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Philip Pullman film sanitised to mollify Catholics

National Secular Society condemns censorious Hollywood for tampering with award-winning novelist's work



Philip Pullman

A HOLLYWOOD movie based on British author Philip Pullman's popular children's books is to be controversially stripped of key religious themes amid fears it will offend Catholic audiences, according to a report by Lewis Hannam in the *Observer* last month.

The first instalment of the award-winning fantasy trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, which captured the hearts of millions of children around the world, will reach cinema screens later this year. The film version is entitled *The Golden Compass*.

But one of the series' main themes – the rejection of organised religion and in particular the abuse of power within the Catholic Church – is to be watered down.

The move has been described as "white-washing" by anti-censorship groups.

The controversy centres around the trilogy's sinister Magisterium, which readers understand to be a thinly veiled attack on the Catholic Church.

However, when the film is released in December the Magisterium will be shown as a critique of all dogmatic organisations, thereby avoiding a religious backlash.

Director Chris Weitz confirmed the film's portrayal of the mythical body will not echo that of Pullman's books.

He said: "In the books the Magisterium is a version of the Catholic Church gone wildly astray from its roots.

"If that's what you want in the film, you'll be disappointed."

The film, which stars Nicole Kidman and British actor

Daniel Craig, is called *The Golden Compass*, the American title of Pullman's novel *Northern Lights*, the first book in the trilogy.

The second volume is called *The Subtle Knife*, while the final part of the trilogy is called *The Amber Spyglass*.

Pullman himself expects the film to remain "faithful" to the books he wrote, but the National Secular Society – of which Pullman is an honorary associate – has reacted against the changes.

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the society, said: "There is an issue here over the white-washing of religious problems from cinema and literature, especially in America.

"It is wrong that children watching these films should not get the opportunity to see the more balanced picture of religion."

"The Catholic Church in particular has had problems in the past that it has tried to cover up – such as child abuse – but these things are much better discussed out in the open. This is part of a long-term problem over freedom of speech."

The Golden Compass tells the tale of Lyra, a young girl brought up in the cloistered world of Oxford heading off to save her best friend Roger, who has been kidnapped.

Nicole Kidman, who plays the role of Mrs Coulter in the film, said she would not have been comfortable starring in an overtly anti-Catholic production. She told film journalists in the summer: "I would not be able to do this film if I thought it

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WHEN corpulent Christian bigot, Jerry Falwell, popped his clogs in May this year, it soon emerged that he'd dug his own grave with his teeth. Not content with merely being an imbecile, the American evangelist was a glutton as well, and when they buried this 400-lb+ Jesus-lovin', faggot-hatin' tub-o'-Lord, a great many people celebrated the fact that they would no longer have to put up with offensive observations such as: "There are almost as many alcoholics [in the US] as there are negroes" and "If you're not a born-again Christian, you're a failure as a human being."

The internet was awash with messages for weeks after the 73-year-old fundie slid off his greasy perch. Most of these could be distilled into just two words: "Good riddance."

Now the internet is again buzzing over the death of one of his acolytes – fundamentalist Alabama preacher Rev Gary Aldridge, 51, who, a month later, followed Falwell into oblivion, also as a result of an apparent addiction – in this case not to food, but to rubber.

When Aldridge, who once worked for Falwell, died of asphyxia in June, initial reports suggested he might have been the victim of foul play. But in October it emerged that he had died of another form of play which led directly to suffocation.

The preacher was found hogtied and wearing two complete wet suits, including a face mask, diving gloves and slippers, rubberised underwear, and a head mask, according to the autopsy report. Investigators concluded that his death was not caused by foul play, and that the pastor at Montgomery's Thorington Road Baptist Church was alone in his home at the time he died.

Although the *Montgomery Advertiser*, which first obtained the autopsy report, revealed details about his wet suits, the paper prissily chose not to mention what police discovered embedded in the pastor's bum – a dildo sheathed in a condom.

Safe sex, in this instance, had clearly not worked to his advantage.

Aldridge served as the church's pastor for 16 years. Immediately following his death, church officials issued a press release asking community members to "please refrain from speculation" about what led to the kinky pastor's demise, adding that, "we will begin the healing process under the strong arm of our Saviour, Jesus Christ."

Well, in this respect, Jesus Christ, as always, proved to be as much use as an ashtray on a motorbike, and miserably failed to prevent a tide of tittering that began the moment the autopsy report became public knowledge.

At the risk of being accused of brutal callousness, or sheer tastelessness – or both – I have chosen to share with you a selection of comments that appeared on just one blog, only because they had me giggling so helplessly.

"That guy had enough rubber on him to keep every cheerleader in Texas from getting pregnant till the next coming of Christ."

"Is this what 'good' folks in 'Bama do for fun? Count me out."

"Maybe he was just getting his *Creature of the Black Lagoon* costume ready for the holiday. Funny, I don't remember any dildos in that movie."

"While I admittedly have been away from Dixie's heart for some years now, this was not how we used to entertain ourselves. For starters, we never wore condoms."

"He was just sweatin' away the pounds and stealing a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven when his maker called him home. So what if he was a little over-accessorized? Y'all are so mean."

**Freethinker editor
BARRY DUKE gets
wise to rubber
fetishism and air-
conditioner cleaning**



"Oh I see how it is. First, it's 'don't hire prostitutes', then 'leave little boys alone'; now all a man is doing is pleasing himself, not bothering anyone (not even his wife) and you STILL call him a hypocrite? Won't you libtards ever leave white Christian men alone?"

"No ball gag or nipple clamps? Amateur!"

"Imagine the look on St Peter's face when he bounced up to the pearly gates dressed in rubber head to toe. St Pete must have thought the Michelin Man had died."

"I think the second wet suit was just overkill. But seriously, how does somebody hogtie themselves? I think there must have been a deacon or two there at the time of his demise."

"Why a condom over the dildo? Someone needs to ask Dr Dobson [Focus on the Family chairman] if that is how it should always be done in a good Christian household."

"When there's a condom on the dildo it means you're not gay."

A FEW weeks back I developed an irresistible urge to clean the air-conditioner in the store where I have a part-time job.

Trouble was that no-one had the foggiest idea where the operating manual was, or how one might access the filters. A friend suggested that I go on-line and access *Wikihow* – a comprehensive internet DIY manual.

This proved no help at all – but while searching the site I discovered the instructions for disposing of a bible.

C'mon, I thought, this just *has* to be a joke. But no, the "recipe" for properly disposing of a bible appears to be completely genuine.

According to *Wikihow*: "In the middle ages it was a deadly sin to dispose of a bible in any way, but in modern times there is a very defined procedure that few people know about because disposing of a bible is so rare. You will need a few things besides the bible itself; holy water, a cross and a self-lighting match. (This does not apply to King James bibles).

At any rate, here is the procedure, should any of you be contemplating lightening a bookshelf:

1. First you will have to take the bible and a cross and go outside and find an area where you can dig a hole.

2. Dig a hole about 4-6 inches deep and lie the bible in the newly made 'grave'.

3. Place the remaining dirt over the bible and place the cross at the head of the grave.

4. Say a prayer and remember what Jesus did for you.

5. Water the grave with holy water for exactly six days. These days should be Monday thru Saturday; do nothing on Sunday.

6. Remember who created this beautiful world.

7. During the days that you water the bible, make sure you share your experience with anyone who walks into your home. Show them the grave.

8. At any point after these seven days you may dig the bible back up, and clean it very well.

9. The cross is no longer needed. You should light it with the match until it is ashes. Use the ashes to draw a cross on the bible. (Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.)

10. Display the bible in your home for a week to show that you are not ashamed of the bible or your religion. Show it to anyone who enters your home.

11. You will then need the bible to be blessed. At this point you can proceed to dispose the bible in any way you see fit and respectful.

And here are some tips:

- Do not burn the bible, this is a sign of disrespect.

- If you no longer want the bible, why not give it away to someone who does, or perhaps a church or other religious organization? If you do not know of any, you may want to find a local freecycle group and post it there for someone to pick up from you.

- Some believe that it is the contents of the bible that makes it holy, not the paper and ink, and therefore the bible can be disposed of like any other book.

And here are the things you'll need: holy water, a cross and a match.

Other useful "how-tos" on *Wikihow* include how to:

- Fold a Napkin Into a Pyramid
- Avoid a Rattlesnake Attack
- Make Beef Jerky
- Drive a Golf Ball
- Leash Train a Cat

Incidentally, I at last found what I was looking for when I Googled the air-conditioner's model number. Around 20 manuals exist on-line.

That they are *all* in Polish or Russian proved no problem whatsoever because our local coffee shop is run by a very friendly bunch of Poles who were more than pleased to translate the relevant section on cleaning.

Iranian Human Rights Activist Wins Secularist of the Year Prize

THIS year's £5,000 Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year, awarded by the National Secular Society, has been won by Iranian women's rights activist Mina Ahadi.

Ms Ahadi is founder of the International Committee Against Execution and Stoning, was spokeswoman for the International Campaign in Defence of Women's Rights in Iran and, more controversially, the founder of the Central Council for Ex-Muslims in Germany.

Iranian-born Mina, 50, was driven out of Iran after challenging the clerical regime over the treatment of women, and particularly over her campaigns to stop the barbaric stoning to death of women and girls charged with "crimes against chastity".

She was not at home when the authorities arrived to arrest her, but they managed to arrest her husband and some other friends. Mina's husband was hanged soon after and she had to flee the country.

She now lives in Germany where she continues to struggle for the rights of women to live free of the oppressive Islamic strictures



Mina Ahadi

that apply in Iran. She is of the opinion that Islam cannot be reformed, and so she has now created the Ex-Muslim Committee to provide a focus for those who come from a Muslim

background, but who do not want to be defined by that religion and want to abandon it. This powerful idea has resulted in chapters of the organisation being formed in the Netherlands, Belgium, Scandinavia and England.

Ms Ahadi is under constant threat of death from fundamentalists.

She was in London on Saturday, October 20, to receive her prize, presented at a gourmet luncheon organised by the National Secular Society.

Bible-bashing British Army head wants soldiers prepared for the 'afterlife'

DEATH is not the end and soldiers need to be spiritually better prepared for war, according to the head of the British Army.

Evangelical Christian, General Sir Richard Dannatt, Chief of the General Staff, said that Christian leaders and chaplains in the Army needed to equip soldiers for the spiritual issues at stake.

"In my business, asking people to risk their lives is part of the job, but doing so without giving them the chance to understand that there is a life after death is something of a betrayal," he told an evangelical Christian conference in Swanwick, Derbyshire.

His Dark Designs

(Continued from p1)

were at all anti-Catholic."

The Catholic League in the US has made its feelings known over the content of Pullman's books, while also urging parents to ban their children from watching the forthcoming film. While it acknowledges religious themes have been watered down for the cinema, it is still launching a boycott as it says the movie lures kids and their "unsuspecting parents" into reading the books.

It also says *The Golden Compass* is "the least offensive of the three books" and warns that *The Subtle Knife* is "more overt in its hatred of Catholicism" and *The Amber Spyglass* "even more blatant".

Among the literature awards Pullman has received is the 2001 Whitbread Book of the Year for *The Amber Spyglass*, and the Carnegie Medal for children's fiction in 1995.

What became of the pictures of Vatican priest Tommaso Stenico?

Until very recently, as far as we can ascertain, Mgr Tommaso Stenico, of the Congregation of the Clergy in Rome, had a number of pictures on his official website, www.tommasostenico.it.

But these are no longer available.

Could it be that Vatican officials – not content with merely suspending Stenico – have expunged photos of him from the internet?

Mgr Stenico's suspension last month came in the wake of a "sting" carried out by the Italian TV programme, *Exit*, in which the priest had apparently confessed to homosexual practises.

The director of the Holy See's Press Office, Father Federico Lombardi, has now confirmed that Stenico had been suspended from the priesthood after he appeared on a documentary broadcast on October 1 in which the producers arranged for a young gay man, who finds blind dates on the internet, to carry a hidden camera and microphone on his visits to three homosexuals who claimed to be priests.

The three appear on camera with their faces and voices distorted, but one of them arranged to meet the young man in St Peter's Square and took him to his office at the Vatican.

Vatican officials said the office was that of Father Tommaso Stenico of the Congregation for the Clergy.

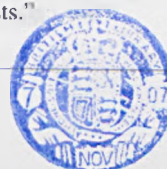
Father Lombardi confirmed reports of the priest's suspension and of the launch of an investigation. "His superiors are treating the situation with appropriate discretion, even if this person has made a mistake," he explained.

"Vatican authorities must intervene with decisiveness and severity in response to behaviour that is not compatible with priestly service and the mission of the Holy See."

Despite the evidence in the TV programme which showed him making advances towards a young man whom he described as "very tasty", Mgr Stenico says he was innocent and that he was pretending to be gay in order to discover "the true enemies within the Church".

According to *The Times*, the 60-year-old priest claimed the pretence was an attempt to unmask a Satanic plot to seduce Catholic priests to homosexuality and thus discredit the Church.

"I only pretended I was gay to study how priests are seduced. There are people who go after them . . . I really believe there is a diabolical plan by groups of Satanists."



Christianity suffers a growing image problem in the US

A NEW study in the US shows that an increasing number of Americans are becoming disenchanted with Christianity.

According to a report in *Time* magazine, a poll carried out by the Barna Group among young Americans showed that 38 percent had a "bad impression" of present-day Christianity.

"It used to be", Barna's David Kinnaman told *Time*, "that Christianity was both big and beloved in the US – even among its non-adherents."

But, as Kinnaman puts it in his new book (co-authored with Gabe Lyons) *UnChristian*, "That was then."

Back in 1996, a poll taken by Kinnaman's organisation found that 83 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians, and that fewer than 20 percent of non-Christians held an unfavourable view of Christianity.

Barna polls conducted between 2004 and this year, sampling 440 non-Christians (and a similar number of Christians) and carried out mainly for evangelical groups, do not show "a pretty picture", the authors say in their book.

Kinnaman says non-Christians' biggest complaints about the faith are not immediately theological: Jesus and the Bible get relatively good marks. Rather, he sees resentment as focused on perceived Christian attitudes. Nine out of ten outsiders found Christians too "anti-homosexual," and nearly as many perceived it as "hypocritical" and "judgmental". Seventy-five percent found it "too involved in politics".

Not only has the decline in non-Christians' regard for Christianity been severe, but Barna results also show a rapid increase in the number of people describing themselves as non-Christian.

One reason may be that the study used a stricter definition of "Christian" that applied to only 73 percent of Americans. Still, Kinnaman claims that, however defined, the number of non-Christians is growing with each succeeding generation. His study found that 23 percent of Americans over 61 were non-Christians; 27 percent among people ages 42-60; and 40 percent among 16-29 year olds.

Younger Christians, he concludes, are therefore likely to live in an environment where two out of every five of their peers is not a Christian.

Churchgoers of the same age share several of the non-Christians' complaints about Christianity. For instance, 80 percent of the Christians polled picked "anti-homosexual" as a negative adjective describing Christianity today. And the view of 85 percent of non-Christians aged 16-29 was that present-day Christianity is "hypocritical – saying one

thing doing another," was, in fact, shared by 52 percent of Christians of the same age. Fifty percent found their own faith "too involved in politics." Forty-four percent found it "confusing."

Christians have always been aware of image problems with non-believers, says *Time*.

Kinnaman commented: "The question is whether to care." But given the increasing non-Christian population and the fact that many of the concerns raised by non-believers are shared by young Christians, he says, there really is no option but to address the crisis.

Not only has the decline in non-Christians' regard for Christianity been severe, but Barna results also show a rapid increase in the number of people describing themselves as non-Christian

Earlier this year, James L Evans, a syndicated American columnist who also serves as a Baptist pastor, examined the growing trend towards non-belief in the US.

He wrote:

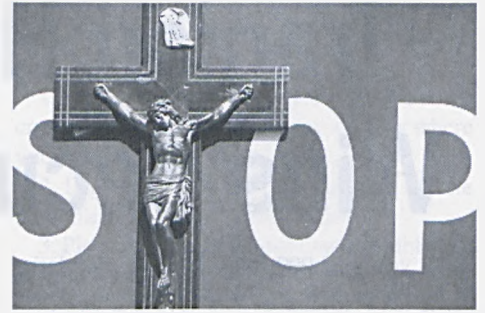
"According to a recent article in *The Washington Post*, atheism is on the rise in America. Margaret Downey, president of the Atheist Alliance International, reports that her organisation's membership has doubled in the last year. She also reports that the Alliance's annual convention already has a 500-person waiting list.

"The Barna Group, an organization of pollsters that specializes in religious issues, conducted a survey and found that about five million adults in the United States refer to themselves as atheists.

"Their poll also found a number of additional people who say they have no religious faith or that they are agnostic. Combine these folk with the five million atheists, and the number of Americans detached from any sort of religious life rises to about 20 million.

"This may explain why several recent books promoting atheism and criticizing all forms of faith have managed to become best sellers. Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*, have all appeared on the *New York Times* best seller list. In fact, *Publisher's Weekly* reports that titles attacking faith have sold a combined 750,000 copies.

"We cannot help but ask, why? Why this



The photo illustration by Fred de Noyelle/Godong/Corbis used by *Time* to illustrate its Barna report

sudden interest in atheism?

"Part of the answer, according to Sam Harris and others, is the rise of militant Muslim fundamentalism. In his book *The End of Faith*, Harris quotes long passages from the Koran arguing that anyone who takes those selected words literally, and seriously, has no choice but to be at war with the rational world.

"For Harris, fundamentalist Muslims and Christians are but two different sides of the same coin. Each serves as examples of why the world would be better off if there was 'an end to faith'.

"Others believe atheism is on the rise because of the secular influence of American culture. Dennis Prager, writing at Townhall.com, makes the case that 'from elementary school to graduate school, only one way of looking at the world – the secular – is presented'. Some truth may be in that statement, but that is precisely what the framers of the US Constitution had in mind. They had seen the disastrous results of state-supported religion and official orthodoxies mingled with civic duty in Europe and wanted none of it for America.

"The Constitution establishes a secular society but with a guarantee of religious freedom for all.

"If children go through life not knowing their faith heritage, as Prager asserts, that is not a failure of the public school system. If children do not learn their faith at home and at church, we cannot be surprised if they emerge into adulthood with low expectations about the role of faith in their lives.

"We must also be willing to admit that some of this turning away from religion may be a form of running away.

"The aggressive attacks on science from many quarters of the faith community have left some people feeling great resentment toward faith. It could be that certain expressions of faith have made God too small to be embraced by those who experience the universe as vast and great.

"A person who looks at the universe through the Hubble telescope is going to have trouble taking the first two chapters of *Genesis* literally. And when told that being faithful to God requires such belief, unbelief may feel like the only option."

Oh Jesus, another Muslim is offended

A FOOLISH Christian who stuck a picture of Jesus on the wall of a staff rest-room at Manchester Airport earned himself a three-day suspension after a complaint had been registered by a Muslim co-worker.

Gareth Langmead, 40, a Catholic car parks supervisor, found the The Sacred Heart of Jesus picture in a desk drawer.

Instead of binning this kitschy piece of "art", Mr Langmead – without considering the consequences – stuck it up on the rest-room wall. He apparently could not bring himself to trash it.

Did he not think of taking it home, or that, by placing it in a public area, it might be offensive to his atheist colleagues? Or doubly offensive to Muslim co-workers?

Obviously not – until all hell broke loose. The atheists might have been content to grace it with an irritated glance, or blow a raspberry at the alleged Son of a God, but a Muslim worker went a step further and registered a formal complaint.

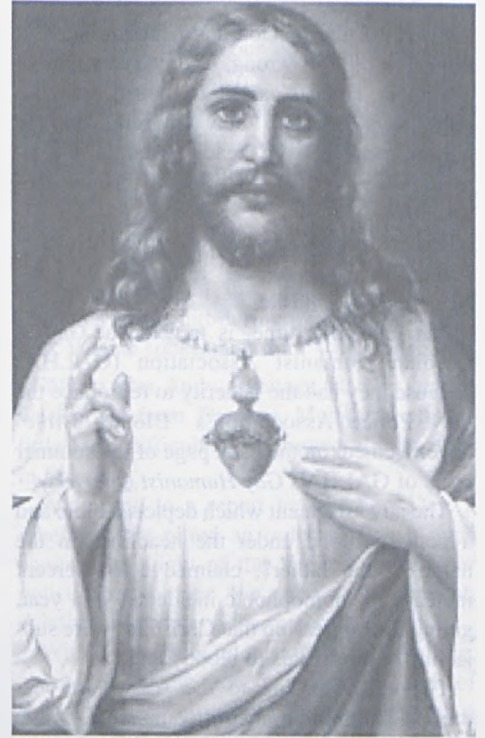
The Son (or was it a daughter?) of the Prophet apparently saw the picture as "an act of provo-

cation", and the hapless, unthinking Mr Langmead found himself suspended for a period of three days while an investigation was carried out. He was then reinstated with a clean record.

A Manchester airport spokesman said: "We can confirm that a member of staff was suspended pending an investigation into his conduct. This investigation was swiftly concluded and the employee has returned to work with a clean record"

"Given the nature of this incident, we have agreed with our airport chaplain that he and his team will work with the employees involved to foster a greater level of understanding about each other's beliefs and how this applies in the workplace."

What's to understand? People with religious beliefs are delusional, and therefore cannot be expected to act rationally when their beliefs come into conflict, as they inevitably must. Muslims, for example, regard anyone who suggests Jesus was the Son of God as a "blasphemer". Christians, of course, accuse Muslims of being "blasphemers" for denying the "divinity" of Jesus.



Dead pope makes a comeback as a fiery figure

Local Polish bishop says Pope John Paul II made many pilgrimages during his life and is continuing to do so in death

IN THE same week that Rowan "Dumbledore" Williams, the Archbishop of Cant, castigated Richard Dawkins, and declared: "Don't distract us from the real arguments by assuming that religion is an eccentric survival strategy or irrational form of explanation," hordes of superstitionists rushed to their TV sets and computers to goggle at a picture of the late Pope John Paul II "rising as a fiery figure from a bonfire in Poland".

The image, said by believers to show the Holy Father with his right hand raised in blessing, was spotted during a ceremony in Poland to mark the second anniversary of his death.

Details appeared on the *Vatican News Service*, a TV station in Rome which specialises in religious news broadcasts.

Service director Jarek Cielecki, a Polish priest and close friend of John Paul II, travelled to Poland after hearing that an onlooker had photographed the image.

Father Cielecki said he was convinced the picture showed the former pontiff.

"You can see the image of a person in the



flames and I think it is the servant of God, Pope John Paul II."

Or it may simply be another example of pareidolia, or a clear-cut case of photo-tampering. Or, more to the point, pathetic idiocy.

The pictures, according to a *Daily Mail* report, were being broadcast continuously on Italian TV and also posted on religious websites, some of which crashed as thousands logged on to see for themselves the eerie figure formed by the flames.

The bonfire was lit during a service at Beskid Zywiecki, close to John Paul's birthplace at Katowice, southern Poland, on April 2 – the second anniversary of his death.



Hundreds had attended the ceremony. Gregorz Lukasik, the Polish man who took the photographs, said: "It was only afterwards when I got home and looked at the pictures that I realised I had something.

I showed them to my brother and sister and they, like me, were convinced the flames had formed the image of Pope John Paul II. I was so happy with the picture that I showed it to our local bishop who said that Pope John Paul had made many pilgrimages during his life and he was still making them in death.

Oh really? Will someone please pinch these people and remind them that we are now in the 21st century – not the 12th!

Bloody bible ad sparks fresh fury

"WITH no fear of God and hence no idea of objective right or wrong, or dread of a Day of Judgment, atheists can lie to their hearts content," says Stephen ("Stay a Virgin, Marry a Virgin") Green, who heads Britain's dotiest evangelical outfit, Christian Voice [of Insanity].

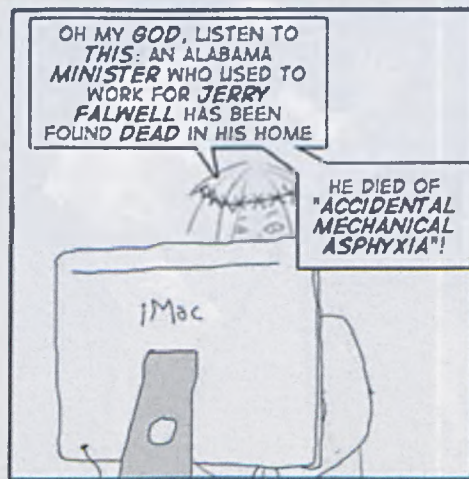
His latest rant appears in a piece of crack-pottery (or "press release" as he calls it), posted on the CV website.

His rage, this time, is targeted at Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) because they had the temerity to reproduce the Gay Police Association's 'Bloody Bible' advertisement on the back page of the summer issue of GALHA's *Gay Humanist Quarterly*.

The advertisement which depicts a bible and a pool of blood under the headline "in the name of the father", claimed a 74 percent increase in "homophobic incidents" in a year, giving the impression that Christians were subjecting homosexuals to bloody attacks.

The ad, according to the ASA, last year drew the highest number of complaints – more than 500, primarily from evangelical groups.

Jesus and Mo



Although the complaint was upheld on the grounds that the GPA could not provide any figures to substantiate the claim, it nevertheless makes a valid point: that the bible is the primary source of violence against homosexuals. It is used by evangelical Christians such as Green to generate hatred against gay people, and this bible-based rhetoric often translates into physical and verbal abuse.

In condemning GALHA for reproducing the ad, Green said: "Obviously, the atheists in GALHA have a lot in common with the members of the Gay Police Association. An irrational hatred of all things Christian and a complete disregard for truth and accuracy are among them. Sadly, by reprinting an advert already condemned as untruthful by the ASA they have proved the point.

"Despite saying that, I am still shocked at the cavalier disregard for truth and accuracy within the ranks of the GPA and GALHA. Plainly, that verse in the New Testament which says, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness' is as difficult for them to get their minds around as the one which says 'Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind' or the one which describes homosexual desires as 'vile affections'. How they need conviction of their sin and to find forgiveness and the love of God in

the Lord Jesus Christ (*sic*).

"But how deep is the hatred which the reprinting of the bible ad shows to be seething in homosexual police officers against the peaceful, Christian law-abiding section of the population. This must spill over into their everyday policing and affect their judgment and their ability to testify honestly. To protect the public, I believe the police should remove officers prejudiced by such a personality flaw from duty.

"A couple of years ago, we suggested in a our booklet *Homosexuality and the Police* that homosexual police officers were living a lie and could not be trusted to tell the truth in Court. GALHA and the GPA have proved our point."

San Diego Catholic Diocese goes cap in hand to parishioners to help pay sex abuse victims

THE Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego is asking parishioners to donate \$25 million (£12.5million) to help pay for its \$198.1 million settlement with childhood sex abuse victims.

The diocesan headquarters and a nearby seminary may have to be sold if the campaign is unsuccessful, Bishop Robert H Brom wrote in a letter last month sent to parishioners with a note from individual pastors.

"I need your help to cover the expense we incurred recently through compassionate outreach to our brothers and sisters who suffered sexual abuse within the family of the church so that we can continue, without serious jeopardy, the many other aspects of the mission," Brom wrote.

Earlier last month, the bishop asked the 280 priests in the diocese to contribute one month's salary – about \$1,535 (£767) – to the "Embracing Our Mission" campaign.

The idea came from current priests who saw it as a gesture toward the 144 men and women who claimed they were abused by clergy and church workers when they were minors.

The average payout will be \$1.38 million (£690,000) per victim, according to the settlement announced last month.

This settlement was the second largest payout from any US diocese, though it is dwarfed by the \$660-million (£330-million) settlement reached by the archdiocese of Los Angeles in July.

Carry on up the Convents

A CONVENT in Italy is to be shut down after an unholy scrap among its last three inhabitants.

Relations among the sisters at Santa Clara in Bari became so bad last month that the convent's mother superior, Sister Liliana, ended up having hospital treatment for facial scratches, according to the ever-helpful *Ekklesia* website.

Ekklesia reported that only Sister Liliana now remains. She's said to have barricaded herself in and refuses to come out. She's written to Pope Ratzinger. She does not want the convent to be closed down.

The *Ekklesia* story continues:

"Sisters Annamaria and Gianbattista say they were driven to distraction by the nasty habits [sic] of their Mother Superior, Sister Liliana.

"They became so angry that during the summer they turned on her, allegedly scratching her face and throwing her to the ground.

"The two nuns have now moved into a nearby convent, leaving Sister Liliana barricaded inside. Despite the efforts of the Archbishop Giovanni Battista Pichierri to reconcile the three sisters he has been forced to call on the Vatican for help."

The *Freethinker* can now reveal that a secret Vatican radio station, *Santo Radio Scratchia Yur Eyes Outtia Italia*, recorded the last fight that brought this once tranquil and godly convent to such an ignominious pass. At enormous expense, the *Freethinker* has transcribed and translated the commentary from the side of the ring set up especially in the convent's Chapel of the Holy Sepulchre, where we joined the action ...

You join us now as Sister Liliana enters from the altar end, Sister Annamaria from the west end and Sister Gianbattista from the direction of the Chapel of Santa Pugilista di Scunthorpe. All three punch the air and snarl menacingly at each other, while calling on the Blessed Virgin Mary to come to their aid.

The bell goes for Round One, and Sister Annamaria has gone straight in for an uppercut to the jaw of the unsuspecting Sister Liliana and, oh, she's going for the wimple. She grabs Sister Liliana by the wimple and nuts her in the face. Will the referee, Archbishop Giovanni Battista Pichierri, stop the fight? No, he's signalling for the proceedings to . . . er, proceed.

The Wimple Whammer is a very controversial move and there've been calls for the Inter-Convent Biting and Scratching Board of Control to ban it.

Sister Gianbattista, though, has taken hold of Sister Annamaria now and she's - oh, no, she's tearing off her cassock to reveal the Barbarella catsuit underneath. What other surprises have these battling sisters got up their ...

A special report by Andy Armitage

But the bell has gone for the end of Round One just as Sister Liliana was about to knee Sister Gianbattista in the crotch. Saved by the bell, you might say.

And, as Sister Gianbattista is sponged down by an ageing monk with a wooden leg, she spits several teeth into the water bucket.

As the three sisters count their body parts, I've just got time to tell you that Pope Benedict XVI has had a wide-screen plasma TV specially flown in, and he and several cardinals are thought to be watching the bout with interest.

"I haff got a lot of dosh invested in Sister Liliana," the Pontiff told The Tablet. "If she loses it she vill haff to go to der Congregation of der Doctrine of der Faith und experience der thumbscrews."

The bell has gone for Round Two, and Sister Gianbattista is losing no time. She's pulled the cloth off a big table just outside the ring - the altar, yes, the altar - and is throttling Sister Liliana with it. But Sister Liliana won't be beaten. She's pulling her cilice off her thigh and gouging at Sister Gianbattista's eyes with the spikes.

And, oh, the referee Archbishop Giovanni Battista Pichierri, has stopped the fight just as Sister Annamaria has picked up a smoking thurible and is swinging it round her head like a mace. But using a cilice is an illegal move. The referee is huddled in a corner with offi-



In the hunt for an illustration for this report, we found The Fighting Nun on the Archie McPhee toy and gift website. It is described as 'our most popular punching puppet, and with good reason: she has a habit of fighting for what's right. This is no novice puncher: all you have to do is push the two levers under her habit with your fingers, and she comes out swinging ...' The company also sells a nun called Nunzilla. 'This fire-breathing wind-up sister trudges straight out of a Catholic-school student's nightmare like a determined disciplinary force, with green eyes blazing and sparks flying from her mouth. Wearing the traditional black and white habit and carrying a Bible in one hand and a ruler in the other, this holy terror will have you owning up to transgressions from as far back as birth ...'

cials now as the three nuns growl, snarl and hiss at each other across the ring.

The thurible is still gyrating menacingly.

Pichierri is moving back into the ring now and— Oh, he's declared a draw and ...

And that's where our commentary ended, when Sister Annamaria let go the thurible, sending it at high speed towards the commentator and his recording equipment.

Sister Gianbattista told the *Freethinker* after the bout: "I'm glad to be outta thatta stinkinga place, anyway. Liliana, she always leave her dirty knickers on the radiators and squeeze the toothpaste tube in the middle. And Sister Annamaria, she fart during mass."

A Vatican spokesman said: "It's a bugger."

• Shortly after Andy Armitage filed his report, we learned from *The Age*, Melbourne, that a little local difficulty had erupted at a convent in Poland.

According to a report by Matthew Day, a rebellion that pitted an order of Polish nuns against the might of the Vatican ended after police forced their way into their convent, evicting 64 people and arresting two.

With a battery of television cameras rolling, about 150 officers moved against the Sisters of Bethany after they refused to comply with a court order that they leave their convent in the small town of Kazimierz Dolny, south-east of Warsaw.

The eviction ended a revolt dating back to 2005 when the Vatican sacked the then mother superior, Jadwiga Ligocka, after she claimed she had had "private inspiration by the Holy Spirit". Attempts to replace her triggered the confrontation.

Loyal to their spiritual leader, the Bethany sisters locked the convent doors, cut themselves off from the world and failed to follow the Church's orders.

The rebels refused to comply with the Vatican's demands, even when 10 of them were defrocked and the diocese banned the administration of the sacrament in the convent.

Faced with excommunication, they adopted a siege mentality, hired security guards, changed the locks on the gates and shunned all outside contact.

Cut off from the Catholic Church and without electricity, the women had to rely on food parcels brought by well-wishers and family members.

Officers used a ladder to scale the convent wall after the women refused to unlock the gates. While some of the black-habited rebels sang religious songs and played guitars, others hurled abuse and swore, police said.

The former mother superior and a renegade monk, Roman Komarczyko, whom police described as "very aggressive", were arrested.

Speaking on behalf of the Polish Church, Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek admitted that the affair had damaged the church but added that it had been left with no choice but eviction. "It was the last resort that nobody wanted," he said, "but we had to do it."

The truth about Baden-Powell and

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the Boy Scout movement, an event now being celebrated. Legend has it that it was started by the Boer War hero Lord Baden-Powell. But was it? And what sort of man was B-P?

When Lord Baden-Powell died in Kenya in 1941, he was known throughout the world and almost universally acclaimed as one of the “greatest benefactors” of humankind. As founder of the Boy Scouts he had been showered during his own lifetime with the highest honours – civilian orders from numerous countries, a peerage, honorary degrees from six universities (including both Oxford and Cambridge), the freedom of the city of London, as well as the Order of Merit, and had it not been for the Second World War, he would certainly have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Few men have received such universal acclaim. His public image was that of a warm, jolly, considerate man, exuding tolerance and goodwill, and, in spite of his bare knees and a little eccentricity, a personality to be admired and respected. It thus seems almost sacrilege to suggest anything that might mar such an estimable reputation. But the evidence suggests that Baden-Powell was something of a fake and a charlatan.

One of the many biographical studies of Baden-Powell is entitled *The Wolf That Never Sleeps*. This is a translation, given by B-P himself, of the Ndebele word *impeesa*. We are told, again by B-P himself, that this was the name given to him by the Matabele people during the 1896 campaign in the Motopo Hills near Bulawayo – one of the many colonial affrays that went to make the British empire. It is a revealing translation. Actually, the word means *hyena* and it would be difficult to find in the Ndebele language a more abusive or insulting word. For the hyena, as in other African cultures, is associated with witchcraft, deceit and evil intent. What this innocent translation indicates is that B-P's whole personality was tinged with a guile and a craftiness that was quite unique. For B-P, with characteristic adroitness, if not deceit, makes it sound as if the Ndebele were actually paying him a compliment!

Tim Jeal's well-known biography of Baden-Powell was largely an attempt to defend the integrity of the Boer War hero, to present a “balanced” portrait – between the early biographers like William Hillcourt who tended to depict Baden-Powell as a saint and a hero, and his later detractors, specifically Piers Brendon and Michael Rosenthal. Yet even Jeal, who at times is almost sycophantic towards B-P, cannot help but indicate that Baden-Powell was

ruthless, vain, crafty, devious, often a liar, and in his dealings with the artist-naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton, thoughtless and none too scrupulous. This, as we shall see, is a mild way of putting it.

Baden-Powell was certainly no hero, for all recent studies of the Mafeking episode and Baden-Powell's other activities during the South African war seem to indicate that he was something of an incompetent.

BRIAN MORRIS examines the life of a 'devious, authoritarian imperialist'

Highly imaginative and full of tricks, yes; but hardly the great hero or military strategist. Brian Gardner's study of Mafeking (1966) had already damaged his reputation as a hero; more recent studies depict him in even more sinister light. For in order to save the garrison B-P commandeered all the food for the white population, giving Africans the choice of starvation in the town or dispersal on the veldt – where around a thousand died through lack of food, mainly women and children. Starving Africans were flogged or shot for stealing food during the siege, while caviar was being served in the Mafeking hotel.

Yet the studies of Piers Brendon and Tim Jeal, though containing some penetrating observations on B-P's personality – or should it be “persona”? – seem somewhat apologetic in surveying Baden-Powell's hardly creditable military career and thoroughly reactionary outlook. They seem to want to excuse B-P for his misdeeds and attitudes. This is done by suggesting that B-P was no worse than his contemporaries, that he was somewhat naive when it came to politics, and that he was somewhat of a perennial schoolboy.

B-P's racism, war-mongering and anti-democratic attitudes are depicted, even ridiculed, but hardly censored. And they seem to conclude that whatever his faults, early misdeeds and eccentricities, no one can deny Baden-Powell the credit for creating the largest and most flourishing youth movement in the world.

Yet this was B-P's greatest con of all. For anyone who examines the historical record, or even looks at Ernest Thompson Seton's booklet *Birch Bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians*, will come to realise that B-P appropriated, in a devious fashion and without acknowledgement, all the essential ideas of the American artist-naturalist. Brendon's suggestion that B-P was strongly influenced by Seton is an understatement; B-P simply pinched Seton's ideas.

But before examining this issue, let us look at B-P's philosophy of life, and the social

“reality” that lay behind the jolly exterior.

First, B-P was not a man of peace. The suggestion that he may, had it not been for the Second World War, have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize is ironic in the extreme when one examines his record and his social values. What did B-P consider the greatest “sport” in the world? Apparently espionage and soldiering, or “man-hunting” as he described it. Nothing gave him more excitement and enjoyment than active war service, which is why he found his Matabele experiences so rewarding. Looking back over his life he records, in his autobiographical *Lessons for the Varsity of Life* (1933), the exhilaration and emotional satisfaction, the glorious feelings, he got from military service. But more than this, he advocated the army as *the* training ground for the virtues he admired, and these of course are all the military virtues – loyalty, courage, patriotism, self-discipline, obedience and sense of duty; not, we may note, knowledge, self-expression, humility, human well-being, reciprocity and love.

Is it to be wondered then that he quotes from Kaiser Wilhelm II – a genial man, “full of wise sayings” – and Machiavelli in his autobiography, and relates stories about his old friend “Maori” Brown, whose only claim to fame was that he went around killing the “natives” and liked to be photographed standing over one of them with a bayonet. When in later years B-P suggested friendly interchanges between the Scouts and the Hitler Youth, this was consonant with the kind of philosophy he espoused.

Coupled with this militarist outlook and its anti-intellectual accompaniment was an intense nationalism which had marked racist overtones and which runs counter to the public image that the man fostered. In reality B-P was neither an internationalist nor a humanist, let alone a socialist or a pacifist, but rather a staunch and bigoted imperialist. In fact, he was almost a reincarnation of one of Henty's heroes. The famous book *Scouting for Boys* (1908) is essentially a book of right-wing political propaganda, or, as Samuel Hynes puts it, a “crude and insistent expression of Tory imperialism” (*The Edwardian Turn of Mind*, 1968). It expresses B-P's concern for national unity, his social imperialist outlook (which he shared with Roberts, Beresford and Meath), and his impassioned defence of the British Empire which permeates almost every page of the book. In his concern for national unity, B-P was not only extremely disparaging about democratic procedures, but he clearly saw the rise of socialism as a threat to “class unity”. He therefore denounced trade union leaders as “professional agitators” and described socialist ideas as “extreme” or utopian. As for his

and the Boy Scouts

racism, this is evident in many of his writings, particularly his travel books.

Given B-P's imperialism and motivations in founding the Scout movement – the effective maintenance of the British Empire – it is hardly surprising that the Boy Scout movement today embodies Baden-Powell's essential ideas in being immensely nationalistic. What other voluntary organisation supports the state and the monarchy with such fervour? Who but a Scout knows the history and composition of the Union Flag? The Scout law and promise, with its stress on obedience and loyalty and duty, clearly reflects B-P's patriotic and reactionary credo.

He was quite unable to accept that any decent person could be an atheist – atheism being highlighted as one of the 'rocks' to avoid when 'paddling your canoe' through life

Linked with this, and representing a third aspect of B-P's philosophy, is the strong authoritarian attitude that runs through his writings. "A Scout obeys orders without question", is one of the Scout laws. B-P was generally sceptical of individual self-expression or any freedom of thought. For him the State always took priority over the individual. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Scout movement is a very undemocratic institution; its council, constituted by Royal Charter, has autocratic control, and there are no procedures or electoral system through which the rank and file can channel their views. At the troop level, too, the mode of organisation, as B-P intended, is basically authoritarian, the *scoutmaster* being a kind of benevolent dictator ruling through his patrol leaders. A stress on hierarchy is naturally associated with the cultivation of the military virtues, and by discipline B-P meant "patient obedience to authority".

Finally, given the close association between the State and religious institutions, it is not surprising that B-P was a highly religious man, in a rather orthodox sense. Again, his reputation for broad-minded tolerance in religious matters is something of a facade. Indeed, one only has to read his chapter on "irreligion" in *Rovering to Success* to realise how narrow-minded and bigoted he could be. He was quite unable to accept that any decent person could

be an atheist – atheism being highlighted as one of the "rocks" to avoid when "paddling your canoe" through life – the others being "horses" (gambling), "wine", "women" (sexual relations outside marriage) and "cuckoos and humbugs" (that is, socialists and intellectuals).

So between B-P's moral pronouncements and his own life – which embodied his philosophy – there is a wide gulf. "A Scout is a friend to animals" is another Scout law, yet a whole chapter of B-P's autobiography is devoted to describing how he stalked and killed everything from woodcock in Albanian woods to lions on the African veldt, and it includes a spirited defence of both pig-sticking and fox-hunting.

In summary, B-P's political and moral philosophy can be described as militarist, imperialist and authoritarian – almost fascist.

Although Baden-Powell was indeed a cagey opportunist, if it had not been for the Mafeking episode he would probably have ended his days as a retired and relatively obscure army officer. As it was, he suddenly found himself a national hero at the age of 43.

It is to his credit that he sought to put his fame to the service of youth, although it is clear, as Brendon suggests, that the army found him a bit of an embarrassment.

The initial stimulus came from William Smith of the Boy's Brigade, who invited B-P to attend some of the Brigade's annual inspections. B-P was evidently impressed by these displays, and in 1906 he sent a paper to Brigade headquarters with suggestions for a "scouting" badge. But the real stimulus came later in the same year when B-P met Ernest Thompson Seton, who was in Britain promoting his Woodcraft Indians organisation. B-P was even more impressed by what he learned about Seton's ideas on outdoor education. Seton, who at that time was a very popular writer of animal stories, had begun around 1900 holding nature camps for boys on his Cos Cob estate, Connecticut. As these became more successful Seton began to formulate a programme of activities and a mode of organisation for an outdoor movement for children.

The first public announcement of the organisation was in a series of articles in the influential *Ladies' Home Journal*, beginning in May 1902. The articles achieved wide popularity, and bands of Seton or Woodcraft Indians sprang up spontaneously in many parts of the United States. In 1906 Seton published *The Birch Bark Roll of the*



Lord Baden-Powell, a 'cagey opportunist' whose philosophy bordered on the fascist

Woodcraft Indians, giving an outline of the organisation, a programme of outdoor games and activities (focusing on camp craft and nature study), and a system of badges based on set standards. The organisation was based on American Indian ideals, and the camps were organised along tribal lines, very much like an Indian encampment. Seton had sent B-P a copy of his handbook, and at their meeting had told him all about his youth organisation.

B-P realised that here was an idea of great potential. He sent Seton a copy of his own booklet *Aids to Scouting*, and in an accompanying letter, remarked that "our principles seem practically identical". In fact they weren't; but the important point is, that whereas Seton in 1906 had already had a carefully worked-out plan for an outdoor movement for children, B-P had formed nothing substantial, having merely a vague idea of introducing the scouting programme he had used in the army as a supplementary aid to existing boys' organisations. Anyway, the two men agreed informally to cooperate and share ideas: the launching of a new outdoor movement for boys was seemingly to be a joint enterprise.

The birth of the Boy Scout movement is well known. After holding an experimental camp on Brownsea Island in the summer of 1907 – an event celebrated this year – B-P brought out the following year *Scouting for Boys* in six fort-

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nightly parts. It received an electric response throughout Britain. By September 1908, 100,000 boys had enrolled as Scouts. The product of an era rather than a man, the rapidly growing organisation was finally controlled by B-P, and the shape it eventually assumed was largely moulded by the outlook and philosophy of this one man. It differed radically from the type of nature movement that Seton had envisaged and founded.

The difference was that Baden-Powell, unlike Seton, was an able administrator, and he quickly gained the support of many influential men and of the Establishment generally. Particularly important was the support of the promoter of the Boy Scout scheme. A staunch imperialist like B-P, Pearson guaranteed the movement financially for a year, and gave the organisation maximum publicity through his newspapers. Taken together, Pearson's financial support, B-P's organising ability and guile, his charismatic presence as the hero of Mafeking, and Seton's woodcraft programme guaranteed the success of the new movement.

Yet when you subtract from *Scouting for Boys* the political tracts on the Empire and patriotism, the moralistic discourses on religion, continence, discipline and the duties of the citizen, the anecdotes about B-P's own colonial experiences – and all this constitutes a greater part of the book – and when you focus on the core of the book dealing with the organisational framework of the future outdoor youth movement, it is clear that B-P has taken over all the essential principles of Seton's woodcraft scheme. These are worth enumerating, as Seton explicitly outlined them in the *Birch Bark Roll* long before the Boy Scouts came into existence:

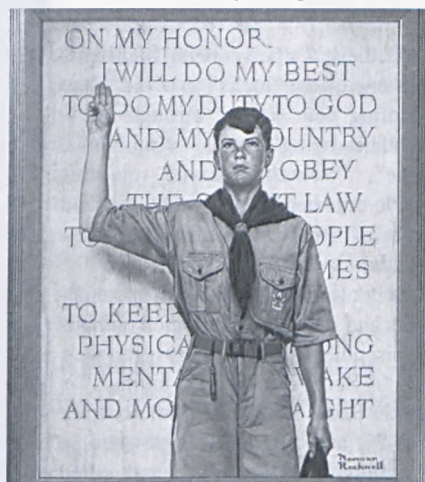
The movement was to be purely recreational and concerned with conservation, camping and outdoor life: there was to be self-government by the children with adult guidance; a focus would be made on campfire ceremonial; there was to be a system of badges with accompanying totemic symbolism; there would be a ten-point written code for camp life, and woodcraft pursuits would be centred on outdoor athletics, scouting, wood lore, and nature study; there was to be an emulation of the American Indian with an emphasis on art, dancing, romance and the picturesque.

What B-P essentially did was to take this woodcraft programme and re-fashion it to his own ends – without acknowledging the source of his ideas. He does mention Seton a few times in *Scouting for Boys*, describing him as the head of the Red Indian Boy Scouts in America, and suggesting in his devious way that Seton had already founded a somewhat "similar" organisation that was having a "full and widespread success", giving the erroneous impression that all the ideas expressed in the book were his own.

But in the process of appropriating and adapting Seton's woodcraft organisation B-P made several fundamental changes. First,

Lord Baden-Powell

(Continued from p9)



Norman Rockwell's depiction of an American boy scout

Seton's aims – the promotion of interest in nature, conservation and wildlife and good fellowship – were discarded and "woodcraft" became merely a "means" to an end, and that end was the effective maintenance of the British Empire and capitalist hegemony.

Second, given this aim – "good citizenship" – B-P infused into the programme a militarist and authoritarian ethos entirely foreign to Seton's scheme. This emphasis is apparent to anyone who reads *Scouting for Boys*, where B-P writes that "we ought not to think so much of any boy unless he can *shoot and drill and scout*". Seton's camp laws were then re-drafted as positive affirmations reflecting B-P's conservative outlook, stressing such virtues as honour, loyalty, duty, courtesy and obedience.

Duty to God and the State, accepted through a solemn oath, became a prerequisite for membership – something quite alien to Seton's socialist outlook. The authoritarian "patrol system" replaced Seton's democracy: scoutmasters replaced "medicine men" – and were to be addressed as "Sir" rather than by a woodcraft name – and the Scout camps largely continued to follow the pattern of the Boys' Brigade and army camps with their morning inspections, flag-raising and regimentation. Most of Seton's practical ideas – the camp games and the badge system, for instance – B-P simply took and re-named. Anything not consistent with his own militarist outlook was ignored, and it is of interest that the only dance that B-P mentions in his book was a war dance that he had witnessed amongst the Zulu.

Third, B-P rejected entirely Seton's ideal type – the American Indian. It has been suggested by scout historians that this was a serious handicap and limitation to Seton's programme, and that if B-P had adopted it the Scouts would not have become a worldwide movement. It has also been said that he had a wide first-hand knowledge of "primitive" peoples and did not blind himself to their supposed virtues. This interpretation leaves out

some crucial points. First, B-P's admiration of pre-literate peoples, like most of his colonial contemporaries, was restricted to lauding their tracking abilities and their martial qualities.

B-P, as his travel books indicate, took little interest in and had little knowledge of the culture and customs of the tribal peoples he harassed. To him they were "hostile savages", and some of his writings have a decidedly racial slant.

Fourth, the ideal type that B-P advocated – the backwoodsman or the "pioneer civilising a savage country so that it becomes a colony for our Empire" – though an exact antithesis of Seton's ideal, is every bit as romantic and limiting as Seton's American Indian, and morally hardly more estimable. B-P's model for the Scouts was the colonial – the white man was the precursor and forerunner of capitalism.

This ideal is apparent in all his writings, and the sort of man B-P himself was and advocated can be seen as embodied in this type – a muscular Christianity, a distrust of intellectuals, and an emphasis on self-abnegation and stoicism with the allied virtues of pluck, self-reliance, endurance and duty. But the important point is that B-P never put much emphasis on romance and the picturesque; his approach, in contrast to Seton, was dull and prosaic, for he was essentially a pragmatist. "Woodcraft" was simply the means to political ends and shouldn't be taken too seriously. Thus what eventually came to be known as the Boy Scout movement was in no sense Seton's creation, and though Seton was for five years the Chief Scout of America he was eventually ousted from the organisation, largely because he took a pacifist and "unpatriotic" stand during the First World War.

The truth then about B-P was that he was not the true founder of the Boy Scout movement, but rather appropriated, without acknowledgement, all the key elements of Seton's woodcraft movement and gave them new labels and meanings. A good idea, as Seton once remarked, was put to a bad use. In the process B-P chose to ignore or obliterate the source of his ideas. Whether he did so deliberately, for B-P was an extremely devious individual, or whether he felt he was developing his own embryonic thoughts, it is difficult to say. But I think Paul Wilkinson is close to the truth when he remarked in an article on "English Youth Movements" (*Journal of Contemporary History*, 1969) that what B-P essentially did was to combine the timeless quality of woodcraft and outdoor scouting which derived largely from Seton with social imperialism, fashionable at the turn of the century, which was represented by Pearson.

But it remains highly ironic that 100 years later we are encouraged to pay homage to Baden-Powell whose personal life and philosophy are hardly worth emulation, and cannot even be credited with founding the movement whose anniversary is being celebrated.

IN SPIRIT I left the Irish chapter of the Roman Catholic Church sometime in my early teens. Too many times afterwards I found myself physically at church in reluctant body – a victim of an oppressive orthodoxy that permeated the fabric of family and community life. To reject the apparent absurdities spoken every Sunday in church – and every day in the rosary on the kitchen floor – was to puncture not just the family heart but the very fabric of reality itself. The parting was therefore a long and painful one.

I am now 48, and recently I attended a non-requiem Mass for the first time since the 1970s. What drove me to distraction as a teenage rebel at Mass then was the collective and obedient unthought of the congregation before things that seemed utterly and obviously preposterous – a profound questioning of reality that all but drove me mad because it was so central to lived reality. My return, with a friend, on the outskirts of Belfast down the road from Purdysburn mental hospital, was both a token of how far I'd travelled psychologically and a toe in the post-relativist waters of religious belief. In an age of belief in belief, of faith fed on the oxygen of "respect" and relativism – and sometimes extraordinary apologetics for faith on the part of apparent atheists – I wondered whether I would "understand" (or even respect) what I saw and heard. Or indeed what it might feel like to try to "believe" at some level or other.

Over 30 years later, there it was again: people *en masse* enrapt by unmitigated daftness, ritually shriven of thought. Yet there were new questions: "do they really believe it?"; "aren't they happier going along with this stuff?"; and "why do you have to take everything so seriously?". Oh, and of course, "so what if it's a load of baloney?"

Some things had changed – things that seemed important back in the swinging decades. Children were seen and heard – so much so that I couldn't hear much of the proceedings. But then we knew the words anyway. Small children clutched things to keep their interest – *Thomas the Tank* books to read there and then, or DVDs they were promised they could watch once they got the Mass over and done with. Where once only the priest's ordained hands could touch the host (which was administered to the worshipper's mouth and doubly protected by a platen and by a long run of cloth folded over the altar and our human hands), a bunch of ordinary people emerged from the congregation and started handing out the hosts to the rest of them – either to the mouth or on the hand. And many of them were women.

The gospel was, remarkably, a "difficult" passage – Jesus said "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already! ... Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on a household of five will be divided: three against two and two

Losing my Religion

against three; the father against the son, son against father ..." In the Penitential Rite of the Mass Jesus had just been told by these good Belfast folk that he "came to reconcile us". I was interested to find out how the priest would explain Jesus' declared appetite for conflict and destruction – but instead he gave up his sermon to a member of the congregation, who took the altar to talk about his experiences on a lay retreat programme.

This piece by PETER McKENNA has prompted the *Freethinker* to relaunch a series run in 2000. It was then called *My Atheism* and ran for 18 months.

Since then we have gained many more new readers, and would like to offer them a chance to describe their journey, in around 750 words, from faith to scepticism. Please send your contributions, along with a photograph (optional) to: Losing My Religion, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD, or email it to fteditor@aol.com

No need for answers, as nobody was going to ask questions, or even think that it mattered one way or another. At the church gates after mass the talk would be of absent friends, of the week gone by, neighbourhood developments and other social tittle-tattle – nobody would even dream of talking about the day's gospel. Members of the congregation collected cash and offered the basket of cash along with the bread and wine – holding the basket aloft while genuflecting to the tabernacle. I think the money for the clergy has always been part of the holy sacrifice, but the doctrine's practical archness had never struck me so graphically.

And then the highlight of the proceedings – the bread and wine were imperceptibly turned into the body and blood of Jesus, then consumed by the congregation. Indeed, having taken delivery of the glittering prize, many people headed straight for the door.

As a boy, trying to believe the doctrine of transubstantiation created a strong sense of metaphysical displacement. All the ripples around this preposterous stone threatened a maelstrom of unreality: this is not my understanding of reality, yet it is that of everybody close to me. One could not safely question such things. And even now, in today's world, the idea of "respect" for religion casts questioning as rude, probably for similar reasons.

(What boor would want to go round picking holes in a highly delicate fabric that redefined reality?) And there is probably an appealing simplicity and peace in not questioning anything laid down by those in authority. Why would anyone want to question such simplicity? Indeed, I could not go up to any of these people and ask whether they really believed that the substance of the bread and wine had just been miraculously converted into the body, blood and soul of the whole Christ? Perhaps that would be rude, when you know perfectly well that they cannot really believe that, but say they do. I could be the little boy who whispers that the Emperor has nothing on – who, while realising it to be true, would probably, as in the fairytale, simply have completed the procession with his head held high. There is a guise of profundity in the doctrine of transubstantiation – power over the substance of things, what things are in themselves, rather than what they appear to be – that is challenging and says firmly that it is not to be meddled with. Yet I had a disturbing feeling that these people were not taking life seriously – that they were denying real life in favour of an imaginary one, betraying our common humanity to rank meaninglessness.

How much this was driven by a deep inner fear of mortality ("Make us worthy to share in eternal life with Mary, the virgin Mother of God") I could not guess; nor how much by a social bonding akin to the manic football chant ("Before the nations he has bared his holy arm: our God reigns, our God reigns"). Yet it seemed to be a deliberate rejection, certainly of the intellect, but also of the mind – an agreement to suspend disbelief in a fabulous narrative, the better to shelter from the hard questions of existence.

There is a comfort to be had in un-thought, in missing out the how for a certain why: it seems at times that those who accept things as they are told rather than as they are, are at home in the world, in this life; yet ultimately they are not – and, one suspects that they suspect that they are not. But it doesn't pay to be too conscious. Who speaks of the big things – existence, time, death? "All life, all holiness comes from you through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord". It was the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time, and we prayed that the love of God would "raise us beyond what we see". One day with God is, apparently, worth a thousand without him. The value of things that are real has been sold for a pittance – the present moment cruelly sacrificed to harkings for a mythical past and a fantastic future beyond this, our exile.

• Peter McKenna has launched an internet blog in which he is keeping watch on hate speech directed at apostates. You can view it at <http://apostophonywatch.blogspot.com/>

Peter invites *Freethinker* readers to visit his site and send him examples of apostates being threatened. Submissions can be sent to him at pemix@gmail.com.

Why agnosticism is indefensible

"AGNOSTICISM holds that reason and the best scientific evidence do not allow one to reach a decisive conclusion regarding the existence of God." That statement is clear proof that agnosticism is indefensible. While Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and others agree that the existence of "gods" cannot be disproven, the same is not true of "God."

God is the protagonist of the fantasy novel known as the Bible, and is by definition possessed of the qualities that the novel's authors attribute to him, qualities, such as the ability to create a number that is more than ten but less than nine, that cannot and therefore do not exist. To say that it is not possible to reach a decisive conclusion about God's existence, even though the only testimony that he/she/it does exist is confined to a book that also assures its readers that the earth is flat (among 19,000 other demonstrably false statements), is like saying that it is impossible to reach a decisive conclusion about Lemuel Gulliver's existence after recognizing that *Gulliver's Travels* is permeated with fantasy concepts incompatible with non-fiction. The probability that gods, or entities we would identify as gods, exist is vanishingly small. The probability that God (or Gulliver) exists is zero.

The Agnostic Reader is a chronologically ordered collection of essays by professed agnostics, starting with Thomas Huxley. How well I can epitomize these essays, ranging from six to 28 pages, with brief excerpts, the reader will have to decide. Keep in mind that my reasons for objecting to the continuing use of the word "agnostic" do not apply to a time when religion had not yet been fully falsified.

Thomas Huxley (1889): "It is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty". "There are many topics about which I know nothing; and which, so far as I can see, are out of reach of my faculties. But whether these things are knowable by anyone else is exactly one of those matters which is beyond my knowledge, though I may have a tolerably strong opinion as to the probabilities of the case".

Edgar Fawcett (1889): "Rationalism owes a debt of gratitude to him who coined the word 'agnostic.' Previously there had been only 'infidel' and 'atheist,' and one or two other similar terms, all irate bayonets pointed at the very teeth of orthodoxy ... The average type of agnostic has reached his present position through the help of reason, and therefore he cannot be expected to abandon the power which has made him what he is".

Clarence Darrow (1929): "An agnostic is a doubter. The word is generally applied to those who doubt the verity of accepted religious creeds or faiths ... In a popular way, in the Western world, an agnostic is one who doubts or disbelieves the main tenets of the Christian faith".

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews
***The Agnostic Reader*, edited by**
S T Joshi, 2007, Prometheus
Books, ISBN 978-1-59102-533-7,
386 pp, ppb, \$21.

Bertrand Russell (1953): "An agnostic is a man who thinks that it is impossible to know the truth in the matters such as God and a future life with which the Christian and other religions are concerned. Or, if not for ever impossible, at any rate impossible at present". "I think that if I heard a voice from the sky predicting all that was going to happen to me during the next twenty-four hours, including events that would have seemed highly improbable, and if all these events then proceeded to happen, I might perhaps be convinced at least of the existence of some super-human intelligence. I can imagine other evidence of the same sort which might convince me, but so far as I know no such evidence exists".

Those are all of the essays written to explain and justify the author's agnosticism. Other sections include *The Critical Study of Religion* (4 essays), *Agnosticism and Science* (4 essays), *The Deficiencies of Religion* (3 essays), *Christianity in Decline* (4 essays), and *The Agnostic Way of Life* (3 essays). One excerpt from each section, or two for the section that includes Isaac Asimov and Albert Einstein, should be sufficient.

David Friedrich Strauss (1846): "Let us transplant ourselves among other religious communities; the believing Mohammedan is of opinion that truth is contained in the Koran alone, and that the greater portion of our Bible is fabulous; the Jew of the present day, whilst admitting the truth and divine origin of the Old Testament, rejects the New.... But which community is right? Not all, for this is impossible, since the assertion of each excludes the others".

Albert Einstein (1941): "The idea of the existence of an omnipotent, just and omnibenevolent personal God ... is accessible to the most undeveloped mind. But ... if this being is omnipotent then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also his work.... In giving out punishment and rewards He would to a certain extent

be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to Him?".

Isaac Asimov (1981): "By ancient tradition, the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses.... Modern scholars are convinced that this theory of authorship is not tenable and that the early books of the Bible are not the single work of any man, and certainly not of Moses". "Since the Bible and science both state that heaven and earth had a beginning, does this represent a point of agreement between them? Yes, of course – but it is a trivial agreement. There is an enormous difference between the biblical statement of beginning and the scientific statement of beginning".

Arthur Schopenhauer (1889): "In the Christian system the devil is a personage of the greatest importance. God is described as absolutely good, wise and powerful; and unless he were counterbalanced by the devil, it would be impossible to see where the innumerable and measureless evils, which predominate in the world, come from, if there were no devil to account for them. And since the Rationalists have done away with the devil, the damage inflicted on the other side has gone on growing.... The fact is, you cannot take away one pillar from a building without endangering the rest of it".

Walter Lippmann (1929): "The attempts to reconstruct religious creeds are beset by the modern man's inability to convince himself that the constitution of the universe includes facts which in our skeptical jargon we call supernatural. It is a nice question whether the use of God's name is not misleading when it is applied by modernists to ideas so remote from the God men have worshiped. Plainly the modernist churchman does not believe in the God of Genesis".

H L Mencken (1927): "Is the skeptic ever happy, in the sense that a man who believes that God is watching over him is happy? Privately, I often doubt it.... The happiest people in the world, accepting this definition of happiness, are probably Christian Scientists—that is, until they come down with appendicitis or gallstones".

All of the foregoing writers called themselves agnostics, mainly because they lived at a time when "atheism" was considered as dogmatic as fundamentalist theism. The word continues to be viewed pejoratively even by liberal believers. It should be abandoned, for the same reason the word "nigger" was abandoned even though it meant nothing more than "black." As long as calling someone a "nigger" or an "atheist" is seen as a put-down, the word serves no useful function. "Agnostic," although not pejorative, likewise serves no useful function. There are only two positions one can take in connection with religion: one can be a theist, meaning that he has a religious belief, or a nontheist, meaning that he does not have a religious belief. All attempts to add a third category, or subdivide the second, are pointless hairsplitting.

The notion of blasphemy is absurd – but it has to be taken seriously

BLASPHEMY is to be taken very seriously – and many blasphemers have. It was my concern for free speech in the region of religion that led me to sit through the trial of *Gay News* in 1977. The trial for publishing an allegedly blasphemous poem suggesting that Jesus was gay was presided over by Justice Alan Hamilton, who had announced before the case started that homosexuality was a cause of the decline of the Roman Empire. The private prosecution was won and blasphemy law upheld.

I felt it equally important to take part in a reading of the poem on the steps of the church of St Martin in the Fields on the 25th anniversary of the trial – illustrated with a photograph in this book.

David Nash takes blasphemy seriously, too. He is a historian whose earlier book on blasphemy in modern Britain has here been enlarged to cover Europe, America and Australia. It gives an analysis of the development of blasphemy from the middle ages to the modern world. He brings a wealth of material of heretical and anti-Christian instances and also brings to his study some fascinating theoretical ideas which underplay the development of anti-religious moments.

Nash gives a broad description of blasphemy – “the attacking, wounding, and damaging of religious belief”. The British legal usage would be much narrower, involving vilification of Christ and seen entirely in the Anglican context. He elaborates his definition: “Blasphemy is a manifestation of what people think about their God and the sacred. It is also a display of power, a crime, and a species of flawed and social interaction transgressing norms of manners and acceptable behaviour.”

Nash's definition enables him to give a full examination of anti-religious criticism for nearly 1000 years; and his decision to stick to the Christian world leads to cover of Europe (not much on Eastern Europe) and the USA and Australia (nothing on Latin America). This limit to his subject means that Islam is barely touched upon – and key disputes such as the *Satanic Verses* affair and the fracas over the Sikh play *Bezhti* are not covered in great detail. The Common Law of blasphemy remains in this country, but the call for it to be replaced by a law prohibiting incitement to religious hatred has been loud though very narrowly defeated in Parliament.

A key aspect of his work is the discussion and demonstration of how heresy morphed

into blasphemy. From the middle ages to the early modern world heresy trials dealt with religious dissent. Some were minor cases of drunken insult to religion, some were more serious anti-theological positions where the punishment could be removal of the tongue. Nash is particularly good at finding examples which can fascinate and instruct.

JIM HERRICK reviews
Blasphemy in the Christian World: a History by David Nash (Oxford University Press, £35 hardback, 270 pp).

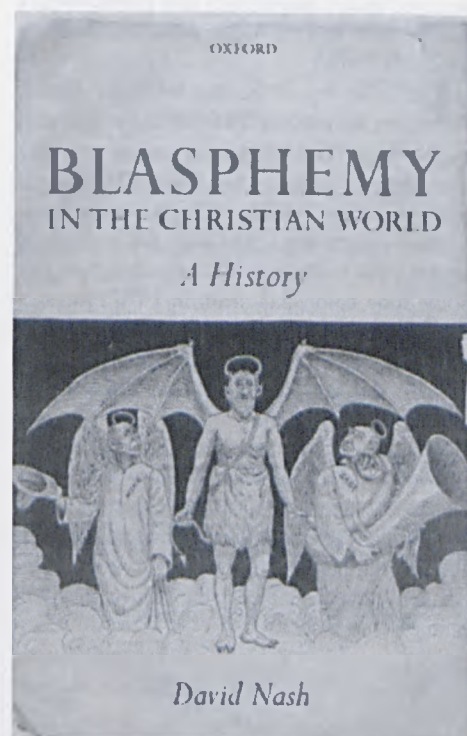
Some historians' view is that periods of rapid change and unrest lead to an increase of anti-religious behaviour.

It is the development of individual autonomy, partly through the Reformation, that brings about that individualism and that individual relationship with God, which is liable to bring about blasphemy rather than the wider social phenomenon of heresy. The idea that there is a threat to the cohesion of society is an important view in the understanding of both heresy and blasphemy. It is interesting that the menace to social cohesion was seen as a threat by Mary Whitehouse. (Nash rightly sees her as a formidable and personable woman – not the old bag of the cartoons.)

The renowned 17th-century Judge Hale made a statement of longstanding influence: “Christianity is a parcel of the laws of England; and therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law”. This was altered by the 19th century Justice Coleridge to a concept of the “manner” of the offending article and the “intention to hurt”.

The more liberal world of the 19th and 20th centuries was the context for the slow removal of “blasphemy” to being an offence against freedom of speech rather than against God. In many cases the crime of blasphemy slithered into the crime of obscenity.

A particularly interesting aspect of Nash's book is the examination of the people who blasphemed and of the views of those who tried to protect society from anti-religious material. For instance, the Society for the Suppression of Vice formed in the early 19th century led to prosecutions of people such as Carlyle. The title of a society existing now in Saudi Arabia is the Commission for the Propagation of Virtue



and the Prevention of Vice.

There is a fascinating chapter on blasphemy in film concentrating particularly on *The Life of Brian* and the video *Visions of Ecstasy* – which depicted St Teresa in a mildly erotic sequence, which was thought by the film censor to be blasphemous. I cannot see that either of these would be likely to damage social cohesion.

Nash looks at theories of control of society by Foucault and changing sociological views of secularisation, but many readers will find the greatest interest in the wealth of historical examples which crowd this book – including the blasphemy trial of our very own G W Foote. The book is lucid and with both depth and width.

The book concludes with a quotation from the famous American freethinker, Ingersoll: “There is a law higher than men can make. The fact is they exist in this poor world – the absolute consequences of certain facts – they are above all. And this higher law is the breath of progress, the very outstretched wings of civilisation, under which we enjoy the freedom we have. Keep that in your minds.”

I keep it in my mind, but cannot share its optimistic view of progress: I fear that laws relating to religious hate in some form or another will come in across the world with strength and cause us to stop our tongues – unless we want them cut out.

Historicity of Jesus

MAY I say that I found it distinctly odd that William Harwood (July, 2007) and Stuart Campbell (Oct 2007) should both write so confidently and knowledgeably about the historical Jesus when the man regarded as the greatest Christian theologian of the 20th century declared quite categorically and unequivocally that we have no knowledge whatever about the historical Jesus.

I am referring to the late Professor Rudolf Bultmann, the eminent German theologian who taught New Testament Studies at Marburg University in Germany for almost 30 years, and who also wrote a number of books on the inter-connection between Christianity and mythology (eg his 1960 book *Jesus Christ and Mythology*). Some time before his death in 1976 Professor Bultmann was on record as saying:

"When I ask myself what do we know about the life and personality of Jesus, the answer must be: simply nothing!"

We can only conclude, therefore, that Messrs Harwood and Campbell must have had access to early 1st-century Christian sources about Jesus which were clearly unknown and unavailable to one of the most learned and distinguished New Testament scholars of the 20th century. Odd indeed!

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Gwent

Nudity

IN today's climate of paranoia regarding images of children, the photograph of naked youngsters on a nudist beach which appeared in August's *Freethinker* made a refreshing change. It was relevant to the article it accompanied and treated its subjects with respect. No-one was harmed, there were no victims and no crime was committed.

Yet I'm certain that such nakedness would be censored by all current mass-circulation newspapers and magazines, no doubt thinking the children needed to be "protected" somehow and fearing a hysterical reaction if it was printed. So to publish this photograph seems a particularly bold decision, in the true spirit of freethinking. The editor deserves high praise.

R M ATKINSON
Edinburgh

Hell

YOUR Catholic correspondent Andrew Harvey (*Points of View*, September) like Pope Benedict XVI and the late Pope John Paul II does not believe that all non-Christians inevitably go to Hell.

Let me quote another Catholic, Thomas Merton: "Our ideas about God tell us much more about ourselves than they do about God" (*New Seeds of Contemplation*). Of course the Rev Richard Turnbull's view that 95 percent of Britons are hell-bound unless they accept the gospel of Jesus is "vile" and "morally obnoxious".

But whether Mr Harvey likes it or not, it is firmly bible-based. Like millions of others

who call themselves Christian, Mr Harvey is accepting those parts of the bible he likes and rejecting those he doesn't.

It's an intellectually impossible position to put yourself in. The late Pope Paul VI, quoted in *The Tablet* (September 18, 1971) spoke of "... the terrible truth of a possible eternal punishment, called Hell, about which Christ minced no words."

If Mr Harvey prefers the words of Popes Benedict and John Paul to Pope Paul, fair enough. But intellectual honesty demands he cannot really dismiss the latter's as I feel he might.

RAY MCDOWELL
Co Antrim

Socialism

I WOULD just like to say to Diesel Balaam that in order to criticise socialism he first needs to understand it. Karl Marx wrote "question everything", but Bob Dylan wrote "don't criticise what you don't understand".

Between these two statements truly lies the essence of his argument in his article "How Socialism became a Poisoned Chalice for Freethinkers" (*Freethinker*, May) Diesel, surely writing about what you don't know is profigate waste of a life.

STEVEN JOHNSTON
Stockport

DIESEL Baalam (*Points of View*, September) is still wrong about socialism, with a small 's'. Let us call it by another name, humanitarianism, and add to that the doctrine of the Gentle Anarchist.

The gentle anarchist is to be oneself in a conforming society. The gentle anarchist is responsible only to and for his or her own self. There is no obligation or call to others, except by choice, when he or she may then deny themselves, or even die, for the sake of others, from a sense of duty, compassion or enfolding love.

The gentle anarchist may knock at the door but would not cross the threshold of another person's privacy uninvited. The person is sacrosanct and their visible and invisible boundaries should not be violated for no-one has rights over another person except what that person freely allows.

The gentle anarchist uses power, the radiant/creative/healing/sexual/physical energy and authority, to create health, well-being and prosperity in society.

The destructive anarchist, our other self, uses power negatively to dominate and destroy, to sow discord and corruption, to exploit and neglect, to hate and envy, to gain without scruple. The destructive anarchist within us, the selfish, has therefore to be denied if we are to achieve full humanity.

There is personal anarchy and there is general anarchy which is war: tribal, civil, military, economic, religious, criminal.

The gentle anarchist is for the arts of peace and against war, the war politicians, arms manufacturers, ruthless criminals and terrorists, the

selfish, who wage relentless campaigns against humanity, their own kind, their own selves.

We have not just to criticise the apartheid of religions but to take over. There can be humanist sermons – a spoken or written discourse – or even prayers and a creed. I am, regarding the mystery of existence, a seeker, an agnostic; regarding gods, devils, demons, supernatural or occult worlds, an atheist, a sceptic, a cosmist.

As to morality – morality is to do with human nature; with those problems of behaviour and relationships that arise when people live together in complex changing societies. The criterion of morality is motivation: whether our thoughts and acts have goodness or badness, are life-supporting or life-denying, creative or destructive, lawful or criminal, trustworthy or deceitful, selfish or altruistic.

Altruism is our being aware of, and concerned for, the needs of others, even those we think are not of our own kind, to whom we may respond with empathy, understanding and enfolding love your need is greater than mine.

The four aspects of the Person are the intellectual, the emotional, the sensuous and the physical and the satisfaction of the needs of these is the work/vocation of woman and man kind. These needs are for Understanding, Well-being, Beauty and Health.

W K HARPER
Stoke-on-Trent

Secular material for prisoners

IT has long been the custom of the Anarchist Publishers Freedom Press (of which I am part) to gift a subscription of their newspaper, *Freedom* to any prisoner on request – the free sub to last until they are released or request that it be cancelled (This is a practice common to anarchist publishers).

So why not Secular Publication For Prisoners- a group that would supply free subs to the *Freethinker* and other secular journals, pamphlets and even books to individual prisoners as well as to prison libraries where they are willing to accept them? Subs could be paid for by money raised by the group and or sponsored by individuals and groups.

There must be many in our movement who must know of individual prisoners who would welcome such reading matter, and they could be encouraged to share it with others on a one-to-one basis or by donating them to the prison library (and if the latter were to refuse such a gift, given that they are quite prepared to stock religious books, there would be grounds for a campaign that would draw in many useful allies from outside the movement).

Living in London I could only be involved in a group launched in London but there is no reason why there should not be a network of local groups working closely with local secular/humanist groups

It's time the secular movement engaged in social action instead of just complaining about what the religious are doing in this area.

If anyone is interested in starting some-



thing along these lines in London would they please contact me at antines@yahoo.co.uk or telephone me on 07981 900 563.

I'm sure it would be possible for others to take up this idea on a local basis or for the London group – once established – to act as a clearing house for this purpose

ED MCARTHUR
c/o Conway Hall
Red Lion Square
London WC1R 4RL

The Holy See

READERS of the September issue of the *Freethinker* will know that I am very interested in the activities of the Vatican (I wrote the article, in that issue, on "Vatican Imperialism").

In further research, I have just discovered that the Conservative MP for Southend West, David Amess, on 30 March 2006, announced during a debate in the House of Commons that he was setting up "an All-Party Parliamentary Group on the Holy See" which will, inter alia, "support the (UK) embassy in the Vatican as an independent entity and recognise the important international role that it performs".

Regarding one of the activities of this Group, in *The Tablet* of August 11, 2007, it is stated that some members of it will meet the Pope later this year, and quotes David Amess as saying, regarding the draft Human Tissue and Embryos Bill, "We will seek the Pope's advice; we will ask him what he thinks Parliament should do".

There are many all-party parliamentary groups at Westminster. On his website, David Amess mentions that he belongs to at least seventeen, ranging from the All-Party Cider Group to the All-Party Funerals and Bereavement Group, and from the All-Party Obesity Group to the All-Party Girlguiding UK Group. So, one hopes that his efforts to protect the Holy See are, compared to his other group activities, given a low priority.

MICHAEL IRWIN
Co-ordinator
Secular Medical Forum

Jonathan Edwards

IT is good news whenever believers decide to ditch their delusions; it is great news when they are high-profile and go public about it, because the publicity helps the anti-religious cause. That's why I said Jonathan Edwards, should he continue his public denouncement of religion, will be an ambassador for reason – an opinion John Hunt argues against (*Points of View*, October).

May I suggest it would also help if active atheists voiced appreciation and encouragement to such celebrities, rather than be pedantic about imperfections. Okay, so Jonathan's rhetoric isn't as robust as that of many contributors to the *Freethinker*, nor as knowledgeable and eloquent as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris *et al.* But he is young and new to atheism, and I expect will grow

into its language. Besides, Jonathan's potential audience is probably attuned more to the popular mass media than to scientific inquiry and secular rationalism, the mere mention of which would likely make them reach for the remote.

To such a viewing public – and to children and sporting youth – by simply voicing his disbelief in God and describing Christianity as nonsense Jonathan would indeed be an ambassador for reason. Should he engage in discussion against religion, even awkwardly, so much the better. Anything to engender free and critical thinking in this age of unreason.

Mr Hunt says, rightly, that there is no evidence for the existence of a god, an ulterior purpose to life, and life after death, and that to be "reasonable" one must be cognisant of these opposite evidential facts.

That's easy to say, but hard to accept unquestioningly if you're not familiar with them. As I assume readers know, the latest works of the above writers clearly set out this evidence, negating the claims of religions and showing them up to be intolerant, divisive and, in their irrationalities and myriad contradictions, mad.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

Pantheists

THOSE of us who do not have some religious sounding label need one if we are to have a fair hearing in schools, the media or Parliament.

The effectiveness of this tactic has already been shown in the USA. Determined parents insisted that if the biblical version of creation was to be taught in science classes, as an alternative to evolution, then they wanted their explanation taught. They won the day and neither the Christian version of creation nor that of the Flying Spaghetti Monster will be taught in science classes.

An initiative, unintended but with potential, has now been opened up in Britain by Mr Justice Burton.

The judge found that there were nine false claims in Al Gore's film about the threat to the planet from global warming. Where does this leave the teaching of religion in schools?

If Al Gore's brilliant film, which I have seen, is to be prevented from being seen in schools unless time is allowed for an alternative opinion, the same requirement should apply to religious teaching.

The claims of religion go far beyond the "false" and, so far, have not been supported by a prestigious group of scientists to the extent that they, and Mr Gore, have recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.

Al Gore, a man doing his best to save the planet and basing his views on the best science available to him, is challenged in a court in an attempt to refute his warnings.

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Church is free to teach against restricting the birth rate by artificial means or even the use of condoms to prevent the spread of AIDS.

While Al Gore's views are to be countered in schools, tax-payers are forced to fund the propagation of inhuman beliefs in presumably the same schools, and sceptics are still banned from *Thought for the Day*.

Something to ponder perhaps when next you pay your income or Council tax or BBC licence fee.

But we still need that name – Pantheists?

DENIS WATKINS
Pembrokeshire

Archbishop's amnesia

I'M truly astonished to read (FT Oct 07, Page 3.) that the Archbishop of Canterbury can say that faith schools can develop a "greater level of community cohesion through the understanding of how faith shapes common life." It must be the case that Dr Williams has no memory of how the protestant and catholic churches in Northern Ireland so effectively kept the two communities at war with each other over so many years.

BRIAN WHITELAW
Essex Humanists

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Friends Meeting House, George Road, Edgbaston. Wednesday, Nov 21, 7.30pm. Sandra Thomas: *Mental Health*.

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.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Farm Tavern, Farm Road, Hove. Tuesday, Nov 6, 7.30pm. Barry Duke, editor of the *Freethinker: Turning the Tide Against Fundamentalism*. Tuesday, Dec 4, 7.30 pm. Robert Stovold: *Has Science Buried God?*

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: NI Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: <http://hampstead.humanists.net>

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wednesday of every month (except July and August) 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 863-2977.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

Humanism for Inquirers: www.humanists.freeserve.co.uk

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. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Sq, Leeds. Tuesday, Nov 13, 7.30pm. David Fanaroff: *The Planet – Plan it or Damn It?*

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. Third Thursday, 8pm

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk and Fens: Tel: 07811870215.

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. Contact: Derek Marcus, 47 Birch Grove, Potters Bar, Herts, EN6 1SY. Tel: 01707 653667 email: enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

website: www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

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.

Pink Trangle Trust: Registered Charity promoting humanism and obtaining justice. PTT 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB. www.pinktriangle.org.uk

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wednesday, Nov 7, 8pm. Speaker and subject to be announced. Wednesday, Dec 5, 7.30pm. Seasonal Buffet, Quiz & Social Evening. Tickets £11. Bookings by Friday, Nov 23.

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.orange-home.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.

The Thomas Paine Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, London WC1.

Saturday Nov 3, 2pm. Robert Morell: *Moncure Conway, Paine's Great Biographer*.

Think Humanism: An independent discussion forum for anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought - www.thinkhumanism.com

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: brianmccinton@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.