, goats, llamas, and peacocks, were "absolutely fine".

He said he understood the authorities' concern over public health but added: "In testing positive Shambo is suspected, not proven, to be carrying TB. Our own vet examined Shambo and assured us he was in excellent health."

Ramesh Kallidal, of the Hindu Forum of Great Britain, said: "To have a sacred bull



**Shambo the 'sacred' bull**

slaughtered strikes at the very core of our beliefs. "It is very important that some times governments understand that if there is a way out of the situation, they should look at that seriously."

A Welsh Assembly spokesman said every effort would be made to treat the case as sensitively as possible.

But, referring to the slaughter policy, he added: "We fully understand this can be distressing for the owners, but these measures are in place to protect public health and animal health and prevent the further spread of the disease."

## Elderly couple accused of witchcraft burned alive

ANGRY villagers burned an elderly couple alive because of suspicions they were practising a form of black magic, according to reports from India.

"One Rajaiah, a distant relative of the couple, alleged that they killed his cattle with black magic," the Indo-Asian News Service says. "Rajaiah and some others picked up the couple from their house, beat them and tied up their hands and legs. They then poured kerosene on them and burnt them as other villagers watched."

A police superintendent tells Reuters: "The aged couple died screaming for help."

IANS says this is not the first time people have been killed because of concern that they were practising black magic, known as "bhanamati." Every year "dozens" of women are accused of being witches and murdered, according to Reuters.

"In the region, steeped in poverty and illiteracy, villagers resort to 'bhanamati' for revenge. Self-styled witch doctors are in demand to solve land disputes, family feuds and other enmities with the help of black magic," IANS reports.

## Political party launches a campaign against 'satanic' Welsh flag

1959 and is not the historic symbol of Wales.

"The gold cross on the black background goes back nearly two thousand years. This Christian cross of the great patron saint of Wales, St David, is the true spiritual heritage and owner of the soul of Wales."

The party has launched an online petition against the dragon symbol, but this appears to have been hijacked by mischievous elements. When the *Freethinker* checked to see how many had signed the petition, it appeared that virtually all the names of the petitioners were, in fact, links to pornographic websites.

The party is also calling for a referendum to allow the Welsh people to decide which flag they would prefer.

But historians and politicians said the symbol of the dragon had a long tradition in Wales and was a source of pride. Welsh historian John Davies said, "What's the point of changing it now? It's been part of our tradition for more than 1,500 years, while the flag of St David has a much more specific remit.

"There are a large number of flags that are tricolour and so they don't stand out. But when you see the Welsh flag you know what it is. It's recognisable in the same way the Union Jack

or Stars and Stripes are."

According to Davies, the dragon pre-dates the Christian era, dating back 1,500 years. Widely used by the Romans, the first reference to dragons in Wales is in the *History Brittonum* in the eighth century. During the Tudor era the symbol was used by Henry Tudor at the battle of Bosworth to represent his Welsh ancestry.

Davies suggested that Wales may have adopted the symbol in an attempt to draw an association between the Welsh royal houses and the might of the Roman empire.

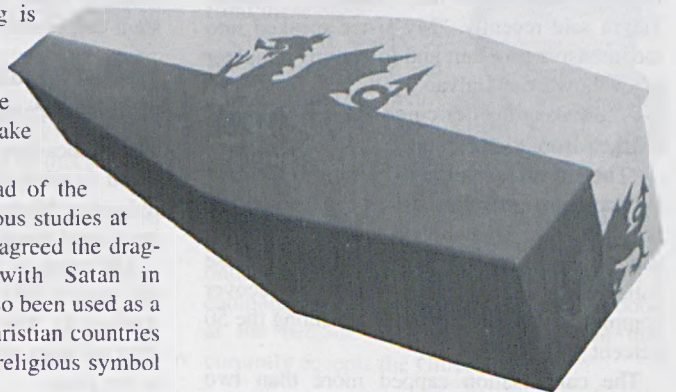
Plaid Cymru AM Janet Ryder said although the St David flag is becoming increasingly popular, the Welsh flag is internationally recognisable. "I think the Welsh flag is a symbol that a lot of people are proud of and I think it would take an awful lot to change that."

Gregory Barker, acting head of the school of theology and religious studies at Trinity College, Carmarthen, agreed the dragon had been associated with Satan in Christianity, but said it had also been used as a symbol of divinity. "Many Christian countries have flags without a specific religious symbol

on them. What's most important is that the flag is something the citizens of that country can endorse."

Bishop David Yeoman said few Christians in Wales would associate the dragon with the devil. The dragon is a very ancient symbol in Wales. I don't think Christians see it as demonic. They see it as a symbol of the past."

*It is not only on flags that the "demonic" Welsh dragon can be found. This casket is produced with the Welsh in mind by Colourful Coffins – "the leading providers of distinctive, personalised and memorable picture coffins"*





# Catholics will swallow anything – including paper pills

A FRANCISCAN monk who is said to have had the miraculous power of bilocation – appearing in two places at once – has become Brazil's first native-born saint.

Antonio de Sant'Anna Galvao, who died in 1832 at the age of 83, was canonised last month by Pope Benedict XVI at an open-air mass in Sao Paulo attended by around one million devout Catholics.

But the friar was canonised not for his talent for bilocation, nor, indeed, for his alleged telepathic and levitational powers – sainthood was conferred on him for the miraculous qualities of his cure-all paper pills.

Whenever he was approached for help by the afflicted, Galvao would dish out paper pills containing the active ingredient of a prayer: *After the birth, the Virgin remained intact / Mother of God, intercede on our behalf.*

In this way, it is claimed, Galvao cured around 24,000 believers – but evidence has yet to emerge that any of these were amputees who had their missing bits restored.

Galvao's miracle pills are still in production. They are created in five locations around Sao Paulo state, including, by women, in Galvao's hometown of Guaratingueta, who gather every afternoon in a room above the local cathedral.

The pills also are made by cloistered nuns at the Convent of Light in Sao Paulo, where Galvao died, and handed out free.

The gullible swallow three Tic-Tac-sized pills over nine days, during which they recite the prayer printed on the paper.

The Vatican officially certified the medical cases of two Brazilian women as divinely inspired miracles that justified the sainthood of Galvao. Sandra Grossi de Almeida, 37, claimed that she had a uterine malformation that should have made it impossible for her to carry a child for more than four months. But in 1999, after taking the pills, she gave birth to Enzo, now 7. "I have faith," Grossi said, pointing to her son. "I believe in God, and the proof is right here."

Almost ten years before that, Daniela Cristina da Silva, then four years old, entered a coma and suffered a heart attack after liver and kidney complications from hepatitis A.

"The doctors told me to pray because only a miracle could save her," Daniela's mother Jacyra said recently. "My sister sneaked into the intensive care unit and forced my daughter to swallow Friar Galvao's pills."

A few days later, a cured Daniela was discharged from the hospital.

"That was no miracle," huffed Roberto Focaccia, an infectious disease expert at the hospital where Daniela was treated. "Statistics show that an average of 50 percent of these patients die and the other 50 percent recover completely. She was lucky to be among the 50 percent who survive."

The canonisation capped more than two



Galvao, father of the 'miraculous' paper pill

decades of advocacy by nun Celia Cadorn and other Brazilian church officials who have trumpeted Galvao's virtues.

The church requires saints to have performed two miracles, and the process of proving them, always after the individual's death, can take centuries. Special cases, such as the ongoing beatification of Pope John Paul II, can be fast-tracked.

The Vatican confirmed the monk's first miracle in 1998, in the case of Daniela Cristina. The monk's second miracle – Ms Grossi de Almeida's successful pregnancy – was recognised last December, clearing his path to sainthood.

Celia Cadorn said she picked the two cases out of nearly 24,000 miracles attributed to the monk because they were the best documented

and most inexplicable.

"It was a very scientific process," Cadorn said. "We had to interview witnesses, talk to doctors and scientists and document everything. You have to really prove that, scientifically, the events were impossible."

Benedict, on his first visit to Latin America, promptly succeeded in angering Brazilian Indians by claiming their ancestors had been "silently longing" to become Christians when Brazil was colonised 500 years ago.

Jecinaldo Sateré Mawé of the Amazonian Sateré Mawé tribe called the Pope's remarks "arrogant and disrespectful".

According to the BBC, the Pope also claimed that the Christianisation of the region "had not involved an alienation of the pre-Colombian cultures".

Today, the indigenous population of Brazil is less than 7 percent of what it was in 1500. Of a thousand distinct tribes, only about 220 remain. The Catholic Church's Indian advocacy group in Brazil has called the Pope's statement "wrong and indefensible".

Before the Pope made his comments, Indian leaders had written to him about the threats they continue to face, and expressed their gratitude for the support of missionaries and the church in Brazil in fighting for their rights.

Survival International's director Stephen Corry said: "It is tragic that, unlike previous popes who have visited Brazil, he did not meet with Indian leaders, and made no public reference to the genocide visited upon the indigenous peoples of Brazil over the past 500 years."

## Secular Medical Forum established to counter the Christian Medical Fellowship

FOLLOWING informal discussions that occurred at the National Secular Society's AGM last November, an independent Secular Medical Forum has been established.

This new organisation is opposed to religious influence in medicine which affects the manner in which medical practice is performed. It will therefore campaign for a secular approach to current major health issues, ranging from physician-assisted suicide to stem-cell research; from the funding of hospi-

tal chaplains to religious circumcision, and from abortion to HIV/AIDS.

One of the main purposes of the SMF will be to challenge the Christian Medical Fellowship, which, established in 1949, has a membership of 4,500 physicians. The CMF successfully helped anti-choice organisations, at the BMA annual conference in June 2006, to overturn the BMA's neutral position on physician-assisted suicide which had been adopted the previous year.

During 2007, membership in the SMF will be limited to physicians and nurses (there are no membership fees this year). But, next year, there will be further discussions on whether membership in the Forum should be extended to other health care professionals.

The Forum has a website: [www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk](http://www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk).

For further information about the Secular Medical Forum, please contact its co-ordinator, Dr Michael Irwin, at [michael-hk.irwin@virgin.net](mailto:michael-hk.irwin@virgin.net).

### Resistance to Clitheroe mosque crumbles

THE Lancashire town of Clitheroe has finally voted to allow the conversion of an imposing redundant Methodist Church to a mosque, having turned down seven previous applications.

The battle to provide a place of worship for the town's 300 Muslims was led by Sheraz Arshad, 31. The 7-5 vote for the mosque came after of years of bitter opposition by residents to the plan.



# Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell dead at 73

THE Rev Jerry Falwell, the television evangelist who founded America's Moral Majority and used it to mould the religious right into a political force, died on May 15 shortly after being found unconscious in his office at Liberty University, Virginia. He was 73.

Falwell credited his Moral Majority with getting millions of conservative voters registered, electing Ronald Reagan and giving Republicans Senate control in 1980.

"I shudder to think where the country would be right now if the religious right had not evolved," Falwell said when he stepped down as Moral Majority president in 1987.

The fundamentalist church that Falwell started in an abandoned bottling plant in 1956 grew into a religious empire that included the 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church, the "Old Time Gospel Hour" carried on television stations around the country and 7,700-student Liberty University, which began as Lynchburg Baptist College in 1971.

Republican Senator John McCain, said "Dr Falwell was a man of distinguished accomplishment who devoted his life to serving his faith and country," but many Americans regarded him as an ignorant buffoon given to making outrageous statements, and exposing himself to ridicule.

In 1999 he attacked the BBC's children's programme, the *Teletubbies*, saying it did not provide a good role model for children because Tinky Winky, the purple character with the triangular aerial on his head who carried a handbag, was "gay".

In an article called "Parents Alert: Tinky Winky Comes Out of the Closet", he said: "He is purple – the gay-pride colour; and his antenna is shaped like a triangle – the gay-pride symbol."

In the same year, he told an evangelical conference that the Antichrist was a male Jew who

was probably already alive. Falwell later apologised for the remark but not for holding the belief.

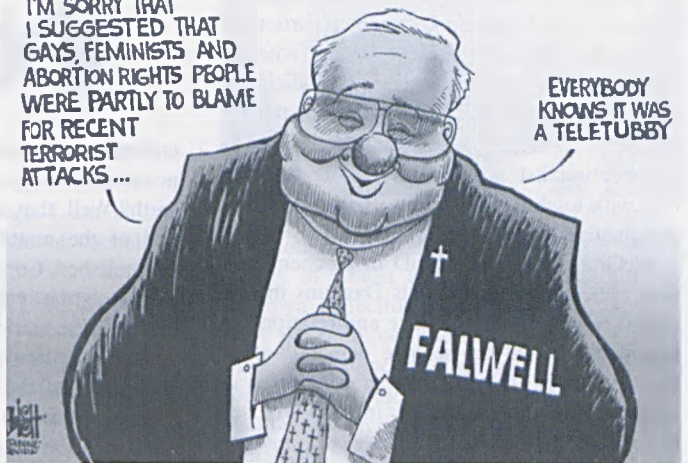
He had to apologise again for remarks made shortly after the Islamic attack on the twin towers in New York. He blamed feminists, gays, lesbians and liberal groups for bringing on the terrorist attacks.

Here is a selection of Falwell quotes:

- If you're not a born-again Christian, you're a failure as a human being.
- I had a student ask me, "Could the savior you believe in save Osama bin Laden?" Of course, we know the blood of Jesus Christ can save him, and then he must be executed.
- I hope I live to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be!
- AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.
- AIDS is the wrath of a just God against homosexuals. To oppose it would be like an Israelite jumping in the Red Sea to save one of Pharaoh's charioteers.
- The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the Devil to keep Christians from running their own country.
- If we are going to save America and evangelize the world, we cannot accommodate secular philosophies that are diametrically opposed to Christian truth ... We need to pull out all the stops to recruit and train 25 million

I'M SORRY THAT I SUGGESTED THAT GAYS, FEMINISTS AND ABORTION RIGHTS PEOPLE WERE PARTLY TO BLAME FOR RECENT TERRORIST ATTACKS ...

EVERYBODY KNOWS IT WAS A TELETUBBY



Americans to become informed pro-moral activists whose voices can be heard in the halls of Congress.

- It appears that America's anti-Biblical feminist movement is at last dying, thank God, and is possibly being replaced by a Christ-centered men's movement which may become the foundation for a desperately needed national spiritual awakening.
- The Bible is the inerrant ... word of the living God. It is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, etc.
- The Jews are returning to their land of unbelief. They are spiritually blind and desperately in need of their Messiah and Savior.
- Grown men should not be having sex with prostitutes unless they are married to them.
- We're fighting against humanism, we're fighting against liberalism ... we are fighting against all the systems of Satan that are destroying our nation today ... our battle is with Satan himself.
- Billy Graham is the chief servant of Satan.

## New Galha secretary is on fertile ground in Brighton

ATHEISM in Britain's most godless city has been further boosted with the transfer of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association's administrative base to Brighton.

Galha gained an advantageous foothold in the city earlier this year when the Association's secretaryship passed from gay rights veteran George Broadhead, based in Kenilworth, to Cliff James, 34, who moved to Brighton in September, 2006.

Cliff James came to humanism via an unconventional route. At the age of 17, in a bid to repress his homosexuality, he joined an Anglican monastery. The "cure" he hoped for by taking this radical step never materialised. Instead, it was in the monastery that he met his first boyfriend. "I wound up a gay atheist, and he went on to become a priest," said Cliff.

The homophobia he saw emanating from Christian and Muslim groups spurred him to become an activist in the field of human rights, and he joined Galha two years ago, seeing the organisation as an ideal platform for countering homophobia, and advancing the cause of atheism in the gay community.

He is on fertile ground in Brighton. It is estimated that the city's gay population makes up around 13 percent, or 35,000, of its total population of around 250,000. Most of this population is indifferent to religion.

Cliff, along with the enormously revitalised Brighton and Hove Humanist Society with whom he has formed links, wants to change this indifference into positive action. "Enormous strides have been made in the area of gay rights, but we cannot rest on our laurels.

So long as religious groups remain hostile to homosexuality we need to have a strong activist base to counter and confront these bigots."

Cliff also wants to attract more women and ethnic minority members into the movement.

He thinks that one way of increasing the number of "active atheists" is to place a copy of Dawkins' *The God Delusion* in every secondary school in the country, and feels that a campaign should be launched to have the book at the bedside of every establishment that currently accepts the Gideon Bible.



Cliff James



# McGrath v Russell on a case of the pot calling

**D**r Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, is a prolific author and editor. In recent years he has been making a name for himself as an increasingly shrill critic of atheism, and of Richard Dawkins in particular. McGrath's central argument is that atheism (which he defines narrowly and prejudicially) is in decline in the West, a phenomenon that he attributes to its alleged unfashionable modernist-rationalist preoccupations, its association with totalitarianism, and its failure on the imaginative front.

McGrath, who has a PhD in biochemistry, also criticises those (he puts Dawkins in this camp) who think that science and religion are incompatible, or that science demands atheism. His book *The Twilight of Atheism* was first published by Doubleday in 2004<sup>1</sup>, closely followed by *Dawkins' God: genes, memes, and the meaning of life* (Blackwell, 2005). In response to Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (Bantam, 2006), McGrath published a short (96-page) pamphlet entitled *The Dawkins Delusion?* (SPCK, 2007).

Infuriated by McGrath's distortions of atheism and its history, and by the generally dreadful quality of the scholarship on display in *Twilight of Atheism*, I have slowly been compiling a detailed critique of that book. In this article, I present an analysis of one short section of *Twilight* to give an early airing to a discovery that I believe to be an original contribution to the literature on Calvin and Copernicus.

One of McGrath's targets in *Twilight* is the idea that science and religion are (or have been) at war, or that they are inevitably in conflict. To illustrate his argument that there is "no universal paradigm for the relation of science and religion, either theoretically or historically" (*Twilight*, p 84), McGrath concentrates on refuting two legends: the Wilberforce-Huxley "debate", and the myth of Calvin's condemnation of Copernicus. He claims that both stories "have been known to be completely false since about 1970, and are now viewed by historians as the urban myths of journalists too lazy to check their sources" (*Twilight*, p 81). McGrath is on safe ground here. A legend has grown up around the encounter between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Huxley at Oxford in 1860, giving retrospective importance to a minor skirmish and exaggerating Huxley's role. It is also true that Calvin never criticised Copernicus by name. It is this latter story, and McGrath's treatment of it (found on pp.80-81 of *Twilight*), that concerns me here. I will first set out what McGrath has to say, and then draw out his many mistakes.

McGrath begins by referring to Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (first published 1945).

"Russell illustrated the 'bigoted' nature of Christian theology with a racy account of the early fortunes of the Copernican theory of the solar system, and singled out John Calvin's

critique of the theory for special criticism. Did not the Bible say that the sun went round the earth? Well, that, according to Calvin, was the end of the matter. "Calvin," wrote Russell, "demolished Copernicus with the text: 'The world also is established, that it cannot be moved' (Psa xciii.1), and exclaimed: 'Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?'" John Calvin emerges from this episode as an arrogant fool, typical of the kind of person who gets in the way of scientific progress. With the coming of atheism, such obscurantist ravings against advances in our knowledge could be silenced. (*Twilight*, p.80)"

However, McGrath continues:

"Russell did not source his citation from Calvin, forcing others to work out where he got it from. The noted historian of science Thomas S. Kuhn attempted to track it down when studying early responses to Copernicus's theory. Yet neither Kuhn nor anyone else could find anything like the quotation attributed to Calvin in any of his published writings. It did, however, feature prominently in the pages of Andrew Dickson White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896). (*Twilight*, p 81)

"In his earlier book *Religion and science* (first published 1935), Russell had expressed his indebtedness to White<sup>2</sup>, so it seemed that White was probably Russell's source in *History of Western Philosophy* as well. Unfortunately for the literary detectives, White didn't cite his sources properly either. Historian Edward Rosen (1960; see also Ratner's challenge to Rosen's conclusion that Calvin had never heard of Copernicus, and Rosen's reply (both 1961)) is credited with discovering that the quotation could be tracked back from Russell, via White, to "a work published in 1886 by F.W. Farrer (sic)" (*Twilight*, p.81)<sup>3</sup>.

"Once more, no source was provided for the citation. The trail fizzled out at that point. Farrer was a cleric at Westminster Abbey in London who perhaps lacked the will and resources to check his facts. The remark attributed to Calvin thus had to be dismissed as pure invention. (*Twilight*, p 81.)"

A writer who criticises others for failing to check their facts and their sources needs to take particular care over their own material. McGrath comments, sarcastically, that the "intellectual authority of the great atheist writer Bertrand Russell was such that few bothered to check out his assertions." (*Twilight*, p 81). McGrath's intellectual authority is somewhat less intimidating, and I can report that there is

no shortage of mistakes in the two pages of *Twilight* under examination. Despite criticising Russell for failing to cite his sources, nothing by any of the key figures (Russell, Kuhn, White or Farrar) in this story can be found in McGrath's bibliography, except for the article by Rosen.

## DAN BYE dissects Alister McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism*, written by the biochemist as a counter-blast to *The God Delusion*

McGrath's reference to "F W Farrer" is a misspelling of the name of one of the important players in the spreading of the Calvin/Copernicus story (yet Farrar's name is correctly spelled in Edward Rosen's article, which McGrath cites). The cleric in question is Frederic William Farrar (1831-1903). He became dean of Canterbury Cathedral in 1895, but had previously been canon and archdeacon of Westminster Abbey. The apparent source of White's Calvin "quote" was Farrar's *History of Interpretation* (1886, p.xvii).

McGrath claims that Russell "illustrated the 'bigoted' nature of Christian theology with a racy account of the early fortunes of the Copernican theory of the solar system, and singled out John Calvin's critique of the theory for special criticism" (*Twilight* p.80). In fact, the 33 words quoted by McGrath are the sum total of what Russell has to say about Calvin on Copernicus. McGrath omits "similarly" from Russell's original, which reads: "Calvin, similarly, demolished Copernicus..." (Russell 1961, p.515), indicating that, far from singling Calvin out, the passage is just one of a series of examples. Nor does Russell say that "Christian theology" is "bigoted", as McGrath implies. What he actually says is this:

"Protestant clergy were at least as bigoted as Catholic ecclesiastics; nevertheless there soon came to be much more liberty of speculation in Protestant than in Catholic countries, because in Protestant countries the clergy had less power. (Russell 1961, p.515)"

Furthermore, although Copernicus' work involved "the dethronement of the earth from its geometrical pre-eminence", which "made it difficult to give to man the cosmic importance assigned to him in the Christian theology... such consequences of his theory would not have been accepted by Copernicus, whose orthodoxy was sincere, and who protested against the view that his theory contradicted



# n Calvin v Copernicus: Tilting the kettle black?



Alister McGrath, left, and Bertrand Russell

misquotation of Calvin in their books. But a survey of atheist and rationalist literature in my own collection reveals that most writers have not promoted the misquotation. On the other hand, some religious people (creationists for example) hold that there is indeed a conflict between religion (or their particular interpretation of the Bible) and science (or particular scientific findings), and so much the worse for science. But, historically, stories like that of Calvin and Copernicus have also formed part of arguments designed to promote liberal theological views. See, for example, W R Inge (Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral) in *Needham* (1926, p 359). Farrar's *History of Interpretation* falls into this category too; after citing Calvin, and other examples, Farrar comments, "such ignorant condemnations show us that the revision of the principles and methods of exegesis is rendered absolutely necessary by the ever-widening knowledge of modern days." (Farrar 1886, p.xviii). Others to have employed the misquotation include Bryan Appleyard (1993, p.32) and the Russian Orthodox evolutionist Theodosius Dobzhansky (1969, p.95. Dobzhansky is one of McGrath's favourite examples for the compatibility of science and religion!).

One nagging question remains: did *anyone* ever say those infamous words, "who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the Holy Spirit?" In 1960, Rosen identified Farrar as the earliest known source, and there the matter has rested for the last 47 years, with the former Canon of Westminster Abbey standing accused of making up quotations. However, my own research has uncovered an earlier citation – as far as I can discover, this is the first progress on the issue in over half a century. And while I cannot rescue Farrar from the charge of being careless with facts, I can establish for the first time that the quotation was not invented by him, just wrongly attributed to Calvin.

The source I have unearthed is *The Protestant Theological and Ecclesiastical Encyclopedia*, edited by J.H.A. Bomberger (1860):

"This orthodox theology had, since Gerhard, taught an equal inspiration of the O and N Testaments, so that the *H Spirit* is author in an equal measure of every part of the Scriptures, of the book of Esthor, as of the gosp. of St.

the Bible" (Russell 1961, p 513). Russell's point was that "Copernicus was right to call his theory a hypothesis; his opponents were wrong in thinking new hypotheses undesirable" (Russell 1961, p 514), and not, as McGrath has it, that Calvin was "an arrogant religious fool, typical of the kind of person who gets in the way of scientific progress." Nor does Russell say anything remotely resembling McGrath's overheated rhetoric: "With the coming of atheism, such obscurantist ravings against advances in our knowledge could be silenced." (*Twilight*, p.80). Russell's position was therefore more nuanced and less dogmatic than McGrath would have his readers believe.

McGrath mentions the Calvin /Copernicus myth in some of his other books (see for example McGrath 2001, pp 258-259). He seems to have particular difficulty with Farrar's name. In *A Life of John Calvin* (1990, p xiv), and *Reformation thought: an introduction* (1999, p 273) he spells Farrar's surname correctly, but misspells his first name as "Frederick". Interestingly, however, one of McGrath's books shares *Twilight's* misspelling of Farrar's surname: *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science and Religion* (1998). McGrath's account of the story in *Twilight* very closely resembles that in *Foundations of Dialogue* (compare *Twilight*, p.80-81 with McGrath 1998, pp 16-18).

In *Twilight*, McGrath credits Thomas S Kuhn with having made some effort to track down the alleged comment of Calvin. In *Foundations of Dialogue*, McGrath was more explicit:

"This particular urban myth was not challenged until Thomas S Kuhn attempted to track it down as part of his exploration of the background to the Copernican Revolution. Kuhn did not find the quotation in Calvin but in Andrew Dickson White's *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom...*" (McGrath 1998, p 17)"

McGrath doesn't supply a source for this claim in either *Twilight* or *Foundations of Dialogue*, and it seems to be false. First, no other writer on the subject refers to any such investigation or "challenge" by Kuhn. Secondly, Kuhn doesn't mention conducting any such research or making any such challenge in any of the publications by him that I have consulted (Kuhn 1957; Kuhn 1977; Kuhn 1996; Kuhn 2000). Thirdly, far from exposing the error, Kuhn in fact *perpetuates* it by reprinting the alleged quotation from Calvin in his book on Copernicus (Kuhn 1957, p.192). His cited source? Andrew D. White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in*

*Christendom!* There is no indication that Kuhn was even aware that the quotation was of dubious provenance. Although I am at one with McGrath in his criticism of "scholarly laziness" and "the urban myths of... amateur historians" (McGrath 1998, p.18), I fear he has blotted his copybook by introducing this *new* urban myth into the literature in place of the old Calvin/Copernicus one. McGrath presumably does not have Farrar's excuse of lacking "the will and resources to check his facts". (*Twilight*, p 81)

How can we explain McGrath's solecisms? If the relevant passages in *Twilight* have, as I suspect, been copied largely unaltered from *Foundations of Dialogue*, it makes sense to examine that work for clues. The bibliography of *Foundations of Dialogue* contains three entries for Kuhn (including two different editions of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), but, oddly, not his *The Copernican Revolution* (1957). On the other hand it does, like *Twilight*, include Edward Rosen's article, in which Kuhn is identified as one of those who uncritically borrowed the Calvin quote from A.D. White (Rosen 1960, p.163). *Foundations of Dialogue* also cites Helge S. Kragh's *An Introduction to the Historiography of Science* (1987). In that work Kragh correctly says:

"Following White, Calvin's alleged anti-Copernicanism has been a permanent part of the history of science and history of ideas for generations; the quotation from Calvin used by White has been used as evidence many times, by Bertrand Russell, Will Durant, J G Crowther and Thomas Kuhn, among others. (Kragh 1987, p 135)"

But these are dead-ends, demonstrating only McGrath's inattention to his sources. McGrath's gloriously ironic failure to properly cite any of his assertions on this issue leaves us with fewer clues to work with than Edward Rosen had in 1960. Unable to solve the puzzle, I can only conclude by noting that perhaps McGrath's Kuhn story must be "dismissed as pure invention", to borrow McGrath's remark about Farrar's error (*Twilight*, p 81).

McGrath characterises the "warfare model" of the relationship between religion and science as symptomatic of atheism (although the main sources, Farrar and White, were not atheists). But although it is fair to say that it has not been unusual for atheists to adopt such a view, many have not. Atheism is consistent with a range of opinions on the relationship between science and religion. Among recent rationalist authors, Ludovic Kennedy (1999, p154) and Dick Taverne (2006, p17) have included the

(Continued on p11)



John. If others had explained differences of style and language by an accommodation of the *H Spirit* to human *calami*, C utterly discards this refuge: the differences of subjects alone is sufficient to explain the form: or, the divine oracle shows itself in all its contents, astronomical and geographical. "Who will venture to place the authority of Copernicus above that of the *H Spirit*?" (see Witt. Theolog. p 254. – Gasz, Gesch. der prot. Dogm. 1854, 1 Th p 165). No trace, therefore, of historical or personal exposition. (Bomberger 1860, vol 1, p 525).

The "C" referred to here is not Calvin but the Lutheran theologian Abraham Calovius (1612-1696), described by Farrar as "a man of stupendous diligence and wide learning, but the very type of a bitter dogmatist." (Farrar 1886, p 364). Bomberger's encyclopedia is an incomplete (only two volumes were produced) English adaptation of the *Real Encyclopädie für protestantische theologie und kirche* (22 vols. 1853-1868), edited by Johann Jakob Herzog (1805-1882). The article on Calovius (the article is entitled "Calov", which is a common variant abbreviation of his name) was written by Dr. Friedrich Tholuck (1799-1877), and the indications are that it is a straightforward translation of the original article Tholuck wrote for Herzog. I must leave it to others with better knowledge of German and access to the original sources to follow the references further.

Bomberger/Herzog is not the only source I have discovered which attributes the quotation to Calovius. The Scottish theologian Marcus Dods (1834-1909) also credits a version of the quote to Calovius in his *The Bible: Its Origin and Nature* (1905): "'Who', said Calovius, 'would dare to set the authority of Copernicus above the authority of God?'" (Dods 1905, p 66). Dods' source is not cited, but in any case Dods was writing too late to be a source for Farrar or White.

If either Bomberger or Herzog's original work was Farrar's ultimate source, then a plausible explanation for his mistake presents itself: he simply confused 'Calov' with Calvin (in Bomberger, the article on Calvin appears in close proximity to the article on Calovius). The dates of publication also fit well, both Bomberger and Herzog appearing a good many years before Farrar's book. So, is there any evidence that Farrar consulted either Bomberger or Herzog? Yes: he cites Bomberger's translation of Herzog in his *The Life of Christ* (1874), which predates *History of Interpretation* by over a decade. And he cites Herzog, apparently the original this time, in *History of Interpretation* itself (Farrar 1886, p 480).

In *Foundations of Dialogue*, McGrath says: "I am unpersuaded that White drew his citation directly from Farrer's work. Rosen's research suggests to me that both Farrer and White are more likely to have drawn on a third source, common to both, yet at present

## McGrath v Russell

(Continued from p10)

unknown to us." (McGrath 1998, p 17).

No supporting reasons are provided<sup>4</sup>, but now that a third source has finally been identified we can begin to evaluate McGrath's hypothesis. White cites Herzog at various points in *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology*, and also mentions Calovius in relation to his opposition to the Copernican system. Although White and Farrar both used Bomberger/Herzog, it seems unlikely that they both would independently conflate the entries on Calovius and Calvin. The evidence therefore still suggests that White drew directly on Farrar for the misquotation.

Alister McGrath enjoys an enviable reputation as a scholarly and accurate writer. Several of his books bear the imprimatur-esque praise of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams: "Alister McGrath invariably combines enormous scholarship with an accessible and engaging style". His anti-atheist work is very much concerned with correcting the errors (real or alleged) of writers like Richard Dawkins. Yet few people have subjected McGrath to the same amount of scrutiny. In this article I have put just two pages of *Twilight of Atheism* under the magnifying glass, and revealed more flawed scholarship than I have space to discuss in detail.

### Notes

THE references to *Twilight* in this paper are to the paperback edition published by Rider, see McGrath (2005).

For Andrew D White's version of the legend, see White (1896, p 127). Contrary to the impression McGrath creates ("It did, however, feature prominently..."), White devotes just two sentences to the story. Also note that McGrath mixes up his publication dates. On p 81 he dates *History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* to 1896, which is correct. But on p 85 he dates the same title to 1876. On p 86 he correctly notes that in 1876 White published an early version of the material under the title *The Warfare of Science. History of the Warfare of Science with Theology* essentially expands on the 1876 publication, and it seems McGrath got the two books confused.

Although Rosen gets the credit, Reijer Hooykaas identified the implausibility of the alleged quotation in terms of Calvin's theology in the 1950s, but he isn't mentioned in *Twilight*. Citing White's attribution, Hooykaas commented, "Many historians pass judgment on Calvin without having a serious knowledge of his works" (Hooykaas 1956, p 136 note 100). In the same work Hooykaas also mentions Farrar's favourable opinion of Calvin in his *History of Interpretation* (Hooykaas 1956, p 138) but nowhere does he mention Farrar's use of the controversial quotation. A century before Hooykaas, *The Gentleman's Magazine* observed that Calvin was pre-Copernican rather than anti-Copernican: "He knew not of the opinions of Aristarchus of old; nor was he even aware that Copernicus had so recently enunciated the truth upon the heavenly system." (Anon 1854, p 31)

There must be some doubt whether McGrath has even read Farrar's *History of Interpretation*, since it is absent from the bibliographies of both *Twilight* and *Foundations of Dialogue*.

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## The Regensburg Row: How the Pope inadvertently infuriated Muslims

AN old song has the title, and refrain, *There's bound to be a row!* There certainly was one following the speech of Pope Benedict XVI at the University of Regensburg on September 12, 2006. It is worth looking at what happened, and at what was actually said.

The lecture, for such it was, was entitled *Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections*, and is available on the Vatican website. This is a translation from the original German, and has been, apparently very slightly, amended from the text as spoken. The occasion was an academic one. Benedict was addressing "representatives of science" in the Aula Magna or Great Hall of the University where he had been professor of theology. He begins by remembering warmly the collegial atmosphere, free exchange of views between specialists, and common commitment to "a single rationality with its various aspects and sharing responsibility for the right use of reason." He acknowledges that some people thought it odd to include theology in this.

Then comes the short passage that caused all the trouble. Benedict had been reminded of the above when he read part of a dialogue, from the end of the 14th century, between the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, and "an educated Persian". In the course of discussing Jewish, Christian and Islamic beliefs, and specifically the relation between religion and violence, the Emperor said: "*Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached*". He went on to argue that violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul, which is what in man gives rise to faith. Benedict then adds that in Muslim teaching, on the other hand, God is absolutely transcendent, with no limits or constraints, such as being reasonable or even bound by his own word or his own nature. He quotes Islamic scholars in support.

This is all really just an introduction to the main theme of Benedict's lecture, which is the relationship of the biblical (in particular New Testament) message, and the classical Greek philosophical tradition. There is no further mention of Islam or Mohammed. Benedict's thesis, if I follow it, is that Christianity is essentially a fusion of faith and reason. The first comes from the revelation of God to the world, in the Old Testament and above all in the person of Jesus, the second from the classical philosophers. This was so from the start, he argues, quoting St John's Gospel which opens "In the beginning was the word", using the Greek *logos*, which also means reason. God, while far beyond our understanding, is not capricious, but "has acted, and continues to act

lovingly on our behalf". Benedict then follows this line through the subsequent development of Christianity, but argues that in modern times, starting with the Reformation, there has been a tendency to reject the Greek tradition of reason – "dehellenization" as he calls it – which is still going on. This not only distorts the nature of Christianity, but restricts reason to what is empirically testable, ignoring the insights of religion and the nature of the divine, and indeed all questions of right and wrong. Reason and faith must come together in a new way, and theology should be part of "the wide-ranging dialogue of sciences" which is the function of the university. "Only thus do we become capable of that genuine dialogue of cultures and religions so urgently needed today."

### Professor JOHN RADFORD examines a row which led last year to Muslim condemnation of the Pope

Benedict does not define "reason", but distinguishing it from "faith" implies that he means something like "science" in its broadest sense, that is knowledge gained by natural means rather than supernatural. He also seems to mean "rational". He nowhere suggests that he agrees with the Emperor's view of Mohammed or the Koran, and in a note to the published version specifically denies that he does so. But by claiming that Muslims do not accept the necessarily reasonable nature of God, he implies that the Islamic view is wrong, or at least not as right as the Christian one. Many people, both religious and non-religious, might query Benedict's views. But as they stand, they are simply an academic theological lecture, arguing for the place of that discipline within a university, and proposing a way forward in the wider divisions of the world outside it.

This was not, of course, how they were received in some quarters. Many of the reactions are noted in the invaluable Wikipedia on the world-wide web. Outside Westminster (RC) Cathedral on September 18 about 100 protesters carried banners calling for the Pope to be executed, stating that he will go to hell, that Islam will conquer Rome, and so on. A *fatwa* issued in Pakistan called on the Muslim community to kill the Pope for his blasphemous statement. Several churches were attacked in various places, and an elderly nun was killed, possibly though not certainly in the course of a protest. Flags of Germany, the USA and Israel, Christian crosses, and effigies of Benedict and Jesus were burned in Basra. And so on. Meanwhile the Pope tried to



A poster depicting Pope Benedict XVI and Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, spotted in Turkey during the Pope's visit to the country last year

assuage the storm. On September 16 an official statement from the Vatican expressed "sincere regret" for any offence caused, and stressed that the Pope's aim was to reject violence from any quarter. On the 17th Benedict himself affirmed his regret at the reaction, and stated that the words he had quoted from Manuel II "in no way express my personal thought".

This was generally received negatively, with various demands that he must apologise, though precisely for what seems unclear. Of course many other reactions world-wide were far milder. But two obvious questions are, why did he say it? And why was there such a reaction? Various answers have been offered to the first. My intuitive guess, and it is no more, is that, coming across the quite obscure Byzantine debate, Benedict simply thought it would make a nice scholarly opening to his lecture, to be given to a university audience. Omitting it would not have affected his argument at all. It has been suggested that due to a reorganization within the Vatican, the lecture may not have been vetted as carefully as usual. On August 20, 2005, at Cologne, the Pope addressed a gathering of Muslim representatives. He went out of his way to avoid anything controversial, repeatedly stressing his high regard for them, and arguing that Christians and Muslims all worshipped "the one God living and subsistent, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves wholeheartedly". This is true in a sense, but completely ignores the Islamic denial of the divinity of Christ, which is absolutely central to the Pope's faith, as well as numerous differences between the decrees in the Koran and those in the Bible.

(Continued on page 12)



I HAD no intention of writing this at all. The fuel for this article was my rapidly increasing animosity towards organised religion. But all fuels require ignition before they cause any reaction. In my case that ignition was the reading of an old law report in which the judge sought the guidance of God to make the right decision.

At first glance this simple description did not cause me any offence, but, while eating my supper on a quiet Saturday night, with the children safely in bed, my sub-conscious kept reminding me of it, and I began to consider what that description actually meant.

To me, it meant the complete destruction of the value that the court system has.

## The Regensburg Row

(Continued from page 11)

It is tempting to answer the second question with "Well, they would, wouldn't they?" We have got used to people, not merely Muslims, taking offence at practically anything, or imagining it. Not long ago the town council at Carlisle proposed to ban a traditional ritual in which some characters appeared blackfaced. Nobody had objected, and the reason for it is simply disguise, typical of many such rituals. However, religions, and it appears Islam in particular, do seem exceptionally prone to violent reaction to insults real or supposed. Some of this, as appeared with the notorious Dutch cartoons, is deliberately stirred up. The "insults" are distorted and exaggerated.

This no doubt happened with the Pope's speech. At least some of those denouncing it admitted that they had not read it. Many ordinary Muslims (and indeed people in general) are not well-informed, certainly on recondite aspects of Christian history and theology. And there is no doubt that many groups, including large Muslim populations, have a deep resentment and antagonism to the dominance and perceived imperialism of "the West". There are many complex economic and political factors. Islam is, and always has been, far more than simply a personal faith. It is intended to be, and for many functions as, a whole system of life. The individual finds identity as a member of the *ummah*, the Islamic community, which provides unity and strength. Mohammed, as God's messenger, is revered in a way hard for non-Muslims to grasp.

A perceived attack on him or on Islam is a threat to all this, and almost anything can be taken as one, so sensitive is the personal involvement. It resembles the concept of "taboo", thoughts or objects that are untouchable or unmentionable, which I think has yet to be properly explained.

From an atheist standpoint, the best hope is perhaps the long-term gradual reduction of emotional dependence on unsubstantiated myths. In the short term, one must offer public figures a modified catch-phrase, "*Don't mention Mohammed!*". There's bound to be a row.

To a lawyer that was rather an annoying prospect. Our system is based upon a simple premise: that through the process of proper advocacy and argument the truth shall be revealed. The finder of fact, whether it be a judge sitting alone or a full jury, makes their decision based upon the facts presented to the court. I do not believe for one moment that any god or religious guidance has any place whatsoever in a court of law. When I appear, as I often do, before a judge I am there because opposing parties in an action effectively require a referee to give guidance and a ruling on the facts and the law in the case.

I want a judge who exercises expertise in the law. I want a judge who evaluates the evidence. I want a judge who can and will give reasons for his judgment even if those reasons give rise to the possibility of appeal. I want the judge to make the right decision based upon the law.

I am not suggesting that any modern judge would be so naive as to credit a judgment to the guidance of God. Any participant that did not share such a judge's religion or race would immediately appeal on grounds of discrimination. However, this does raise a question of the role of God in court. Some lawyers still prepare witness statements with the old "prayer" (even the name confirms the origin) for the witness to sign. When giving evidence it is automatic to be presented with the Bible on which to take an oath. On many occasions I have seen people who I know to be non-religious take the oath, presumably because they were not aware that the more modern "affirmation" is available.

But why is this important?

The world is full of religions. Some share basic views, some oppose completely. All have a common denominator: that those who do not share in that particular religion are somehow less human, less worthy, less important. The oath system (which does not give a name to God – Christianity is merely implied if there is a Bible with the script card, but other holy books are available too) therefore expressly allows the abdication of personal responsibility because of a religious belief. Let me make it clear what that means: the person taking the oath has been given the opportunity to present any evidence he likes if he believes that God has directed him to do so – because it is "God's truth." Our hypothetical witness may believe he saw a blue car leaving the scene of a crime, but if for some reason God directs him to say that the car was red then he has not lied to the court – he has merely been corrected/guided by God.

So taking the "all other faiths are less important" mantra, we have a devout Christian man giving evidence in a criminal trial. The defendant is of another religion, and obviously so (by that I mean has dressed in accordance with his religion). The Christian witness gives his oath under (unnamed) God. What is there to stop that Christian witness from giving evidence that is tainted by a belief that in the dock

# Why religion sits out of our seats

sits either someone to be converted, or the enemy and unworthy of the truth and the "gift of justice" in a "Christian" court? (My point about dress code is simple, but requires clarification. Some religions have a dress code, others do not. A Christian witness in England is likely to give evidence wearing a business suit, or jeans, or a shirt and tie or a T-shirt. A Sikh will be wearing a turban. This lack of a level playing field could cause a disproportionate amount of discrimination-based appeals from one religion as opposed to another, and the plain suit-wearing Christian gives no hint as to affiliation at all.)

**PAUL WILLIAMS – Solicitor and Jedi Knight – puts forward the argument**

Does that non-Christian defendant deserve that the facts of his case are assessed properly after the truth has been presented? Of course he does. Any interference by religion would prevent the evidence being assessed properly.

To a religious witness the oath system effectively reminds the witness, at the point of actually giving evidence, that the person sitting opposite might be "less worthy".

Almost every day one newspaper or another runs an article about the rise of religious fundamentalism, and not even religious scholars agree on what the various holy books mean. Does "Thou shalt not kill" or its equivalent in almost all holy books actually mean that? Or does it mean (as some extreme fundamentalists claim) "Thou shalt not kill, but shalt heed Schedule 1 as annexed where the exclusion clauses are given." In any world where this type of thinking exists, the importance of having completely secular courts (and that requirement being imposed by legislation) is even more important than any reason based upon judges looking to the sky for assistance.

Recently the British tabloids have been running scare stories about the rise of Sharia "courts" in the UK. While the headlines might well be excessive, the worry behind them is not. After all, if we expect a secular court system then the idea of a non-official secret court based purely on (any) religion should be completely intolerable. The entire concept of closed courts purely for believers of a particular deity is appalling. This applies equally to all religions: it simply does not matter. Religion has no place in the interpretation of law. If the law that falls to be interpreted is written on solely religious principles then it must be discarded.

Men of the cloth have historically been



# should be kept secular courts

excused from jury service, because they serve a "higher master" than the court (what is higher than justice anyway?). In theory this was introduced to avoid any conflict between the word of God and human law, for some human activities are not against the law but are considered immoral by religion. However, in practice, this had a rather welcome, and no doubt unintended, side effect: it ensured that a group of people who demonstrably cannot assess evidence were prevented from sitting on a jury. The recent valiant attempt to make jury selection more inclusive has caused huge damage by allowing such prejudiced people to sit on a jury. For similar reasons I completely oppose the eligibility of lawyers to sit on juries, but that is for another article.

Of course that old rule has now gone, but in any event only excluded the professional clergy and not the keen amateur.

But even during that time of prohibition we (you, me, the public, everyone) allowed defendants to use religion as, not merely an excuse, but a justification of criminal acts: The abuse of Catholic and/or Protestant children; honour killings, etc. In recent weeks there have been two separate trials of women accused of child abuse whose defences stated that they were acting in a Christian manner. So a valiant attempt to remove religious interference from the jury was completely negated by allowing defendants to attempt to rely on the same source!

The last census even confirmed that the only question for which one could not be prosecuted for giving wrong information was in regard to religious belief. Of course when many people claimed their religion was "TOG" – Terry's (Wogan) Old Geezers – or "Jedi Knight", the government did the entirely predictable thing and claimed that those replies were not valid. The fact that those new "religions" have just as

much evidence in their favour as the more traditional options seems to have been ignored.

So, what do I seek? I seek a removal of the influence of religion in all courts: the removal of any oath based upon a holy book to be replaced by personal affirmation with properly publicised penalties for breach; the removal of all courts that are based solely on religion. I might even go as far as to suggest that the religious beliefs of all the judges should be published, but I rather suspect that this would cause the appellate courts to be jammed solid with more unmeritorious appeals than valid ones, and ultimately my aim is to make sure the system works and does not cause addition-

al problems.

Let me be clear – I really do not care what religious beliefs a person holds. As long as there is no attempt to force those beliefs upon someone else and no mental or physical harm is caused, then I see no reason for that person to change. But I do object to that same person using those beliefs to make a decision in court, whether it be as a lawyer, judge, witness or juror. Justice is too important for that.

In this modern, educated and sophisticated world, justice must not be blind: justice must be allowed to see and test all the evidence and recognise her own inherent flaws. If evidence cannot be tested, it is worthless.

## Hot on the heels of *The God Delusion* comes *In Defence of Atheism*

MICHEL Onfray is France's answer to Richard Dawkins. Although Onfray is a philosopher rather than a scientist, his contempt for religion is easily equal to that of Dawkins.

Of course, in France philosophy is considered much more important than it is here, and Onfray is an extremely popular exponent. He conducts weekly lectures in an always-packed 500-seat Caen auditorium, and these are broadcast on a state radio station.

**TERRY SANDERSON,**  
President of the National  
Secular Society, reviews *In  
Defence of Atheism* by Michel  
Onfray (Serpents Tail, hard-  
back 240pp, £17.99)

His book, which is his first to be translated into English, has caused a sensation among the religious establishments of Europe, and has been on the best-seller lists in France, Spain and Italy. It proposes a "new" philosophy, something that he calls "ethical hedonism" which distils to: "To enjoy and make others enjoy without doing ill to yourself or to others, this is the foundation of all morality."

(This, of course, sounds like a variation on the old Golden Rule "Treat others as you'd like to be treated". Robert Ingersoll's famous variation went: "Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so.")

Onfray suggests that we try to expunge religious approaches entirely from our thinking and start again from the beginning. He accepts that this is easier said than done, so deeply embedded have these sentiments become over the centuries. He has no time for "religious atheists", those who try to recreate religion without God (I think he is referring to humanists with their "weddings" and "baptisms" – entirely religious concepts).

He makes the appeal for an "atheistic atheism" that does not constantly fall back on traditional religious morality for its answers – particularly in relation to sex.

The book itself looks at the three Abrahamic faiths and explores not only their histories, but the malign effects they have had on the human race since they were first invented (and he goes into detail about just how, and by whom, they were invented). He attacks the senselessness of the rituals and restrictions that believers have inflicted upon themselves. They may have been appropriate for desert-dwelling tribes in the Bronze Age, but why on earth do Muslims in the modern world still cling to their almost psychopathic aversion to pigs and dogs? Why do so many Jews restrict their diets with objectively batty kosher rules?

Mr Onfray doesn't spare us the parts of Christian history that the Christians have tried hard to erase – such as that Christianity was enforced by extreme brutality by Constantine, and if it hadn't been for him, it would probably not exist today. Mr Onfray takes us through the arguments for the non-existence of Jesus. He tells us that Judaism invented genocide and that Islam is in its essentials misogynist, war-like and completely incompatible with Western ideals.

These are not new arguments or insights for seasoned freethinkers, but they need to be rehearsed for a new generation. They need to be constantly repeated until they have been heard by those who otherwise only hear the ubiquitous mantra of how wonderful religion is (starting at primary school).

With this book, Michel Onfray has added another weapon to the growing literary artillery that atheists can deploy against the big guns of religion. And the military analogy is not accidental. Reason is at war with irrationality, and we have big battles ahead.

*In Defence of Atheism* is available from the NSS Shop [www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk) or send a cheque for £18.99 (inc p&p) to NSS Books, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

### Don't you Believe It!

IN the May issue of the *Freethinker* we published John Radford's delightful book, *Don't You Believe it! – some things everybody knows that actually AIN'T SO*. We gave the price as £9.95 plus £1 p & p. In fact it is £9.95 post free in UK. It can be bought from the National Secular Society shop ([www.secularism.org.uk](http://www.secularism.org.uk)) or ordered by post from NSS Books, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

All money raised through sales of this book will be donated to either Amnesty or the National Secular Society (according to the buyers' choice).



## Last words on Israel

KEN Baldry (*Points of View*, February) is absolutely not anti-Semitic/anti-Jewish. He does not mention Israel as being a "chosen homeland". Judaism is a religion, and as such does not merit a "state" or "homeland".

Six million Jews were not murdered because they had no homeland to admit them (didn't we accept as many as were able to get here?) but because a Roman Catholic fanatic didn't want them in Germany, or anywhere in his hoped-for Nazi empire.

In March Derek Wilkes implied that both Ken Baldry and Graham Livingstone were anti-Jewish. I am very sorry that school-day taunts relating to his Jewishness and being sent back to Palestine have left such a stigma on him.

In contrast to Derek Wilkes' rambling piece in the April *Freethinker*, David Ibry (May) has made a succinct and extremely thoughtful argument, as did Graham Livingstone in April.

FIONA WEIR

London

DAVID Ibry (*Points of View*, May) refers to a gap. And it reaches right down to the call of Mohamet of the Quraysh. The Jews had Abraham and Moses, yet they ignored his call – and of course, in that first dawn, they paid heavily for their wickedness. This perspective on things is the normal one; it is a religious matter, so Mr Ibry is right. But it means that for most Muslims the absence of nationalist feeling, even tender feelings for an historic state, is not a gap. Allegiance may not be to anything comparable to the Crown-in-Parliament; it is to Allah, therefore, in the absence of a respectable khalifate, to whomever speaks as if from Allah – such as the late Ali Khomeini, leaders of al-Qaeda, and newsworthy British preachers.

In Islam there is no separation of state from religious establishment. In contrast, most Israelis, Mr Ibry will find, now give a plain allegiance to the nation-State. Their problem is, therefore, the one Mr Wilkes leaves alone in his passionate defence of the Israeli State.

The majority of Muslims – outside Turkey, possibly Egypt – neither think in terms of the nation-State nor feel the need to. It's as if the two sides speak languages from different planets and this, as Mr Wilkes must know, could be why many *Freethinker* readers might wish all sorts of things for Israel which Israeli citizens do not wish for themselves. Once upon a time, we comparably wished Czechoslovakia would vanish, and that was an easy one!

KEITH BELL

Wrexham

DEREK Wilkes both misquotes me and traduces me. I did not suggest that Jews "driven out of their chosen homeland by fear of death" should be welcomed back. An orderly and sensitive evacuation of the Palestine Mandate area is what I had in mind. To accuse me, when I write of welcoming Jews to the England where I live, of anti-Semitism seems an inversion of logic.

The point remains that the Balfour Declaration, which promised the Jews someone else's country, was out of order. The Jews are a religious, not a racial group. There was thus never a need for a "Jewish Homeland". In the long run, anti-Semitism would be vulnerable to improved education.

Incidentally, I remember that the holocaust was generally hushed up until the 1960s, because NATO needed the German army and did not want to cause offence. Advertising the holocaust became convenient when the Americans decided that the Jewish colony called Israel was useful to their foreign policy. Is Mr Wilkes an Israeli agent or an American one?

KEN BALDRY

London

IT IS irritating to have someone like Derek Wilkes proclaiming the benign nature of Zionist nationalism against the known facts. It is necessary to correct the distortions in his letter in the May edition of *The Freethinker*. I'll be brief.

The notion that the religious Irgun-Stern terrorists' actions were "invented" and these actions were "directed entirely against the British occupying forces" is laughable: they murdered 250 people at Deir Yassin in April 1948 in a successful attempt to put the fear of an expansionist Yahweh into the Palestinian population. The leaders stated, "As in Deir Yassin so everywhere... Oh Lord, Oh Lord you have chosen us for conquest". Some 300,000 had fled by May (Chomsky: *Fateful Triangle*, p 96).

Later a Jewish settlement was built on the site and in 1980 the remaining ruins were bulldozed. Remorse didn't come into it. In December the Palmach (of the Haganah) carried out a "retaliation" action against the village of Khissas, killing ten people, including one woman and four children (op cit p 95). There are others. According to Ilan Pappé roughly 900,000 people were expelled by force. It beggars belief that the Stern Gang were prepared to establish relations with the Third Reich on a totalitarian solidarity basis, but such is the case (see Chomsky for further references).

The modern equivalents are, of course, the Nazi-like actions at Sabra and Shatila under Israeli auspices (Ariel Sharon, architect of earlier atrocities). Perhaps Derek Wilkes thinks all this an anti-Semitic invention too. We should remember that the indigenous peoples of the region (as opposed to the millenarian converts and born-again incomers) could be described as Semites divided by religion.

[The Arabs in 1948] "outnumbered the Jews by 200 to one". Evidently the Arab League held twenty thousand men, with ten old Spitfires and twenty-two small tanks. Arrayed against them were fifty-two thousand fighters and thirty-thousand reservists in a home guard (Pilger, *Freedom Next Time*, p 142). All states, like all religions, are based on myth; the Israeli state is no exception, including its vulnerability and "purity of arms".

Claiming that "six million Jews [gypsies, gays and others often get a mere passing men-

tion in the horror catalogue as they serve no state interests] were hideously murdered because there was no homeland to admit them" is a lame and belated justification for pre-planned land seizure, but it is part of the mythology. Anti-Semitism is a disgusting phenomenon with a revolting history, ably fostered by the Roman Church and other religious/state-bureaucracies and fanatics. The term is used to smear critics and substantiate the ludicrous religious-territorial claims of early and modern day Zionists, as is the holocaust itself, with considerable success.

Israel has never accepted critical UN resolutions as having any validity and its similarly acting paymasters in Washington have ensured these resolutions carry no weight, providing war material in large quantities: "overlooking" the nuclear capability which attracts no attention in the Western media as it's a threat to no-one, just another benign defensive measure. The "Road Map" is but one expression of the continual hypocrisy and double standards of the West's controllers. Finally, it ought not to be necessary to say that I hold no brief for any Arab state or terrorist faction, nor am I interested in assessing the "equivalence" of atrocities, merely an interest in honesty in debate.

ROY EMERY

Radstock

DEREK Wilkes wonders why correspondents to this journal who criticise Israel have not mentioned the expulsion of Jews from their homes by Arabs, nor the failure of oil-rich nations in the region to welcome Arabs who have been expelled from their homes by Jews. Why are we picking out Israel for criticism rather than various other countries nearby that have acted similarly, or even worse?

The reason is that no one mistakes the political character of those other countries. No apologist for any of those corrupt kingdoms, dictatorships and theocracies has written to the *Freethinker* proclaiming them as beacons of racial harmony, democracy and secularism. And none of them has supporters who insult us in these pages with crass falsifications of history, while asking us to "have respect for facts".

Derek Wilkes' latest letter contains such a dizzying variety and density of falsehoods that reading it induces a feeling of bewildered helplessness. It's impossible to know where to begin. Presumably that is precisely the effect he is striving for.

Interestingly, though, some of his falsehoods are rather out of date. He seems to be unaware that the line now being taken by the most go-ahead Zionist historical revisionists is that Palestine *never really existed at all*. Merely to claim that the expulsion of the Palestinians didn't happen is *so* last year.

Get with the programme, Derek – your propaganda manual needs an update!

GRAHAM NOBLE

Fareham

Ed. note: This correspondence is now closed.





### Socialism's poisoned chalice

I WAS disappointed but not surprised by Diesel Balaam's article "How socialism became a poisoned chalice for freethinkers" in the May edition. I can assure him that had he defined socialism correctly he would have seen that it is no poisoned chalice, at least for the working class.

Perhaps he should consult the SPGB first on what socialism is (and is not) before he writes another article attacking socialism. What he defines as socialism and correctly attacks is left-wing capitalism. This has about as much to do with socialism as the parties of right-wing capitalism. Marx taught that socialism would be a stateless world of free access.

But I cannot fault him in his condemnations of the SWP. Respect, Ken Livingstone *et al.*

Had he actually bothered to join the SPGB he would have realised that socialism has never been tried anywhere.

If he wishes to debate with the SPGB about the virtues of socialism versus liberal democracies, then I suggest he writes to the party headquarters at Socialist Studies, PO Box 46338, London SW17 9US and we will be happy to set him straight and discuss matters with him.

Until then, scientific socialists will just have to put up with freethinkers misunderstanding socialism.

I hope that when he learns the truth about socialism, he (and other writers connected with the *Freethinker*) will present the truth.

STEVEN JOHNSTON  
Stockport

BEFORE the *Freethinker* grammar police pounce on Diesel Balaam's use of a split infinitive – "to shamelessly court the radical Muslim vote" – can I just say how much I enjoyed his adroit demolition of the British Left in the May issue?

For some time, it has been increasingly apparent to many of us that the Left is washed up and is getting ever more desperate to find a bedrock of support since the diminished and disinherited working classes abandoned socialism *en masse* some 20 or 30 years ago.

Socialism, being quite a male-orientated ideology, was never going to sit easily within the feminist movement and was never going to appeal very much to ethnic minorities, or gays, or even pro-individualist "yoof" culture.

Having realized this, it does seem that Muslim militants are now seen as the best bet for providing one last hurrah for socialism – however ludicrous and self-defeating that may be.

In his book on the same subject, *What's Left – How Liberals Lost Their Way*, Nick Cohen charts exactly the same arc of socialist desperation and decline in courting radical Muslims, so Balaam clearly has his finger on the pulse of the same "new humanist" zeitgeist. How refreshing it is to read erudite atheist polemic that eschews mealy-mouthed political correctness, that is couched in everyday populist

idioms, shot through with an engaging sense of humour.

With the current NSS leadership fighting shy of criticising the Muslim menace too loudly, no doubt for fear of upsetting the multiculturalist apple-cart, could it be that, in Balaam, we have just found our next great communicator, or even our next Secularist of the Year?

J STUART  
Middlesex

### More on the aspirate and capitalisation

UNLIKE Barbara Smoker (*Points of View*, May 2007), I find it more difficult to say "an humiliation" than "a humiliation." I concur with William Harwood (April *Points of View*) in eschewing "an hotel", "an historical document" and so on, in both speech and writing. Such fustian ranks with the absurd use of "she" for a ship, motorcar or aircraft.

However, I cannot support Mr Harwood's "god" for "God", when referring to a particular deity. It is a matter of ease of reference and avoidance of ambiguity. God may be a figment, a fictional character that has held man in thrall for untold millennia, but he (or, if you must, He, She or It) is as deserving of a capital letter as Mickey Mouse or Dracula. For God's sake let us give the Devil his due!

DAVID JAMES  
London

SOME interesting letters have emerged concerning the capitalisation, or not, of the pronouns of the deity (or should I say the Deity?). As a freelance editor, I tend to be guided by *The Oxford Guide to Style*, which is intended not only for editors and writers, but also typographers.

On the question of God himself, that is the name we give him. He deserves the capital G, as much as Zeus must take the capital Z. *The Oxford* also capitalises "the Almighty", "the Supreme Being", "the Lord", "the Holy Trinity" and "the Holy Spirit". Atheist though I am, I do so, too, because these are alternative names for the being we call God. They are proper nouns. I see on many blogs that people who normally do capitalise proper nouns and the first words of sentences use a lowercase G for god, because they feel he doesn't deserve the capital. This is nonsense. By that token, they would not capitalise the name of anyone they disapproved of or thought did not exist, be that Adolph Hitler or Batman.

Another guide, of course is the Bible itself. It doesn't cap the pronouns. The KJ doesn't, at any rate. Nor, I believe, does the Book of Common Prayer.

I've always thought it silly to cap pronouns, and in authors' copy I lowercase them, unless I'm dealing with a very precious author.

And, as for the business of whether to say "an" before aspirates if the first syllable is not stressed, this is just so much nonsense these days. No one, in spite of what Barbara Smoker says in her letter, is going to say "an humiliation", or, as she has it, "naturally writes" it. I've never heard it said that way, and have

never seen it written that way. Far more unstressed-first-syllable words beginning with the aspirate are simply taking "a", these days, and fewer and fewer people even say "an hotel". The important thing is to decide on your style and then be consistent. If people can't say "a hotel" or "a humiliation" without difficulty, they should visit a speech specialist.

ANDREW JOHN  
(Writer and editor)  
Pembrokeshire

### It's the Pope who is the real threat

ACCORDING to the *Guardian* (May 15) the Pope regards legalised abortion and contraception as a threat to the "future of peoples." When a family already has eight or nine children and he "forbids" them to use contraception to stop having more it is the Pope himself who is a threat to the people of Latin America.

PETER SUTHERLAND  
Scotland

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**Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Programme available. Friends Meeting House, George Road and St James's Road, Edgbaston. Friday, July 13, 7.45 pm. Maryam Namazie: *The Dangers of Regarding Secularism/Humanism as a Religion*.

**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. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, July 3, 7.30 pm. Annual General Meeting. Summer programme available.

**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 and programme: 01494 771851.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Hampstead Humanist Society:** Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: <http://hampstead.humanists.net>

**Harrow Humanist Society.** Meetings every second Wednesday of the month (except July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977. Our next meeting will be on June 13, a talk by Christopher Haine, founder of the Green Humanist Group, entitled: *If Green is the new religion, will God or Man Save the Planet?*

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Crescent, Gidea Park.

Thursday, June 7, 8pm Mark Richards: *The Other Lewis Carroll*. Thursday, July 5, 8pm. Bob Cant: *From the Wolfenden Report to Civil Marriage*.

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

**Humanist Society of Scotland:** 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: [secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism-scotland.org.uk) or visit [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk). Media: [media@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:media@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Education: [education@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:education@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Local Scottish Groups:

**Aberdeen Group:** 07010 704778, [aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Dundee Group:** 07017 404778, [dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

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[scotland.org.uk](http://scotland.org.uk)

**Glasgow Group:** 07010 704776, [glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Highland Group:** 07017 404779, [highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Perth Group:** 07017 404776, [perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk)

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. 14 Foxholes Crescent, Calverley. Saturday, July 14, 3pm-7pm. Summer social.

**Isle of Man Freethinkers:** Information: Stuart Harthill, 01624 814496. E-mail: [stuart@iomfreethinkers.co.uk](mailto:stuart@iomfreethinkers.co.uk). Website: [www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk](http://www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk)

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, June 21, 8pm. Barbara Smoker: *Do Humanists Need the Concept of Evil?*

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** Information: Howard Kinberley 01982 551736

**Northants Secular & Humanist Society:** For information contact Maggie Atkins on 01933 381782.

**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. Wednesday, June 6, 8pm. Speaker and subject to be announced. Summer programme available.

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

**South Place Ethical Society.** Weekly talks/meetings, 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 Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e-mail [edward@gwinnell.orange-home.co.uk](mailto:edward@gwinnell.orange-home.co.uk)

**Suffolk Humanists:** 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. [mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk) [www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk)

**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:

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