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The voice of atheism since 1881

It's official: Scotland has 31,161 bigots



They are those who cast votes in the recent Scottish elections for the Rev George 'So Macho' Hargreaves' Scottish Christian Party

believes the country needs a distinctly Christian Voice in the Scottish Parliament. By God's grace, it is possible to do so.

"We are thankful that there are Christian MSPs in the main-line parties, but they are not always able to articulate Christianity clearly because their party managers don't want them speaking in a 'religious manner'. Even our Prime Minister was prevented by his advisers from ending his address to the nation, at the start of hostilities in Iraq, with the words: 'God bless you'. On a later occasion, Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister's director of strategy and communications at the time, interrupted an interview with Tony Blair to say: 'We do not do God', in order to prevent the Prime Minister from answering a question about his Christianity. We hope to be a distinctly Christian Voice in the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood, Edinburgh."

Posing the question "What is the point in having a Christian Voice in Holyrood?", Hargreaves provides this answer: "The rise of the Green vote in the Scottish Parliament, from one MSP in 1999 to seven MSPs at present, has contributed to the other parties turning green. Similarly, we believe that a rise in the Christian Voice will have an effect on the other parties. Party managers in these other parties, keen to win back 'the Christian vote', will allow Christians in their own parties to speak more openly about Christian values. At present, the Labour Cabinet seems to think that there is more humanism in the country than Christianity, so it ignores even the powerful Roman Catholic vote over the gay adoption issue."

Hargreaves then goes on to attack Green Party leader Robin Harper, MSP for Lothian, pointing out that Harper is "a prominent supporter of homosexual issues. He is a patron of LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] Youth Scotland. Do Christians want this?"

Earlier this year, Hargreaves spectacularly crossed swords with the Green Party's Patrick Harvie, the MSP for Glasgow.

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DESPITE the fact that the Scottish Christian Party, fielding 72 candidates, only managed to attract around 30,000 votes and won no seats in the 2007 Scottish elections, its leader, the Rev George Hargreaves, is convinced that his party's narrow following of delusional crackpots will provide a springboard for far greater influence in Scottish politics in years to come.

"As I travel around Scotland carrying the news of the Scottish Christian Party, I have been greeted with joy and enthusiasm as Christians across all denominations and traditions have cried out: 'At last we have a political party that will stand up for the Lord'," trumpets Hargreaves on his website.

Hargreaves, an ordained minister of 15 years' standing, first entered politics as a candidate for the Referendum Party in 1997, when he stood as a Parliamentary candidate in Walthamstow, London.

"The Scottish Christian Party," he continues, "hopes to use the talents of the Lord's people, in their different callings, to bring the grace of the Gospel to bear upon the religious, spiritual, moral and social problems of our society. The SCP

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THE Catholic Church in the UK is so full of itself these days, claiming vast numbers of fresh recruits – mainly from among new, young Polish immigrants coming to this country in ever increasing numbers.

I am sceptical of these claims because they simply do not square with the conversations I have had with young Poles in Brighton, where their presence is felt everywhere from new bars to convenience stores – now full of wildly colourful and mysterious food products which I have so far held off from buying because I simply cannot read the labels, nor the instructions for their preparation.

None of those I have spoken to both here and in Spain exudes any piety whatsoever. Quite the contrary. Their disdain for the Catholic Church normally manifests itself in snorts of derision, followed by a litany of complaints that the Polish Government's entanglement with the sinister forces of Catholicism has plunged the country into a new dark age.

Yet, all my attempts to find a definitive study showing a link between young Poles leaving Poland because of the jack-booted religiosity of the Polish state, rather than for economic reasons, have been in vain. If no such study has been done, I would suggest that now is the time to embark on one, if only to take some of the wind out of the smug Catholic Church's sails.

There is, however, no doubt that Poland has been stitched up like a kipper by the Church, and that its government now largely comprise brown-nosers who are prone to saying incredibly stupid things, and enacting incredibly stupid laws to keep the Catholic clergy sweet.

Last month, you may recall, the government-appointed children's rights spokeswoman, Ewa Sowinska, said she was concerned that the popular British children's show, the *Teletubbies*, promoted homosexuality, and that she was taking "expert" advice to see if this was, in fact, the case. Ms Sowinska, a former lawmaker from the far-right, ultra-Catholic League of Polish Families, said she was planning to gather a group of experts to investigate the show.

She seemed blissfully unaware of the fact that the porcine televangelist Jerry Falwell had already been there, done that, and, in the process, made a complete horse's arse of himself.

Sowinska said "I noticed (Tinky Winky) has a lady's purse, but I didn't realise he's a boy. At first I thought the purse would be a burden for this Teletubby ... Later I learned that this may have a homosexual undertone."

Poland's right-wing government had already upset human rights groups and drawn criticism in the European Union over its anti-gay initiatives. Education Minister Roman Giertych had proposed laws to sack teachers who promoted "homosexual lifestyles" and to ban "homogitation" in schools.

But in a sign that the government wanted to distance itself from Ms Sowinska's ultra-barmy comments, Parliamentary Speaker

Ludwig Dorn said he had warned her against making public pronouncements "that may turn her department into a laughing stock".

Apparently chastened by this rebuke, Sowinska then announced that she no longer suspected the show of promoting homosexuality. Or, presumably, of encouraging purple-handbag-toting among male toddlers.

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE finds
Poles less than pious**



"The opinion of a leading sexologist that this series would have no negative effects on a child's psychology is perfectly credible," concluded Sowinska, who sounds like a person in need of expert examination herself – ideally of a psychiatric nature.

According to a statement posted on the Polish Humanist Federation's website, "the Constitution of Poland states that the relationship between the state and churches and other religious organisations shall be based on the principle of respect for their autonomy and the mutual independence of each in its own sphere, as well as on the principle of co-operation for the individual and the common good.

"But in today's Poland there is no mutual independence of State and Church. The Catholic Church in Poland has, to a large degree, been beyond any democratic or legal control, even if its activities have been unconstitutional or plainly criminal. At the same time the Church has constantly, and without any self-restraint, violated the autonomy of the state. The Church has significantly reinforced its political and economic power and today there is practically no public authority or other organisation that would dare to criticise or oppose its activities or aspirations."

But while the Church has gained enormous political clout, religiosity in the country as a whole is, according to the PHF, on the decline, particularly among teenagers. A survey conducted in 1999 by the Statistical Institute of the Catholic Church among the students of secondary schools (15 to 18 years of age) showed that more than 21 percent of young Poles were religiously indifferent, while only ten per cent said that they were deeply religious.

This phenomenon was regarded so seriously by Church authorities that they decided to introduce evangelisation of the unfaithful to school curricula.

Polish knowledge about central Catholic dogmas is also limited. For example, only 26 per cent of the adults in one survey understood the duality (the human and divine nature) of Jesus. People asked to name the Holy Trinity quite commonly answered: the Father, Joseph and Mary. Other studies showed a wide gap between Catholic teaching on the one hand, and moral convictions and attitudes of Poles on the other.

The survey conducted by the Statistical Institute of the Catholic Church showed that 75

percent of Poles accepted contraception, 68 percent premarital sexual contacts, and 55 percent supported the idea of legalising certain forms of euthanasia. One Catholic sociologist, the Rev Wladyslaw Piwowarski from the Catholic University in Lublin, said that two-thirds of Poles were unaware that they were, in truth, heretics who did not understand the tenets of the Catholic faith.

The PHF points out that, since the early 1990s, Poland has been heading "towards a religious state and, despite four years of Social Democratic rule, when this process slowed down", it is now close to being a theocracy.

In 1997, the electoral victory of the ultra-conservative coalition called the Electoral Action "Solidarity" resulted in the newly-elected authorities rewarding the Church by adopting several laws to its advantage, and assuring the clergy that future government policies would satisfy their economic, ideological and political aspirations.

What followed was a large body of legislation which turned some aspects of Catholic doctrine into national laws, and reinforced the position of the Church in social life. The first piece of such legislation legalised religious instruction in public schools and ensured that catechism teachers were paid by the state, which, however, had no say whatsoever as regards the content of such instruction. Another example is a law enforcing respect for "Christian values" in television and radio programmes, which resulted in bans on broadcasts that might be regarded as offensive to the Church. And a relatively liberal law on abortion was then overturned by the conservative majority in parliament, resulting in a ban on abortion being reintroduced.

"Today, the Church is treated by Polish authorities as a source of law and, at the same time, as an institution whose interests are above the law. There are numerous examples of the clergy violating laws with impunity: insults hurled at 'disobedient' MPs, racist and anti-Semitic speeches, and infringements of financial regulations.

"Institutions dealing with the administration of justice abstain from prosecuting in such cases, and those few prosecutors who try to instigate legal proceedings against clergymen are being punished by their superiors," says the PHF.

Its case against the Catholic Church is nothing if not convincing, and is certainly borne out in the conversations I have had with young Poles. Depressingly, they all expressed deep pessimism about Poland's ability to break the power of the Church. "It won't happen in my lifetime, and I doubt whether it will in the lifetime of the next generation," said one young Polish holidaymaker I met in a bar on the Costa Blanca. Embarrassingly, he then threw his arms around my neck and burst into tears.

"Why are you so upset?" I asked.

"Because I am going back to Poland tomorrow," he sobbed.

Orthodox Jews assault woman on segregated bus

AN international row has erupted over segregated buses in Israel following an assault last year on an American woman who refused to move to the back of a bus in Jerusalem.

Miriam Shear, 50, was travelling to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem's Old City when a group of ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) men attacked her for refusing to move to the back of the Egged No 2 bus.

Shear, who lives in Canada, says she was slapped, kicked, punched and pushed by a group of men who demanded that she join other women at the back of the bus. Shear's account has been substantiated by an unrelated eyewitness who confirmed that she sustained an unprovoked "severe beating".

"Every two or three days, someone would tell me to sit in the back, sometimes politely and sometimes not," she said. "I was always polite and said 'No. This is not a synagogue. I am not going to sit at the back.'"

The assault occurred when a man got on the bus and demanded her seat – even though there were a number of other seats available in the front of the bus.

"I said, 'I'm not moving', and he retorted, 'I'm not asking you, I'm telling you.' He then spat in my face. At that point, I was in high adrenalin mode and called him a son-of-a-bitch, which I am not proud of. Then I spat back. He reacted by pushing me down. People on the bus were screaming that I was crazy. Four men surrounded me and slapped my face, punched me in the chest, pulled at my clothes,

beat me, and kicked me. I fought back and kicked one of the men in his privates. I will never forget the look on his face."

Shear says that when she bent down in the aisle to retrieve her hair covering, "one of the men kicked me in the face. Thank God he missed my eye. I got up and punched him. I said, 'I want my hair covering back' but he wouldn't give it to me, so I took his black hat and threw it in the aisle."

Throughout the encounter, Shear says the bus driver "did nothing". The other passengers, she says, blamed her for not moving to the back of the bus and called her a "stupid American with no *sechel*" (common sense). People blamed me for not knowing my place and not going to the back of the bus where I belonged."

Following the assault, a number of women, including Shear and Jewish writer Naomi Regen, have decided to challenge the segregated bus system in court.

Regen said "I was in downtown Jerusalem and I saw a bus going straight to my neighbourhood. I got on and sat down, in a single seat behind the driver. It was a completely empty bus, and all of a sudden, some men started getting on – ultra-orthodox men. They told me I was not allowed to sit there, that I had to go to the back of the bus."

Not only is the segregation system discriminatory, says Ms Regen, but it can also be dangerous for those like her who ignore it. "I said to him, look, if you bring me a code of Jewish

law and show me where it's written that I have to sit at the back of the bus I'll move. He then tried to gain support from the rest of the passengers and I underwent a half-hour of pure hell – abuse, humiliation, threats, even physical intimidation."

Shlomo Rosenstein, a city councillor in Jerusalem where a large proportion of Israel's segregation lines operate, insists that bus segregation is "really about positive discrimination, in women's favour. Our religion says there should be no public contact between men and women. This modesty barrier must not be broken."

Opponents of the segregated buses face an uphill struggle. Orthodox Jewish leaders are a powerful minority in Israel.

Naomi Regen says the buses are just part of a wider menacing pattern of behaviour towards women in parts of the orthodox Jewish community.

"They've already cancelled higher education in the ultra-orthodox world for women, and they have packed the religious courts with ultra-orthodox judges.

"In some places there are separate sides of the street women have to walk on."

She says that there are signs all over some religious neighbourhoods demanding that women dress modestly. "They throw paint and bleach at women who aren't dressed modestly, and if we don't draw a line in the sand here with this seat on a bus, then I don't know what this country and this religion is going to look like in 20 years," Ms Regen said.

Why won't politicians challenge the menace of 'faith schools'?

IN AN interview in the *Guardian* last month, Oona King, the former MP and now chair of the new Institute for Community Cohesion, says that despite the fact that "faith schools" are an obvious cause of separation, no politician will ever dare to oppose them.

She said that soon after her election in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets she went to visit a pair of adjoining schools, one with predominantly white pupils, the other Asian. "I've never got over the sight of a shared playground with a fence running down the middle, with white children on one side and entirely Muslim Bengali children playing on the other," she recalled. "I just found it intolerable and incomprehensible. I couldn't understand how we arrived at that situation."

Despite being a Blair loyalist, Ms King opposes "faith schools". She says she is disappointed that the government failed to check their expansion or establish meaningful enrolment quotas for children of other faiths, but she can also understand why ministers were so feeble. She says: "The reason I forgive them is that politics is about the real world, and in the real world no political party is ever going to persuade parents to vote for a party that wants

to abolish their faith schools, whether it is Christian, Muslim or Jewish faith schools." She says she doesn't know if the dividing fence is still in existence at those Tower Hamlets schools.

"Well, she can be assured that it is, and the separation is getting worse rather than better," according to the National Secular Society's *Newsline*.

An investigation by the Young Foundation revealed that 17 of the borough's primary schools have more than 90 percent Bangladeshi pupils and nine have fewer than 10 percent.

The report found that in three faith secondary schools – two Catholic – Bangladeshis made up under three percent of students. But two secondaries have 95 percent-plus Bangladeshis and three more than 80 percent.

The Foundation study also revealed that more white working-class parents were using faith schools instead of Bangladeshi-dominated community schools. And Eastern European migrants are said to have put pressure on Catholic schools.

A Tower Hamlets Council spokeswoman said: "Almost 60 percent of our school com-

munity is Bangladeshi and this is clearly reflected in the make-up of our individual school populations. Our priority is in helping pupils reach their maximum potential whilst respecting all faiths and cultures. The council's success in this is reflected in rapid improvements in educational achievement which have ranked Tower Hamlets schools as one of the most improved in the UK."

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS, commented: "This is the new mantra in relation to religious schools – no sane politicians would dare challenge them because they would be electoral suicide.

"Therefore, one of the greatest threats to community cohesion in this country – 'faith schools' – continues to expand and to separate children in the most insidious way imaginable.

"Is there no politician who is prepared to do what is right rather than what is expedient for their re-election? There is no evidence that challenging the 'faith school' madness would be electorally damaging. But there is growing evidence that 'faith schools' themselves are one of the most dangerous threats to our future safety and unity as a nation."



Muslim Declaration draws praise

THE Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) – the US equivalent of the Muslim Council of Britain – is not happy. In fact, it is hopping mad over a declaration recently released by the delegates to the first Secular Islam Summit in St Petersburg, Florida.

The declaration reads:

We are secular Muslims, and secular persons of Muslim societies. We are believers, doubters, and unbelievers, brought together by a great struggle, not between the West and Islam, but between the free and the unfree.

We affirm the inviolable freedom of the individual conscience. We believe in the equality of all human persons.

We insist upon the separation of religion from state and the observance of universal human rights.

We find traditions of liberty, rationality, and tolerance in the rich histories of pre-Islamic and Islamic societies. These values do not belong to the West or the East; they are the common moral heritage of humankind.

We see no colonialism, racism, or so-called “Islamophobia” in submitting Islamic practices to criticism or condemnation when they violate human reason or rights.

We call on the governments of the world to:

- **Reject Sharia law, fatwa courts, clerical rule, and state-sanctioned religion in all their forms;**
- **Oppose all penalties for blasphemy and apostasy, in accordance with Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;**
- **Eliminate practices, such as female circumcision, honour killing, forced veiling, and forced marriage, that further the oppression of women;**
- **Protect sexual and gender minorities from persecution and violence;**
- **Reform sectarian education that teaches intolerance and bigotry towards non-Muslims;**
- **and foster an open public sphere in which all matters may be discussed without coercion or intimidation.**

We demand the release of Islam from its captivity to the totalitarian ambitions of power-hungry men and the rigid strictures of orthodoxy.

We enjoin academics and thinkers everywhere to embark on a fearless examination of the origins and sources of Islam, and to promulgate the ideals of free scientific and spiritual inquiry through cross-cultural translation, publishing, and the mass media.

We say to Muslim believers:

- **There is a noble future for Islam as a personal faith, not a political doctrine;**
- **To Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus,**

Baha’is, and all members of non-Muslim faith communities: we stand with you as free and equal citizens;

• and to non-believers: we defend your unqualified liberty to question and dissent. Before any of us is a member of the Umma, the Body of Christ, or the Chosen People, we are all members of the community of conscience, the people who must choose for themselves.

Among those who endorsed the St Petersburg Declaration were Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Ibn Warraq, who read out the declaration.

CAIR immediately declared the summit “illegitimate”.

This prompted a response in the *Investor’s Business Daily*. Under the headline “What is CAIR afraid of?” the US publication said that the first Secular Islam Summit was “a success if for no other reason than it intimidated the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the PR machine of militant Islam.”

It continued:

The Washington-based group that boycotts airlines and bullies radio personalities and politicians into toeing the Islamist line is clearly worried about the message from Muslim reformers.

It despatched its henchmen to Florida to shout the reformers down at their confab. CAIR also posted on its website no fewer than four stories bashing the event and its courageous speakers, many of whom are women calling for an end to inequality and mistreatment under radical Islam.

CAIR declared the summit illegitimate because few of the participants are “practising Muslims”, and those who are, it claims, are merely pawns playing into the hands of “Islamophobes”.

“In order to have legitimate reform, you need to have the right messengers,” asserted CAIR spokesman Ahmed Bedier.

And who might they be? The four CAIR executives who have been successfully prosecuted on terrorism-related charges? The CAIR co-founder who said the Koran should replace the US Constitution as “the highest authority in America”?

True voices of moderation are the delegates to the Secular Islam Summit, who insisted in their Declaration that mosque and state should always be separate. They also called for tolerance for non-Muslims, and an end to violent jihad. CAIR should take note.

So what if many of them are ex-Muslims? They risked their lives to leave Islam and now dare to openly criticise an ideology that everyone else is afraid to criticise. What these brave souls have to say carries far more weight than anything said by CAIR, which couldn’t even bring itself to condemn Osama bin Laden in

the wake of 9/11.

An article posted by CAIR suggests “Israeli intelligence” is behind the movement.

In CAIR’s kooky world, the Zionists are behind everything, even 9/11. But if anyone was behind 9/11, it was the Saudis. And guess who bankrolls CAIR? Right: the Saudis.

Another CAIR sugar daddy is the ruler of Dubai, which acted as the staging ground for the hijackers and the transit point for 9/11 cash.

Sheikh Mohammed, who before 9/11 requisitioned cargo jets to supply Osama bin Laden’s Afghan camps, owns CAIR’s [Washington] D C headquarters through his foundation, which also holds telethons for Palestinian “martyrs”.

The same foundation recently pledged \$50 million to CAIR to boost its operations, which includes a legal shop set up to intimidate critics with vexatious lawsuits.

Radical groups like CAIR have been on the offensive, primarily because counter-attacks by moderates have been few and far between.

But the Secular Islam Summit offers a ray of hope. Just a handful of reformers gathered in Florida made CAIR squirm. Imagine if hundreds of moderate Muslim voices rose up and challenged the Saudi-backed Wahhabi lobby.

Robert Spencer, writing in the online *FrontPage* magazine said that the St Petersburg Declaration was “the most comprehensive and forthright statement of Islamic reform anyone has yet managed to come up with. Instead of denying the existence of the elements of Islam that are being used around the world today to incite violence and justify oppression – as do all too many putative Islamic reformers and moderates – the St Petersburg Declaration is firmly rooted in reality, and evinces no interest in fashionable evasions or political correctness.”

Spencer said that CAIR’s denunciations of the Secular Islam Summit focused on speakers there, not on the message. “And unfortunately, no journalist has had the presence of mind or the courage to ask any CAIR official point-blank what he or she actually thinks of the content of the Declaration”.

He continued: “The Council on American Islamic Relations bills itself as ‘America’s largest Islamic civil liberties group’ and claims that ‘its mission is to enhance the understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding’. The mainstream media and even many government and law enforcement officials accept it as a moderate group. CAIR officials have worked with the FBI and other organizations at the highest levels.

“Yet suspicions persist about the group, due

se and condemnation

not only to the terror convictions of several of its former officials and the questionable statements of some of its spokesmen, but because it always seems to be on the opposing side of anti-terror efforts, as well as of any honest attempt to examine and reform the elements of Islam that jihadists are using to justify violence today.

"In light of all that, the St Petersburg Declaration offers CAIR a golden opportunity to demonstrate the genuineness of its claim to moderation ... CAIR should declare its support for the Declaration. Shouldn't a dedicated and sincere group of Islamic moderates jump at the chance to go on record opposing 'all penalties for blasphemy and apostasy', as well as opposing 'female circumcision, honour killing, forced veiling, and forced marriage'?"

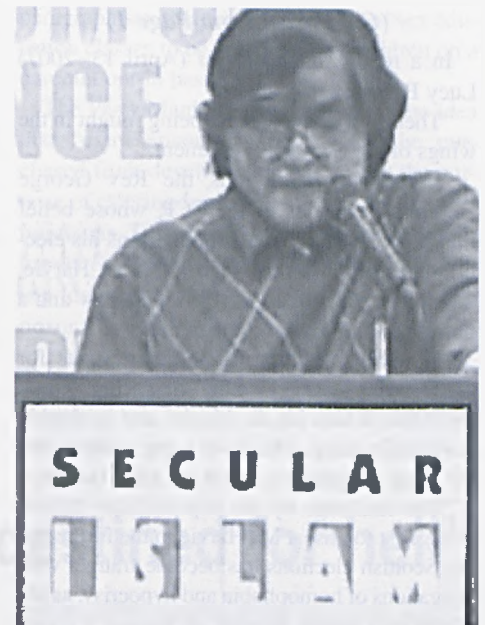
"Shouldn't CAIR gladly and without hesitation endorse a statement calling for protection of 'sexual and gender minorities from persecution and violence' and the elimination of 'sectarian education that teaches intolerance and bigotry towards non-Muslims'? Isn't CAIR dedicated to protecting 'civil liberties'? And as

for the developing of 'an open public sphere in which all matters may be discussed without coercion or intimidation', wouldn't such a public atmosphere help CAIR 'encourage dialogue' and 'build coalitions'?"

"What's not to like? CAIR need not worry that endorsing the St Petersburg Declaration will lead anyone to think they are associated with the 'neoconservatives' behind the Summit. But such an endorsement would go a long way toward reassuring people that CAIR is indeed what it presents itself to be, and not a group whose goals are, in fact, quite different from those of the St Petersburg Declaration."

Despite its significance and potentially far-reaching international implications, it is worth noting that the Declaration appears to have received no coverage in the Muslim press in the UK, and no mention of it is made on the website of the Muslim Council of Britain.

- A British branch of a new Europe-wide movement for ex-Muslims was launched in London on June 21. The Council of ex-Muslims of Britain hopes to build on the stunning success of other branches already operat-



Ibn Warraq delivers the St Petersburg Declaration

ing in Germany, Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. The British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society sponsored the launch of the new organisation. See the August *Freethinker* for a full report.

Iranian women accused of 'bad hijab' offences

THOUSANDS of Iranian women were cautioned recently over their poor Islamic dress, and several hundred arrested in the Iran capital Tehran in the most fierce crackdown on what is known as "bad hijab" for more than a decade.

The latest police crackdown on Islamic dress has angered many Iranians – male, female, young and old. But Iranian TV has reported that an opinion poll conducted in Tehran found 86 percent of people were in favour of the crackdown.

Police cars were stationed outside major shopping centres in Tehran. They stopped pedestrians and even cars – warning female drivers not to show any hair. They impounded vehicles and arrested women if they put up an argument.

Middle-aged women, foreign tourists and journalists were all harassed – not just the young and fashionably dressed. Several were physically attacked.

Even shop window mannequins considered "too revealing" were dealt with. One shopkeeper selling evening dresses said the "morality police" had ordered him to saw off the breasts of his mannequins because they were "too provocative."

It was not just women who were targeted this year. Young men were cautioned for wearing short-sleeved shirts, or for their hair-styles. Police seized young men and forcibly cut their hair if they judged it too long.

Following the crackdown, Iran announced plans to make special bicycles designed for women that will be compatible with Islamic

regulations and not expose their body movements while riding.

The new bicycle would have a cabin to cover half of a rider's body, according to the project's manager Elaheh Sofali.

Women's sports in general, and cycling in particular, have been a constant controversial

Muslims in a fury over Rushdie knighthood

IRAN and Pakistan were among the first to condemn Britain for awarding a knighthood to author Salman Rushdie.

"Awarding [a knighthood] to one of the most hated persons within the Islamic world indicates Britain's hostility towards Islam, and will put this country against Islamic societies," said Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammad-Ali Hosseini.

A Pakistan Cabinet minister added that the knighthood provided a justification for suicide attacks. "If someone exploded a bomb on his body he would be right to do so unless the British government apologises and withdraws the 'sir' title," Mohammed Ijaz ul-Haq, religious affairs minister said.

And Labour Peer Lord Ahmed condemned the honour as "provocative."

Rushdie, the Indian-born British author, sparked international protests with his book *The Satanic Verses*, and a fatwa calling for his death was issued by the Ayatollah Khomeini, the late spiritual leader of Iran.

issue in Islamic Iran. Several efforts to promote athletics by reformist circles and women's activists have failed because of opposition by the conservative clergy.

Women in Iran are obliged to wear scarves and long gowns to hide their hair and body contours. Female athletes must also follow this rule and participate in sports wearing scarves and gowns.

The clergy claims that the movements made by women's bodies while riding conventional bicycles are provocative to men and therefore incompatible with Islamic social rules.

The news of the "modesty" bike, or "bur-cycle" (see *Jesus and Mo*, page 10) was greeted with considerable mirth on the internet, and prompted several people to design prototypes they thought *would* be compatible with Islamic values. We rolled on the floor laughing at the contraption pictured above.

Commenting on the project, one internet blogger said: "Forget those overblown claims of Islam's contributions to Western science and culture; this little episode hilariously illustrates the only type of creativity possible in Islam. That is, taking an infidel idea or invention and proceeding to deform it horribly, according to one or more of the myriad Islamic pathologies."



(Continued from Page 1)

In a report in *The Times* (April 13, 2007) Lucy Bannerman revealed:

"There is a curious battle being fought in the wings of the Scottish Parliament.

"In one corner stands the Rev George Hargreaves, leader of the SCP, whose belief that homosexuality is a sin underpins his election campaign. In the other is Patrick Harvie, the openly gay Green MSP for Glasgow and a prominent gay rights campaigner.

"However, only one of the contestants for the Glasgow vote is also the songwriter behind the 1980s Sinitta hit, *So Macho*, and its double A-side, *Cruising*, which were gay anthems for the disco generation. And it isn't Mr Harvie.

"The challenge by the pop-producer-turned-evangelist to unseat Mr Harvie in the forthcoming Scottish elections has become fraught with allegations of homophobia and hypocrisy, as Mr Hargreaves stands accused of waging a prejudiced, personal attack against his political rival.

"Having made millions from his success on the gay club scene, the Pentecostal minister is having to deny accusations of double standards as he uses his fortune to fund a campaign berating homosexuals."

"*So Macho*," said Bannerman "reached No 2 in the charts and became one of the bestselling singles of 1986. Mr Hargreaves's spiritual conversion came several years later, while he was living as a tax exile in the Isle of Man."

In a letter to the Manx press, as well as other publications, Stuart Harthill of the Isle of Man Freethinkers group, wrote: "Readers old enough to remember naff 1980's music may recall a song called *So Macho* ... Embarrassed

Gay song royalties help fund

by the popularity of the song as a gay anthem. Mr Hargreaves admits he felt it necessary to move to the Isle of Man to avoid tax on the proceeds. Distressingly, he goes on to say that he also took solace in religion while over here after an ill-advised liaison with members of a local evangelical sect.

"His life has now reached such depths of depravity that he is using the royalties of the song to underwrite attacks on his original patrons.

"Certainly George Hargreaves is old enough to know better, but the island's role in this terrible state of affairs cannot be ignored. In my humble opinion, the Speaker of the House of Keys, as a former DJ himself, would be the perfect person to offer a public apology on behalf of all Manx people.

"Mr Brown, please tell the world just how sad and sorry we really are."

Bannerman, in her *Times* article, observes that "though he once wrote lyrics such as 'He's got to be big and strong, enough to turn me on', the born-again evangelist and theology scholar now prefers to quote scriptures on his party banners. He offers a surprisingly revisionist view of his famous song's success. According to Mr Hargreaves, it was not the gay fans who made *So Macho* a chart-topper; it was all the straight Sinitta fans north of the Border.

"Without the Scots, it would not have been a big hit. It was because of all the Karens and Kevins" – he pauses to correct himself, mindful of the constituents in his sight – "and Calums

and Morags, who went out and made the record a Top 40 hit. The gay support is a myth."

Harvie said he was not expecting a surge of support for Christian fundamentalism in Glasgow, where he has served as the city's first Green MSP for the past four years. And the Scottish elections proved him right. "We threw religious fundamentalism out with John Knox 300 years ago, and we're not about to go back to it now," he said.

Harvie sympathised, nevertheless, with his rival's attempts to distance himself from the gay anthem. "There's no accounting for taste," he smiled. "I'd be racked with guilt if I wrote that song too."

Hargreaves, who says he turned to God after realising that he was a "hedonistic sinner", declares on his website that the SCP "will work with Christians in other Parties. We will talk with other Parties, but we will oppose them when they oppose Christian values. Thus we do not attack the Green agenda, but we attack the Party for supporting homosexual practices. At the same time, the Scottish Christian Party will oppose discrimination against homosexuals as we are to love our neighbour as ourselves."

Despite this, the SCP wants "the reinstatement of Section 2A (also known as Section 28), to halt the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship".

Other SCP policies include:

- The reinstatement of the death penalty for severe crimes;
- Legislation to ban abortion;
- Greater observance of a weekly day of rest (Sunday)
- The promotion in school of chastity before marriage;
- The reintroduction of corporate readings from the Bible in all Scottish state schools;
- A science curriculum which reflects evidence of creation/design in the universe;
- Publicising "the catastrophic effect of ungodly behaviour on the life expectancy and health of people, whom God loves and we should love; particularly homosexuality, excessive drinking and the use of addictive substances";
- The restoration of the right for parents to smack their children, and teachers to impose corporal punishment;
- Opposition to the practice of altering birth certificates to reflect gender re-orientation surgery;
- Mandatory Christian religious education.

The *Wikipedia* entry for the SCP points out the following inconsistencies in the party's policies.

• The Party claims that it wants parents to have more choice in their religious education. In the Party manifesto, it is claimed that "The rising tide of humanist secular fundamentalism in schools in Scotland has meant that the choice of education in line with parental beliefs and

Religious Education lessons should include secular views, says Ofsted

OFSTED, the education watchdog, says that RE lessons should include secular views such as humanism, according to a report in the *Telegraph* under the heading "Schools breeding intolerance between faiths".

In a report published last month, Ofsted inspectors criticised the "patchy" standards of RE being taught in England and called for lessons to be subjected to national controls for the first time.

RE is compulsory in all schools but it is the only subject not governed by the National Curriculum. Instead, syllabuses are drawn up locally by groups of teachers and religious leaders in a manner designed to reflect community diversity.

In a controversial move, Ofsted now says the model is outdated and is calling for classes to be reigned in – a recommendation strongly backed by the Church of England.

For the first time, this would ensure that all schools gave appropriate lesson time to faiths such as Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism as well as secular philosophies.

The suggestion, said the *Telegraph*, "is likely to be strongly resisted by local religious leaders, some of whom believe humanism has no place in RE lessons."

Figures published earlier this year showed that many schools – particularly in northern towns such as Blackburn, Oldham and Bradford – were monopolised by single racial or religious groups. The Commission for Racial Equality warned that schools segregated along religious lines were a "ticking timebomb waiting to explode".

In May, the Government said RE could be used as a vehicle to teach tolerance between faiths, suggesting that Christian faith schools struck up partnerships with Muslim and Jewish institutions, while other community schools organised more trips to churches, mosques and synagogues.

But according to Ofsted, many religious education syllabuses do not focus strongly enough on the impact of religion in modern Britain – and may be undermining the Government's drive to promote so-called community cohesion.

David Willetts, the Conservative shadow Education Secretary, said: "RE has been a local responsibility for a long time and we would need to see a very strong case for taking it away from local government."

and the Scottish Christian Party

wishes is increasingly difficult to come by”.

However their policy of mandatory provision of Christian religious education is difficult to reconcile with their pro-choice claims. Combined with their policy to “re-introduce corporate readings from the Bible in all Scottish state schools” it is difficult to assess how “choice” for those who do not want religious education for their children can be facilitated.

- Despite claiming to be pro-life, a return of the death penalty for murder is supported.
- It is claimed that “Diversity training ought to

be about learning to live peaceably and tolerantly with people with diverse lifestyles and world views”, and yet in their education policy on mandatory provision of Christian education they add, in parenthesis, “with no obligation to promote other faiths”.

- Despite the fact that learning about “lifestyles” is mentioned in their view of diversity training, the Party calls for a return of Section 2A (Section 28).
- It is claimed that they will promote “faithfulness in marriage, as the safest sexual practice”. In sex education classes and yet in the same

paragraph say that the Party calls for “sex education classes to be given only to children on a parental opt-in basis”.

The Party Manifesto also promotes the idea that “extra prison capacity should be purchased from developing countries for the purpose of catering for Scotland’s medium security prisons. This should take the form of building state-of-the-art prison facilities in developing countries that wish to host Scottish prisons”.

The consequences of reinstating the deportation of prisoners (in the sense of penal transportation) to a foreign country and the resulting virtual suspension of their visitation rights (and therefore human rights) are not mentioned.

Ninety-five percent of Britons ‘are destined for hell’

ALMOST 58 million Britons, or roughly 95 percent of the population, are heading for eternal damnation in the fiery pits of hell, according to the alarming judgment of one of the nation’s leading evangelical Christians.

A report in the *Independent* by Andy McSmith revealed that “the fire-and-brimstone warning has turned the Rev Richard Turnbull, principal of Wycliffe Hall, the evangelical school of theology within Oxford University, into an overnight internet star. The Thinking Anglicans website that featured a video of his speech to an audience of fellow evangelical Christians had so many hits that it crashed for almost an entire day.

Dr Turnbull said on the video: “We are committed to bringing the gospel message of Jesus Christ to those who don’t know. In this land that’s 95 percent of the people: 95 percent of people facing hell unless the message of the gospel is brought to them.”

His comments, noted McSmith, are an embarrassment to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who is already under fire from liberal Christians for his decision not to invite Gene Robinson, the openly gay Bishop of New Hampshire, to next year’s Lambeth Conference, although every other North American Anglican bishop has been invited.

Dr Williams is fighting to prevent the Church of England from falling apart, but Dr Turnbull’s words are ammunition for liberal Christians who argue that there is no point in staying in the same religious community as the evangelical right.

Dr Turnbull told the *Independent* that he could not remember whether he had used the words attributed to him, and had not been able to access the website to check, but he added: “I’m not denying it”.

He did, however, say one thing that may come as a relief to the General Synod.

His words had been interpreted as meaning that Christians who were prepared to take Communion from women or gay priests were on the road to hell. In fact parishioners of



The Rev Richard Turnbull

priests such as Bishop Robinson or the fictional Vicar of Dibley were not meant to be included in that 95 percent who face damnation.

Dr Turnbull was thinking only of the atheists, agnostics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, people who are too lazy to get up on Sunday morning, and anyone who fails to make it to a regular church service.

He told the *Independent*: “Why 95 percent, you ask. All that means is actually in church, on a Sunday morning, you have roughly got five percent of the population. I want the good news of the Gospel to be brought to the other 95 percent. It’s got nothing to do with people’s style of church.”

Dr Turnbull made his comments in October, at the annual conference of Reform, a conservative evangelical pressure group. The fact that they have appeared on the internet now may be linked to an investigation into complaints about his management of Wycliffe Hall, where it has been suggested that he has been driving out academic staff who do not subscribe to his brand of Christianity. An anonymous document accused Dr Turnbull of making the college “increasingly hostile to women priests and openly homophobic”.

Six full- or part-time academic staff have resigned since Dr Turnbull took over as princi-

pal in 2005. Among those who left was the director of studies, Dr Philip Johnson, who accused Dr Turnbull of overriding the views of colleagues and students in his choice of vice-principal. The man whom Dr Turnbull selected as his deputy, the Rev Simon Vibert, was co-author of the paper *The Ministry of Women in the Church Today*, which argued that women should not teach men.

The complaints were investigated by the College Council, headed by the Bishop of Liverpool, the Rt Rev James Jones, who said that Dr Turnbull had the Council’s unanimous backing, although he acknowledged that there had been “unsettling” changes at the college.

Dr Turnbull is also chairman of the Church of England Evangelical Council, which has led the opposition to the ordination of openly gay clergy in the UK. The group says that Christians in same-sex relationships should repent and give up sexual contact with one another. He was one of the most prominent signatories of the “Covenant for the Church of England”, presented to the Archbishop of Canterbury in December, which read like a declaration of war on liberal clerics. The document warned: “The Church of England is increasingly polarised into two churches: the one submitting to God’s revelation, Gospel-focused, Christ-centred, cross-shaped and Spirit-empowered; the other holding a progressive view of revelation, giving priority to human reason over Scripture, shaped primarily by Western secular culture, and focused on church structures.”

It encouraged Christians in parishes where the vicar had liberal views on issues such as sex and marriage, or who appeared not to believe in the “uniqueness of Christ”, to break away and form their own congregations, and offered to supply suitable ministers.

“The comments now featured on the internet are likely to have less impact on the sinners Dr Turnbull wants to save than on fellow Christians, for whom it is another episode in the unending conflict within the Church of England,” observed McSmith.

The question is this – Is man an ape or an angel?

– Disraeli

AS AN evolutionary biologist in the States, the late Stephen Jay Gould sensed a crisis in need of a political solution. His proposal recognised two grand fields of knowledge and teaching, that is “magisteria”, science concerned with the empirical and factual, religion with values and ethics. He urged that these should engage together, but since he also asserted their fundamentally thorough difference it is hard to see what meaningful discussion there could be. Assertion and insult apart, there remains only expedient negotiation – perhaps something like “If you will just keep creationism out of schools, then you can be in charge of morality!” Might this seem tempting in our own current situation?

In this article I shall argue that Gould’s approach in his book *Rocks of Ages* is wrong in both principle and practice. The distinguishing of such “forms of knowledge” has often been made and has some appeal. For example, it explains how some intelligent people simultaneously hold scientific beliefs and religious faith: they may view evolution simply as a god’s chosen mechanism or trust in a resurrection utterly beyond scientific inquiry. Such religious ideas escape rational argument and may allow a peaceful co-existence harmless to society. But what has to be dealt with is the reality of religious institutions which seek power in the world. Religions demand support whether by ritual obedience, finance and provision, fertility and evangelism, or the elimination of opposition; and the secular view is that their power is already wildly excessive.

Gould spoke of himself as an agnostic, and of the moral field as wider than religion, but neither fact deters the proposal of magisteria and one cannot help feeling that honesty has succumbed to tactics. Conceding the moral sphere wholly to religion can have the most fearful consequences as history shows, not least the recent destruction of states (the broadly socialist but at least part tolerant Iraq, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia and Soviet Union) by

Religious symbols ousted

A BUCHAREST court has upheld a decision made by Romania’s main anti-discrimination body to remove religious symbols from schools. The National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) successfully argued that the presence of religious symbols in schools, as well as the teaching of orthodox Christianity, was an act of discrimination towards atheists, or people of other faiths. The Patriarchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church has launched a counter-offensive based on the argument that Romanians are a Christian people and that the removal of religious symbols from public areas would discriminate against the Orthodox majority in the country.

Morality, Magisteria and

subversion and war, replacing order by nightmares of ideological excess. To absolute religion every means is legitimate and there is no reliable hope that a balance of power between such will allow tolerance. Regardless of theological difference, most religions insist that some supernatural faith is better than none (pending their own victory), and, for example, the male gods of holy books are near unanimous that women are inferior (and, by extension, homosexuals doubly so). Religions will accept new converts but deal punitively with dissent, so woe betide all those branded at birth who venture upon a right to think.

I want to begin by refusing religion the status of a form of knowledge in its own right. If we look at such disciplines as mathematics, law, geography, the arts and so on, we see that they have differences in their concepts, methods and tools. But this should not lead us to suppose that there are assorted equally valid “truths”. We can of course have fairly objective knowledge about a religion (its history, demographics etc), but that doesn’t count as religious knowledge, for example accepting as known truth the usual Christian assertion of the trinity or the Koranic denunciation of Jews, Christians and other “unbelievers before them. God assail them! How they are perverted!” (Medinan ch Repentance). What is asserted is not confined to the faithful but is typically to be imposed on others, from matters of etiquette to obligations for survival. Plainly, religions assert contrary “truths” – one god or many, monogamy or polygamy, further life on earth, immediately in a supernatural place, or at some future resurrection, and so on.

Even worse, there is no means in principle for resolving such disputes since texts and the characteristic “revelations” are mutually repudiated. Practices too vary incompatibly, from silent meditation or collective prayer to excited song or ritual dance. Where claims can be tested, eg that a food is harmful or that believers are socially more good (even using their own standards), they are generally incorrect. In those instances where religion appears psychologically effective it is not because of any theological content but because of an adopted non-supernatural means. So believers respond magically to curses because people are suggestible, exhilaration can be found equally in sacred mass and profane rave, hope however generated is beneficial, social disapproval inhibits. The seeming assurance of a conversion experience often is a natural response to an offered way of dealing with a sense of guilt or inferiority or to an invitation to companionship and purpose, while neurotic conversions can be especially powerful.

If religion is taken seriously as directing behaviour in life, we must note that “good” (ie conforming) conduct is largely seen merely as

a means to the end of salvation after death and so a matter of personal gain rather than of a morality intrinsic to the values of living (Corinthians 15.32 “... what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not?”). Self-righteousness on such grounds is unattractive but most of the alternatives, such as a duty to glorify god, seem fatuous. If we search for evidence of outstandingly good conduct among the eminent religious – in the line of popes for example – we shall not find it.

EDWIN SALTER argues that science is a better model than religion for a moral life

The current British policy for “faith schools” has to ignore evidence that they are probably nastier on most moral measures. And can anyone direct me to passages in the Old Testament or the Koran which clearly affirm enough of simple human kindness to balance the rule of wrath? I shall argue that science does better as a model of sensible (rational and humanist) principles for a moral life. Instead of containing knowledge, the narratives of religion are fictions to be read, like all myth, as invented narratives; and theological concepts such as godliness and sin, salvation and damnation, are to be understood as dramatised equivalents of human experience. Such fictions cannot compel but may illuminate moral thinking as a particular kind of art, made up of story, enactment and participation.

Science then remains the prototype in the factual realm which is accessible to empirical study.

Some disciplines have a foot in both camps. Historians may create plausible accounts on the basis of insufficient evidence, and there is something speculative in architecture. Advanced mathematics operates within sets of definitions that may not correspond to any reality. But whether forms are empirical, imaginative or mixed (anyone for factive, fictive and fuctive, recognising the special difficulty of the last group?), their content has to be open to reasoned debate. A scientific hypothesis can be refuted, a work of art criticised by analysis, comparison and so forth. The ultimate recourse of religions – “because it says so” – will not do to support any claim as knowledge.

Gould argued for Non-Overlapping Magisteria, the NOMA principle to prevent dispute, and to leave the moral realm empty for religion to occupy. He was driven to assert that both science and nature were value neutral, amoral. Again I shall argue that he was wrong.

Certainly it would be absurd to see animals as moral agents and somehow to disapprove of predators, though analogies of parasitism

d the Manner of Science

(exploitative) or parenting (those cinematic penguins) might trouble or please. And it makes sense if we prefer excellent human-like movement to scuttling strangeness, and in general we give greater value to animals more intelligent or nearer to ourselves biologically (so, for example, a case can be made for a dietary preference of vegetable, fish, birds, mammals, primates in that diminishing order).

The problem of aesthetic value in nature has long been debated. How can it possibly make sense to talk of the moon/landscape/waves/sunset etc as beautiful, for surely these are merely objects or phenomena that happen so to be? But we do indeed admire nature and recognise "things bright and beautiful". Religion would claim that this is evidence of the designer god whose work we admire, but other explanations are better. Physiology may play some part in our delight with light for example, an animal may look well as food or a cave as an affordance of shelter, a high viewpoint give a sense of sublime power. Arguably we sometimes view nature "as if" it were a designed scene and use our creative critical skills in explication as we would responding to art proper.

I suggest that evolution offers an overriding explanation for our approving sense of natural beauty, since as adapted beings we necessarily find our natural environment pleasing as well as informative – it is what sustained us prior to our ability to change it. Were it otherwise our species would have been continually disadvantaged by distress and confusion – any sentient beings evolved on Jupiter would delight in their balmy tempests of frozen ammonia.

Natural evolution can seem a repugnant idea, especially in our sanitised world. Descent from an ancestor in common with monkeys (though perhaps a hundred thousand generations away) is not so very far from the notion of sex with/as or birth from/to monkeys in neurotic thought. To moral thought, evolution may seem to make human nature inevitably competitive and vicious. Actually of course most ordinary people are, for good evolutionary reasons which can extend to altruism, rather helpful and cooperative, at least within their group (large population conglomerates are not biological and create much anomaly and stress).

Part of the interesting history in Gould's book is his description of the anti-evolution lawyer in the famous Scopes "monkey trial". W J Bryan. A champion of liberal causes (pro-women, anti-war, pro-union), Bryan had often opposed big business, and perhaps his otherwise puzzling view can be attributed to experience of capitalist institutions (again beyond biology) which most clearly and frighteningly embody a ruthless struggle for power and dominance by monopoly which now surpasses even states.

The case for science as moral may seem implausible. After all, what of ethics is there in

scientific reports that the most remote galaxies are thousands of millions of light years away or that genes may mutate only once in many millions of divisions (I can't resist numbers if only because they make ridiculous the folk tales of religion). Of course, the first disposes of a biblical age for the universe and the second is a key to the mechanism of Darwinian evolution, but these are not inherently ethical. However, I shall argue that it is not the content of science but rather the manner of its practice which has moral relevance.

There is, though, a sombre caution to discarding neutrality. Why then should science not be blamed for the damages and perils inflicted on humanity, and can there be any excuse for its placing mass destruction within our foolish reach? Logically, we may try to distinguish science itself from fallible scientists and the even more corrupt structures which develop and apply science. But, confronted by the potential global disaster of climate change resulting from technology, such fine distinctions are unlikely to divert a desperate fury (which cheerful thought lets me rabbit on).

It will help to have at the back of your mind such plainly ethical notions as equality and respect, freedom subject to the rights of others, treating others as one would wish to be treated, and general good rather than personal gain. Suppose I carry out a piece of research carefully and make reasoned deductions from fair evidence, including an experiment designed to try to refute my own hypothesis. When I submit a report for scrutiny my status is relevant only marginally as track record, and the initial assumption is of honest practice and disclosure. Published content is open to discussion and challenge by others who may repeat the investigation. The report mentions existing relevant studies and is dated, so even if overlooked it may later have priority as with Mendel's work. If it is accepted as important, the reward may simply be appreciation or further opportunity (salaries, patents etc arguably belong to commerce). As research proceeds, an accepted outcome becomes part of the growing body of consistent knowledge which is public and always subject to review, though concepts that are well supported and powerfully explanatory and predictive require decisive counter-evidence to be overturned.

Clearly, much here can be translated into a model of ethical behaviour. I think that ethics has been unduly directed by religious notions of fault towards dubious right/wrong problems rather than toward general principles for good process in elucidating the moral by debate. If, for example, you ask whether science can say if abortion is right, the answer is that it can't and doesn't attempt to (with the rider that nothing we know of can do so absolutely, and

that religious pronouncements are worthless because they are prejudiced or, arguably, meaningless).

But what science can do in such cases is supply the evidence. For example, doctors vie with each other to secure the earliest surviving baby of interrupted pregnancy, but what does life offer such extremely premature survivors and their families? And what of wealth – are people happier in societies of vastly contrasted wealth or in more nearly equal circumstances? How do societies which seek collectively to reduce crime fare in terms of civil order compared to those emphasising a justice of revenge and retribution? Asking what would happen if behaviour X was eliminated, common or universal, can often be put to the test by a search for direct evidence or by modelling.

If religious ideas are excluded, is there really so very much dispute about what it is to lead a happy, satisfactory and good life? The difficulty lies rather in educating people to make decisions on the basis of evidence, which the fog of religious discourse avoids as surely as evil avoids the light. (So there!)

In some ways I much sympathise (as in *Faith and the Therapeutic*, the *Freethinker*, January 06) with Gould's attempt to find some means of moderating conflict, and his *Rocks of Ages* is an informative, intelligent and well-written book. He frequently appeals, with approval, to those scientists who have acknowledged the last bastion for the agnostic defence of religion that the non-existence of gods cannot be known with certainty. But surely this has no real meaning, for nothing (especially the absence of an invisible supernatural) is ever absolutely certain. We must act and can only do so best according to tested evidence and argued reason.

Therein lies the inescapable dispute of scientific and religious claims to knowledge. By looking at these clearly I think we can find aesthetic interest in religion as fiction and, more strikingly, valuable moral example in the way science pursues fact. And a dodgy deal with the godly to apportion human concerns magisterially is surely a lot worse than Faust's contract with Mephistopheles.

Many thanks for your donations to the Freethinker fund

FREETHINKER subscribers proved enormously generous between April 24, 2007, and June 4 contributing a total of £459.00 to the *Freethinker* fund. We would like to thank the following for their donations:

M Anderson; J F Bartley; D Baxter; A Beeson; R A Billen; N L Child; J Davies; D Dawson; H P M Dorey; C Govan; M G Hinks; J C Hopkins; R E Ison; R Lewis; J Lance; D C Marshall; G Meaden; H L Millard; D Rogers; K C Rudd; E Salter; Sir Thomas Risk; J Sault; D L Seymour; J & K Wayland.

'My Way or the Highway': Jesus and M

FOR more than 1,500 years, mainstream Christianity adhered to the biblical teaching (Mat 10:29-30) that, "Not a sparrow falls except through your father. For even the hairs on your head are numbered." But with the evolution of biblical criticism, and a growing awareness that biblical myths were contradicted by the discoveries of science, a majority came to view the world separately from their religion. The attitude arose that natural disasters were a fact of life that their paramount god neither inflicted nor desired. They were an inevitable consequence of the god's virtually deistic non-intervention policy. When pressed for an explanation of something like the flu epidemic of 1918, proponents of godly omnipotence would blame it on their devil. The devil needed the god's permission to perpetrate his atrocities, but the god granted such permission as a necessary corollary of free will – or something equally illogical and self-contradictory.

Then around the middle of the 20th century a theofascist cult known as the Religious Right invented a new religion called Fundamentalism. The word did not originate with the Religious

Right. In fact the first self-styled Fundamentalists were biblical literalists who claimed to be simply "going back to the Bible" in a culture that increasingly saw the Bible as only metaphorically true rather than literally true. That positive view of fundamentalism has now vanished to the point where nobody today identifies himself as a Fundamentalist. "Fundamentalist" has come to mean someone who practises the religion invented by the likes of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Pat Buchanan, and a handful of equally fanatic theofascists who equate right and wrong with "whatever I say they are."

To such members of the Christian Taliban, the core dogma of their religion is, "My way or the highway." And like all inventors of new religions, the new Fundamentalists have no awareness that they are practising a religion of their own invention. They call themselves "Christians", believe that they are merely preaching a corrected version of the religion they were born into, and categorize everyone who disagrees with them as "not true Christians," much the way Paisley-type Protestants have informed anyone who will listen that the Pope is not a Christian.

Similarly, when Ron Hubbard invented a new religion in recognition that "that's where the money is," his reaction to psychiatrists who left

no doubt in his mind that they regarded him as mentally ill was to declare psychiatry pseudomedical humbuggery. (That he was right does not invalidate the point that his denunciation was based on their daring to disagree with him.) Likewise, when Mary Baker Eddy invented a religion based on the teachings of her teacher, mesmerist Phineas Quimby, her response to mesmerists who recognized her as one of them was to categorize the practice of mesmerism by anyone but herself as "malicious animal magnetism." In other words, "My way or the highway."

WILLIAM HARWOOD on the invention of religion

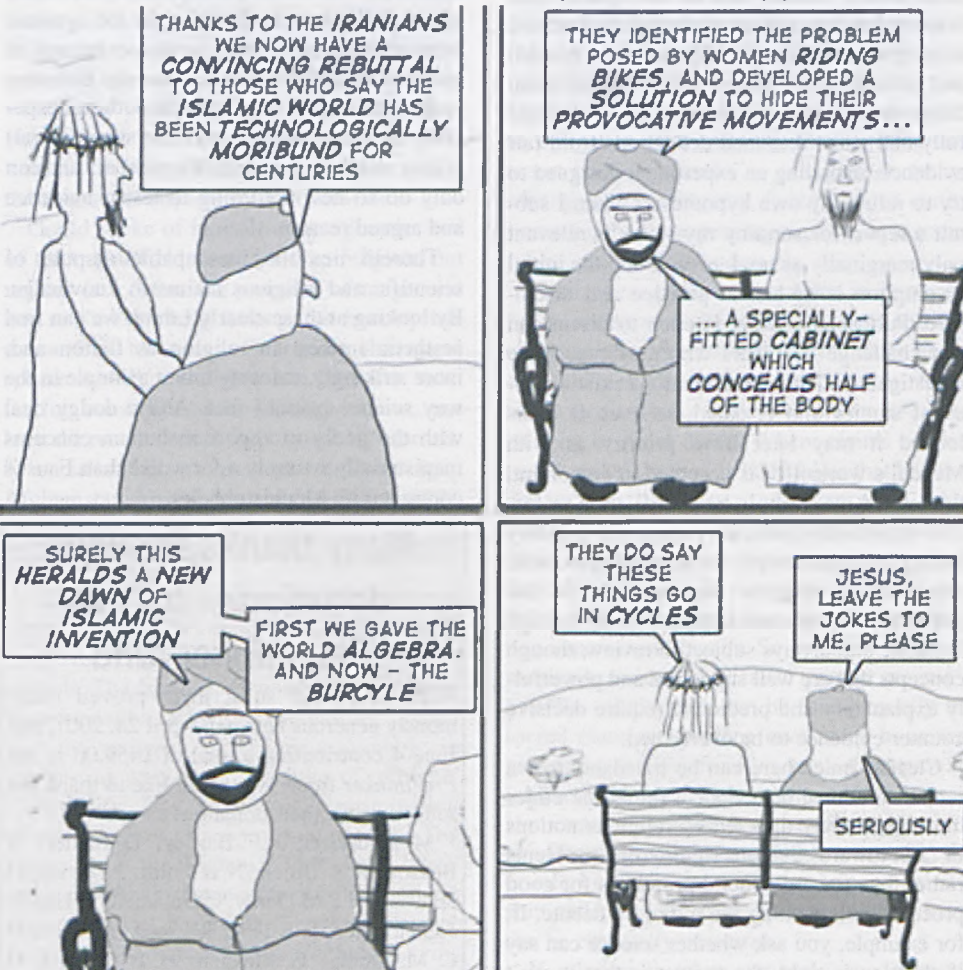
The same is true of Ellen White, who invented the Seventh Day Adventists by plagiarizing published writings and passing them off as revelations from Jesus or an angel, and tolerated no dissent from her obedient mindslaves.

Then there was Joseph Smith, who plagiarized an historical novel by Solomon Spaulding and rewrote it into the semblance of non-fiction under the name *The Book of Mormon*, and Brigham Young, who repudiated Smith's biological heir and created the religion now known as Mormonism (forcing the original Mormons to change their name to incorporate the word "Reorganized," to distinguish them from Young's splinter sect). Smith's version of "my way or the highway" was "God made Aaron to be the mouthpiece for the children of Israel, and he will make me to be God to you in his stead. And if you do not like it, you must lump it" (*Documentary History of the Church*, vol. 6, pp 319-320). Young's version was, "I say, rather than the apostates should flourish here, I will unsheathe my Bowie knife and conquer or die" (*Journal of Discourses*, vol 1, p 83).

Those innovators followed a long tradition of refusing to acknowledge that they were inventing new religions. With the exception of Hubbard, each either believed or at least claimed that he/she was restoring a religion that already existed, and that he/she had divine authority to do so. And so did their prototypes of centuries earlier.

Jesus the Nazirite invented a new religion. It was not Christianity, a religion that Jesus would have repudiated as infidel superstition, derived more from paganism than from Judaism. The religion Jesus invented was Ebionism, from an Aramaic word meaning "paupers." Christianity was invented in a primitive form by Paul of Tarsus, a form in which Jesus was neither a god nor the son of a god, except in an adoptive sense, and was not the son of a virgin. It evolved into modern Christianity when the second and third gospels were interpolated with a "virgin birth" myth early in the second century, the fourth gospel transformed Jesus into a god toward the middle of the second century, and Bishop Athanasius transformed the Christian god into a Trinity early in the fourth century.

Jesus and Mo



Two volumes of *Jesus and Mo* cartoons, by Mohammed Jones, are available online via Lulu.com at \$5.51 each, or follow the links on www.jesusandmo.net

Mohammed as prototype theofascists

Jesus invented the religion of Ebionism. And like Robertson and his ilk, he had no awareness that he was inventing a new religion. He believed he was Judaism's prophesied *mashyah*, Yahweh's Anointed King, with authority bestowed on him by his adoptive father-god to decree that right and wrong were whatever he said they were. Naturally he preached "My way or the highway." That is what inventors of new religions do now, and it is what they did when Jesus was a nobody desperate to become a somebody.

Trying to identify Jesus' actual preaching from the many speeches put into his mouth in the Christian gospels is almost impossible – almost. The Jesus seminar, a conclave of two hundred biblical scholars, concluded that only 18 percent of the words attributed to Jesus were actually spoken by him. The criteria for identifying a teaching as legitimate were basically that it conformed to Jesus' calculable beliefs about who he was, did not endorse Christian doctrines that the Jewish Jesus could not have believed, and most of all stressed his conceit that right and wrong were whatever he said they were. In other words, any sermon that decreed "My way or the highway" was almost certainly historical. There were many such.

Jesus was born and raised in Capernaum in Galilee. And like any practitioner of the talk therapy some still call hypnosis, he was unable to achieve any cures among the people who knew him best and regarded him as an upstart local boy (Mark 6:5). His response was, "As for you, Kafar Nahoum, you're going down to Hades" (Luke 10:15). It seems most unlikely that gospel

authors would have credited Jesus with behaving like a petulant little boy if he had not indeed told his hometown, "My way or the highway."

Consider the verse "Anyone who disowns me before humans, I will disown him before my father in the skies" (Matthew 10:33), and the verse "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters" (Luke 11:23). In other words, "My way or the highway."

The self-appointed leaders of the Religious Right are paranoid egomaniacs, as were the inventors of religions in the past. Pat Robertson's prototype, Jesus, was a paranoid egomaniac, and Osama bin Laden's prototype, Mohammed, was a paranoid egomaniac too.

Mohammed was a self-confessed terrorist, acknowledging that "I have been helped by terrorism" (Ram Swarup, *Understanding the Hadith*, p 39). With a terrorist like Mohammed as his role model, it was not unpredictable that bin Laden would also become a terrorist. And Mohammed's status as an egomaniac who brooked no dissent was revealed when he beheaded 800 members of the Quraiza tribe in the market place of Medina for the alleged crime of refusing to join his crusade to enslave the peaceful population of Mecca. Mohammed's version of "my way or the highway" was not so much comparable with Jesus and his preachers as with Adolf Hitler – and Osama bin Laden.

The Christian Taliban preaches "My way or the highway" because Jesus preached "My way or the highway." Christian fanatics have justified murdering non-conformists to their anti-abortion obsession on the ground that Jesus used analogous violence against moneychangers in

the temple. Osama bin Laden practises a terrorist form of "my way or the highway" because Mohammed practised a terrorist form of "my way or the highway." But Jesus and Mohammed were themselves culturally conditioned by the "my way or the highway" message of the priestly author of Leviticus and the final redactor of the Pentateuch.

Persian religion-inventor Zoroaster prohibited homosexual activity in the somewhat deluded belief that he could force gay men to start breeding tithing believers. The priestly author of Leviticus appropriated Zoroaster's taboo for the same reason. But the priestly author went further than his source, who had merely forbidden gay acts, and pronounced it an "abomination". Two centuries later, when it had become clear that tribal ostracism was an insufficient penalty to terrorize dissenters into behaving "my way," the redactor added a death penalty (Lev 20:13).

In instituting death penalties, not only for being gay but also for even the tiniest breach of taboos that originated in his own imagination, he set a "my way or the highway" precedent that would be followed by Jesus, Mohammed, Pat Robertson, and all of the other egocentric theofascists of the 19th and 20 centuries.

While it would be an exaggeration to say that Osama bin Laden murdered 3,000 Americans because Zoroaster had imposed taboos designed to maximize breeding, there is a clear line of descent from the latter to the former. "My way or the highway" started 2,700 years ago (or earlier), was utilized by Jesus and Mohammed, and continues among religious maniacs to this day.

Veiled women must show their faces on Edinburgh buses

BUS drivers have been ordered to ask women wearing veils in the Scottish capital to show their faces in order to catch out fare cheats.

According to a report in the *Edinburgh Evening News*, the women are being told they must lift their veils or produce their passports or driving licences if they want to use a bus pass.

The move has caused anger in the Muslim community, with at least one woman walking off a bus after being told of the new rules.

The rules were introduced by Lothian Buses to stop passengers using other people's passes. The firm says the rules are in line with airport security regulations and follow "best practice" in the industry.

Security staff at UK airports have been authorised to ask female passengers to lift their veils to verify their identities.

However, many drivers are said to be uneasy with the change, and fear passengers will think they are being racist. One driver, who asked not to be named, said: "All the drivers are raging about this. It seems really unnecessary and puts the driver in an awkward and potentially dangerous position.

"We risk being branded racist or just unhelpful because we are refusing people on to our buses. We could end up being attacked by other passengers."

Lothian Buses changed its rules in February so that anyone buying a Ridacard had to remove a veil to obtain a pass photo. The orders to drivers have since been pinned up at the firm's Annandale Street depot. Veiled pass holders who fail to comply with a driver's request would have to pay for a full fare ticket.

Some city Muslims said the new rules were unfairly intrusive. Sohaib Saeed, events coordinator at the Edinburgh Central Mosque, said: "You can see in areas such as airport security where there needs to be a degree of flexibility because of security, but I don't see why it is such a big issue for buses."

Shabana Banheer, a member of Muslim Women's Association Edinburgh, said: "I don't cover my own face but I can understand that if someone does it could be very demeaning to be asked to take off a veil like that. It shows a lack of trust."

Ian Craig, managing director for Lothian

Buses, said: "Following transport industry best practice and guidelines set down by the British Passport Office, the DVLA and Transport Scotland, we issued our own guidelines to Travelshop staff, stating that veils must be removed for the issuing of Ridacard photo cards.

"Guidance notes have also been issued to our drivers on how to deal with passengers wearing veils who travel using a Ridacard.

"Our Ridacards are unique to the holder and are non-transferable. Drivers must check that any travel pass presented is not being used fraudulently."

Councillor Dougie Kerr, the city's equalities leader, said: "I would hope Lothian Buses would look very carefully at any policies they have on this. This [policy] will obviously cause offence to some people and I would hope that anything so culturally sensitive would be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. I am quite sure there are very few women who would wear a hijab just to avoid paying a bus fare.

"If you don't need to remove them in schools or such like, I don't see why you should have to do so on a bus."

Lucretius: Poet, Philo

Titus Lucretius Carus (99-55 BCE)* was an eloquent progenitor of freethought. In *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things), an exposition in Latin hexameters of the metaphysical system of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, only a miniscule portion of whose work survives, Lucretius maintains that human happiness is incompatible with belief in gods that manipulate nature, pursue their own agendas, and legislate human ends. Humans would do well, he says, to unshackle themselves from superstition, irrational fears, and hollow pieties. They should exercise their rational faculties and embrace a scientific outlook.

Lucretius is often classified as an atheist. Rightly so, perhaps. The gods he ostensibly believed in were singularly ungodly. They didn't create the universe, stage-manage events, answer prayers, reward virtue, punish vice, inspire sacred texts, visit the sublunary world, or, apparently, even know humans exist. They had none of the usual "omni" attributes. They were limited in knowledge, power, and inventiveness. Though Lucretius doesn't offer a physical description, they were corporeal beings. They dwelt between worlds (intermundia), ensconced in a Shangri-la of perpetual stasis. There, they lived lives of ceaseless tranquility and repose, unruffled by crass desires and base emotions, inviolably shielded from the thousand shocks, natural and unnatural, terrestrial flesh is heir to.

In *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius sought to clear the mental rubbish that obscures reality. He pointed out flaws in common assumptions about gods. To begin with, he scoffed at the anthropocentric notion that gods created the earth for humans. The terrain and climate are woefully inhospitable, he observed, unkind to our mortalities: "Of all that the sky covers with its mighty expanse, a great part is possessed by mountains and forests full of wild beasts, rocks and marshes, and seas that keep the lands far apart. Much of this land is barred to mortals by scorching heat and constant frost. Of the land that is left, nature would cover it with brambles except that man's power resists. He groans over the stout mattock for his very life and cleaves the soil with the pressure of the plow."

Why should we think gods created us at all? What motive would they have? We can do nothing for them: "What largess of beneficence could our gratitude bestow upon beings immortal and blessed, that they should effect anything for our sake? Or what novelty could entice those who were tranquil before to desire a change in their former life! For it is evident that he must rejoice in new things who is offended with the old. But when one has had no annoyance in the past, enjoying a life of happiness, what could kindle a love of novelty in such a one?"

Nor by creating us would the gods necessarily confer a beneficence on us. Had our species never existed, we would be none the worse: "What evil had there been for us had we not

been made? He who has never tasted the love of life, never been enrolled in the lists, how does it hurt him never to have been made?" What's more, since all knowledge is grounded in experience, how could the gods even conceive of beings like us? "Whence was a pattern for making things first implanted in the gods, or even a conception of mankind, so as to know what they wished to make and see it in the mind's eye?"

If the gods against all probability did create us, they are either sadistic or bungling. Consider the plight of the infant: "The child, like a sailor cast forth by the cruel waves, lies naked upon the ground, speechless, in need of every kind of vital support, as soon as nature has spilt him forth with throes from his mother's womb into the regions of light, and he fills all around with doleful wailings — as is just, seeing that so much trouble awaits him in life."

Other species have a better claim than we to terrestrial primacy: "The diverse flocks, herds and wild creatures grow. They need no rattles, none of them wants to hear the coaxing and broken baby-talk of the foster-nurse, they seek no change of raiment according to the temperature of the season, they need no weapons, no lofty walls to protect their own. For them, the earth herself brings forth all they want in abundance."

Nature needs no god. She is a law unto herself. She is "free and rid of proud masters, herself doing all of her own accord, without the help of the gods." We shouldn't fear that capricious or inept gods will undo the orderly motions of the heavens: "When we think of the sun and moon and stars, into our hearts already crushed with other woes a new anxiety awakens and lifts up its head—whether we have to do with some immeasurable power of the gods, able to make the bright stars revolve with different movements. For it shakes the mind with doubt whether the walls of the world are able to endure the strain of restless motion."

Nor should we fear the gods will punish us, either here or hereafter. That false supposition generates paralyzing fear of death and natural phenomena. Lightning, tempests, earthquakes, and disease become agents of divine retribution. When earth gapes, thunder rolls, or plague rages, even the educated may "revert to the old superstitions and take to themselves cruel taskmasters, whom the poor wretches believe omnipotent, ignorant of how the power of each thing has been limited and its boundary firmly fixed."

As the wind blows and the waves mount, even the doughty warrior may cower like a frightened child: "When the supreme violence of a furious wind upon the sea sweeps over the waters the chief admiral of a fleet along with his mighty legions, does he not crave the gods' peace with vows and in his panic seek with

prayers the peace of the winds and favoring breezes." All for naught: "Nonetheless, he is caught up in the furious hurricane and driven upon the shoals of death." Thunder and lightning and other natural phenomena bring whole nations to heel, in collective prostration for sins real or imagined.

GARY SLOAN, a retired professor of English in Ruston, Louisiana, examines the thoughts of Lucretius, the great Latin didactic poet, and concludes that he was way ahead of his time

Lucretius notes the absurdity of such fears. Take the thunderbolt. If its purpose is to punish wrongdoers, why does it strike the innocent? Why does it strike where no one is? "Are the gods practising their arms and strengthening their muscles?" Why give targets advance warning by thundering from every direction? Why shoot everywhere to zap one victim? Why do the gods shatter their own temples and statues?

The underworld Lucretius viewed as a fiendish projection of earthly travails: "Assuredly whatsoever things are fabled to exist in deep Acheron [Hades], these all exist in this life. There is no wretched Tantalus, fearing the great rock that hangs over him in the air and frozen with vain terror. Rather, it is in this life that fear of the gods oppresses mortals without cause, and the rock they fear is any that chance may bring."

When fortune smiles, the educated deride the concept of eternal punishment. To see what they really think, "scrutinize them in danger or peril". The bravado crumbles: "Banished far from the sight of men, stained with some disgraceful charge, afflicted with all tribulations, they yet live. And in spite of all, wherever the wretches go they sacrifice to their ancestors and send down oblations to the departed ghosts, eagerly directing their minds to superstition."

Lucretius held that the soul, like the body, consists of material particles, albeit of a finer sort. What he called the soul we might call sensation or perception. Thought, or reflection, he called mind, mediated by a third class of particles. Soul, mind, and body were, via the complex interaction of their particles, mutually interdependent. What affected the one affected the other two. A hard blow to the body stunned the mind and soul. Mental depression dulled sensation and weakened the body. When a person died, the three types of particles were irremediably dissevered and scattered. Every particle went its separate way, never again to link up with the others in the configuration that generated the selfhood of the deceased. Body,

Philosopher, Freethinker

mind, and soul were thus mortal. The particles themselves, on the other hand, were immortal, forever reassembling to create new entities, both animate and inanimate.

Hades aside, Lucretius believed fear of death stems from misconceptions about nonbeing and from overactive imaginations. When people think of themselves dead, they instinctively imagine they retain bodily sensations: "They do not see that in real death there will be no other self that lives to bewail the perished self or stands by to feel pain that they lie there lacerated, burning, or mauled by wild beasts." They fancy they will miss life's pleasures, forgetting that "no longer will any desires possess them". Death is merely the resumption of our pre-zygotic condition: nonentity. As the American poet Philip Freneau wrote: "If nothing once, you nothing lose / For when you die, you are the same."

Eternal existence was the exclusive privilege of atoms (*primordia rerum*) and the void, empty space within and between atoms. Without a void, the atoms would have nowhere to move, and without movement they couldn't do anything. Atoms were indestructible and indivisible. Were they infinitely divisible, all macroscopic phenomena would long ago have vanished. Disintegrating bodies would decompose forever. Particles would never reconstitute themselves to form new entities. The universe would fizzle into virtual nothingness. And nothing can come of nothing (*Nil ex nihilo fit*).

Like his Greek predecessors Epicurus, Leucippus, and Democritus, Lucretius was a thoroughgoing materialist. Everything in the universe – all objects, all events, including those called mental and spiritual – is a manifestation of the interaction of particles. Ultimately, nothing exists but atoms and the void (*corpora et inane*). There is no ghost in the machine. Just as the letters of an alphabet can be variously ordered to create an infinite number of words, so diverse combinations of atoms produce an inexhaustible supply of entities. The movement of the atoms is entirely fortuitous, undirected, without behest.

A cosmic designer is a superfluous hypothesis: "Certainly it was no design of the atoms to place themselves in a particular order, nor did they decide what motions each should have. But atoms were struck with blows in many ways and carried along by their own weight from infinite times up to the present. They have been accustomed to move and to meet in all manner of ways. Being spread abroad through a vast time and trying every sort of combination and motion, at length those come together that produce great things, like earth and sea and sky and the generation of living creatures."

Despite his advocacy of materialism,

Lucretius wasn't a strict determinist. He attributed to particles unpredictable swerves, causeless motions, which he invoked to preserve autonomous volitions in animals, human and nonhuman: "Whence comes this free will in living creatures all over the world? Whence is this will wrested from the fates by which we proceed whither pleasure leads each, swerving our [particle] motions, not at fixed times and fixed places, but just where our mind has taken us? Undoubtedly it is our wills that begin these things, and from the will movements go rippling through the limbs." Although the concept of the swerve may sound gratuitous, it has some affinities with quantum theories of atomic behavior.

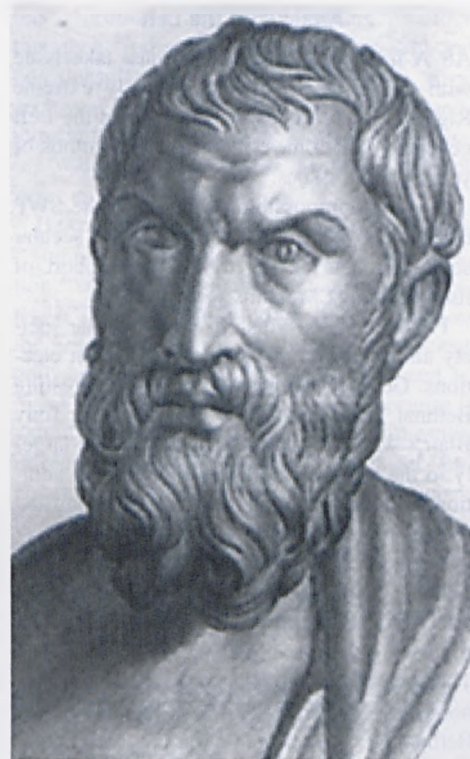
'It is no piety to show oneself often with covered head, turning towards a stone and approaching every altar, none to fall prostrate upon the ground and to spread open the palms before shrines of the gods, none to sprinkle altars with the blood of beasts in showers and to link vow to vow'

Lucretius contended that belief in cosmic designers sprang from human ignorance and indolence. By treating gods as the causal agents of natural processes, humans spared themselves the labor of seeking the real causes: "They observed how the array of heaven and the various seasons of the year came round in due order and could not discover by what causes all that came about. Therefore, their refuge was to leave all in the hands of the gods and to suppose that by their nod all things are done."

Humans placed the gods in the sky because it is the locus of impressive and intimidating phenomena: "Through the sky the moon revolves, the solemn stars of night, heaven's night-wandering torches and flying flames, clouds and sun, rain and snow, winds, lightnings and hail, rapid roarings and great threatening rumbles of thunder."

The ascription of causal efficacy to the gods was a mistake for which humans paid dearly: "O unhappy race of mankind, to ascribe such doings to the gods and to attribute to them bitter wrath as well! What groans did we create for ourselves, what wounds for us, what tears for generations to come!"

Having created celestial potentates, humans sought to appease them with ignominious rituals and sacrifices: "It is no piety to show oneself often with covered head, turning towards a stone and approaching every altar, none to fall prostrate upon the ground and to spread open the palms before shrines of the gods, none to



Titus Lucretius Carus

sprinkle altars with the blood of beasts in showers and to link vow to vow."

True piety, says Lucretius, consists in the ability "to survey all things with tranquil mind". Observe closely and reason carefully, he advises. Be prepared to discard cherished presuppositions and to defend novel premises: "Forbear to spew out reason from your mind, but rather ponder everything with keen judgment; and if it seems true, own yourself vanquished, but, if it is false, gird up your loins to fight."

Lucretius' skepticism earned him the lasting enmity of the Christian church. Spreading unsubstantiated rumors, St Jerome claimed that the poet "was driven mad by a love potion, composed books in the intervals of insanity, and committed suicide in his forty-fourth year." Jerome threw in for good measure that Cicero had to correct the poet's botched ravings. Among his own tribe, the poets, Lucretius has found favor. He has stirred the collective poetic imagination of the West. Echoes of *De Rerum Natura* reverberate in Virgil, Ovid, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Arnold, Tennyson, and other luminous legatees.

In Lucretius, we encounter misinformation, untenable hypotheses, and implausible surmises characteristic of his age, but his conviction that the universe can be understood and happiness achieved without recourse to supernatural agencies and divine revelation put him far ahead of his time. So much so that many still haven't caught up.

***Other than his authorship of *De Rerum Natura*, little is known for certain of Lucretius. Apparently, he came from an obscure branch of an ancient Roman family and was well educated.**

Attacks on the Left

AS A member of Respect, I must take issue with the ill-informed and basically extreme Right-wing criticisms of Respect and the Left generally which have polluted the columns of your last two issues.

It is quite impossible for Respect, the SWP or any other political organisation in a secular society such as the UK to woo the support of fundamentalist Muslims.

Fundamentalist Muslims reject secular society and therefore do not vote in British elections. George Galloway's success in wresting Bethnal Green and Bow from one of Tony Blair's war-mongering stooges was due largely to the votes of moderate Muslims, in addition to those of middle-class voters disgusted by the carnage in Iraq.

Even more significantly, very many core Labour voters, understandably disillusioned after six consecutive election victories by right-wing Conservative governments led by Thatcher, Major and Blair respectively, stayed home on polling day. (The total Labour vote in Bethnal Green was in fact roughly the same as the Labour MAJORITY at the previous election.) Why should they have bothered to vote for a party committed to destroying everything that could conceivably benefit working-class people while leaving every aspect of Thatcherism (including excessive Christian influence on a very secular society) intact and unchallenged?

Far from Respect representing a Left-wing failure, it has in a very short period become the only Left of Labour party to win a parliamentary seat in England since 1945 and has become the official opposition in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. It also this May won at least one council seat outside London in a largely white working-class ward with a negligible Muslim vote.

Respect in fact stands for everything the Labour Party ought to stand for, as well as providing voters with a conscience the opportunity to support an organisation committed to peace in the Middle East and not dominated by Right-wing Christians whose arrogance blinds them to the plight of their own supporters in the UK and to human suffering on an unimaginable scale in the societies they have destroyed.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE,
London.

STEVEN Johnston's thoughtful response to my *Freethinker* article "How Socialism Became A Poisoned Chalice for Freethinkers" (May) raised some interesting points.

Debating the merits of the Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) and its particular take on Marxism would doubtless be a fascinating academic exercise – but that's all it ever will be, so why bother? Since 1904, the purer-than-pure SPGB has made no headway whatsoever. In fact, the prospects for socialism, pure or otherwise, seem more remote now than at any

time in the last 100 years.

Does he really believe that a totally uniform "stateless world of free access" can ever be achieved? His faith in this strikes me as utopianism on a par with that often depicted on the cover of the Jehovah's Witnesses' *Watchtower* magazine (an orderly, manicured world, in which cheery multi-ethnic folk in sarongs wander around with bowls of fruit on their heads, while lambs and lions frolic together by fountains of milk and honey). Back in the real world, human beings are separated by culture, history, language, intelligence, genetics, access to material resources, geography, climate and personal experience. It's also in our nature to compete and conquer and divide ourselves into tribes, castes and nation states.

Capitalist globalisation has been accompanied by a corresponding counter movement of "identity" politics, which encompasses everything from lesbian separatism to "ethnic cleansing" in the Balkans. Evidently, human beings require difference and hierarchy, belonging and exclusivity. The rational part of our psyche is the one tenth of the iceberg that is visible – the other nine tenths that we can't properly apprehend are scary and disruptive, but are the parts that make us truly human (can you imagine life without individual ambition, emotions, dreams, humour, fetishes and phobias?). Rationally, one has to embrace the irrational.

"Socialism has never been tried anywhere" Johnston maintains. I think it's fair to say that Fidel Castro had a pretty good stab at establishing socialism, as did Lenin and Chairman Mao. In Britain, democratic socialism (Left-wing capitalism, if you prefer), has actually made real and lasting differences to the quality of working-class people's lives, which is why, unlike some of my forebears, I am not condemned to a life of coal mining, tuberculosis, illiteracy, or being stuck in the poor house. For this happy state of affairs, I am indebted to the Attlee Government of 1945-1951. Being homosexual, I am also indebted to the Wilson and Blair governments (no more prison or legal disadvantage). What did the SPGB contribute? It's all very well for the SPGB to sulk and complain "It's not real socialism" and refuse to support anything that falls short of their Marxist ideal – but that's like a diabetic refusing to take insulin because it doesn't cure their diabetes.

Socialism is not a "science": it is flawed 19th century guesswork overlaid with a discredited utopian pipe-dream. Humanity is not perfectible (thank goodness), life is governed by more than just a series of economic inputs and outputs (mercifully) and politics is all about struggle, strategy and compromise in the service of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (at least, it should be). Yes, it's messy, it's tough and it's terrifying, but life amongst our fellow human beings is also incredibly rewarding and even beautiful, Mr Johnston. With respect, purity and secluded self-denial should be left to the Trappist monks

– you need to get off your ideological high horse and engage with the real world.

DIESEL BALAAM
London

Editor's Note: It has been pointed out to us that the address for the SPGP contained in Steven Johnston's letter was incorrect. The correct one is SPGP, 52 Clapham High Street, London SW4 7UN. Tel 0207 622 3811.

Whose churches and cathedrals?

THE bishop of London puts a case for government funding for the maintenance of cathedrals but in what sense does he mean "our" cathedrals and churches?

Most of the cathedrals are superb works of architecture and craftsmanship as are many of the mediaeval churches throughout Europe. They demonstrate the fabulous wealth and power of the mediaeval church, the first European multinational commercial and industrial organisation since the Roman Empire, but it was the common man and some uncommon master craftsmen that built them.

After the Dissolution and Reformation the Anglican Church in Britain and equivalents in other European countries appropriated them and found the money to maintain them. Together with the wealthy aristocracy they also paid the finest composers and performers to develop European music; but music and buildings are not religious, they are just used for religious purposes. J S Bach's music is performed in concert halls as well as cathedrals. It is great music and cathedrals are also great works of art but it was the people with money and power who decided how cathedrals should be used.

Today if we are atheists, Buddhists, Hindus or Muslims the cathedrals are *our* cathedrals even if the Anglicans and other religious organisations use them. Yes, we owe a debt to the people who created these wonderful buildings and therefore an obligation to maintain them, but perhaps we should persuade our governments to share authority with the religious organisations on decisions about their use.

We may deplore mediaeval priestly misuse of wealth and distortion of the teaching of Jesus, but perhaps the Open University graduation ceremony in Ely Cathedral is a good example of how cathedrals could be used more frequently for secular purposes. Let us help to pay the piper and we could call some more of the tunes.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney

Catholics and sin

I HAD always understood that the Roman Catholic Church would give Holy Communion to members who had repented of their sins by confessing them to a priest. I have several Catholic friends who describe themselves as serial sinners but regularly go to confession to make themselves "right with God".

What then is so special about politicians who have voted in favour of permitting women



to have abortions that Cardinal Keith O'Brien would deny them Holy Communion for all time? Are they not to be permitted the opportunity to repent? After all, serial murderers regularly receive the Sacraments of the Church in our gaoils as do priests who have been convicted of sexual offences against children.

JOHN EOIN DOUGLAS
Edinburgh

The 'paranormal'

HALF a century ago I infiltrated and manipulated a spiritualist seance so successfully that its "physical" medium pronounced me both clairvoyant and clairaudient, and I detected collusion between a "mental" medium and a supposed receiver of messages.

I then turned my attention to the "scientific" mumbo-jumbo of Scientology, but found it too expensive to infiltrate. Fortunately it boasted a large "literature" by L Ron Hubbard himself, from which one could draw unflattering conclusions. Finally I explored the "paranormal" world of parapsychology.

This upstart academic "discipline" became something of a cult in the mid-20th century, and was especially espoused by agnostics who, having lost their faith in divine mysteries, were eager to latch on to human ones instead. Unfortunately for the faithful, I found this "science" rested on chaotic theories and flawed or fraudulent experiments, and the consequences of it – if true – would not only ruin all book-makers but render life as we know it untenable.

I prepared a paper for submission to H J Blackham's excellent *Plain View*, the only humanist periodical publishing long articles. He first asked if I'd read Professor Antony Flew's sympathetic *New Approach to Psychical Research* (1953). I replied that I had and didn't agree with it; and my controversial piece appeared, as written, in the journal's winter 1962 number. Nothing that has happened since prompts me to add to or subtract from my assessment then.

David Tribe
Australia

Looking deeper

HAD Jack Hastie's daughter *To catch a Clergyman*, May *Freethinker*) shared his apparent view that marriage is essentially a legal contract, she would presumably have been content for the formalities to be completed in a register office, with only the statutory witnesses present, and then have the (more important?) reception for family and friends at a different time and venue, thus avoiding the logistical and bureaucratic nightmare he so graphically describes.

The fact that she and her husband wanted all their guests present at the ceremony suggests they are indeed a long way from "fully paid-up atheists"; and, in rejecting his preferred Unitarian option, may have recognised, however dimly, the sacramental nature of the marriage vows. They were doubtless also grateful for the love, support and perhaps even prayers of at

least some of those they wanted around them.

Denys Drower, on the same page, wonders "whether a theist can help me solve [specified] problems" of a profoundly philosophical nature. He is in luck: they have been ably addressed by Paul Copan and W L Craig in their book *Creation out of Nothing* (Grand Rapids, 2004), and in Craig's *Time and Eternity* (2001).

Mr Drower wisely does not expect atheists to answer his questions; nor could they even admit their legitimacy. But they nonetheless demand – and have elsewhere received – serious answers that amply repay unprejudiced attention.

DAN O'HARA
Salburn-by-the-Sea

The aspirate and grammar

ALTHOUGH I agree that contributors' grammar is not the weightiest of matters (C A M Aitchison, *Points of View*, April), I'll put another thought into the argument.

In modern usage the aspirate H has become almost redundant, except "an hour", "an hotel" (I don't agree with Barbara Smoker about "an humiliation": doesn't an unvoiced H have more poignancy than an aspirated one, whatever the rules?) The use of "an" is now mainly confined to nouns starting with a vowel, except "a unit", "a eulogy".

On the other hand, perhaps it's pedantic to think about the letter H at all in this age of glottle-stopping, even among the "educated".

FIONA WEIR
London

Homoeopathy

BEFORE WWII many people in the UK regarded homoeopathic doctors as quacks; despite the royal family always having one on their list of three medics.

However, after WWII the homoeopathic authorities insisted that anyone that wanted to study homoeopathy should first of all have at least an MB.ChB degree. This resulted in their practitioners now having *more* qualifications than their allopath counterparts.

Apparently this has apparently not yet filtered through to William Harwood, who, with his customary lack of restraint (in the May article "Sam Harris v the brain-dead") describes alternative medicine as a "delusion" and lumps it together with "astrology" and "ghost whisperers".

C A M AITCHISON
Glasgow

Angels

BREWING through a local free paper I noticed an advertisement for "Angel Workshops" and how you can "bring them into your life", where, presumably, they will perform miracles on demand.

Whoever is offering this service had also been "trained" in all the "ologies", the penchant for turning pseudo-medical practices into moneymaking opportunities by giving them fancy names and ensnaring the gullible into paying for it; "crystal healing", "reflexol-

ogy", "aromatherapy", "aura reading", "colour therapy", "Indian head massage". Clearly one can doesn't suit all! The list seems to grow each year as people who regard orthodox medicine with suspicion and view quackery as having validity seek cures for the social ills that beset us in this alienating world.

Below this ad was one for a clairvoyant ("stunningly accurate") which begs the question "Why does a clairvoyant need to advertise"? This brings to mind the recent debate in the *Freethinker* on the nature of an omniscient god: an all-knowing god would not need to make, or be able to make decisions because it would know the answer before the question raised itself, thus defeating the object and creating abundant confusion in the omniscient mind.

A suitable case for treatment by the "angels".
ROY EMERY
Radstock

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see 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

Central London Humanist Group: Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: 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

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: info@devonhumanists.org.uk Website: 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. Our next event (not a meeting) will be a Daytime Riverboat Excursion to Greenwich on July 11th. Non-members welcome. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 863 2977.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Crescent, Gidea Park. Thursday, August 2, 8pm. Ian Wilkes: Havering Museum 2008.

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. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk. Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen Group: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Dundee Group: 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh Group: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Glasgow Group: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Highland Group: 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Perth Group: 07017 404776, 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: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk

Isle of Wight Humanist Group. Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail 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

Lewisham Humanist Group: Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. the Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Thursday, July 19, 8pm. Members Annual General Meeting.

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Howard Kimberley 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, July 4, 8pm. Barry Johnson: *Christian Fundamentalism*.

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. Monthly programmes on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e-mail edward@egwinnell.orangehome.co.uk

Suffolk Humanists: 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. mail@suffolkhumanists.org.uk www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk

Sutton Humanist Group: Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: 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 website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the *Freethinker*, PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD

Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.