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The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

BBC apologises to atheist over 'Songs of Praise' blunder

SONGS of Praise is a long-running religious programme on the BBC. It is now in its 47th year.

The Songs of Praise band, on the other hand, has nothing whatsoever to do with religion; indeed, its mischievous creator, south Londoner Billy Jenkins, is a diehard atheist, and the raw, visceral sound of his band is a powerful antidote to the anodine, aural loveliness that has syrugged up our ears for almost half a century.

So you can imagine Jenkins' surprise when two clips of live performances by his band were removed from the popular YouTube website late last year at the behest of the BBC, which claimed that his use of *Songs of Praise* was an "infringement of copyright".

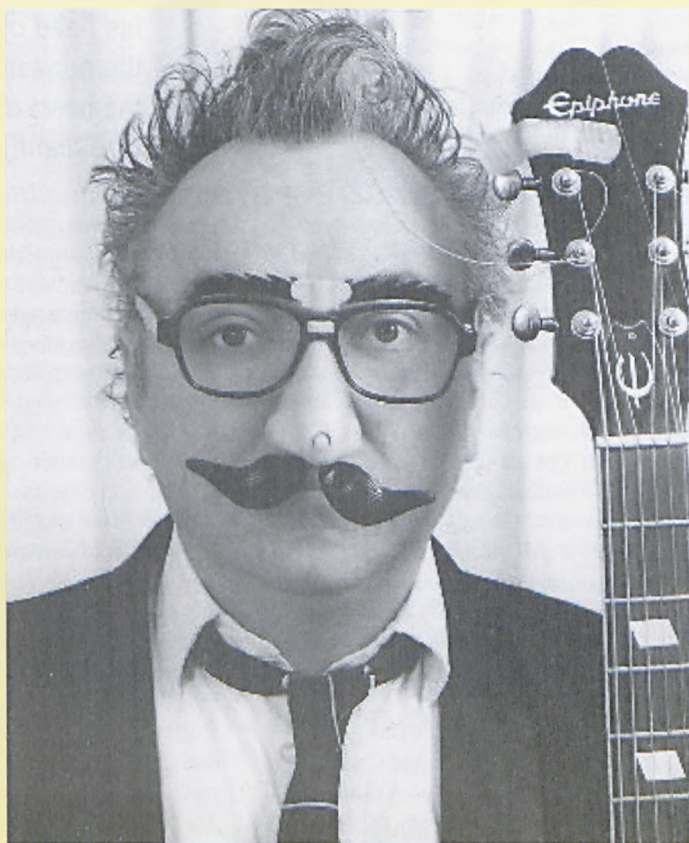
"Quite how they deem the tracks 'Dreadnought Seaman's Hospital' and 'Blues Is Calling Me' (performed live at the late, lamented The Spitz in October, 2006) to be under their jurisdiction is rather unsettling.

"Do they presume that no one is allowed to sing songs of praise?" said singer and guitarist Jenkins, who also happens to be the nephew of the former Bishop of Durham, David Jenkins, whose controversial views on Thatcherism and the Resurrection angered many in the Anglican communion.

"It's hilarious," added Jenkins. "Our national broadcast company not only considers the name of a television programme to be their exclusive copyright, even when used in other contexts, such as, in this case, six musicians performing their own secular musical songs of praise – but also deceive those believers they make religious programmes for by pre-recording what are considered 'sacred' days sometimes months ahead of their actual date. If I were a believer, I would consider this an 'infringement of copyright'."

When Jenkins reported on his website that the two clips had been pulled, the story was picked up by two London newspapers – and, in the wake of the unwanted publicity, the BBC hurriedly moved to withdraw its objections.

Jenkins received a phone call from Robert Brosgill, a solici-



Billy Jenkins, in frivolous mode
Photo copyright: Nick Corker

tor in the BBC Litigation & Intellectual Property Department, who followed up with the following email apology:

"Further to our conversation a moment ago, I can confirm that the BBC takes no issue with your use of the name 'Songs of Praise' for your band.

"As I explained, the BBC actively seeks to protect the copyright in its programmes and routinely flags copyright infringing content on YouTube and other such sites for takedown by the website administrators.

"It recently came to the BBC's attention that a great deal of footage from the BBC's 'Songs of Praise' programme is being made available on YouTube in breach of copyright.

"It appears that, in dealing with the high volume of BBC *Songs of Praise* content on YouTube, your legitimate content may have been accidentally flagged for removal. I can assure you that the BBC makes every effort to ensure that only infringing content is flagged and there was no intention to remove your legitimate clips."

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THE word "physics", according to one of a myriad of definitions on the internet, is "the scientific study of matter and energy, their interrelations and the physical properties of the universe. Physics is based on mathematics, and its natural laws, forces and processes are fundamental to the other sciences. Branches of physics include mechanics, thermodynamics, optics, acoustics, electromagnetism, nuclear physics, particle physics, solid-state physics, astrophysics and quantum mechanics". And Christianity, if we are to believe American physicist Professor Frank J Tipler, of Tulane University, New Orleans.

I sought out the definition of the word after learning that Tipler had recently added to the sum of humankind's knowledge a study intriguingly entitled *The Physics of Christianity*.

As someone who cannot even make sense of the complexities of Sudoku, I decided that I would give the book a miss, and simply read its synopsis.

According to Tipler's official website, he "realised that in all the debate about science versus religion, there was no serious scientific research into central Christian claims and beliefs. So he embarked on just such a scientific inquiry.

"*The Physics of Christianity* is the fascinating results of his pioneering study. Tipler begins by outlining the basic concepts of physics for the lay reader and brings to light the underlying connections between physics and theology.

"In a compelling example, he illustrates how the God depicted by the Jews and Christians is completely consistent with the Cosmological Singularity, an entity whose existence is required by physics. His discussion of the scientific possibility of miracles provides an impressive, credible scientific foundation for many of Christianity's most astonishing claims, including the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, and the Incarnation. He even includes specific outlines for practical experiments that can help prove the validity of the 'miracles' at the heart of Christianity ..."

Having fallen at the first hurdle – "the Cosmological Singularity" – I decided to check out what others of a more scientific bent had made of Tipler's offering. And that's when the fun really began.

Writing in the *New Scientist*, Lawrence Krauss, American Professor of Science and Astronomy, kicked off his review of the book thus: "Halfway through Frank Tipler's new book, I scanned the table of contents and was disappointed to find there would be no explanation of the recently reported miraculous appearance of Mother Teresa's image on a cheese Danish in Nashville, Tennessee. That was surprising, since Tipler goes out of his way to provide convoluted physical justifications for similar Christian miracles, including the image of Jesus on the Turin shroud, long debunked as a forgery by so many experts. When conventional physics doesn't provide a

sufficient explanation for the religious phenomenon in question, Tipler reinvents it."

Krauss, in describing Tipler's work as "a collection of half-truths and exaggerations", said he was tempted to call it nonsense – "but that would be unfair to the concept of nonsense."

Freethinker editor BARRY DUKE scratches his head over the nonsense at the heart of *The Physics of Christianity*.



He elaborates: "It is far more dangerous than mere nonsense, because Tipler's reasonable descriptions of various aspects of modern physics, combined with his respectable research pedigree, give the persuasive illusion that he is describing what the laws of physics imply. He is not. This book provides an object lesson in the dangers of pushing science beyond its domain of validity, and using scientific approximations as if they are completely valid in all contexts ...

"Tipler, for example, claims that the standard model of particle physics is complete and exact. It isn't. He claims that we have a clear and consistent theory of quantum gravity. We don't. He claims that the universe must recollapse. It doesn't have to, and all evidence thus far suggests that it won't. He argues that we understand the nature of dark energy. We don't. He argues that we know why there is more matter than antimatter in the universe. We don't. I could go on, but you get the point..."

Vatican launches another Attack on Harry Potter

AN article in the Vatican's official newspaper has condemned JK Rowling's Harry Potter books for posing a danger to children by promoting witchcraft and the occult.

In a damning indictment of the bestselling books, the Vatican's official newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* last month called the teenage boy wizard "the wrong kind of hero".

Under the headline "The double face of Harry Potter", the lengthy article, by Edoardo Rialti, a professor of literature at Florence University, concludes: "Despite the values that we come across in the narration, at the base of this story, witchcraft is proposed as a positive ideal. The violent manipulation of things and people comes thanks to knowledge of the occult. The ends justify the means because the knowledgeable, the chosen ones, the intellectuals know how to control the dark powers and turn them into good.

"This is a grave and deep lie, because it is the old Gnostic temptation of confusing salvation and truth with a secret knowledge."

Phew! – but there is more to this delicious hatchet job.

"I have racked my brains to think of a more extreme example of uncritical and unsubstantiated arguments put into print by an intelligent, professional scientist, but I cannot. Given some of the junk that has been published in the last decade, that's saying a lot.

"I urge potential readers who may feel the need to seek out some empirical justification for their faith to bestow a kindness on Professor Tipler and turn to another book with either better science, or better theology."

Science writer John Walker, on his Fourmilab blog, had a pop too. Describing Tipler's work as a "beyond-the-fringe science cataclysm", he simply extracts quotes from it to make his point that, while it provides answers to the Big Questions which philosophers and theologians have puzzled over for centuries, these answers are far from correct.

My favourites include:

What is the nature of God? Answer: "God is the Cosmological Singularity. A singularity is an entity that is outside of time and space – transcendent to space and time – and it is the only thing that exists that is not subject to the laws of physics."

How can the three persons of the Trinity be one God? Answer: "The Cosmological Singularity consists of three Hypostases: the Final Singularity, the All-Present Singularity, and the Initial Singularity. These can be distinguished by using Cauchy sequences of different sorts of person, so in the Cauchy completion, they become three distinct Persons. But still, the three Hypostases of the Singularity are just one Singularity. The Trinity, in other words, consists of three Persons but only one God."

How did Jesus walk on water? Answer: "For example, walking on water could be accomplished by directing a neutrino beam created just below Jesus' feet downward. If we ourselves knew how to do this, we would have the perfect rocket!"

How can long-dead saints intercede in the lives of people who pray to them? Answer: "According to the Universal Resurrection theory, everyone, in particular the long-dead saints, will be brought back into existence as computer emulations in the far future, near the Final Singularity, also called God the Father. ... Future-to-past causation is usual with the Cosmological Singularity. A prayer made today can be transferred by the Singularity to a resurrected saint – the Virgin Mary, say – after the Universal Resurrection. The saint can then reflect on the prayer and, by means of the Son Singularity acting through the multiverse, reply. The reply, via future-to-past causation, is heard before it is made. It is heard billions of years before it is made."

Jewish readers will be puzzled, amused or deeply disturbed to learn that Tipler has dedicated his book "To God's Chosen People, the Jews, who for the first time in 2,000 years are advancing Christianity."

Blasphemy laws about to be binned

THE 140-year battle that the National Secular Society, as well as the *Freethinker*, has waged against the blasphemy law in England is on the brink of being won.

Last month, NSS honorary associate Dr Evan Harris MP, tabled an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, calling for an end to the blasphemy law.

According to an NSS *Newsline* report, the Government was, at first, unsympathetic to those wanting the law scrapped. Early reports on the BBC indicated that they had "no intention" of scrapping the antiquated law. But it soon became apparent that a large number of Labour back-benchers did not agree with the official line and intended to support Evan's amendment.

A flurry of behind-the-scenes activity then resulted in a compromise. If Evan would withdraw his amendment, the Government would bring forward its own amendment to do the job, in the House of Lords. The only caveat was that "the Churches", particularly the Church of England, would have to be consulted first, to make sure it was OK with them.

The Government minister, Maria Eagle, promised that the consultation with the Church would be "short and sharp". But last month the Church of England was not yet acknowledging that abolition was inevitable, urging "caution" in proceeding. "We are open to the possibility of a review," said a spokesperson, "but that's all".

Although the C of E has indicated in other debates that the law is an anachronism and is not averse to it going, they may change their tune now the possibility is imminent, says the NSS.

"They may decide to use it as a bargaining tool to beef up (that is, illiberalise) the Racial and Religious Hatred Act. Some religious people are arguing that abolition of blasphemy would be the first step to disestablishment, and that may push the Church into resisting."

However, one correspondent, writing to *The Times* asked: "Why is it necessary to consult the Anglican Church? Are we going to start consulting burglars on the breaking and entering laws?"

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "It would be

scandalous if the churches were permitted to scupper this. But I think the Government recognises that if they don't bring an amendment in the Lords, someone else will and they will again be faced with a rebellion from their own troops. I don't think they would want that, given the sinking poll ratings of Gordon Brown."

The NSS has been pivotal in assisting Evan Harris in his efforts. It played a leading role in helping him gather an impressive roster of names that appeared in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph* last month. Wood was feeding Evan Harris a continuous supply of background material and was on hand in Parliament to offer support to the MP.

The NSS said it was "profoundly grateful to Evan for this spirited attempt to put right a centuries-old injustice and to our members who responded to the call to lobby their MPs at rather short notice".

It added: "We must also thank Stephen Green of Christian Voice who attempted to prosecute the BBC for blasphemy and failed in the High Court last month. His efforts gave much topicality and raw material to the debate."

A time to remember Thomas Aikenhead, the last man in Britain to be hanged for blasphemy

THE Government's indication that it was now willing to scrap the country's archaic and discredited blasphemy laws came precisely 311 years after the last person in Britain was hanged for blasphemy.

On January 8, 1697, Scottish medical student, Thomas Aikenhead, 19, was hanged on the road from Edinburgh to Leith for blasphemy, an already archaic punishment inflicted for what reads like headstrong youthful atheism of a decidedly garden variety.

According to the website **Executed today.com**, Aikenhead "partook of the times' emerging (albeit forbidden) store of humanist and skeptical literature, and chatted most unguardedly with University of Edinburgh 'friends' who tattled to authorities to the extent that, not content with testifying against him, one published a pamphlet demanding the offender 'atone with blood, the affronts of heaven's offended throne'."

"Said authorities scarcely elevated the dignity of the temporal throne in their own eagerness to swing a sledgehammer against a fly, trying the young hothead for his life under a Restoration law which by its own letter should not have lodged him in mortal peril until his third offense."

"Thou Aikenhead," the indictment thundered in the second person, "shaking off all fear of God and regard to his majesties laws,

have now for more than a twelvemonth by past ... [vented] your wicked blasphemies against God and our Saviour Jesus Christ, and against the holy Scriptures, and all revealed religion ... you said and affirmed, that divini-

Rome University gives Pope the elbow

STUDENTS and professors at Rome's historic La Sapienza University broke open the champagne last month when it was announced that Pope Benedict XVI had pulled out of a long scheduled visit to the university.

The surprise announcement of the Pope's pull-out was the culmination of weeks of protests against the planned visit.

The pontiff had been invited by the La Sapienza rector to speak at the annual ceremony to inaugurate the academic year. But in the days running up to the visit, unwelcoming banners were already appearing on campus saying "No to the Pope" and "La Sapienza Hostage to the Pope". Several left-wing student groups had promised widespread heckling of the pontiff. Most notable was the professors' letter, printed in the Rome daily *La Repubblica*, calling on school officials to cancel the papal appearance, which they said was "incompatible" with the university's secular mission.

ty or the doctrine of theology was a rapsodie of fained and ill-invented nonsense, patched up partly of the moral doctrine of philosophers, and partly of poetical fictions and extravagant chimeras."

He called the Old Testament "Ezra's fables", Jesus the "Imposter Christ" (preferring Mahomet), and anticipated the extirpation of Christianity.

It was a bare two weeks from conviction to execution. Accounts of Aikenhead's last days seem inconsistent; the prisoner recanted, possibly sincerely, but the Church – explicitly handed the power to at least reprieve him by its intervention – demanded hurried and "vigorous execution."

Macaulay disgustedly pictured the scene:

"The preachers who were the boy's murderers crowded round him at the gallows, and, while he was struggling in the last agony, insulted Heaven with prayers more blasphemous than any thing that [Aikenhead] had ever uttered."

"The singular punishment meted out this day – the last hanging for blasphemy throughout the United Kingdom – cast a long shadow into the coming century's remarkable Scottish renaissance and lingers even today as a suggestion to some just how near the menace of theocracy might yet remain," observed **Executed today**.



Don't poke fun at religion if you want to keep your job

TWO people have lost their jobs after raising a laugh at the expense of Islam.

First to go was a director of Barclaycard who left the company in disgrace after making a joke deemed offensive to Muslims.

Marc Howells, 42, who earned £200,000 a year, was addressing senior executives about the credit card company's quarterly figures when he tried to make them laugh with the quip.

Mr Howells said: "The results were like Muslims – some were good, some were Shi'ite."

His pun was later reported to senior management and after some discussion he left the company in December before any disciplinary process could begin.

A source at Barclaycard said "No-one could quite believe their ears when he came out with his Shi'ite joke.

"He had a very responsible job in a multinational company. What on earth was he thinking of?

"There were a few embarrassed guffaws, but everyone except him knew he was for the high-jump the moment he said it.

"Once word got round and a complaint was made he was toast."

Shi'ites are one of the two main Muslim traditions, along with Sunnis. Feeble puns about the word Shi'ite have been made before – and

got the jokers into trouble.

In October 1999, a white detective in the Metropolitan police was accused by an Asian woman colleague of rudely mispronouncing "Shi'ites" during a race relations presentation.

He was eventually cleared and an employment tribunal also backed him after he told the hearing he had simply mispronounced the word.

Not so fortunate was 26-year-old PC Rob Murrie, of Bedfordshire Police. He landed in hot water, not over a Shi'ite joke, but because he gave a Muslim colleague bacon and wine as a Secret Santa gift last Christmas. PC Murrie subsequently came under such pressure that he felt he had no option but to resign from the force.

The target of the prank, 31-year-old Arshad Mahmood, thought the joke was "tasteless" but took it in good spirit. He said he still regarded PC Murrie as "a good officer and a good friend". And Muslim community leaders accused police chiefs of "overreacting" to the incident at Luton police station.

Despite PC Mahmood's robust view of the matter, his superiors were less than amused.

"I was called into a meeting with my sergeant, who said she was disgusted by what happened," he said.

"I told her I knew it was meant as a joke and did not want to make a formal complaint. I just took it on the chin. But someone else in the



PC Rob Murrie who resigned after a secret Santa prank went bad

room must have thought it was a racist incident, and reported it."

Mr Murrie, who lives in a village near Bedford, said: "The police force has been my home for six years and now I pay the ultimate price. I had no choice but to resign because of the political implications and negative impact on the force if it ever became public.

"I would never have given him the present if I had known the consequences. I suppose it's like giving condoms to a Catholic. I think society has gone far too politically correct, but the force has to make decisions acting within that climate.

"I'm going abroad for a while to think about what I am going to do with the rest of my life."

Shishu Miah, general secretary of the Bedford Jame Mosque, said: "I do not condone what he did but the officer clearly made an error of judgment and should be forgiven."

Antonietta Meo on track to become youngest Catholic saint

AN Italian girl has been put on course by the Vatican to become the youngest saint in history.

Antonietta Meo was just six-and-a-half years old when she lost her battle against bone cancer.

But in the final months of her life she began writing letters to Jesus which theologians have declared to be "extraordinary", and the works of a "mystic".

The letters reveal that when the girl had her leg amputated, at the age of five, she bore her sufferings cheerfully and offered them up in union with those of the crucified Christ.

Last month, Pope Benedict XVI approved a decree recognising the "heroic virtues" of Antonietta.

This means that two miracles are now required to declare the youngster first "blessed" and then a saint.

If she is eventually canonised she will be the youngest non-martyr saint in the 2,000-year history of the Roman Catholic Church.

Antonietta, who was nicknamed by her family "Nennolina", was born in Rome in 1930 but by the age of five she was diagnosed with cancer. After the amputation of a leg she was fit-

ted with a false, heavy limb so she could continue to play with other children.

At about that time she also began to write prayers to God, Jesus and Mary in the form of letters. Vatican experts say the letters reveal "a truly extraordinary life of mystical union with God". In one of the letters she wrote: "Dear baby Jesus, you are holy, you are good. Help me, grant me your grace and give me back my leg. If you don't want to, then may your will be done." Antonietta died on 3 July 1937 and her cause for sainthood was opened in Rome in 1972.

The Vatican has always been cautious about proclaiming children as saints. But the Church accepts that even small children could show "heroic virtues" if their thoughts and behaviour exceed-



Antonietta Meo, praying for the return of her lost leg

ed what was normal for their age.

In the early Church, a number of children were martyred for their faith and later declared to be saints.

They include St Pancras, a Roman who was beheaded at the age of 14 in 304AD after he converted to Christianity, and St Ponticus of Lyons, France, who was just 15 when he was thrown to wild beasts in 177AD.

The youngest saint of modern times is St Maria Goretti who died at the age of 12 years when she was stabbed 14 times during a frenzied attack by Alessandro Serenelli in 1902. After his arrest Serenelli admitted that he had been trying to rape the girl but she had told him that she would rather die than submit to him.

St Maria was canonised "virgin and martyr" in 1950 by Pope Pius XII in a ceremony attended by Serenelli, who by that time had spent 30 years in prison for the attempted rape and murder.

The youngest non-martyr saint is another Italian, Domenico Savio, a 14-year-old student for the priesthood who died of pleurisy in 1857.

Hard-on Jesus rouses the wrath of Christian Voice

CHRISTIAN zealot Stephen Green – still smarting from the brush-off he received last year at the hands of the High Court, which dismissed his attempt to prosecute the BBC for blasphemy following the screening of *Jerry Springer, the Opera* – has found a new source of “blasphemy”, a sculpture of Jesus with an erection.

Green demanded that the priapic messiah – a piece by controversial gay artist Terence Koh – be trashed.

The piece was part of an exhibition at the Baltic art gallery in Gateshead. The foot high depiction of Christ was the central figure in the exhibit “Gone, Yet Still” which featured 74 plaster models ranging from Michelangelo’s statue of David to Mickey Mouse.

Green, who heads the evangelical outfit Christian Voice, expressed outrage at the work, calling it blasphemous and claiming it had created a “storm” of protest.

A statement from CV called for the owner to

“withdraw and destroy the blasphemous statue of Jesus Christ.”

Green was, in effect, told to get lost. A spokeswoman for the Baltic said the artwork had attracted just *three* letters of complaint from the general public since it went on display in September last year.

She added that the gallery takes great pains to warn the public when an exhibition may be seen as offensive.

“Contemporary art by its very nature is often challenging and controversial; reflecting and responding to some very serious personal and social issues in modern life.

“Baltic does not shy away from presenting such works.”

The statue of Jesus is owned by Newcastle-born collector Anita Zabudowicz, who studied fine art and history at Newcastle’s College of Arts and Technology before spending 10 years as an interior designer.

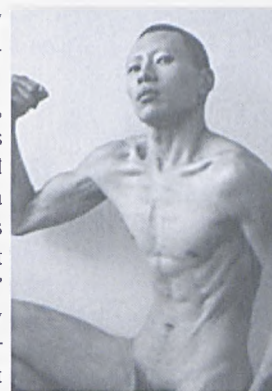
As well as the statue of Christ, other models,

including Mickey Mouse, also sported erect penises.

“For Christians, the image of Jesus is very special and to interpret it in a sexualised way is an affront to what we hold dear,” bleated the Rev Christopher Warren of St Mary’s Catholic cathedral, Newcastle upon Tyne.

“While Jesus was a human being in every way, to portray him this way will offend.”

The 31-year-old artist’s work sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars in America where he now lives.



Self-portrait by Canadian-Chinese artist Terence Koh

Al-Baghdadi is my sculpture: an interview with Lars Vilks

LARS Vilks is used to death threats. He’s been getting them since October last year, when a local Swedish newspaper published one of his Mohammed-as-a-dog drawings, sparking an international outcry from over-sensitive Muslims.

Inevitably, as a result of all the fuss, the drawings were reproduced millions of times the world over – on the internet, in newspapers, and of course in the *Freethinker*.

Some people never learn.

Vilks was previously known mainly in Sweden for his Nimis project, an illegal construction work that has been going on since 1980 on the peninsula of Kullaberg in the south of the country (now the self-declared independent state of Ladonia).

It was what was to become known at the Mo-doggie affair which catapulted the 61-year-old artist into the global limelight.

Dave McKeegan caught up with him in his studio.

DM: Are you still getting death threats, or have things quietened down a bit now?

LV: It is much calmer. When I checked up the latest letters in my threatbox they are either telling me that I will be punished by Allah and burn in hell, or giving me insults with many f-words.

DM: In your CNN interview you appeared amazingly calm in the face of these threats. Are you as relaxed about them as you seemed to be?

LV: Yes, I am relaxed. I am living in the countryside far off from crowded places. I have understood that the threats are mainly propaganda. But I was scared by the Swedish secret police as they considered (and still consider) the situation very dangerous.

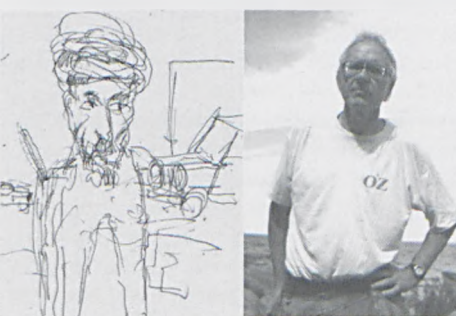
DM: If you met Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (the possibly-mythical leader of al Qaeda in Iraq who offered a \$150,000 reward for your head), what would you say to him?

LV: You are a sculpture, a part of my art installation. And you have played your part very well, Amatullah.

The controversial Swedish artist last month granted an exclusive interview to *Freethinker* Correspondent DAVE MCKEEGAN

DM: Ha! So “Amatullah”, the crazy burqua-clad Swedish Muslim shown on CNN saying she would slaughter you “like a lamb”, is also part of your work! How do you imagine she would react to that idea?

LV: Amatullah is a bit dangerous. Not that I think she is dangerous on her own, but she could have a network of people. She has written several times on my blog always keeping up her wish to kill me. But it is very much feelings as I see it. Of course she is not able to see herself as a part of art in the form of “relational aesthetics”. Anyway, she is convinced in her mission. CNN called me when they had met her, warning me. “She is very dangerous.”



Lars Vilks and one of his Modog drawings

DM: Have you ever been religious?

LV: No, I left the church when I was young.

DM: How would you describe your personal philosophy?

LV: The only thing we actually know is the essence of being in each moment of presence. It makes a difference being aware of this.

DM: Is it true that you have a dog named Mohammed?

LV: No, I do not have a dog named Mohammed. But I pretended to. The story is that the secret police wanted me to go underground and they offered a hidden flat. When I said no to this I had to arrange my security by myself. As the media could help me, I did say that I had regular police on patrol, a security electronic system. Then I used a visiting dog to announce a special protection.

DM: You are currently collaborating with the band Neurobash on a musical of the Modoggie affair, entitled “Dogs”. How is that going?

LV: This week Neurobash played the first trailer for the musical on Swedish Television. This and further parts will be available on YouTube. Information can be found on the homepage of Neurobash. Right now you can find pictures from the first performance.

DM: What is the goal of your art? Would you say you have been successful in achieving that goal?

LV: Art has to be transgressing. I mean it is all about that, challenging conventions. I would say that I have been rather successful in that sense.

DM: The *Freethinker* agrees, and wishes the phlegmatic Mr Vilks continued success for many years to come. May your threatbox always be empty!

I AM a humanist celebrant and I am often asked how I became one. Irritatingly, this is often prefaced with "you being Irish". As we are regarded as ambassadors I cannot be rude by showing my irritation at such stereotyping. So, I just smile and tell them that there is a long and a short answer as to how I became a practising atheist.

The long answer I am turning into a show. The short one explains how, at the age of seven, Catholic indoctrination begins with us having to learn the Catechism in preparation for Holy Communion when we are told about God who made the world and how it is a terrible thing, a sin, to take "his name in vain". Like many a youngster I rose to the challenge and told God to "feck off". Nothing happened and so I was well on the way to becoming an atheist.

I did not tell this to the priest at "confession". This is when Catholics go into a dark confessional box to confess their sins. It makes me shudder even now to think that we had to go through such a spooky process, alone with an old man and tell him that we told fibs, were naughty etc. We were also told that God was almighty and was always watching us and knew everything that we did – even when we were asleep and, worse still, watching us on the toilet with our knickers down.

How could anyone believe in the existence of this dirty old perv and, anyway, hadn't us girls already worked out that God is a backward dog – just like a yob is a backward boy.

The crazy thing is that they decided that seven was the right age to start this abusive indoctrination, as this was when a child reached "the age of reason". Duh! (Studies have shown that parents smack/beat/hit their children most when they are aged three or four more than at any other age. Why? because they can't reason with them. And it is sanctioned by the bible.)

We had already learnt about fantasy creatures through fairy stories, but at seven we were introduced to more tales of the supernatural – but this time told as the *truth*. It is only later on that we discover that there are other religions, and that they can't all be true.

Much later, as a philosophy student, I learn the definition of religion. It is an understand-

Losing my Religion

By Jean Rathbone

ing of the world through the supernatural, and this usually means a belief in God/gods and a life after we die (except for the Scientologists who believe in aliens). The three big organised religions of the book, Christianity/Judaism/Islam, have some common stories and beliefs, but the Christians had great difficulty in sticking to the idea of one supreme God, so invented a very convoluted theory about three persons in one God.

Then they tried to explain this to us seven-year-olds who had heard the story of the three bears. We would expect to hear about the Daddy God called God and the baby God called Jesus and, of course, we expected to hear about the Mummy God called? There was no Mummy God – only an effing Holy Ghost. (There *is* something about bears and religion!)

It did not take long for some of us girls to realise that all religions were invented by men. What a great revelation – religion is the product of male fantasy. And so is pornography.

We hear their silly story of Adam giving "birth" to Eve from "his spare rib", and realise that it springs from their "womb envy" and misogyny. Then they dreamed up the porn fantasy tale about Mary, the teenage virgin – Christianity is predicated on the homoerotic, sadistic, gory account of Jesus being crucified.

Quite honestly there really is nothing in it, at all, for girls. There was the nativity scenes/plays – all boy parts; Joseph, the shepherds, the three wise men, the angel Gabriel etc, leaving the girls to fight over who could be Mary. I suppose we were lucky that they didn't make us be the animals in the stable – and thank goodness that they never made children enact the crucifixion.

At Holy Communion, and later when we



Irish comedienne and atheist Jean Rathbone

had our "Confirmation", becoming "soldiers of Christ". Us girls were dressed like young, virginal brides in lacy white dresses and veils, practising for the time we would walk up to the altar to be married. The boys got new suits as well, and we all got money from adults – which was, of course, bribery.

I performed a one-woman show, *Sheela-na-Gig*, named after the masturbating Irish, female stone carvings found on the walls of castles and churches in Ireland from the 15th century. One reviewer at the Edinburgh festival compared me to Dave Allen. It was my privilege to conduct Dave's funeral service. (When we go to a crematorium to officiate at a funeral we have to ask the attendants to remove the cross/crucifix, and I always resent being turned into a vampire. On this occasion, I was so aware of how the great comedian would have used this to comedic effect.)

As you know, there has been a spate of books written by men criticising religion. There was Dawkins, then Hitchens retaliated, trying to show that he was cleverer and wittier than Dawkins, as Dawkins is serious and not into comedy. Sam Harris wrote *The End of Faith*. These three were called an unholy trinity. There was Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and one with a wordy title by John Gray – *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*.

Dawkins got his own TV series *The Root of All Evil*.

Well, there you have it. Substitute men for religion and you get the gist of *The Gospel According to Sheela na-Gig*, and why I became an atheist.

Parents launch petition against halal meat at Oxford school

A PETITION against the use of halal meat in all children's meals at an Oxford school attracted more than 100 signatures last month.

Rose Hill Primary School introduced halal meat – which is slaughtered in a specific way for consumption by Muslims – into all meat dishes for a trial period.

Parents of pupils at the school were only informed of the change on the last day of winter term, after halal meat had already been used in some dishes.

About 10 mothers stood outside the school gates yesterday morning and afternoon to ask parents to add their signature to a petition calling on the school to offer a choice.

Headteacher Sue Mortimer said the school introduced halal meat because it was not forbidden by any religion or culture, and would allow every pupil a greater choice of dishes.

The decision is to be reviewed in a few weeks.

The *Oxford Times*, which carried this report, was inundated with letters to its website, the overwhelming number of which expressed outrage that halal meat had been foisted on children without them being informed of the school's new policy.

This simmering religious war must be nipped in the bud

THE bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir Ali, likes a bit of publicity. If he's out of the lime-light for very long he knows he can always get himself on the front pages again by stirring the hornets' nest of multiculturalism. This he did in last month's *Sunday Telegraph* by claiming that there were no-go areas for non-Muslims in some British cities.

Although it may not be quite as bad as the bishop makes out, there is a definite and unhealthy separation of communities in some cities.

This was explored last May in a *Panorama* programme on BBC1 subtitled "White Fright". It looked at the situation in Blackburn in Lancashire and discovered quite alarming levels of separatism between the Asian (mostly Muslim) population and the white population.

So what is Bishop Nazir Ali's answer to the problem? Well, he makes the usual attack on multiculturalism, saying that the policy has encouraged immigrant communities to develop apart from the mainstream. We would agree with him on that. But then he goes on to claim that it is because Britain has lost its "Christian character" that Muslims are refusing to compromise their culture in order to become "proper" citizens, with requisite respect for the country's alleged Christian heritage. He wants us all to return to a Victorian model of Christianity, where a severe, misogynistic, homophobic, nationalistic Church rules us all (benignly, of course) whatever our religion or lack of it.

He writes: "None of this will be of any avail if Britain does not recover that vision of its destiny which made it great. That has to do with the Bible's teaching that we have equal dignity and freedom because we are all made in God's image. It has to do with a prophetic passion for justice and compassion and it has to do with the teaching and example of Jesus Christ regarding humility, service and sacrifice. Let us pledge in this New Year to restore this noble vision to the centre of our national life."

What the bishop does not recognise is that while he continues to live as though it were still the 19th century, the rest of us have to live in the modern world with all its challenges. Whether the prelate likes it or not, we have people of many different religions in this country now, but we have vastly more people of no religion at all, and we have all got to find some way to live together. His ambition to restore the Church of England to the right arm of Government – as in its gory glory days – is poisonous pie in the sky.

By constantly jabbing at the Muslim population in this country and creating the impression that "our (Christian) way of life" is under

threat from them, the bishop is (maybe deliberately) forcing large numbers of people to assume a religious identity that they don't really have.

National Secular Society President TERRY SANDERSON warns of an impending 'nasty religious conflict'

Suddenly we are all "Christians" (in case anybody should think we are Muslims). The country is now divided by religion rather than culture or colour. Being "Christian" is increasingly coming to be a cipher for being "white British", and that's dangerous.

A quick look at reader reaction to the various news reports of what the bishop said reveals that there is a real and growing problem here. It centres round a polarising of the religious extremes – Muslim and Christian. Theocratically-minded individuals from each side appear to be limbering up for a turf war, and in doing so they are creating fears among the population at large that we are all on the brink of having our culture "swamped" or taken away from us. (More fuel

to this particular fire from other evangelical Christians here.)

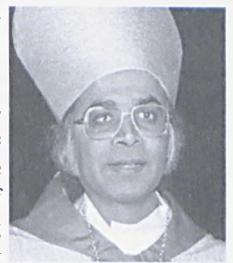
Are not the Bishop's tactics, whether he realises it or not, little different from those of the hate-mongering imams or the ultra right agitators? Is he not playing on the same visceral fear of "the other" that they do in order to get his way?

Those of us who have been happy to let religion get on with its business undisturbed are suddenly being drawn into this war of faiths. People who previously were indifferent about religion are all at once passionate about not letting "the Muslims" take over the country. Equally, more and more Muslims are reaching the conclusion that this country won't be happy until Islam is eradicated.

We have all the makings of a very nasty religious conflict.

The Government must urgently review its policies. It must take the emphasis off religion. It must stop involving religious groups in policy-making and it must put religion back where it belongs – in the mosques, churches and temples. If it doesn't, the consequences could be catastrophic.

• *This editorial first appeared in the NSS's Newslines, and is reproduced with permission.*



The Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir Ali

Oxford loudspeaker plan re-ignites 'call to prayer' row

THE row over a proposal to broadcast the Muslim call to prayer through a megaphone across part of Oxford intensified last month when elders said that they will seek planning permission to install a loudspeaker at the city's Central Mosque later this year.

The plan to sound the two-minute long call three times a day has infuriated local residents, but elders from the mosque, where up to 700 people gather to worship every Friday, have pledged to plough ahead with the proposal despite opposition.

Last month, dozens of people packed into a council meeting to signal their outrage, claiming they feared the prayer call would be an "un-neighbourly intrusion" that could turn the area into a "Muslim ghetto".

The Rt Rev John Pritchard said those opposed to the plan should "relax" and "enjoy community diversity".

Those against the idea have said they will rally support to try and block the proposal and they had hoped that the mosque might drop the plan in the face of opposition.

Dr Allan Chapman, 61, an Oxford University academic who lives close to the mosque, said: "The response against this has been incredible, we have been inundated with calls and letters ranging from stiff-upper-lip outrage to sheer screaming fury.

"The universal message is what an utter cheek to inflict this on a non-Muslim area of Oxford. Christian churches ring bells, but they are just a signal. The Muslim call is a theological statement. Imagine the outrage if churches were to propose broadcasting the Lord's Prayer over and over again three times a day. If this application goes forward then a large number of angry people are poised to form an opposition to it."

Elizabeth Mills, 56, a charity consultant, said: "We don't have a problem with the Imam climbing to the top of the minaret and shouting. But we object to electronic amplification.

"The Bishop of Oxford might say it's okay, but he does not have to listen to it." Martin Stott, 53, a member of the Oxford Oratory, said: "This is not an anti-Muslim thing, it is more about community cohesion."

I have no objection to creationism being taught in our schools for, as Thomas Bullfinch wrote: "The creation of the world is a problem naturally fitted to excite the liveliest interest of man – its inhabitant." But what I would advocate is that the subject be made to embrace the accounts of acts of creation performed by *all* the gods and not just the god of Genesis, or Jehovah as his name is revealed in Exodus.

Claims have been made on behalf of gods the world over concerning their creative powers and I have often thought of them, in a lighter moment, singing a chorus or two of Harry Champion's old music-hall song *We've All Been Having a Go At It*.

There are several reasons for my view, not the least of which is that it seems inequitable that so many creative gods should be ignored, particularly when many of them were of a similar standing to Jehovah. In addition, an enlarged subject is bound to excite a lively curiosity among students which is surely what education ought to be about. This, in turn, would inevitably lead to most interesting discussions, with comparisons being made of the gods' relative merits.

Finally, if the record in Genesis were considered in isolation, there would be precious little to study, since it occupies only two chapters of Moses' first book. Students could spend a little time discussing which of the two accounts presented therein is the correct one and they could consider questions arising from them, for example: how light came to be created before the sun; how, if Jehovah separated light from darkness, what it was like when they were mixed; whether animals were created before Adam and, if so, on what did the human flea feed in the intervening period, and so on. But I doubt if such discussions would claim a great deal of time. Students would soon find themselves driven to the conclusion, I think, that such matters are too difficult for the human mind to contemplate and that, therefore, time should be spent not trying to understand them but, rather, simply noting them.

One of the earliest discoveries students would make in an examination of the acts of creation would be that there were almost as many methods employed as there were gods. They would also learn that many gods were more inventive than Jehovah. After all, according to Moses, Jehovah had only to utter a few well-chosen words to call the elements of the universe into being. And here, incidentally, another question arises which could be stimulating to students: why, having uttered only about 300 words, did Jehovah feel the need to rest?

One-upmanship seems to have existed many years before Stephen Potter was created, for a Persian god, obviously having observed Jehovah, completed his act of creation without uttering a word at all. It is recorded that he had only to *think* of what was required for it to

appear. Nor did he need to rest afterwards.

Thoth was another god to whom creation presented very little problem. His head may have resembled that of a baboon or an ibis (his portraitists differ) but it was not important, since it was a different part of his anatomy which was required for the first stage of his creative act. He hatched the world from an egg, following which eight gods were formed from words emanating from his lips (or beak) and this octet continued the work on his behalf, singing hymns the while.

Tirawa, a North American god, was another who required a little assistance to effect a decent creation. He took responsibility for forming the sun, moon and stars, and then assigned lesser gods to smite the waters so that the earth would appear from them. He thoughtfully provided each with a mace for the purpose. They then brought all the elements and the earth's features into being singing hymns, like their Egyptian counterparts, throughout the process.

The god of the Pueblo Indians, like the one in Persia, required no assistance in the matter. He simply projected his thoughts to create a dense fog from which sprang the germs of life. He then, very selflessly it must be said, sacrificed his body so that its constituent parts could form the earth and sky.

Ymir, in Iceland, was another god from the same mould, for his flesh became the land, his blood the seas, his bones the mountains, his skull the vault of heaven and his hair the trees. What was left, presumably, he kept.

In Finland Luonnator, like Thoth, required for her creation an egg, the lower half of which formed the earth, the upper the sky, the yolk the sun and the albumen the moon.

An egg was employed in India too and, as this one contained all the continents, oceans, planets, gods, demons and humanity, one can only sympathise with the creature designated to lay it. The cry of "That's better out than in!" probably dates from this period. There was a minor problem in this act of creation in that the earth was submerged beneath the waters, but the god concerned was more than equal to it. He astutely transformed himself into a wild boar and lifted it out with his tusks. It is generally accepted, I think, that the simplest solutions are often the best.

There was a similar problem in Polynesia – that the earth was beneath the sea, but it was overcome there by a number of gods with fishing rods and lines. The work took rather longer than it did in India, but that is not because the gods were less competent, merely that there were so many islands in the region to bring to the surface.

Most creations seem to have begun with a void, a chaos or a slimy ocean, but there were exceptions. Jehovah had to deal with his own variety of bleakness, but, as Thomas Bullfinch wrote: "The ancient pagans, not having the

'We've all having a

information on the subject we derive from Scripture, had their own way of telling the story." They did indeed. An unknown god, Bullfinch relates, found the earth, sea and air were mixed, but not inextricably so, since, with the aid of nature, he deftly separated them. A second, also unknown, god then attended to the more mundane matter of installing the earth's geographical features.

Creationism? Let's teach *all* its variations in our schools, says NEIL BLEWITT.

In Hawaii the void was merely the wreck of an earlier world so it was comparatively simple for their god, by virtue of his experience, to reconstruct it. There is, unfortunately, no record extant of how the earlier earth was brought into being. This god, it seems to me, had an unfair advantage over his rivals in that he was able to eliminate any faults that had been revealed in the earlier creation. The others had to get it right first time. Jehovah was an exception, of course, but he solved the problem by destroying his creation with a flood.

A North Borneo creator had no void, chaos or slimy ocean to contend with – merely a sea wholesome enough for two birds to plunge into and bring up a pair of eggs from which both the heavens and the earth were made.

In Nias the bleakness consisted of a fog which, over a period of time, formed itself into a being; and although this being lacked speech, limbs and the power of movement, it was not without the ability to reproduce since it was the progenitor of a tree from which both gods and humans emerged.

Phoenicia began with the conventional chaos. From it there issued a strange combination of time, desire and darkness which eventually produced the cosmic egg containing all that was necessary for the formation of the earth.

Babylon had one of the slimy oceans in which dwelt two serpents whose remit was to give birth respectively to the earth and the sky. It would be interesting for students to reflect on the probable size of these serpents, upon what they fed and what became of them.

But serpents were not the only creatures to become involved in the process of creation. In North America the business was attended to

all been a go at it'

by a musk-rat, a hare or a coyote (the accounts differ); in South America a beetle, and in Oceania a butterfly, a crab and a spider were variously recorded as the responsible mediums. The spider, it must be said, could not manage the feat alone; she had to call on two snails to help open a giant clam from whose upper half the earth and the sky were formed, and a worm to provide sufficient liquid to form the sea in its bottom half. The worm, incidentally, expired shortly afterwards, one assumes from dehydration.

After the somewhat complex matter of creating the earth and the heavens, the gods had to direct their attention to the creation of human beings – and each god, as one might expect, had his, or her, own method.

In the Arabian peninsula, as is well-known, Jehovah created just two humans, a man from the dust and a woman from one of the man's ribs. In Greece Prometheus' mixture consisted of soil and water which, some accounts suggest, was actually his tears. But his creation was, like Jehovah's, made in his own image.

Juok in Africa used sand, but he was a little more sophisticated than Jehovah and Prometheus. He created men of different colours. For the Land of the Whites he used white sand (green clearly would have been inappropriate), for the Egyptians, equally logically, brown sand, and for the Central Africans black. Strictly speaking he need not have concerned himself with creating Egyptians since Khnoumou had already dealt with the matter, fashioning his humans from clay on a potter's wheel.

Bel in Babylon also used clay, as did the Chinese deity, although, unsurprisingly perhaps, the latter's was yellow. In North America the musk-rat who created the earth married a musk-mouse, and from this unlikely conjugation proceeded all the people of the earth – except, presumably, for those whom Tirawa was producing from the sun and the stars in the same area.

In Iceland Ymir, by way of novelty, produced human beings from his armpits. In South America the



The god Thoth



The North American god Tirawa, creating stars and stuff

beetle which created the earth drew forth men and women from a hole in the ground he dug for the purpose, while in Mozambique the responsible god used the same method but, as a refinement, dug two holes – one for ladies, the other for gentlemen.

In Guatemala the creator made men and women from maize, having previously failed when using first clay and then wood. The wooden men, by the way, were not wasted; they were refashioned as monkeys.

One aspect of creation remains and that is how or by whom the creators themselves were created. Alas, many of the records are as deficient as Moses' of Jehovah. However, there are some which give information on this intriguing subject. In Egypt, for example, it is recorded that Khepera made himself, which seems an economical arrangement. He was not, however, so extravagant as Prometheus in the materials he used subsequently to make mankind; his tears were sufficient. The Japanese creators followed Khepera's example and made themselves. Such feats show them to be gods of a very high order.

The Californian god Niparaya did not need to be created since he was invisible and had no body, but these apparent drawbacks did not prevent him from fathering three sons. In Iceland Ymir was formed from drops of melting ice, while Kitcki Manitou, a neighbour of Niparaya, was never created at all, although that did not inhibit him from being present in the sun, the wind and other elemental forces.

Other creators appeared from eggs, the soil and the primordial oceans, but in no instance that I have come across is it stated how they came to be there nor who created the eggs, the soil and the primordial oceans in the first place. These are mysteries not uncommon

with gods.

Jehovah's origin is a mystery too, but in his case, one feels, it need not have been so. Moses, his biographer, had many conversations with him, and was obviously in his confidence – yet he seems not to have asked him whence he came. Or did he ask and was told to mind his own business? Or did Jehovah reveal the nature of his origin and Moses, finding it so improbable, thought his biography would be discredited if he included an account of it? This, surely, would be another fascinating matter for students to discuss.

I have given the briefest review of the many accounts of the creation of the earth and heavens and the extraordinary beings involved in the process. But I hope I have written enough to justify my earlier point that there is sufficient material available to make it worthy of study in our schools.

Students ought to be encouraged, if not required, to delve more deeply into the matter than the first two chapters of Genesis. I am sure they would be interested – surprised even – to learn that there were so many creators and that the accounts of their work are no less reasonable than that of Moses. I strongly suspect that the brighter students would soon come to the conclusion that it was impossible for all the accounts to be correct. Indeed, following this discovery, one hopes that they would realise that there were but two possibilities: either that only one is correct or that *none* is, in which case they would have to look elsewhere to solve the riddle of how the earth and its inhabitants came to be.

One final point: those students who are set the question "Which of these accounts is correct?" should receive no credit for replying "God knows".

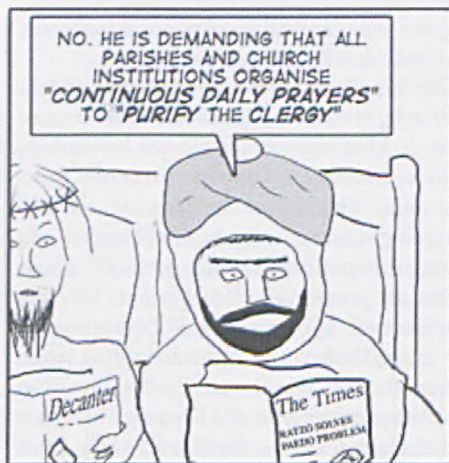
IN a letter published in the December issue of the *Freethinker*, Stuart Campbell makes the questionable and unqualified claim that no historians question the historicity of Jesus.

By this are we to assume that the historians he has in mind unquestionably subscribe to the Christian historical claim that sometime around 10 BCE a god, masquerading as a ghost, had an affair with a young Jewish girl, resulting in her becoming pregnant in order so to enable it to manifest itself in mortal form, and then her husband, or husband to be, dragged her across 80 miles or so from where Nazareth is supposed to have been located – although there is no evidence that it existed at that time – in compliance with an imperial Roman decree that all males were to travel to their places of birth to register for taxation purposes?

Leaving aside the fact that the Romans were not so stupid as to issue a decree that would have brought about social and economic chaos, there is in fact no historical evidence that such an order was promulgated. If this was not enough, Joseph would have been under no obligation to obey such a decree had there been one, as both the location of Nazareth and Bethlehem were located in what was an independent kingdom with its own effective taxation system.

As for all historians believing, as Mr

Jesus and Mo



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Jesus: Man or merely a

ed, for which he later came up with several conflicting explanations.

But perhaps there was an even more pressing explanation for his defection along with the high priest's cash, which, of course, is not mentioned by him or his sycophantic anonymous devotee the writer of Acts, for prior to departing for Damascus there is evidence that Saul had sought to murder James the leader of the Nazarenes, and had set off to Damascus confident in the belief he had succeeded, but *en route* learned that this was not so and the followers of James were out for revenge.

The writer of Acts, whoever he or she was, represents Saul as having to flee Damascus at night because of threats to kill him. Saul, for his part, seeks to present the situation somewhat differently; nevertheless he left the city for Arabia, which is thought to have been Petra or its vicinity, unless, of course, he went back to Tarsus.

ROBERT MORRELL expands on a debate currently running in our *Points of View* section

Few people appear to know about Saul's attempt to assassinate James, as understandably theologians are in no hurry to publicise it, but details are to be found in an early Judeo-Christian, probably Ebonite, work known as *The Pseudoclementine Recognitions*. The Ebonites were declared to be heretical in the fourth century and suppressed, their literature being sought out and burned. The fact that the recognitions survived appears to have been due to a mistaken assumption that the Clement in the title was pope Clement. According to the document, James had been seen in the temple precincts, and Saul with a group of men launched a violent attack on him and those with him.

Saul is described as having been "carried away with madness", and both sides attacked each other, "much blood" being shed. More of James's followers arrived to join in the fracas, causing Saul and his group to beat a hasty retreat, having decided, the recognitions state, it was prudent to do so "lest they suffered themselves to be killed". From this it is all too clear that the Nazarenes, whatever else they might be, were anything but pacifists and must be seen as a group willing to employ violence to gain its ends. There are passages in the gospels that indicate the Jesus movement was not averse to this, one even has Jesus tell his

n of mystery y a myth?

followers that those who refused to accept him should be brought before him and slaughtered (Luke 19; 27).

The account goes on to state that James had been thrown down a flight of steps and left for dead, although he had only broken his legs, which was serious enough, was taken to Peter's house, and the following day, accompanied by a five-thousand strong escort of his followers, was taken to Jericho. There they learned that Saul, who is not named in the account, had been ordered by Caiaphas (the high priest) to go to Damascus where, aided by "the unbelievers" he was to "...make havoc among the faithful", who, we learn, included Peter. (*Tatian, Theophils and the Clementine Recognitions*, Ante-Nicene Christian Library. Edinburgh, T & T Clarke, 1875. pp 188-189). Perhaps Peter's name headed Saul's Damascus hit list.

What is implied by this is that the Jesus group, or Nazarenes, were not averse to using violence, so the inference is that they were probably one of the many Jewish revolutionary factions extant at that time, all dedicated to the re-establishment of the national sovereignty of Israel. This was to be accomplished, or at least it was thought it would be, at grass roots level, by a leader known as the messiah. This "office" carried no connotation of deity or divinity but was a claim to the vacant throne of the nation, a dangerous one considering the Romans had abolished the monarchy following the death of Herod in 4 BCE, as well as a title all kings claiming descent from David held.

The Jewish historian Hyam Maccoby has pointed out that anyone could claim to be the messiah, as it was not blasphemous to do so and under Jewish law it carried no penalty (*The Myth Maker, Paul and the Invention of Christianity*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986. p37).

That Jesus was said to have been crucified by the Romans is a clear indication that he was looked upon as a political dissident, so any movement or group looking on him as their leader, or inspiration, were rebels, and as the high priest owed his financially lucrative job to the Romans it is little wonder that he sought to suppress the Nazarenes and eliminate their leaders as much for himself as a Roman collaborator.

The names of several failed would-be messiahs are to be found in Jewish literature. Two, apart from Jesus, are mentioned in Acts: Theudas and the anonymous "Egyptian". Following the death of Herod, the man the Romans appointed in his place, as ethnarch not king, was his eldest son Archelaus.

His appointment triggered off a revolt led by

the would-be messiah Judas of Gamala, or as he is usually known, Judas the Galilean, one of whose first acts was to lead his followers on a raid on the armoury at Sepphoris, a town close to where Nazareth was to be established in the third century, or thereabouts, to cater for the growing number of wet-behind-the-ears Christian pilgrims all anxious to visit the place where Jesus was supposed to have lived. Although the by then well-armed rebels were defeated by the Romans under Varus, later to lose his life in the forests of Germany along with three legions, Judas escaped to raise the banner of revolt once again in 6 CE following the Romans deposition of Archelaus, and then incorporated Judea into Syria as a sub-province.

The second revolt was brutally suppressed, thousands of rebels being crucified and Sepphoris burned to the ground, and its inhabitants sold into slavery. It is intriguing to speculate that Joseph, Jesus' step-father, was involved in the rebellion but managed to escape to Egypt, for as Yoseph Mattityaha ha Cohen (later Flavius Josephus) wrote, Jewish refugees fled to Egypt following the fall of Massada (Wars of the Jews. 7. 10. 1). If the suggestion is correct, it implies that as a boy Jesus was raised in a household in which nationalistic politics prevailed.

Commenting on this possibility, the historian S G F Brandon notes that "as a precocious boy, [Jesus] must have been keenly aware of the crisis that faced his nation. There can surely be no doubt where his sympathies would have lain – not with the hard insolent Romans, who now deprived Israel of its heritage, but with Judas and his followers who had bravely ventured their lives in resisting the heathen oppressor and died the martyr-death". (*The Trial of Jesus of Nazareth*, London, Batsford, 1968. pp 30-31). Of course it is speculation to refer to the possibility of Joseph being a run-away rebel, but as Simon Dubnov said, "From Galilee stemmed all the revolutionary movements that so disturbed the Romans" (*History of Jesus*, London, Yoseloff, 1967. p74). Joseph will not have lived in a social and political vacuum, so the idea is historically plausible.

Mr Campbell names several individuals, including Brandon, in his letter, and examination of the works of several show them to have supported in lesser or greater degree the political/revolutionary hypothesis. The first who appears to have mooted the idea was another mentioned by Mr Campbell, the 18th-century German academic H S Reimarus, who did so in a privately circulated manuscript essay entitled *Von dem Zweeke Jesu und Seiner Junger*, which was one of seven he wrote.

It and the others, also highly controversial deistic essays, were not published until ten years after his death in 1768, and then anonymously in order to protect the writer's family from potential consequences. An English translation edited by A Voysey was eventually published with the title *On the Intention of Jesus and his Disciples*. Since then, the political hypothesis has developed to an extent that Reimarus might perhaps have had difficulty in comprehending, or even, perhaps, agreeing with. Its most recent supporter turns out to be the aforementioned Professor Tabor, who also subscribes to the contention of the second century critic of the Christian cult Celsus, that the real father of Jesus was a Roman soldier named Panthera (*On the True Doctrine*, translated with a general introduction by R J Hoffman. OUP. 1987. p57. and, Tabor, pp58-65), and even goes as far as to suggest that Panthera's memorial stone survived and can be seen in the Rö merhalle Museum at Bad Kreuznach, Germany. Will this eventually become another place on the must-visit list for Christian pilgrims?

The fact that there are no contemporary documents may be seen as strong support for the myth hypothesis, but as the old saying goes, lack of evidence does not mean there is none. But it can also point to the fact that the authorities in the Christian cult, in their attempts to appease the Roman state, sought to destroy or re-write anything that pointed towards Jesus and the Nazarenes being an anti-Roman revolutionary movement that simply used religion to further their political ends. We encounter enough examples of this in the world at the present time.

Deep-fried Jesus sketch outrages US Catholics

A BRIEF US radio sketch which targeted the religiosity of former Southern Baptist preacher and Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee has landed the station – KCPW, Utah's National Public Radio station – in hot water.

The sketch began with a woman saying: "And now another Huckabee family recipe leaked by his opponents."

[Male Voice]: "Tired of bland unsatisfying Eucharists? Try this Huckabee family favorite. Deep-Fried Body of Christ – boring holy wafers no more. Take one Eucharist. Preferably post transubstantiation. Deep-fry in fat, not vegetable oil, ladies, until crispy. Serve piping hot. Mike likes to top his Christ with whipped cream and sprinkles. But his wife Janet and the boys like theirs with heavy gravy and cream puffs. It goes great with red wine."

Woman: "Now that is just ridiculous. Everyone knows evangelicals don't believe in transubstantiation."

The station apologised and withdrew the sketch from its website after receiving an official complaint from Catholic League President Bill Donohue, who said it was "blasphemous and bigoted."

In this article I shall discuss an aspect of the general problem of the alleged inerrancy of the Bible. I will not concentrate on topics such as religious experience, revelation, or special acts of God revealing himself to human beings. It is old hat that traditional forms of Roman Catholicism, conservative Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others, take the teachings of the Bible to be infallible – the very Words of God himself – divinely authorized truths imparted to man.

It is not equally well known, but, I think, should be, that such views have come under heavy attack by recent authors, such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, to name two salient sources. These authors have aimed their salvos at Christian fundamentalism and evangelicals, all of whom regard the Bible as infallible.¹

There are obvious reasons for doubting the inerrancy view. One is that various parts of the Bible were written in languages other than English, making room for errors in translation from the original or secondary languages. Another argument that seems somewhat obvious is that the majority of the Old Testament was written as a record of the history of Israel and its tribal practices and mores, and not intended to be applicable to current cultures and times. Many, maybe even most, Christians might agree with this.

However, things are much worse than the arguments given above. The Bible is full of logical contradictions. William Henry Burr, in an 1860 publication, cited over 140 contradictions in the Bible.² If Burr is even partially correct, and there is a good bet he is, it is already logically impossible for the entire Bible to be true. That alone suffices to defeat fundamentalism. But there is more. It is well known that the Bible is full of views that are at odds with developments in science. The theory of evolution is incompatible with a literal reading of Genesis, with the fall of Adam and Eve, with the existence of the Great Flood, and arguably with a host of other Biblical beliefs. The theory of evolution is true, therefore ...

Nor is the Bible correct about the order of the origin of life forms. For instance, it is false that birds came before insects (Genesis 1: 21, 25). In fact, insects predated birds by millions of years. Finally, and this will be the subject of this essay, there are many passages in the Bible that are morally unjustifiable, and ought to be totally rejected by any morally sensitive person.³

Consider some of the more immoral passages in the Bible on sexuality and family. We are told that a man and woman should be put to death if they commit adultery (Lev 19: 10). We are also told that adultery is sometimes all right, when it isn't (Numbers 31: 17, 18). We are told that a man or a woman should be put to death for bestiality (Lev 19: 15, 16; Exodus 22: 19). We are told that anyone who curses or speaks ill of their parent or parents should be put to death (Lev 19: 9; Mark 7: 10). We are told that if a daughter of a priest profanes her-

self by playing a harlot "she shall be burned with fire" (Lev 21: 9). If a man lies with his daughter-in-law both shall be put to death (Lev 19: 12). Then we are told that if a man lies with another man, both shall be put to death (Lev 19: 13). This passage, and others like it, have caused much prejudice and suffering, and ought to be rejected as morally unjustifiable.

Preventing same-sex marriage is arguably immoral, unless some reason can be given for doing so. In fact, the biblical believer holds that pretty much all sexual relations are bad, except for having children, and that God will punish you if you even think about sex. We are told that we cannot marry a widow who has had sex (Lev 21: 13, 14). We are also told that a man can sell his daughter as a sexual slave (Exodus 21: 7-11). In the New Testament, we are told that marrying a divorced person is adultery (Mark 10: 10), as is getting remarried (Matt 19: 9). Again, devout and unthinking compliance with such passages has caused untold suffering to good human beings. Many contemporary Christians push the view that sex education in the schools should teach abstinence only. This has caused a lot of unwanted babies.

Another morally unjustifiable theme in the Bible is the attitude towards women. In Genesis 2: 18 we are told that a woman is created "as a helper" to the man. In Genesis 3: 16 it says God tells Eve "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." In Titus 2: 15 we are told that wives should be submissive to their husbands. In Ephesians 5: 22 it says "Wives be subject to (sometimes "submit to") their husbands, as to the Lord." Then there is this: "I do not allow them to teach or have authority over man; they must keep quiet. For Adam was created first, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived; it was a woman who was deceived and broke God's law. Yet women will be saved by bearing children" (1 Tim 2: 11-15). This is nothing short of sheer male physical dominance, the worst kind of male chauvinism, and such immoral teachings are even worse in some other religions.

Then there is the topic of slavery. The Bible approves of slavery in many passages in both the Old and New Testaments. In Exodus 21: 20 we are told that it is permissible to beat your slaves as long as they don't die from the beating. In Luke 12: 47, 49 Jesus gives permission to beat slaves if they are unruly. In Exodus 21: 7-11 we are told every man is free to sell his daughter into sexual slavery. There is also Lev 25: 44-56; and there is Colossians 3: 22 and 4: 1 in the New Testament.

The general portrayal of God in the Old Testament is objectionable. In the Old Testament God is portrayed as offensive and immoral. In Genesis 22 God tests the faith of Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his son Isaac. If we are not to exempt God from our common-sense moral standards, this is a gross use of a double standard. It is OK for God to

A moral obligation the Bible a

test someone's faith this way, but if a mortal ruler ever tried anything like this, it would be considered outrageous and dictatorial. Today we call this child abuse. What exactly is the difference between what God does to Abraham, and religious terrorism?

DR THOMAS W SMYTHE argues that everyone should read the Bible with a critical eye.

We are told that God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their "wickedness". What did they do to deserve the death penalty? Did they enjoy too much sex? This does not seem like a benevolent deity who loves all mankind, and it uses the double standard again. God killed everyone in the Great Flood (Gen 7: 23). No justifying reason is ever given for this. The double standard again. Then there is the Book of Job. Again, I suggest, we do not require God to even live up to our ordinary moral standards. He can do anything, and we are told that we have to believe and have faith.

Another morally unjustifiable result of believing in the inerrancy of the Bible is the attitude this fosters towards other religions and non-believers. Fundamentalist Christians are invariably exclusivists. Traditional Catholics and conservative Protestants believe that God and Jesus will send all people who do not follow their teachings of the Bible and accept Jesus as their personal savior to burn in hell for eternity. Such people believe we should either (1) force all people to be Christians, or (2) most people out of the 6.7 billion people on earth who are non-Christian or non-believers are immoral, bad people who will go to hell. This is hardly a policy that will promote world peace. It was not until the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, 1963-1965, that it was declared that "Those who through no fault of their own are still ignorant of the gospel of Christ and of the church yet sincerely seek God and, with the help of divine grace, strive to do his will as known to them through the voice of conscience, those men can attain eternal salvation."⁴ How benevolent and Christian. Non-believers, doubters, and members of other religions who do not do just as the Vatican Council says, will no doubt go to hell.

We are told that God loves each of us unconditionally. We are also told you can go to hell for all kinds of reasons. In Isaiah 1: 28 we read that anyone who "forsakes the Lord shall be consumed." In Mark 16: 16 we are told we will

igation to treat as fallible

go to hell for even questioning what we are told we have to believe. In Matt 23: 23, Jesus tells any doubters that "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?" The Bible is rife with such passages. If you even question the Word of God, you are already a sinner. And if you are a scribe or a Pharisee, or a convert thereof, you really get zapped (Matt 23).

I would like to suggest that we call such exclusivism Christian Nazism. A Christian Nazi is a Christian who believes that all non-Christians are going to be somehow eliminated for good. If you do not follow Jesus, accept him as your Lord and Savior, you will be systematically weeded out and somehow suffer a great loss. The implication of this attitude, given that there are about one billion Christians of all stripes in our planet, is the other 5.7 billion inhabitants of this planet are doomed. Jehovah's Witnesses especially fall into the category of being Christian Nazis. Their view is that only some 30 million of their people have a chance of going to paradise, and many of them won't make it. All other Christians, or what they call "Christiandom," are doomed, along with every other person on earth.

They even tell their children not to make friends with someone who is not a member of their religion, but to tolerate them as best they

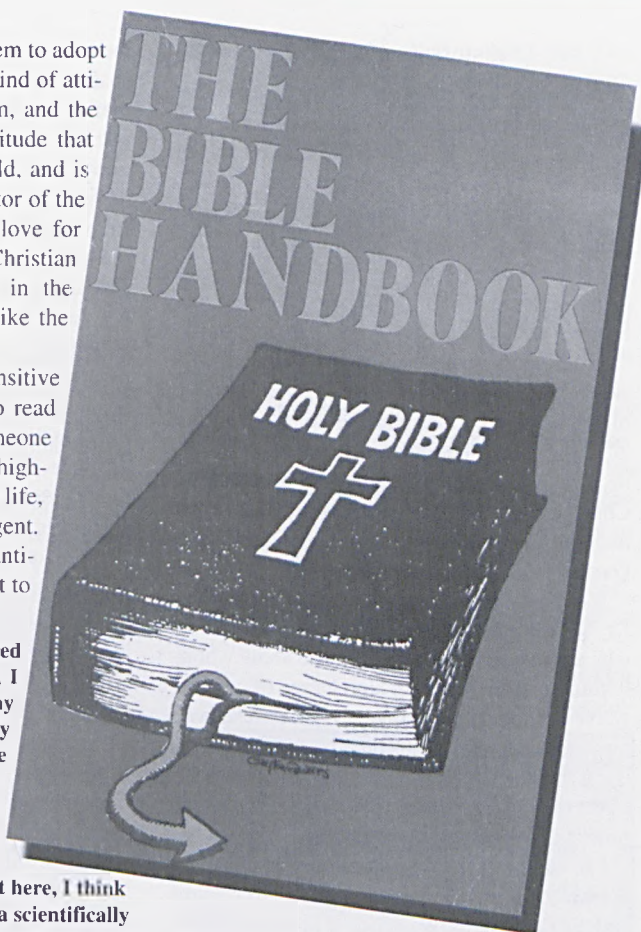
can and try to kindly persuade them to adopt the one true religion. I find this kind of attitude to be no better than Nazism, and the label is well earned. It is an attitude that exacerbates divisions in the world, and is inconsistent with belief in a creator of the universe that has unconditional love for the total package. One cause of Christian Nazism is precisely the belief in the infallibility of some holy book like the Bible.

I conclude that a morally sensitive person has a moral obligation to read the Bible critically, and that someone who does not regard the Bible as highly fallible is living an immoral life, and is not a responsible moral agent. Try reading the Bible. The best antidote to too much religion is to get to know what religion is all about.

1. If a subject holds that any sacred text is the infallible Word of God, I take them to be holding that any statement in the text, when properly understood, cannot possibly be false or mistaken.

2. William Henry Burr, *Self-Contradictions of the Bible*, (Prometheus Press, 1987).

3. Although I will not argue for it here, I think it is immoral to teach our children a scientifically falsified view about the origin of life and man that is contained in the Bible as though it could be literally true. Teaching children to accept everything in any book without question is morally unjustifiable. Some fundamentalists go so far as to advocate banning some science courses from our schools. We have the freedom to be totally deluded in this country, and it is exercised more often than not. All we need is enough votes.



The cover of *The Bible Handbook* published by American Atheist Press

4. Taken from John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 4th ed, (Prentice-Hall, 1990), p 116.

• Dr Smythe is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at North Carolina Central University

Christianity prevents a registrar from doing her job

A REGISTRAR in London is taking her employers to a tribunal because her religion gets in the way of her carrying out her duties.

Lillian Ladele won't officiate at same-sex civil-partnership ceremonies in Islington, and now she's in conflict with the council, for which she's worked for more than ten years.

She's taking her landmark case to an employment tribunal, claiming "discrimination or victimisation on grounds of religion or belief".

Until last month, Britain's registrars worked under an arrangement that allowed them to opt out of some ceremonies. That's now changed, with the coming of the Statistics and Registration Act, which alters that relationship, bringing what were in effect freelancers under the direct control of town halls.

Ladele will represent herself at the tribunal, expected to convene later this year.

That ever-reliable rent-a-quote Stephen Green of Christian Voice, has waded into the argument, saying "I have a great deal of sympathy with this lady. She signed up for the honourable job of joining men and women in mar-

riage. Now she is being asked to solemnise pretend unions of homosexuals. No wonder she feels aggrieved."

The gay lobby group Stonewall says that Ladele's opposition to same-sex civil partnerships, which were given legal recognition in 2005, was unjustified. "All public servants are paid to uphold the law of the land," a



Lillian Ladele, wearing a symbol of superstition with pride

spokesman says.

"Doubtless there were those 40 years ago who claimed a moral objection to mixed marriages between people of different ethnic origin. Discrimination on any basis is equally unacceptable."

Muslims should be proud to be British

"THE rights and freedoms we enjoy in England are better than any other country in the world for Muslims, better than any country in the Islamic world," Shahid Malik, the International Development Minister, said last month. Malik's remark was part of a call to the Islamic community to embrace, rather than reject, Englishness as part of their identity.

"My message to young Muslims is 'Be proud to be English and don't let anyone steal your identity away. This is one of the greatest nations in the world and we should be proud to live here – let's shout about it a bit more.'"

Historicity of Jesus

IN HIS reply to my November, 07, letter on the subject of historical Jesus, Stuart Campbell (*Points of View*, December 07) refers to the great humanitarian, Dr Albert Schweitzer – who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his wonderful work at the Leper Hospital which he set up in 1914 at a place called Lambarene in what was then French Equatorial Africa.

In addition to being a truly dedicated missionary, the brilliant Dr Schweitzer was also a highly-regarded Christian theologian, and for 2/3 years at the beginning of the 20th century he was assiduously engaged in researching Christian origins for a book which would be later published in Britain under the title of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

It appears that at an early stage of the project Dr Schweitzer realised that the Gospel Jesus was an elusive, insubstantial figure about whom nothing was known with any degree of certainty. Nevertheless, he continued with his researching and writing, and eventually concluded his quest with the rather succinct remark to the effect that ... "The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma."

I'm sure Mr Campbell will agree that Dr Schweitzer's remark hardly constitutes a ringing endorsement for the existence of someone called Jesus in the second and third decades of the 1st century. Indeed, I would say that Dr Schweitzer pre-dated Professor Bultmann by about 70 years in asserting that we have no real knowledge about the historical Jesus.

In the 19th century a noted Anglican divine, John Keble, published a book about Jesus entitled *The Great Galilean* but in the preface thereto he admitted that he had no historical documentation for his work because no man had sufficient knowledge about Jesus to write a biography of him. He went on to say that if newspapers were published at that time, and an obituary notice written, no editor could have found in the literature of the day so much as the name of Jesus. He went on further to say that no contemporary writer knew of the existence of someone called Jesus.

Some years ago a Danish anthropologist remarked that ... "We human beings must never, ever underestimate the enormous myth-making capacity of the human mind." (Too true!).

MARTIN O' BRIEN

Gwent

IT SEEMS Stuart Campbell, *Points of View* October and December, can never resist the temptation to write a letter whenever someone suggests that we know nothing about Jesus, or he is a fictitious person, usually with a plug for his book.

It is therefore worth having a look at some of his beliefs as expressed in his book. He states on page 186 "some will continue to search for Jesus despite the fact that I have found him". This could be put as "my view is

the only view" and is not far from the "my way is the only way" of the religious fanatic. He then boasts that in one short chapter running to just 21 pages he completely refutes the case for a mythical Jesus. All he succeeds in doing is demonstrating his own ignorance of the case for a mythical Jesus.

Let me make just three points. On page 36 he states "It matters little whether or not a Christian has interfered with the text". Well, he may not regard Christian forgery as important, but one is hardly going to arrive at a sensible or rational conclusion if one swallows their forgeries.

He makes an even more incredible assertion on page 24 when he states "If Jesus is myth, then Plato is a mere figment of the imagination." He fails to grasp the basic point that Plato wrote books, and if we define Plato as the author of those books then he must have existed, as books do not write themselves. We can thus evaluate Plato on the basis of their content without the need to know anything about any other aspect of his life. Jesus on the other hand wrote nothing, and the accounts we have of his life were written about 120 years after his alleged death by people who were besotted by their faith in a crucified anointed saviour of the zodiac.

Stuart Campbell then makes a vicious attack on Wells for back-projecting Jesus' death to the time of Pilate and mocks him for not putting it back further to the time of Herod. Once again he displays his ignorance of the needs of the situation. First, because a man-god saviour needs to suffer death by crucifixion. Second, to fit in with the activities of Saulus (let us give him his proper name, not the Christian euphemism Paul), he was active from about 40 AD to about 70AD, and the supposed apostles, most as fictitious as Jesus, had to be his contemporaries, so Jesus' ministry had to be set in the early 30s AD. Pilate just happened to be the governor at the time.

One final criticism of his book, although it was published in 1996 it does not make a single reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls. Some of them are contemporary eye-witness accounts of life in Palestine at the time when Saulus was propagating the ideas that became Christianity in the following century, and unlike other sources are uncontaminated by Christian forgery.

CHARLES DOUGLAS
Galloway

Race fiction not fact

HAVING read the forceful article from Diesel Balaam in the December edition of *Freethinker*, I came away with a feeling, once often attributed to poor quality Chinese meals, of being rather bloated but essentially unsatisfied.

The real question must be as to the purpose intended by the article. Was it intended to be an attack on the Left and Socialists, as if all who might subscribe to such a description had perpetrated the sins being heartily denounced? Or was it intended to enhance the profile of Migrationwatch and the sad peddlers of the

anti-foreign propaganda, so popular amongst parts of the media? Or indeed was it a call to end all migration or just Muslim migration?

Personally the one effect the article did not produce in me was to associate freethought with what was really little more than a sophisticated rant.

Diesel Balaam talked of "eschewing ideological fictions" and being "guided by facts alone" yet beats us over the head with stereotypical descriptions of the Left and ideological views of migration. In specific regard to migration I would suggest that real free-thinkers would find the paper by Melissa Lane on "Myths about migration" a revelation.

More importantly, her paper comes from a more credible source than the self-appointed Migrationwatch, being published by History & Policy at the Institute for Historical Research. Some of the important points made or re-iterated by Melissa Lane include a reference to a survey by *Scientific American* which declared that "Human beings have always been migratory". Our ancestors' journey from Africa was not just for a holiday!

Another point to come out from her narrative is that there has been a real change, not in human habits but rather in the imposition of often arbitrary, national boundaries in the recent past. In this respect her conclusion is very telling, particularly for freethinkers, as she states that "once freed from illusions about either the power or the values underwriting state attempts to control illegal immigration, we may come to agree ... that current forms of control of migration are a greater threat to human rights and democracy than the presence of immigrants."

Diesel Balaam endeavours to defend James Watson, the man who before retiring directed the Human Genome Project at the American National Institute of Health, and so someone who should know something about genetics! Sadly, however, his recent stupid statements that have provoked so much controversy indicate that his understanding is actually quite limited. He, of all people, should know that race is a social concept, with no scientific basis.

The further irony is that Dr Watson is one of very few to have his entire genetic code available to him, from which others have discerned that one of his recent ancestors was an "African"! This of course highlights an important scientific truth, that one of the essential mechanisms of sexual reproduction is that we are all products of mixed parentage – such that it is effectively impossible to create a demarcation that would separate us into different race categories.

Whilst it is tempting to go on further in dismantling the extensive rant by Diesel Balaam, I should perhaps "cut some slack" and "make allowances for human fallibility" – but would still ask for a better use of the print space in the *Freethinker*.

IAN ANDREWS
Rochdale



Socialism v Capitalism

I WAS gratified and puzzled in equal measure by Graham Livingstone's response to my article *Why freethinkers must proceed from race fact, not race fiction* (FT Dec 2007). Gratified that he found it "interesting and thought-provoking," but puzzled as to why he focused purely on what he calls "another swipe at the Left". Yes, there was a swipe (several swipes, in fact) at the authoritarian illiberal Left, as represented by Ken Livingstone *et al*, but also several aimed at the authoritarian illiberal Right, as represented by the BNP and David Irving. There really isn't much to choose between these two camps, in my opinion. In fact, the only reason I didn't pour more scorn on the Right, was, as I stated in the article, that their racist views are "so obviously farcical and beyond reason they need not detain us here".

Unfortunately, Graham Livingstone remains wedded to the absurdly quaint notion that capitalism is the root of all evil and that it ought to be replaced by "the dictatorship of the proletariat" – whoever they might be! He sneers at and dismisses our democracy as a vehicle for unchecked individual greed that will wreck global eco-systems, starting with those of the most vulnerable Third World countries like Bangladesh. But isn't it high time that Graham woke up and smelt the coffee? Fairtrade and organic coffee, if he prefers (both provided via capitalist means, incidentally).

Capitalism is here to stay, as inevitable as death and taxes. Yes, it is sometimes brutal and unfair, but just as often it is liberating, inventive and fun. The problems we face in the world today are partly of capitalism's making and partly of communism's making, but it will be capitalist entrepreneurs who solve the energy crisis, feed the world, discover the cure for AIDS and find greener ways for us to travel and enjoy ourselves. Democracy is fuelled by altruism and social necessity, just as much as by self-interest, and it has an uncanny knack of delivering "the greatest happiness of the greatest number", however imperfectly.

This is not to say that there is no place for socialism. Democratic socialism has ably succeeded in humanising capitalism. The mechanism whereby health provision is free at the point of delivery (ie the NHS) is a fine example of how socialism, within capitalism, can improve the lot of ordinary people. However, when socialism gets above itself and seeks to supplant both capitalism and democracy, it soon turns into an inflexible, dictatorial nightmare. Zimbabwe was Africa's bread basket until the Marxists got hold of it – now its own people are starving and beaten to a pulp if they dare complain. Fidel Castro did much to improve standards of literacy – then promptly banned all the books he didn't want the Cubans to read. In China, the Communist Party turned the Army's firepower against unarmed pro-democracy students, the children of its own country. The biggest eco-disasters on planet Earth have all occurred inside the

former Soviet Union. Need I go on?

Let's face facts: Graham Livingstone's doctrinaire socialism was dying on its arse long before I started taking swipes at it in the *Freethinker*. He should try converting to something with a future, instead. How about libertarian freethought?

DIESEL BALAAM
London

The Virgin Birth

A PRE-CHRISTMAS survey was carried out by the *Spectator* among leading public figures in the churches, the arts, the media, and politics, as to whether they believed in the virgin birth of Jesus.

Of the 23 replies received and published, no fewer than 15 were positive, four were negative, and four more-or-less Don't Knows; while those refusing to reply included three bishops and five politicians (Gordon Brown, Tony Blair, David Cameron, George Galloway, and Liam Fox).

The best reply came from Christopher Hitchens, who wrote: "I no more believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary than I believe that Krishna was born of the virgin Devaka, Horus was born of the virgin Isis, Mercury was born of the virgin Maia, or Romulus was born of the virgin Rhea Sylvia.

"As the preceding examples help to demonstrate, parthenogenesis would in any case not be proof either of divine paternity or of the truth of any subsequent preaching ... Christianity insults our intelligence as well as our innate morality by insisting that we believe absurdities that are drawn from the mythology of paganism and barbarism."

The most ignorant reply, from someone called Fraser Nelson, deserves to be quoted in full: "The basis of Christianity is that Jesus was the Son of God, not the son of Joseph – his DNA was a mix between that of Our Lady and the Almighty. If you don't believe in the Immaculate Conception, then *The Life of Brian* starts to look more like documentary."

It is, of course, basic to all Christian theology that the Almighty is pure spirit, with no body, parts or passions, so whence the DNA? As for the Immaculate Conception, the writer obviously thinks it refers to the conception of Jesus instead of that of Mary. And how on earth does the farcical film character of Brian come into it?

However, the conjuring of divine DNA would at least answer the problem of parthenogenesis supposedly producing male offspring. In fact, of course, parthenogenesis can result only in a clone of the mother – as in the actual case of Dolly the sheep. None of the *Spectator* replies (positive, negative, or on-the-fence) mentioned the impossibility of a male child being conceived parthenogenetically, without the Y chromosome.

The only respondent apart from Mr Nelson to mention the Immaculate Conception was A C Grayling – though he did so, of course, in its correct usage. He imagined that, Catholic

theologians having decided in 1854 that they must go back a generation from the virgin birth and preserve Mary herself from Original Sin by establishing the "immaculate conception" for her, they will eventually have to regress another generation and similarly purify her mother, Anne. But what, I would ask, about her father, Joachim?!

Moreover, if God could, prior to the sadistic crucifixion, inhibit even one descendant of Adam and Eve from inheriting Original Sin, why not do likewise for all humanity?

Every doctrinal solution to a theological problem seems only to create a worse problem, requiring yet another solution – and each so absurd that one wonders how leading citizens of this country today can bring themselves to believe them.

Small wonder that some of them, at least, funk admitting, in print, to the absurdity of the virgin birth.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

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Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones pn 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Friends Meeting House, George Rd and St James's Rd, Edgbaston. Wed, Feb 13, 7.45pm. Darwin Day lecture by Dr Tim Betts.

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

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Feb 6, 8pm. Darwin Day lecture by Greg Marshall: *Creationism v Geology: Rock of Ages, or the Ages of Rocks?* Wed, March 5. 8pm. Jim Herrick: *19th-Century Secularism and its Relevance Today*.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information above. 50th Anniversary Celebration at The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton on Sat, March 15, 12.30pm. Welcoming drinks, and buffet. Speakers: Anna Behan, Vice-President, National Secular Society, Adam Trimmingham, Mike Jelley. Tickets £7.50 from Fleur Jacot, 11 Slonk Hill Rd, Shoreham by Sea, BN43 6HX. Tel: 01273 461404.

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: 01296 623730. Friends Meeting House, High St, Berkhamsted. Wed, Feb 6, 7.45pm. Adrian Peeler: *William Blake and His Attitude Towards Religion*.

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

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website www.dorsethumanists.co.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: PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ, Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org. Friday, Feb 8, Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Sq, London WC1, 7.30pm. LGBT History of the Blues, part of LGBT History Week. Ted Brown performs some classic blues songs, and with the aid of narrator Brett Lock highlights the ambiguous and sometimes surprisingly explicit sexual lyrics and what they say about the era in which they were originally performed.

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

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: www.hampstead.humanists.net

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wednesday of the month at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Next meeting Feb 13. Marilyn Mason, former Education Officer of the BHA, will lead a discussion on what to tell children about death. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

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, Jan 8, 7.30pm. *What Muslims Want*. DVD on Channel 4 programme.

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 Kinberley 01982 551736

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

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

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

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. 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.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. Three Cranes Hotel, Queen Street, Sheffield. Wed, Feb 6, 7.30pm. Joe Otten: *Debunking Christianity*.

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.

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

The Thomas Paine Society. Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, London WC1. Sat, March 1, 2pm. Eric Paine Memorial Lecture. Malcolm Chase: *Paine, Spence, Chartism and "The Real Rights of Man"*.

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland. Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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