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# The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

## Religion attacked in children's picturebook

**How Do I Get to God? –  
dubbed 'The God Delusion  
for kids' – has set the  
pig among the pious in  
Germany**

GERMANY'S Federal Ministry for Families is pushing to have a book that "slurs" Judaism, Christianity and Islam labelled "dangerous for children". But the book's publisher says kids have a right to be told what religion is *really* all about.

The Ministry, according to a report in *Israel e News*, is pushing for *How Do I Get to God? asked the Small Piglet* to be added to a list of literature considered harmful to young people.

The superbly illustrated book is written by Michael Schmidt-Salomon, with artwork by Helge Nyncke.

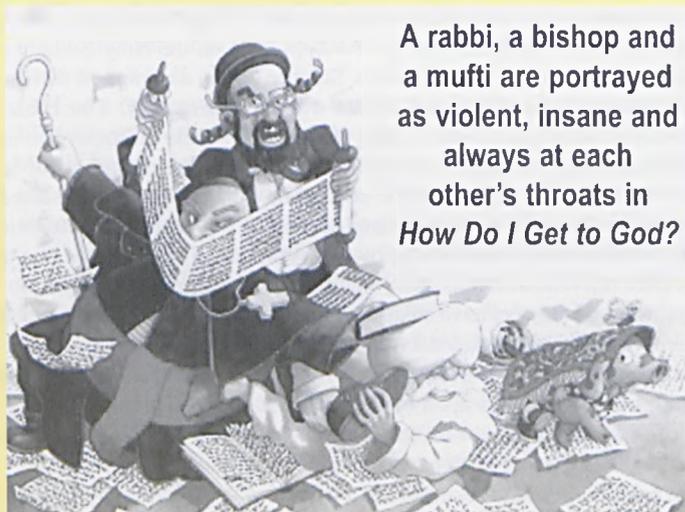
The Ministry for Families announced said that it is considering banning the book's sale to minors – and the Central Council of Jews in Germany agrees with the move.

"The three large religions of the world, Christianity, Islam and Judaism, are slurred in the book," the ministry wrote in a December memo. "The distinctive characteristics of each religion are made to look ridiculous."

The book tells the story of a piglet and a hedgehog who discover a poster attached to their house that says: "If you do not know God, you are missing something!"

This frightens them because they had never suspected that anything was missing in their lives. They then set out to look for "God". Along the way they encounter a rabbi, a bishop and a mufti who are portrayed as insane, violent and continually at each other's throats.

"The rabbi", says *Israel e News*, "is drawn in the same way as the caricatures from the propaganda of 1930s Germany; corkscrew curls, fanatical lights in his eyes, a set of predator's flashing teeth and hands like claws. He reacts to the animals by



A rabbi, a bishop and a mufti are portrayed as violent, insane and always at each other's throats in *How Do I Get to God?*

flying into a rage, yelling at them that God had set out to destroy all life on Earth at the time of Noah, and chases them away.

"The mufti fares little better. While he greets both animals at first as a quiet man and invites them into his mosque, he soon changes into a ranting fanatic. He assembles a baying Islamic mob and holds the animals up in a clenched fist while condemning them to everlasting damnation through bared teeth and an unruly-looking beard.

"The insinuation here is that all visitors to mosques are extremists and every imam who appears reasonable is, in truth, nevertheless, a preacher of hate.

"The bishop, a pale fat man with a clearly insinuated predilection for child abuse, makes up the unholy trinity which eventually convinces piglet and hedgehog, after they have survived the long search in the maze of religions, that nothing of any importance has been missing from their lives."

"I think that God doesn't even exist", the hedgehog says at the end of the book. "And if he does, than he definitely doesn't live in a synagogue, cathedral or mosque."

The 20-page book was published in October 2007, but it was not until last month that all hell broke loose over its appearance. The publisher, Alibri, said it was aware it was risking a religious and political battle when it published the book.

(Continued on p6)

## Good riddance to blasphemy!

See reports on pages 2 and 7



## Thank the Lords, and break out the Bollie, says *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke

TO be honest, the Bollie phrase isn't mine. It came from Stuart Harthill who, last month, appended it to a report on the *Freethinker* website about blasphemy's demise, and I shamelessly purloined it for the print edition.

Having got that off my chest, may I now say how pleased I am that the largest earthquake to have struck England and Wales in 25 years in late February did not come immediately after the Lords abolished blasphemy.

Had it done so, Christian Voice's Stephen "Stay a Virgin, Marry a Virgin" Green would now still be turning cartwheels, and thanking the Almighty for showing his wrath for this "terrible" decision. This pillock would be indulged by the media all over the land, and his sulky bearded features would be glowering out at us from television screens everywhere.

But, wait, he may yet have an opportunity to declare: "I told you so." Any disaster that overtakes us in the near – or even distant – future will, I am sure, be seized upon by this oaf as a sign of God's displeasure with the Lords.

He has already covered all bases by issuing a press release headed in ominous capitals: **BLASPHEMY LAW ABOLITION "WILL BRING JUDGMENT"**. In it he blathers: "This is a sad day for the United Kingdom. Parliament has set the honour of Almighty God at nought just to please a few hard-line secularists. There is no doubt that those against abolition won the debate, but the 'Noes' lost the vote in the face of the shameful Labour whip.

"The Earl of Onslow scoffed at the capacity of the Lord Jesus Christ to bring judgment against those responsible for blasphemy, but it is the judgment of God against this United Kingdom as a whole which troubles me. I do not know in what form it will fall, whether in some dramatic way, or whether simply in an increasing culture of crassness, disrespect and inhumanity. But fall it will, and we shall have only ourselves to blame."

Green was engaged in a futile battle to bring a blasphemy prosecution against the BBC for screening *Jerry Springer, the Opera*, when the axe fell on the law he was trying to invoke. Just before the Lords' vote, he warned that if blasphemy were to be abolished, disestablishment of the Church of England would follow. *Whoopee!*

And if that happens, "the Bishops will lose their seats in the House of Lords and with that, much of their influence in the land. Church schools will go, as it will be argued that Christianity has voluntarily given up its privileged position as the faith of the United Kingdom." *Whoopee again!*

"Prayers in Parliament will be sidelined, made multi-faith or abolished and Christians will find themselves increasingly under attack

for their beliefs in public-service jobs. They will be told to keep their views to themselves." *Whoopee thrice over!*

"The Church will lose its charitable status (the assumption that a religious purpose is charitable has already gone). Faith-based social initiatives will have to give up their Christian ethos to gain Government approval.

"The default position that witnesses swear on the Holy Bible in court will be replaced by an assumption that an affirmation is all that is necessary. The Bible will be available for a while for those who insist upon swearing upon it, then it will go, or become just one of a number of available sacred texts.

"Public manifestations of the Christian faith will be attacked one by one. Hospitals and the armed forces will no longer have paid chaplains. Mayors' chaplains will be abolished. Faith will be relegated to a private matter with no relevance to the public sphere, leaving the arena of public policy clear for atheist agenda-setters alone." *Am I permitted one last, loud whoopee?*

Incidentally, there is to be a grand celebration of the abolition of blasphemy hosted by the National Secular Society in June. The end of the blasphemy law in this country is a major event for the NSS – which has been pressing for its abolition for 140 years. So, why not join them for a fabulous "Bye-Bye-Blasphemy Party" to say goodbye and good riddance to one of the Church's most grotesque privileges?

The celebration will take place in central London at lunchtime on Saturday, June 21. Said an NSS spokesperson: "We'll have a gorgeous buffet lunch followed by entertainment, special guests and loads of surprises. It's going to be a great social occasion, with something terrific to celebrate. Make sure you're there – tickets are limited, so book early to avoid disappointment.

Tickets are available on-line £20 or a special concessionary rate of £10 for students.

**BARGAIN** of the day when I went into my local branch of Costcutters recently were two large tubes of Colgate toothpaste for £1. Little savings like these delight me, but, within 24 hours of buying the stuff, my pleasure turned sour when I learned that atheists should really steer clear of Colgate products. The founder of the Colgate empire, you see, was a vindictive Christian bigot who played a major part in getting American freethinker, DeRobigne Mortimer Bennett – founder and editor of *The Truth Seeker* from 1873 until his death in 1882 – jailed for 13 months with hard labour. Bennett, who regarded Christianity "as the greatest sham in the world, without truth in its

history, without loveliness in its doctrines, without benefit to the human race, and without anything to sustain it in the hold it has upon the world", bravely launched the *Truth Seeker*, the American forerunner of G W Foote's *Freethinker*, in New York when free speech was most under attack from Anthony Comstock, America's self-appointed arbiter of morals – the Mary Whitehouse of his day, if you wish.

Comstock was a "special agent" of the US Post Office, and secretary and chief vice-hunter for The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. A religious zealot, he waged war on "obscene" books (including some classic works of literature), freethinking writers, and publishers. He arrested "liberal" publishers and birth-control advocates, misnaming the latter "abortionists". According to Comstock, the editor of *The Truth Seeker* was "everything vile in blasphemy and infidelity".

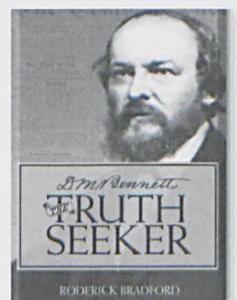
The powerful and the pious backed Comstock, who routinely terrorised his victims and even bragged about driving 15 people to suicide in his mission to "save the young". Among his most ardent supporters was soap tycoon Samuel Colgate, the President of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice.

Bennett was arrested for mailing a free-love tract, *Cupid's Yokes*, to Comstock. "The charge is ostensibly 'obscenity'," Bennett wrote. "But the real offence is that I presume to utter sentiments and opinions in opposition to the views entertained by the Christian Church."

A month before his trial, Bennett wrote his "Open Letter to Samuel Colgate", published in *The Truth Seeker* and mailed (along with *Cupid's Yokes*) to the soap manufacturer. Bennett accused Colgate of distributing a booklet with "prohibited information" – namely advertising Vaseline as a form of birth control. "You violated the law," Bennett wrote, "yet you escape, while you are trying to send me to prison for not breaking the law at all. If this is justice, it must be Christian justice, or Colgate justice, which will not bear investigation." (Bennett's run-in with the biggest tycoon prompted freethinkers to boycott Colgate products for many years.)

Bennett's 1879 "obscenity" trial ended with the 60-year-old editor being convicted of sending prohibited matter through the US mail. He was fined \$300, and sentenced to 13 months with hard labour at the Albany Penitentiary.

A fascinating biography of Bennett, whose life has some extraordinary parallels with G W Foote – who served a term of 12 months with hard labour for blasphemy – has been written by Roderick Bradford, and published by Prometheus. A review of the book will shortly appear in the *Freethinker*.



## No Passion in this piece of propaganda

OH, the optimism! Churches in the UK were standing by at Easter for a huge influx of new believers as a result of the BBC screening a Christian propaganda series entitled *The Passion*.

Evangelists were besides themselves with glee, and set up special help-lines and support groups for the hordes of new members they believed would come dashing into the arms of the Church after the series was shown.

The Reverend Joel Edwards, chair of Churches' Media Council said: "From time to time opportunities arise nationally that provide significant moments for the Christian faith to engage with our culture. This is one such opportunity." Mr Edwards said the series would make a "huge national impact" over Easter.

Ahead of its screening, Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, was invited by the *Observer* to preview the production.

After seeing it, a distinctly underwhelmed Sanderson said that the churches were well advised to start scaling back their efforts.

"The first episode of the series is confused, confusing and consists mostly of a dizzying parade of faces with no names. Who are all these people running around and doing random acts of violence to the accompaniment of portentous music? Even if you are familiar with the Bible story, you might still have difficulty grasping what is going on. The script is so impenetrable, you could be forgiven for thinking it was written by Rowan Williams.

"All the unavoidable clichés are there: the Romans are unremittingly brutal, Jesus walks about spouting over-familiar quotations from his biography and all the faces are disconcertingly familiar from other TV shows – Paul Nicholls as Judas, James Nesbitt as Pontius Pilate – and Jesus is played by Joseph Mawle, who has already revealed to the press that, privately, he is an unbeliever.

"The cheapness of the production gives it the disconcerting look

of *The Life of Brian* – a film that has ensured that none of these biblical epics can ever be taken seriously again. Throughout the whole thing I was waiting for

Terry Jones to stick his head out of the window and screech: 'He's not the Messiah, he's a very naughty boy'.

"I can imagine that a lot of people might tune into episode one out of curiosity, but then abandon it because they couldn't make head or tail of it.

"For a religiously-illiterate nation that thinks Christmas is the birthday of Santa Claus and that Easter is the weekend when the stately homes open again for the season, things need to be spelled out rather more plainly. But even if it is spelled out, I have a strong suspicion that people have grown out of this sort of stuff.

"It just doesn't cut it either as propaganda or as stand-alone drama. They'd have been better off showing one of the overblown Hollywood versions – *King of Kings* or *The Robe* or *The Greatest Story Ever Told* or even *Ben Hur* – as bank holiday afternoon viewing. At least with those extravaganzas you knew you were going to get a bit of spectacle, you knew who was who and what was what. Jesus was always accompanied by a heavenly choir and, from time to time, a supernatural glow. And God always spoke in a *basso profundo* voice, booming through an echo chamber. And you could always depend on Peter Ustinov to give a great performance as an insane Roman Emperor.

"The BBC's *Passion*, I'm afraid, lacks precisely what the title promises. It's as dreary as *Eastenders* with an uncharismatic Jesus who just sort of disappears in a sea of similar faces sporting matted hair and out-of-control beards."



## Padre Pio: Catholics devise a grotesque marketing plan

THE remaining bits and bobs of Italian saint and out-and-out fraud Padre Pio were removed from his tomb last month in preparation for a "public veneration" in April to mark the 40th anniversary of his death.

Italian reports said the exhumation had been carried out in the middle of the night to avoid possible protests and disruptions. The saint's body had then been taken to a "secret location" to protect it both from protesters trying to retrieve it, and from "unscrupulous relic hunters".

Capuchin friars at the sanctuary at San Giovanni Rotondo in southern Italy, where Padre Pio's tomb is visited by seven million pilgrims annually, said that "parts of the body" had been found to be "intact".

Speaking of the dead priest as if he were the mouldering remains of an old Fiat found in a farmer's barn, Monsignor Domenico D'Ambrosio, Archbishop of Manfredonia, said the Capuchin friar's body had been exhumed "to check on its state and to carry out

all the necessary work to guarantee the best conditions for its conservation."

According to *Worldwide Religious News*, the Archbishop added: "The body was in surprisingly good condition. As soon as we got inside the tomb we could clearly make out the beard. The top part of the skull is partly skeletal but the chin is perfect and the rest of the body is well preserved. The knees, hands, mittens and nails are clearly visible ... If Padre Pio allows me, I might say he looks as though he just had a manicure."

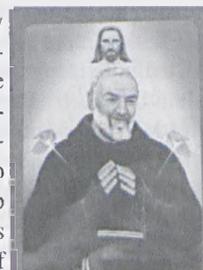
How delightful that will be for the hordes of ghouls expected to goggle at the remains, which are to be placed in a glass coffin and exhibited for "a number of months". And how profitable the exercise will be for the Catholic Church as those who flock to stare at the remains shell out their hard-earned cash for the tacky Padre Pio memorabilia that will no doubt be on sale.

The exhumation – the first time the tomb had been opened since Padre Pio's death in

1968 – was approved by the Vatican despite opposition from some of the saint's most ardent followers. Padre Pio's relatives had threatened to take the local archbishop to court if the corpse was exhumed, and a group of devotees had also threatened legal action.

Padre Pio was canonised by the late Pope John Paul II in 2002. His image is displayed in piazzas, homes, shops, garages and vehicles throughout Italy.

He is credited with over a thousand miraculous cures, but an Italian historian, Sergio Luzzatto, recently caused controversy with a book on Padre Pio in which he claimed to have found documents in the Vatican archives suggesting that Padre Pio may have faked the stigmata he was famous for, and that he also had "intimate and incorrect relations with women".



# Laughing religion off the planet: Dave McKeegan interviews Pat Condell

WITH over five million hits on the popular website *YouTube*, and another couple of million on *LiveLeak*, Pat Condell is a leading voice of atheism on the internet. He is also a stand-up comedian, a playwright, a former lumberjack, a talk-show panelist, and a subscriber to the *Freethinker*.

*Freethinker* webmaster Dave McKeegan tracked the blaspheming infidel down to a garden shed in London and asked him a few questions.

**DM: Your first Youtube video was a response to the Blasphemy Challenge. Was this your first foray into the world of internet video? If so, did you imagine that it would snowball like it did?**

PC: Yes, it was. I didn't know what to expect. I was looking for ways to publicise my stand-up show when I heard about the Blasphemy Challenge. It looked like fun, so I devised a little rant about how much I deny the holy spirit (quite a lot, as it happens), made the video in my garden shed and posted it on *YouTube*. The positive response convinced me that this was a medium I should explore further.

I didn't know much about *YouTube*, but I guessed that most of the audience would be in America, so I made "Hello America" about how I see the relationship between our two countries. Again the response was very positive, especially from Americans. It was viewed thousands of times in a few days, and I realised I could reach a lot more people like this than in a lifetime of performing in small theatres. So I mothballed the stand-up show, much of which was topical anyway, and decided to make more videos.

Then somebody alerted me to *LiveLeak*, a site with a more newsy edge than *YouTube*. I posted my videos there and "The trouble with Islam" took off. To date it has had more than 1,750,000 hits, and with 380,000 on *YouTube*, it's now been seen well over two million times.

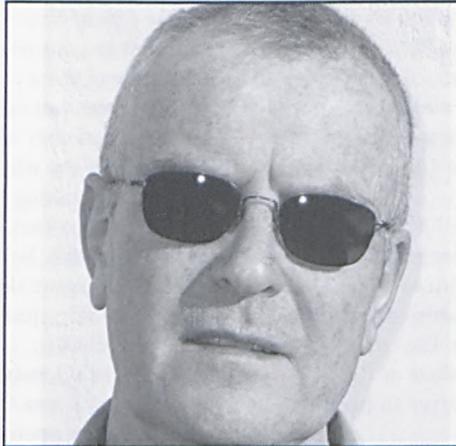
**DM: What do you like about internet video as a medium?**

PC: It's open to anyone. We no longer have to ask someone else's permission to communicate with a wider audience.

I've been criticising religion for years, but only in comedy clubs. Whenever I tried to do it in the mainstream media I was censored, especially by the BBC where jokes about the subject are always heavily edited, and it's virtually impossible to say anything at all about Islam.

The internet allows all of us to bypass these self-appointed gatekeepers and communicate our ideas without interference.

**DM: How has becoming an "internet celebrity" changed your life?**



Pat Condell: 'We don't need our reality filtered through religious dogma any more than we need spring water adulterated with chemicals'

PC: Thanks, but I'm not any kind of celebrity. I'm just speaking my mind. My personal life hasn't changed, I'm glad to say, because I'm very happy with it as it is.

**DM: Your attacks on religion in general, and Islam in particular, have led many people to describe you as "fearless". Are you?**

PC: No. I get death threats and I take them seriously. However, I've never responded well to bullies, and I have no intention of starting now.

**DM: Christian evangelist Dinesh D'Souza has accused you of being smug. How do you respond to this?**

PC: People have called me a lot worse. I'd never heard of this guy until someone directed me to his blog. Since then I've read his book on Christianity, and I didn't see anything in it to warrant respecting his opinion on anything, so he can call me whatever he likes.

**DM: Do you still do stand-up?**

PC: I haven't worked the circuit full time for years. I wrote my last show specifically to say something about religion. Confronted first by the political correctness at the BBC, I felt the subject was being falsely represented and legitimate opinion was being censored. As a result, religion, and Islam in particular, was getting an inflated idea of its own importance. Stand-up was the medium I knew best, and as I didn't see anybody else in the comedy world queuing up to address this situation I elected myself.

**DM: How would you describe your personal philosophy?**

PC: I'm a vegetarian and I strongly support animal rights. (I hope that's OK with Jesus.)

I find it hard not to smile at religion's conceit that we're superior to animals on the basis that we have souls and they don't, when five

minutes in a slaughterhouse would convince anyone that, if anything, it's animals who have the souls and human beings who don't.

As for my opposition to religion, it's not about theology – I couldn't care less whether God exists or not – it's a civil rights issue. I believe everyone should be free to determine their own experience in life and not have it imposed by someone else. We don't need our reality filtered through religious dogma any more than we need spring water adulterated with chemicals.

**DM: What is your favourite thing about religion?**

PC: If nothing else, it is genuinely inclusive. Nobody is rejected, as it doesn't require intelligence, only faith. Not that some intelligent people aren't religious. There are people with biochemistry degrees who devote their lives to proving Genesis true. Nobody could call those people unintelligent, but they are fools.

The best thing about religion is that it's so transparently absurd it can't possibly last forever. I'm convinced it will only take a small shift in human consciousness for it to be laughed off the planet, and I hope I'm still around when that happens.

**DM: What about the future? Will we see a collection of your videos on the market?**

PC: Yes. The Richard Dawkins Foundation is issuing a non-profit DVD of my first 35 videos which should be out soon.

**DM: What can we do to resist the growing influence of religion?**

PC: We can speak out. That's what the internet is for, and it's the only reason my voice is being heard. We need to make as much noise as religious people do, and with as much certainty about our right to do so.

Nobody should be bullied into showing respect they don't think is deserved. If you hear somebody claiming special treatment because of their faith you're entitled to say: "No, I object to this. It offends me, it insults my beliefs, and it's a violation of my human rights."

Use their tactics if you feel strongly enough. Make a nuisance of yourself. Make an official complaint. Take it to a tribunal. As an atheist you're part of a minority whose beliefs are constantly ignored and marginalised while religious prejudice is pandered to and encouraged, and you have every right to be offended by that.

Also, I would urge everyone to join the Humanist Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, both of whom do excellent work in the cause of sanity.

Remember, one person on their own can't do much, but a million people each doing a little every day can change things very quickly.

## Orthodox Jewish women lay claim to the One True Veil

A DISTURBING movement has begun among women in Beit Shemesh, an ultra-orthodox Jewish enclave west of Jerusalem.

Around 100 have begun donning sinister face and body coverings similar to the Muslim burqa and hijab. Some cover just their hair and neck; others wrap their entire face, save their eyes, with a loose cloth.

They call their head-covering a *sal* – but refuse to acknowledge the resemblance to its Muslim twin, the hijab. In Beit Shemesh, the political line is strictly right wing, with many of the religious leaders advocating expulsion of Arabs from the biblical boundaries of the land of Israel.

“The full body, or full face covering that people think is only part of the Arab world actually started with Jewish women,” a woman who asked to be identified only by her first initial, M, told *The Times*.

She added: “Muslim women are imitating Jews to try to gain God’s favour with modesty. The truth is that the women of Israel are lessening in God’s eyes because the Arabs are more modest in dress. If the Jews want to conquer the Arabs in this land they must enhance their modesty.”

Another woman – with a dark cloth secured across her face, hiding everything save her eyes – told *The Times*: “People in cars driving by often stop and stare. Some people are rude – they shout things at me because they think I am Arab.” Named only as Sarah, this woman said that wearing the *sal* was worth the stares and occasional harassment. “In my heart I know this is what God wants me to wear. God willing, more women will see the truth.”

Commenting on the *Times* report, one reader pointed out that “Muslim female apparel has nothing to do with female modesty. It has to do with every woman being regarded in Islam as a possession, in one demeaning way or another, by a man. In the Dispatches: Undercover Mosque programme this was made clear made when an imam said, ‘If she refuses to wear it, we beat her’.”

Another reader added: “Women of all extremist sects, whatever their religion, might as well wear total covering since it signifies their acceptance of their denigration by males and the contempt in which their (man-made) religion holds them.”



One of Beit Shemesh's under-cover women

## Genuine contrition – or a cynical evangelical ploy?

GAY pride events are to god-prodders what picnics are to cockroaches. Whenever such a celebration is staged, they come scurrying out of their vile nests in droves to unfurl their pathetic banners, and hand out their hateful tracts.

But the presence at last month’s Sidney Mardi Gras of a team of Christians from the 100Revs organisation heralded a new tactic: they were there not to picket this world-famous gay event, but to actually take part in the 30th anniversary parade – and to *apologise* for all the nastinesses visited on homosexuals by Christian organisations over the centuries.

They “prayed” that their action “would have the intended outcome of bringing reconciliation and healing to the gay community which has been hurt by the Church, and encourage churches to be welcoming in their attitude to gay people.”

But were they there to signal genuine contrition, or was this a cynical attempt to infiltrate the ranks of the participants in a bid to gather them into the Christian fold?

The 100Revs website gave the game away – in spades! In one section it stated: “A couple of people [a lot, actually] have raised their concern that involvement in the Mardi Gras may be seen (by church members and perhaps by the Mardi Gras organisers) as an affirmation of the promiscuity and lewdness that are part of the

parade. This is certainly not our intention. The Mardi Gras remains the iconic gay and lesbian event and, as such, is the best way of communicating with the gay community as a whole. So while there is much of the Mardi Gras which disturbs us, it is the best place to communicate with those who we are trying to reach.”

So there you have it. The Mardi Gras is still regarded by 100Revs as “promiscuous” and “Jewd” and “disturbing”, but – hey – what a great place to recruit “sinners”!

Commenting on the initiative on the 100Rev website, Nathan Keen – a Christian who deplored the involvement of the group in the parade – offered up this hogwash:

“If we loved them [homosexuals], we would denounce their practice, but show them the right way to live. We might actually read or listen to people’s conversions out of homosexuality and act on their advice. We might actually expose the lies that people believe that it is normal, or that it is genetic, or that you can’t get out of it – but rather it is a choice, and people have gotten out of it.”

Angry letters too were written to the *Sydney Star Observer* by homosexuals equally opposed to 100Revs’ involvement.

The following two letters encapsulate the sentiments of many furious gays:

“There is no place in the Sydney Gay and

Lesbian Mardi Gras parade for any group or organisation which does not adhere to the aims and objectives of the New Mardi Gras constitution. 100 Revs is one such group. The board of New Mardi Gras needs to exercise due diligence, investigate this group urgently and (I recommend) ban them from the parade.

“100 Revs may wish to apologise for being nasty to homosexuals in the past. Fine, if that makes them sleep easier at night. But many of the 100 Revs do not support same-sex relationships in any context, and their own website refers to ‘much of Mardi Gras which disturbs us’ ... Why should they be in our parade?”

The second letter said: “It always amazes me why gay folks feel the need for religion. Why embrace organisations that have for centuries persecuted and murdered us simply because of a lifestyle that we have been born into?”

“Why compromise that lifestyle by adhering to dogma that is its antithesis and, consequently, live with lifelong guilt that you are “unworthy” or “living in sin” according to that dogma. Religion is nothing but self-deluding comfort, something that thrives on our prehistoric fear of the afterlife. Or as the churches peddle it, ‘salvation from eternal damnation’.

“These reverends who want to march in our parade need us a hell of a lot more than we need them.”

## John Radford: A fine frenzy?

There is a "far worse" threat than international terrorism facing us. What can it be you ask, all agog. Global warming, threatening many species and even ourselves? Pollution and destruction of the environment? What about AIDS and other new or resurgent diseases? Or natural disasters – earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, asteroids. Or the famines which are killing thousands every day. Or the inexorable growth in population. Or never-ending wars.

No, presumably worse than any of these, is "the aggressive process of secularisation that has gripped our country, and most of Europe, and which is becoming ever more frenzied". That is according to the Rev Dr Peter Mullen, Rector of St Michael's, Cornhill, in the City of London, writing in *The Times*, 19 Jan 2008, on the Saturday "Faith" page, to which he is a regular contributor.

First off, most of my friends and relations are secularists. None of them show the slightest signs of frenzy ("mental derangement, temporary insanity", *Oxford English Dictionary*). But let us see what else Dr Mullen has to tell us. "I guess not many people are aware that it is against the law for state schools to teach the

### How do I get to God?

"It's clear to me that putting a critique of religion in children's bedrooms is a hot political topic," Alibri head Gunnar Schedel said.

Calling the ministry's accusations an attack on freedom of expression," the publisher said the book answers the question of whether a non-religious child is missing part of life "from the perspective of secular humanism."

Schedel added that the book is intended for nonreligious parents looking to provide their children with a critical view of religion. "All three religions are treated equally in the book," he said.

The animals reach the conclusion that God would not be at home with any of the religions

Author Schmidt-Salomon said the book was "desperately needed considering the enormous mass of religious children's stories." He added that he the book offers children and their parents the opportunity to read about agnostic beliefs if they choose.

"Children also have a right to enlightenment," he wrote on a website set up dedicated to the book. "They should not be left defenceless to the scientifically untenable and ethically problematic stories of religion."

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, the German department responsible for reviewing children's literature was preparing to discuss whether the book presented a danger to children's upbringing.

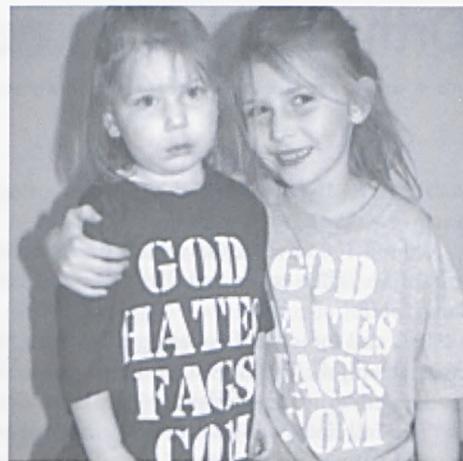
Christian faith as true". As I understand it, all secondary pupils, with certain exceptions, are obliged by the School Standards and Framework Act, 1998, to engage in a daily act of collective worship, "wholly or mainly of a Christian character". Nearly 80 percent of schools ignore this, but it is clearly incompatible with legislating against the truth of Christianity.

In any case that would not be atheism, as there are hundreds more gods to choose from. But to Dr Mullen it is "atheism by decree". In the USA it is illegal to teach Christianity or any other religion in publicly funded schools. That is not atheism either, but secularism, the separation of church and state.

"So," says Mullen, "our children are not brought to a sense of holiness and awe ... This deprivation of the spiritual is a form of child abuse." Presumably holiness means respect for Christianity, and awe is towards that particular God. But, as religionists do, Dr Mullen wants a corner in spirituality, which I would maintain has no necessary link to one religion or any. "Holy" also means "morally and spiritually perfect; of high moral excellence" (*OED* again). In that sense, it is a natural part of the nobler aspects of human life and development. And then it is, as politicians often say, a bit rich to describe failure to teach religious dogma as "abuse", coming from a faith which has done more than its share. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles is paying £340 million in settlement for child abuse by clergy (*Evening Standard*, Jan 23, 2008). The Irish government is funding similar compensation of around three-quarters of a billion pounds (*The Times*, Jan 31, 2008). The dear old C of E cannot rise to these heights, but (according to *The Daily Telegraph*, Oct 22, 2007) ignored child abuse "for decades", and faces a "catastrophic" crisis.

Dr Mullen next becomes perhaps a trifle frenzied on the subject of sexual orientation. He supported the decriminalisation of homosexual behaviour in the 1960s, and deserves credit. But this was on the understanding that it would be only between two persons over 21, and behind locked doors. He does not explain why. "But now, the love that once dare not speak its name, shrieks at us in high camp from decorated floats along the high street."

I don't know which high street he means. Several cities have gay parades once a year. From the little I have seen, those in London appear to be rather jolly, giving pleasure to participants and entertainment to onlookers, and manifestly causing no harm to anyone. That is more than can be said for some religious demonstrations, which in other countries frequently involve riots and murder, and even here explicit threats of death.



Do 'frenzied' secularists put hateful T-shirts like this on their toddlers? Of course not, that's the preserve of swivel-eyed Christian fundies who support organisations like the Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church.

Next on the list is abortion, where reform has resulted in 200,000 embryos a year being "ripped untimely from the womb" (a phrase which Shakespeare used for the birth of Macduff, not for abortion), "just because people fear that a child would interfere with their life-styles". What is the basis for this? There are patently many far more serious reasons. A study by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2004 described the complexity of factors, as well as very wide differences by geographical area and socio-economic conditions. Dr Mullen goes on to cite a previous Rowntree study (1998) which showed a correlation between broken marriages and nine varieties of deprivation such as poverty, poor housing and depression. He seems to think that the marriage failure caused the deprivation. It is far more likely that they are all parts of a syndrome of interacting factors. Poor housing, for example, can only make family life more difficult. However, he then blames Gordon Brown for failing, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, to favour marriage in the tax system. Instead his stated policy was to provide help wherever families needed it, so as 'to find the best way to support every child'. Dr Mullen apparently disapproves. Did someone once say something about "suffer the little children ..."?

The next point is that Muslims reproach the secularists for their "valueless consumerism and reckless hedonism", and urge us to accept Islam. "We" (presumably society in general, since Dr Mullen is no secularist) reply: "No thank you. We've got our own values ... and if you don't like them we'll fire a salvo of condoms at you."

What this means I have no idea. Islam, I understand, accepts contraception, provided it is, like sex, within marriage, and the couple agree.

Lastly Dr Mullen denounces generally the "liberalisation" of the last forty years "that has abolished the idea of the holy and replaced the dignity and moral status of the person with a merely instrumental definition of that once

noble term". Curiously, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in a Christmas message also in *The Times* (Dec 24, 2007) argued that the holy is alive and well. But Dr Mullen denounces him too in one of his sermons (available at [www.st-michaels.org.uk](http://www.st-michaels.org.uk)). What he fails to do, in my opinion, is to show how secularism leads to the circumstances that worry him. Religious observance and belief are very much higher in the USA than in Western Europe. But the abortion rate is also markedly higher, 21 per 1000 compared to 12 (World Health Organisation report, 2007). Divorce rates are the highest in the world, at around 55 per 100 marriages, compared to around 40 in Western Europe. It is true that they are much lower in very religious European countries such as Greece, Italy and Spain ([www.divorcereform.org](http://www.divorcereform.org), Jan 2008).

Gays don't seem any less visible in the USA, and all the data suggest that the rate of homosexuality, being a natural variation, is similar everywhere. But a correlation, even if conclusively demonstrated, which is not the case, is not a cause. The causes of abortion and broken marriages are too complex to be

reduced to one factor. Religion does not prevent people being gay, though it may make them feel unnecessarily guilty about it, and/or conceal it. And a correspondent in *The Times*, describing herself as an Anglican, was "dismayed" at his attitude to gays, who as she says must often be among the clergy and lay people who work alongside him in the ministry.

I have yet to see a frenzied mob of secularists on their way to attack a church, temple, synagogue or mosque. All these have been burned, sometimes with worshippers inside, but usually by adherents of another faith. I don't know any reason why secularists should not possess dignity and moral status. Many I know personally, or whose writings I have read, certainly do. The greatest philanthropists of our day are Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, both giving the bulk of their vast wealth to humanitarian causes. Buffett is definitely, and Gates apparently, agnostic if not atheist, as is George Soros who is perhaps third. I consider dignity and moral status closely linked to self-determination, rational empirical thought, and conscious development of compassion for others, human virtues with nothing supernatur-

al about them. I see no merit in obedience to a mythical creator who is considered to be all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, yet allows, indeed must ultimately be responsible for, the dangers we started this piece with.

I don't think it promotes desirable conduct to suppose, in defiance of the evidence, that we are all somehow imbued with sin from birth (Dr Mullen is hot on original sin. see the sermons), from which we can be "saved" by believing that a man thought to be born in Palestine two thousand years ago was also a god, who died and then came back to life.

I have no doubt that Dr Mullen is sincere and well-meaning, if that does not sound patronising. But from this article he seems, if not actually frenzied, rather sadly distorted in his thinking.

*The Times* is a commercial enterprise, and has to offer its readers what they are interested in. It gives one page each week to "Faith", and over 50 to football. Perhaps Dr Mullen feels this proves his point.

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

## House of Lords vote to ditch blasphemy laws after a fiery debate

THE death knell of blasphemy in Britain was sounded on March 5, 2008, when the House of Lords voted by 148 votes to 87 to do away with this iniquitous law.

The fiery debate, reports the National Secular Society which had been battling for 140 years to have the law scrapped, "had a near record turn-out of bishops, who were split between those accepting the inevitability of change and those lamenting the signal that abolition would give about the decline in religious influence and the secularisation of society". Some feared that abolition would unleash a tide of blasphemous publications.

Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS, said: "This is the culmination of the Society's fight to abolish this medieval law under which many innocent victims have suffered. Even in the 20th century, one of my predecessors was jailed for blasphemy, and an old man was sentenced to hard labour, causing his premature death. The laws have been criticised recently as being uncertain, without penalty and widely believed not to be compliant with Human Rights.

"I pay tribute to all those who have suffered under this cruel law, which denied freedom of expression, and to those before me who have campaigned for its abolition."

However, he sounded a note of caution. "Our celebrations will be overshadowed by the knowledge that parliaments elsewhere in the world will soon be pressurised into passing a new law even more pernicious than blasphemy. It will outlaw so-called

defamation-of-religion. Pressure to pass this law is coming from a bloc of Islamic countries organised by the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference). Having made their demands at the UN Human Rights Commission, they are now planning to lobby the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

"Nations respecting Human Rights must speak out against the defamation of religion law as it undermines the freedom of expression on which our democracy, and indeed our civilisation, depends."

The NSS paid particular tribute to Brighton-based Bill McLroy, who, as NSS General Secretary in 1978, formed the Committee against Blasphemy Law, and distributed a statement signed by over 100 prominent supporters of free speech.

This is what the statement said:

*We deplore the recent trial and conviction of the editor and publishers of Gay News on a charge of blasphemous libel. This was the first successful prosecution for the "crime" of blasphemy in over 50 years, and it demonstrated that the common law can be a device by which censorious elements can, by using the courts, impose their standards on all.*

*The common law offence of blasphemy is clearly a threat to freedom of expression in religious, literary and artistic matters. So long as it is possible for litigious persons to initiate legal proceedings for blasphemy or blasphemous libel, the threat of prosecution, often resulting in crippling financial outlay and even the danger of imprisonment, will*

*hang over artists, writers, journalists, publishers and commentators. This is intolerable in a free society.*

*For three centuries the blasphemy laws were a blot on the Statute Book, and their removal with the passing of the 1967 Criminal Law Act and the 1969 Statute Law (Repeals) Act was welcomed by freethinkers and libertarians. At that time some reformers did not believe that the common law offence merited attention, but the Gay News trial has highlighted the urgent necessity to deal with this anachronism.*

*We are concerned that attempts may be made to extend blasphemy law to protect other forms of religion in addition to Christianity. Such a proposal may appear to be just and reasonable, but whereas the protection of Christianity alone has, to date, been the raison d'être of blasphemy law, its extension would encourage zealots of other religious faiths to exploit this obsolete law.*

*The result would be to increase the divisions between the religious and racial groups within the community. A more satisfactory solution would be to recognise the pluralist nature of our society and to abolish the offence of blasphemy altogether.*

*We urge that a Bill is introduced in Parliament to prevent future prosecutions for blasphemy or blasphemous libel. The passing of such a bill would be welcomed both by traditional opponents of blasphemy laws and by those perceptive Christians who recognise that such laws are discriminatory and absurd.*

## Dan J Bye: Another look at secularism, politics and race

In the December 2007 *Freethinker*, Diesel Balaam argued for a sort of “middle path” of “non-racism” between what he saw as the twin irrational ideologies of racism (on the Right) and “anti-racism” (on the Left). “Anti-racism” is poorly defined by Balaam, but it would appear that he thinks it grows out of a socialist movement he sees as defeated and frustrated, and consists mainly of opposition to an open discussion of race and immigration issues, an extension of the concept of racism to anti-Muslim or anti-Islamic sentiment, and a denial of the personal responsibility of people from ethnic minority communities for any anti-social behaviour they may display.

There is much to agree with in Balaam’s article. He clearly states that he opposes racism, and I too deplore racial prejudice and hatred. He insists that discussion must proceed on the basis of reason and evidence, and what *Freethinker* reader could disagree? I agree with him, too, that the turn to communalist “identity” politics and “multiculturalism” (which treats communities which are diverse as though they were monolithic) on the part of some on the Left has been a mistake. And it is hard to disagree that immigration has been badly managed.

But there is also a great deal that I want to dispute. Balaam presents us with an array of “facts”, but “facts” only mean something in context. In a letter published in the February *Freethinker*, Ian Andrews questioned the purpose of Balaam’s article. Balaam’s response (published in March) accused Andrews of wanting “watertight answers”, and asserted his right merely to “pose questions” and “disrupt the cosy shibboleths” of “ideologues”. Point taken, but the *Freethinker* would become very dry and boring if articles merely recited statistics, with no attempt to construct from them an argument of any kind, even if only an argument to the effect that certain facts are significant and important and disruptive of dogma. I have read and re-read Balaam’s article several times, and I am still unclear what questions of significance Balaam is posing.

I was tripped up by one key point, buried in the final paragraphs of the article, where Balaam says, “pointing out the links between immigration and the upsurge in religious extremism causes the bearded white Catweazles of the atheist Left to go into a tailspin of hysterical denial”. But Balaam doesn’t, anywhere, demonstrate any such links. It is obviously true, but also somewhat banal, to say that some of the jihadists responsible for recent terrorist attacks in Britain are immigrants. But so what? Is that the “link” we’re looking for?

Balaam’s position on “hate” also appears to be ambiguous. He says “Describing asylum seekers as ‘cockroaches’ is dehumanising and hateful, but unless a particular racial group is identified, it cannot be racist.” This legalistic approach is ethically unconvincing, even if it would stand up in court. I don’t think we should be referring to *any* innocent group of people in “dehumanising and hateful” terms, whether doing so is technically racist or not. Balaam defines racial prejudice as “to treat someone differently purely on the basis of where they were born, their skin colour, nationality or ethnicity”, but (legal technicalities apart) if attacking asylum seekers isn’t an example of precisely that I don’t know what is. It’s surprising that Balaam fails to clarify his position on this, given that he is crystal clear on other matters.

For freethinkers, the ethical line should not be difficult to draw. It is one thing to describe Islam as “stupid and barbarous”, as the *Freethinker* editor does, but quite another to abuse all Muslims as “stupid and barbarous”. The Catholic Church’s policy on AIDS and condom use is deadly, but that doesn’t make individual Catholics murderers. It’s not that describing Muslims or Catholics in such terms would be racist, but that it would be hateful and therefore morally wrong (as well as inaccurate).

The usual defence of robust anti-religious criticism is that attacking an ideology, however cruelly, is not the same as attacking an individual in similar terms. This is true, but it is not an argument for cruelty in atheist polemic. The murdered film director Theo Van Gogh notoriously described Muslims as “goat-fuckers”, which I think crosses the line between acceptable and unacceptable criticism regardless of whether or not it would be illegal.

Sometimes Balaam gets carried away and says things that are plainly absurd. The Celebrity Big Brother “racism” row was unpleasant for all concerned, but to say that Jade Goody was “treated like a Nazi war criminal” is nonsense. In fact, there seemed to be some pressure put on Shilpa Shetty to say that Goody’s comments were *not* racist. Terry Eagleton’s attack on Martin Amis was silly (like Amis’ original comments), but hardly a “Spanish Inquisition”.

But what of Balaam’s facts? Balaam’s critics have concentrated on his political comments, and his use of statistics has gone largely unexamined.

Balaam refers to the BBC *Crimewatch* website (<http://www.crimestoppers.uk.org/wanted/>), which, when he looked, listed 78 white people (11 with “foreign names”) and 47

“people of colour”, including 19 with Muslim names. He concludes that “less than 10 per cent of the population provides over 37 per cent of the “most wanted” felons in the UK.” Balaam’s methodology is extremely dubious. When I attempted the same exercise, the calculations proved extremely difficult, even though there were fewer people listed. The name or ethnic identity of some of those listed was unknown, and guessing would have been open to bias. Even where names were given, I often found it difficult to decide whether a particular name was “foreign” or not (what would your average citizen think of a name like “Diesel Balaam”?). If we are looking for facts, as Balaam says, this seems a singularly unscientific means to arrive at them!

For more enlightenment, I went to the fullest set of data I could find: the Home Office Offender management statistics for England and Wales, 2005 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/hosb1806.pdf>). The total number of prisoners back then was 75,980. Among those whose ethnic identity was known, 25 percent were non-White. The largest ethnic group was Black or Black British. Among British nationals, 18 percent were non-White. Curiously, the largest group of prisoners in 2005 were those with no religious affiliation (33 percent of the prison population). 32 percent were Anglicans, 17 percent Roman Catholic and 10 percent Muslims. The fastest growing religious group represented in prison from 1995-2005 were Buddhists. So there are some facts. But how should we interpret them?

If particular groups are disproportionately represented, how do we account for that? Balaam doubts that it can be put down entirely to racism, and suggests “complex cultural factors”, which is probably true but uninformative. What about the impact of poverty, which Balaam doesn’t mention? We know that the “socially excluded” are more likely to end up in prison than the relatively well-off. And we also know that minority ethnic groups are more likely to be “socially excluded”, according to standard measures. The 2001 Census found that Muslims had the youngest demographic profile (age being a key factor in criminal propensity), the worst levels of health, and the highest levels of unemployment. A third of Muslims had no qualifications. I merely pose the question!

Balaam cites Home Office statistics, which show that between 2001-2004, 12 out of 22 racially-motivated murders had White victims (see: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs05/s95race04.pdf>, p20, for the data). The Home Office data also notes that 92 per



# Martin Stoner: Religion – is it all bad?

“WHY are secularists so unfair to us?” the religious say, now that books like *The God Delusion* are becoming best-sellers. “Not all religious people are bigots, homophobes or war-mongers” they might say. “Is it reasonable to describe people as ‘deluded’, just because they disagree with you?” or “Has religion never done any good?”

Fair comments, I suppose. How can they be answered? Religion is a complex and varied business, so it is hard to know where to start. However, in a spirit of fair play, let’s have a go.

I think of religion as a number of different strands or elements. The importance and nature of each strand varies among the religions, among the churches and sects of each religion and among individual members of each church or sect. This can make it hard to discuss religion with believers. If you discuss a particular belief, they might say “Oh, I don’t believe anything like that” or “That’s not why I am a Christian/Hindu/Muslim/Buddhist/etc...”

One strand is the belief in supernatural or superhuman power or powers. Believing

something on flimsy evidence is not in itself a bad thing. Many improbable things have turned out to be true. However, teaching beliefs as certain truths in spite of a lack of evidence is a different matter. Do we want children (or adults for that matter) to accept things just because they are presented in a convincing manner or because people have believed them for centuries?

Would it not be better to encourage people to question what they are told rather than fall for every scam and fraud they come across? “If it seems too good to be true, then it probably is” is a good motto whether you are dealing with unsolicited share advice, wins in lotteries you have never heard of or saints and gods who will see you right if you go to church (or mosque or temple or synagogue) often enough.

If I tell someone he or she is deluded if they think they are really going to get some money from a dead dictator’s bank account, most people would say I am being a good friend. If I say he or she is deluded for believing in supernatural powers because of things written by unknown people thousands of years ago, I am called arrogant or lacking in respect. A bit puzzling.

Another strand is the view that religion is necessary to promote good moral standards.

This idea is reinforced by the plots of films that require someone to act morally somewhere along the line and this is often, at least in older films, a priest, a nun or someone else with a strong religious belief. The argument seems to be that, even if you do not have any religious belief yourself, you must admit that it has raised moral standards, thereby reducing social problems.

Unfortunately for this argument, research suggests that countries with a low interest in religion seem to do better in terms of social problems than those with a high interest.

The moral stances taken by the religious can be shown to do harm. Campaigns against the spread of AIDS have been seriously hampered by religious groups claiming that abstinence should be the only means to stamp out AIDS and spreading lies about other methods. Issuing contraceptive advice and supplying medicines is giving out “the wrong signal” that encourages promiscuity and therefore the spread of AIDS, the argument seems to go. The statistics say otherwise. Here we have a religious moral code that increases social problems and causes real harm.

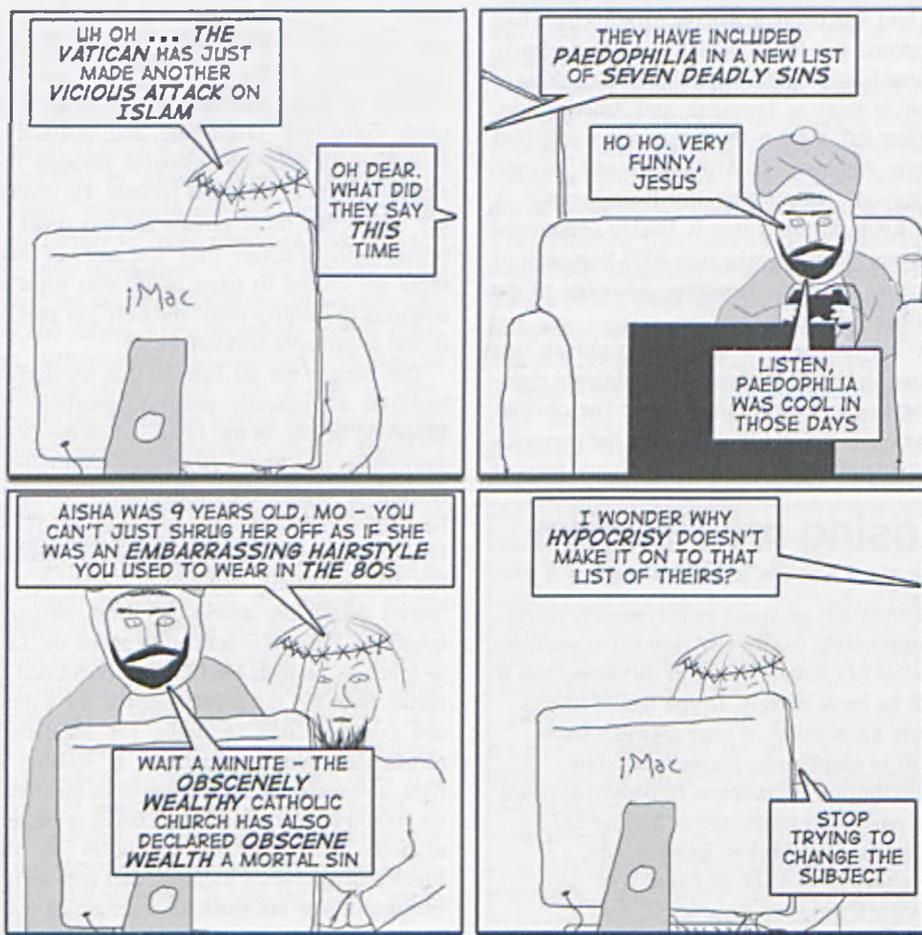
Supporters of faith schools like to claim that the behaviour in these schools is better than average. Usually they do not mention that the selection procedures mean that preference can be given to children who seem to be nice and well-behaved already. Pupils with behaviour problems (arguably the ones who most need a decent education and moral guidance) have to go elsewhere.

The view that religion is responsible for civilised behaviour relies on the belief that human beings are incapable of seeing for themselves the benefits of behaving morally. It also assumes that there is no evolutionary benefit in co-operative endeavours for getting food or defending against predators. Of course, we know that not everyone operates under high moral standards – we only have to look at the newspapers to see that, but it is as well to remember that newspapers report what is out of the ordinary, not on everyday life. Someone being charitable or keeping their hands off other people’s property does not usually make headline news.

Anyway, what sort of morality are we talking about here? Is it honesty, respect for other people and respect for the law? Or is it homophobia, persecution of unmarried mothers and the like? What is the issue dividing the Anglican Church? The morality of the Iraq war, perhaps? No, homosexuality – something that Jesus has nothing to say about, as far as we know.

And, of course, there is the child abuse committed by priests, ministers and elders and the tolerant attitude towards it that usually seems

## Jesus and Mo



to be taken by their superiors. Moral leadership? Pull the other one.

Another strand is religion as a community of believers. Christians often think of themselves as belonging to a "fellowship" or "The body of Christ". Many churches have clubs of various kinds associated with them – youth clubs, rambling clubs, amateur theatre groups, Scouts, Guides and many others. I mention Christians because that is the religion I know best – I expect others have similar clubs associated with them. Generally speaking, humans are social animals and like to associate with like-minded people. Having to go to church is not much of a price to pay for a lively social life, especially if it is the only one around. How many members of these groups really believe in eternal life or try to understand the concept of the Trinity, I wonder. All the same, I expect many are normal, decent people who have no time for some of the nastier attitudes of some of their co-religionists.

Religious groups can be very useful for people who feel in a minority. They can provide all kinds of emotional and practical support. Churches have had a role in securing human rights. Poland and Burma come to mind.

On the other hand, dominant groups can use religion and morality to maintain their superiority. It is easier to attack and oppress people if you think they are morally inferior or fail to recognise "the true religion", whatever that might be. Wartime propaganda promotes real or imaginary stories about the viciousness of the enemy. Also, we should not forget that if people only socialise with others of a similar faith there is a huge potential for social divisions and sectarian conflict. Northern Ireland and Iraq spring to mind.

You can also think of religion in emotional or artistic terms, providing some kind of "uplift" to the soul, whatever that is. For some, this involves elaborate ceremonial in majestic cathedrals; For others it is in the quiet and simplicity of Quaker meetings.

Certainly, over the years churches have paid artists and craftsmen to provide religious works, some of them masterpieces. But then again, you could say that these artists and craftsmen have helped promote religion, in the way that present-day advertising agencies try to present their clients' products in the best light. Do we think smoking is a good thing because the advertising budgets of cigarette companies once gave us amusing adverts and helped pay for some of our favourite television programmes? Ancient castles have beauty and grandeur but do we want to return to the war-like times that made them necessary?

Then there is the role of religion as the provider of charitable works. Churches have set up hospitals, schools and almshouses.

However individual people have also done these things, either by handing out some of their wealth in their lifetimes or by bequeathing it to charitable trusts at their deaths. It must also be remembered that the kind of child abuse that we are used to hearing about in present-day Roman Catholic schools has been going on since they were first set up. Covering up by the church hierarchy has been going on for almost as long. A great many children have no reason to be grateful for their religious upbringings.

Religion is not all bad. If it were, it would have been rejected long ago. However, we can still ask if, on balance, it has been a good thing over the centuries. More to the point, does it have any benefits now? Many of the functions that were once only performed by religious

bodies are now performed by secular organisations of various kinds – charities, clubs, commercial companies, governments. Let us praise the people who have used religious institutions to benefit mankind in various ways. However, if the religious try to claim some special privileges in framing our laws or spending taxpayers' money, the rest of us have a right to point out the harm people have done and are still doing in the name of religion. To do so is only unjust or arrogant if the person doing it is him- or herself claiming a special privilege.

If religion were just a case of people living their lives according to certain beliefs, I, for one, would not mind. It is when religion is imposed on myself and on society in general that I object to its claims.

### Why Dawkins thinks religion is all bad

ASKED by the on-line magazine *Salon.com* what was so bad about religion, Richard Dawkins replied:

"Well, it encourages you to believe falsehoods, to be satisfied with inadequate explanations which really aren't explanations at all. And this is particularly bad because the real explanations, the scientific explanations, are so beautiful and so elegant.

"Plenty of people never get exposed to the beauties of the scientific explanation for the world and for life. And that's very sad. But it's even sadder if they are actively discouraged from understanding by a systematic attempt in the opposite direction, which is what many religions actually are. But that's only the first of my many reasons for being hostile to religion."



Richard Dawkins, as portrayed in a *Salon.com* illustration

### Big winter boost for the *Freethinker* fund

SUBSCRIBERS have been very generous over the winter period, contributing a total of £832.50 towards the *Freethinker* fund between November 16, 2007 and March 15, 2008. We would like to thank the following for their generous donations: B L Able, R C Baxter, K Bell, A N Blewitt, R J Bollans, K Bolton, R Bowell, J Boyd, G Broady, I L Brydon, W Bryan, I Caldwell, H Carter, B Childs, S C Chumbley, C E Douglas, D Dow, E Durbridge, R Fennell, D M Foweraker, P George, P Hadfield, A Hamilton, A A Harrison, F J Harrison, L Horscroft, I Haslam, J I Hayward, Humanist Society of Glasgow, C F Ibbotson, F Jacot, A Jones, V Lelliott, V Martin, R Meredew, L Meszaros, H L Millard, P J Naughton, A Nicholls, M O'Brien, J Onyett, R Parfitt, N Phillips, J Polak, S W Rayment, E A Salter, N Sinnott, V Smith A Stevens, S Trent, E G Tuddenham, R Tutton, L E West, and D Whelan.

We would remind readers that the current subscription of £15.00 (£10.00 for the unwaged) has been held at the same level for over 10 years, in which time printing costs and postal charges have risen dramatically. The reason why the *Freethinker* continues to survive is through donations and legacies.

## William Harwood: Religion and the paranormal

**W**hen a religion claims that an event occurred that violates the immutable laws of nature, it is called a miracle. When adherents of a secular belief system claim to have achieved the impossible, the event is described as paranormal. Since both groups maintain that the impossible is possible, and both tend to be impervious to an infinite amount of falsifying evidence, the difference between religion and the paranormal is in many ways a distinction that exists only in the eye of the beholder.

When Richard Dawkins compared "Intelligent Design" to the Emperor's new clothes, a satirist wrote a pretend-rebuttal that so accurately parodied the mental gymnastics of True Believers that Dawkins reprinted it in the Preface to the paperback edition of *The God Delusion*. P Z Myers wrote, "I have considered the impudent accusations of Mr Dawkins with exasperation at his lack of serious scholarship. He has apparently not read the detailed discourses of Count Roderigo of Seville on the exquisite and exotic leathers of the Emperor's boots, nor does he give a moment's consideration to Bellini's masterwork, *On the Illumination of the Emperor's Feathered Hat*. Dawkins arrogantly ignores all these deep philosophical ponderings to crudely accuse the Emperor of nudity."<sup>1</sup>

More recently I read a similar defence of parapsychology by a True Believer<sup>2</sup> who in all seriousness defended his security belief by citing articles in *Journal of Parapsychology* and *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*. That is like defending a flat-earth belief by citing *Journal of the Flat Earth Society*, or defending a belief in holy water by quoting a priest. Any scientifically-conducted parapsychology experiment that produced positive results would have been published in a legitimate science journal.

Since parapsychologists recognized that that was never going to happen, they created their own journals in which positive results obtained by ignoring all the safeguards of scientific research *could* be published, because such journals did not demand double-blind methodology that eliminated experimenter bias, intentional and unintentional cueing, incompetent interpretation of statistics, such as claiming better-than-chance results for experiments whose results were in fact equal-to-chance, and deliberate cheating.

Sam Harris – before he went over to the dark side and started urging non-theists *not* to come out of the closet and prove to the world that they constitute a full third of the human race, more than Christians, Jews and Muslims combined – wrote, "There also seems to be a body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phe-

nomena, much of which has been ignored by mainstream science."<sup>3</sup>

As I pointed out in my review of Harris's book,<sup>4</sup> every source cited in Harris's endnote supporting that observation has been thoroughly examined, evaluated and annihilated by SCICOP, and the results published in *Skeptical Inquirer*.

The definitive debunking of parapsychology was published by C E M Hansel.<sup>5</sup> After studying the dozen cases cited by the parapsychologists themselves as the strongest proof for the reality of ESP, and finding the flaw in each that allowed for a non-paranormal explanation, Hansel concluded, "Given a high-scoring subject, it would in the normal course of events be only a matter of time before every critic could be silenced. But these subjects cease to score high when tested by critics."<sup>6</sup> It was precisely because positive results ceased when scientific methodology was used, that the parapsychology journals were created.

The experiment that should have wiped out the parapsychology delusion once and for all was organized by magician James Randi and involved two pretended psychics who were in fact magicians, lasted two years, and came to be known as Project Alpha.<sup>7</sup> Experimenters at George Washington University, despite being warned by Randi that the test subjects were "probably" cheating, published their conclusions that the test subjects had demonstrated psionic abilities, impossible to fake. When Randi and his two associates called a press conference to expose the hoax, hardcore believers insisted that the two hoaxers were genuine psychics who were now pretending to be magicians.

A few parapsychologists learned from Project Alpha, and started imposing conditions that precluded cheating. But when all positive results ceased, they reverted to methods that did allow test subjects to cheat. They justified their about-face by arguing that "psi is shy", refusing to manifest itself in the presence of skeptics or under conditions designed by skeptics. That gravity is not shy, magnetism is not shy, and kinetic energy is not shy, did not strike the parapsychologists as a valid analogy. Apparently "psi" is the only force of nature capable of feeling slighted by the presence of non-believers and taking the attitude, "If I'm out I'm taking my bat home."

The first scientist to voice the opinion that ESP or telepathic communication was intrinsically implausible because it violated established scientific principles was Albert Einstein. Einstein pointed out that, whereas gravitational force varies in inverse proportion to the square of the distance between the affected masses, and the other three natural forces similarly diminish

with distance, ESP tests allegedly produced identical results regardless of whether sender and receiver were in the same room or hundreds of kilometers apart.

If ESP messages were electromagnetic, they could be picked up by the equivalent of a radio receiver. If they were ultrasonic, a microphone of sufficient sensitivity could detect them. And if they were carried by a "fifth force", it is incomprehensible that physicists who are able to detect and measure the strong and weak nuclear forces have found no evidence that such a force exists. Only to True Believers is this not self-evident.

But the definitive proof that believers are not sparking on all neurons is their inability to distinguish between non-sensory communication, which could conceivably be explained by a yet-undiscovered fifth force, and precognition, in which an individual receives information that has travelled backward in time. A discipline that cannot distinguish between the unproven and the definitively impossible cannot be taken seriously, and in the absence of any validly obtained positive results, no science journal ever will take it seriously.

Paranormalists differ from theologians in that they couch their security beliefs in pseudoscientific rather than metaphysical terms. But their intrinsic motivation is the same. Both groups are desperate to annul the terrifying reality of death. After all, if human souls can communicate directly without utilizing the body's sensory organs, and can project themselves into an astral plane or a tunnel of light during a near-death experience, then souls that exist independently of the body and can outlive it must be a valid concept.

Once that motivation is recognized, a paranormalist's inability to abandon his security belief in the face of overwhelming falsifying evidence becomes considerably more understandable.

The paranormal has been described as the normal not fully understood. It is more accurately delineated as the nonexistent, touted by the incompetent, and swallowed by the undiscriminating.<sup>8</sup>

### Refs:

- 1 *Free Inquiry*, Aug/Sep 2007, p 12.
- 2 *The Freethinker*, Oct 2007, p 14.
- 3 *The End of Faith*, p 41.
- 4 *Midwest Book Review*, Jan 2007.
- 5 *The Search for Psychic Power: ESP and Parapsychology Revisited*, Prometheus books, 1989.
- 6 *ibid*, pp. 265-266.
- 7 *Skeptical Inquirer*, 7:4:24-32 and 8:1:30-45.
- 8 See the chapter, "My Security Belief Can Lick Your Security Belief", in *The Disinformation Cycle*, Booksurge.com, 2006.

## The Dog Allusion: Denis Cobell reviews Martin Rowson's latest book

THIS book is an expansion of a talk given to Lewisham Humanists in SE London last year with the title: *God, fiction, pets and how to stand up to the resurgence of religion*.

Thankfully the published title is marginally shorter – *The Dog Allusion: Gods, Pets and How to be Human*. In it, Rowson, the well-known writer and *Guardian* cartoonist, has his differences with both Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) and Hitchens (*God is not Great*). I think he finds them a little too dogmatic, and serious. Rowson's book is placed in the philosophy/humour section of Vintage Books. The author claims this is not a scholarly work, indeed near the end he says it is a "rant". He might have made a good Hyde Park orator in the days when the National Secular Society had a soapbox there. There is plenty for *Freethinker* readers to enjoy, though some parts to question as well.

In his differences with Dawkins and Hitchens, I hoped he might also have referred to Sam Harris's *End of Faith*. I found Harris's willingness to obliterate us all in a nuclear holocaust, if confronted by Islamic terrorists, of quite the most repulsive idea for a long time.

But back to this book. Rowson's allusion to dogs is based on a conversation he had with a vicar who asked how he explained the universal phenomenon of religion. Rowson asked in return how the vicar could explain humans

keeping pets. There was no response.

Rowson equates belief and worship with our love of pets. I must say I share his preference for cats over dogs; I have heard it said more than once that trying to organise secular humanists is like trying to herd cats. He draws interesting parallels between our worship of gods and our treatment of pets.

Rowson offers only one contribution from his day job as cartoonist: a drawing of god. From what appears, he obviously takes his cue from John 1:18, "no man hath seen God at any time". This reminded me of the story of the little girl, watched by her literalist mother, drawing When she asked her daughter what she was drawing, she got the answer: "God". The god-fearing mother repeated the verse from St John, that no one could know what God looked like, to which the child said, "Well, they will when I've finished!"

Cartoons often hit harder than acres of text – as the founding editor of this paper discovered in 1881 when he was sent to prison for publishing a drawing of Moses looking at God's backside. And Rowson, I think rightly, finds humour one of our strongest weapons in the battle against irrationality and religion. That said, one cannot deny that some of the faithful have a sense of humour. Jewish jokes are legion, though I doubt any come from Stamford Hill! And who has ever heard of the

Jehovah Witness Big Book of Jokes? I suppose it would have to be titled *Knock, Knock! Only those who take their faith with a pinch of enlightenment salt can joke.*

Readers will be pleased to see Rowson describe the last Pope as a wicked old man (for allowing AIDS to spread through his repressive statements). This makes a welcome contrast to the awful adulation of most of the media when he died.

Rowson concludes that we all have our irrational notions. Cognitive dissonance – the ability to hold two contrasting opinions in one brain – is a well-documented human phenomenon. For example, the Marxist condemnation of religion, alongside the most non-theistic ritualism ever.

The utopia which may appear if only religion disappeared is criticised by Rowson. I'm inclined to agree. The only thing we can be certain about is uncertainty. And accepting this, rather than adopt the "faith answers all" view, is what I think freethought is all about.

Overall, this is wise, witty and highly topical book, in which Rowson argues that rationally, the whole enterprise of religion is a monumental and faintly ridiculous waste of time and money. But then again, so is pet-keeping. What both do, however, is tell us a lot about who we are, which is perhaps a more important question than whether God exists, and if so, if he is indeed great.

On one website promoting *The Dog Allusion*, a reader appended this amusing piece:

*For me, Dog is he who fills the infinite expanse of my couch.*

*It is he who is the origin of puppies.*

*It is he who is the absolute moral authority to determine what it is right and what is wrong to pee on.*

*Dog is he who hears my calls when I cry out in moments of stress.*

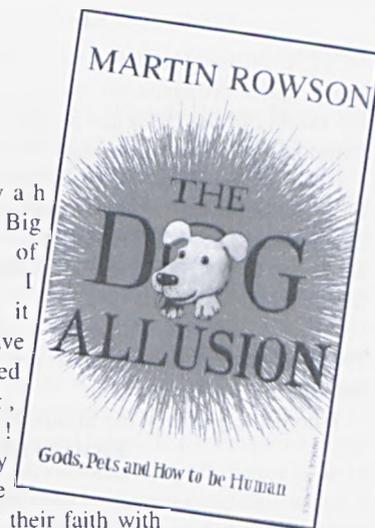
*Dog is he who looks after the helpless.*

*Dog is he who I am sometimes very angry at for failing to look after the helpless.*

*The word "Dog", the essence of Dog, is he who wrestles with Dog.*

*Dog is he with whom I have a relationship. I have a right to challenge Dog.*

*The Dog Allusion: Gods, Pets and How to be Human* is published by Vintage, £6.99



### The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief: reviewed by Barbara Smoker

THE fact that I contributed one small article to this massive work hardly debars me, I think, from reviewing it.

Owing little to *A Rationalist Encyclopedia* (1948) by Joseph McCabe, the book under review is edited by Tom Flynn, who also edits the American journal *Free Inquiry*, and it is the direct, expanded and updated, successor to *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (1985) edited for Prometheus Books by the late Gordon Stein.

Unlike McCabe's *Encyclopedia*, which was the work of a single author, this one is a compilation of almost 200 different writers, some of whom have contributed a number of entries.

The standards of content and style inevitably vary, but each topic has generally been allocated to a known expert in that field – even to the extent of familiar hobby-horses and cherished formulations. For good measure, there is a foreword by Richard Dawkins on the liberating effect of jettisoning god-belief.

Whereas McCabe dealt at length with institutional religion, particularly that of Rome – reflecting his own youth as a Franciscan priest – the main concerns of the present volume are philosophical argument and the life's work of individual freethinkers of the past, together with the campaigns they inspired.

Handsomely produced, with silver lettering on a black stiff cover, this book, as well as affording a valuable reference resource, will visually grace any book-shelf and withstand the frequent perusal it is sure to receive.

*The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* is published by Prometheus Books (Amherst, NY), 2007, hard-cover, 910 pp, \$199.

### Middle East pariah

DEREK Wilkes (*Points of View*, March) is being rather disingenuous when he supports the validity of the UN when it passed its resolution in 1947 creating the state of Israel.

If the UN is indeed the "collective voice of the entire human race" why has Israel, with the connivance of the USA, consistently refused to adopt any of the 100-plus UN resolutions criticising its actions?

In particular, Resolution 242, passed in 1967, urged Israel to return to its pre-1967-war boundaries. Israel ignored it.

Who is the pariah in the Middle East?

RICHARD BATCHELOR  
Scotland

IT is ironic, to say the least, to read Derek Wilkes's defence of the "progressive, democratic non-racist state of Israel" during the same week that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians in the Gaza strip reached the same level of barbarism as the Nazis' treatment of the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto.

GRAHAM LIVINGSTONE  
London

### Age of Consent

PAUL Williams's notion of a law specifying an age of religious consent (*March Freethinker*) is of course absurd, as he well knows. Parents will influence their offsprings' choice willy-nilly, and no law can prevent this.

Driving and voting are in a different category, both being more or less controllable by law. Regarding the "decision to make a baby", I cannot imagine this even being a matter of family consultation, let alone legal imperative. What he should really be arguing for is non-faith schools, as in the United States; this at least would allow God and bigotry a little less scope.

DAVID JAMES  
London

### Religious education

THE Government remains committed to a diverse range of schools for parents to choose from, including schools with a religious character or "faith schools" as they are commonly known.

Religious Education (RE) in all schools, including faith schools, is aimed at developing pupils' knowledge, understanding and awareness of the major religions represented in the country. It encourages respect for those holding different beliefs and helps promote pupils' moral, cultural and mental development. In partnership with national faith and belief organisations we have introduced a national framework for RE.

In February 2006, the faith communities affirmed their support for the framework in a joint statement making it clear that all children should be given the opportunity to receive inclusive religious education, and that they are committed to making sure the framework is

used in the development of religious education in all their schools and colleges.

The Churches have a long history of providing education in this country and have confirmed their commitment to community cohesion. Faith schools have an excellent record in providing high-quality education and serving disadvantaged communities and are some of the most ethnically and socially diverse in the country. Many parents who are not members of a particular faith value the structured environment provided by schools with a religious character.

It says nothing about schools that actually encourage irrational beliefs, but as it comes from a political organisation how can we expect it to?

PETER ARNOLD  
Alderney

### Delusions of consciousness

IN his article, "The Hopeless Pope", John Radford (*Freethinker*, March) reminds us that believers often say that atheists really want God but are not aware of it. While this view may be irritating to atheists it could also conceal a profound truth of human personality – a truth that not only prompts us to invent supernatural entities but also makes us susceptible to the supernatural inventions of others.

From the secular point of view the supernatural can be seen as a human construct whose essential purpose is to provide a "rationale" for the alleged circumvention of death where no credible physical means is to hand. The subsequent invention of God and eventually the heavenly hosts would then have been required to act as guarantor of the much coveted condition of eternal life.

But the foregoing begs the question as to why the thought of immortality should ever have occurred to humanity in the first instance, given the abundance of death and finality which surrounds us. The reason for this, I believe, relates to the imagination which is so habituated to conscious awareness that it cannot conceive of its own extinction. As a result, the ever-present reality of life eclipses the idea of extinction and leaves us open to any theory of survival, irrespective of the means.

This false expectation distorts our understanding and may sometimes find expression in moments of reverie when the imagination "fast forwards" to a point which we perceive to be post mortem. In spite of having supposedly crossed the line between life and death, no klaxon sounds, nor is any discontinuity observed. Instead, we remain conscious in imagination and able to observe and interact with the conjured scene around us. Only the reawakening of critical awareness can dispel the absurdity of this impossible fantasy. Could this anomalous experience, occurring during moments of abstraction, support Freud's contention that the unconscious mind knows nothing of death or termination? If this is indeed the case it could almost be expected that the

human mind would harbour an inherent though counter-intuitive expectation of immortality which subtly misinforms our deeper understanding of the meaning and limitations of our existence.

While the believers' suggestion that atheists harbour an unconscious desire for God is presumptuous, it may arise from their experience of the false promptings of immortality that they are aware of within themselves, and to which they have succumbed.

The difference between believers and non-believers, however, may lie in the fact that non-believers do not indulge in such nebulous notions but recognise them for what they are – delusions of consciousness.

JAMES MCKENNA  
Belfast

### The age of Sinnott

IF my old friend and former neighbour Nigel Sinnott is still only 44 years old (*Freethinker*, March), and assuming that the dates in his article are correct, then there is a *prima facie* case of a miracle or (to us rationalists) of time travel. Nigel is therefore a candidate for beatification and/or a Nobel Prize.

• **Editor's note: Nigel, alas, qualifies for neither. But the editor does deserve a spell on the naughty step for not spotting that Nigel's age was taken from his original manuscript, penned 20 years ago, when he was, indeed, 44.**

IVOR WILLIAMS  
Herts

### Homoeopathy

WHO would have thought that a short letter I wrote last year defending homoeopathic doctors from being labelled "quacks" would have provoked such a diatribe from Dr Stephen Moreton (August 2007)?

He accuses me – by some convoluted reasoning – of equating qualifications with credibility. This I have never done. In fact I do not equate degrees with either intelligence or common sense. The array of them after his name coupled with his intemperate language merely reinforces my opinion.

I understand his arguments and am aware that if a potency is described as 30c it involves a dilution of 10<sup>-60</sup> which, as he says, is so dilute that it will contain "no active ingredient whatsoever". However, we simple-minded non-graduates believe that the proof of the pudding is in the eating. The really important question is does it work? In my experience it most certainly does. Here are some facts.

When eight years of age in the 1930s I was greatly afflicted with styes. I can even recall once having three in the one eye.

My mother took me to the family doctor for treatment. He was a large, coarse man who was a distinct loss to the veterinary profession. Well could I picture him in green wellington boots, up to his ankles in mud at two o'clock in the morning, sticking a hypodermic into a bull's backside – but by no amount of imagery



could I conjure up a vision of his placing a cold hand on a fevered brow.

He pulled out all my eyelashes one by one then, with his mammoth thumbs, proceeded to squeeze the pus from the swelling, explaining to my mother as he did so that this was poison and had to be prevented from going back into my system. Even at that tender age I could not but wonder that, unless his thumbs were highly selective, he could be squeezing a deal of pus back *into* my system. I tried to voice concern but soon found out that, at eight years of age, one's views on medical matters carried little weight.

After the return of the styes my mother took me to a homoeopath. At that age I did not appreciate that a first visit to a homoeopath was akin to being on a psychologist's couch and that I would be asked a lot of personal questions as the medic was trying to treat the person and not just the disease. Not that this interested me so much as the realisation that the thumbs were not to be employed. The result was little short of magic and the styes left me.

A year or two later my mother had a large carbuncle and decided to visit the "vet". He lanced it four or five times but it gathered again. Rather than continue thus, she saw a homoeopath. She was given a powder with instructions to put it into a glass of water and to stir vigorously, then to sip a teaspoonful of the liquid every hour. After six or seven hours the carbuncle began to leak until all the swelling disappeared.

In the 1950s I had a huge swelling on my face. Being away from home at the time I went to see my married sister's doctor. He claimed that it was the biggest gumboil he had seen in the last 20 years. He went on to say that it would "point" meaning – that the seat of infection would drop to a spot on the margin of the enamel and the gum, and that would be the time to lance it.

Not wishing to wait three days I visited a homoeopathic clinic where I was given powders. The following day the swelling was only slightly down, but the pain had gone. Next day the lump had all but disappeared. On the third day, when it was to be lanced, I was completely back to normal.

Now I am not suggesting that homoeopathics work wonders like this all the time. When my daughter was eight she was bothered with chilblains and I sought homoeopathic treatment. The first dose certainly did not work. I cannot remember whether it was the second or third that did the trick, but the chilblains disappeared, never to return, and she is now 54!

This leads me to a friend who had severe psoriasis and had attended her family doctor over a period of six years, during which time she had had about 50 medicines – not one having solved her problem. I mentioned that it might be worth trying homoeopathic medicine and she agreed, albeit with little enthusiasm.

Some months later I asked how she had fared, only to be told that she had been given a prescription but that it had not worked. She then returned to her allopath, who presumably would offer her a 51st remedy. I do not think anyone could possibly claim that this was being even-handed. No doubt if her opinion of homoeopathy were ever sought she would say that it was useless or, perhaps using Dr Moreton's more colourful language, she would describe it as "bollocks", "barking" or "crackpottery".

If I were not an atheist I could attest to the truth of this on a stack of bibles, but doubters will have to be satisfied with my affirmation.

As a footnote may I add that the way this country is now heading, non-graduates will soon be a minority group.

C A M AITCHISON  
Glasgow

### Atheism and spirituality

I WONDER if I can offer your readers a few thoughts on the subject of atheism and spirituality – two states of mind that are often held to be diametrically opposed to one another?

The dogmatic atheist (not an altogether unknown phenomenon!) reacting perhaps to an earlier force-feeding, whether imposed by family or society or both, of religious doctrine, will presumably insist that all experiences and values have a material basis and that therefore spiritual experiences and values (meaning by "spiritual" that conviction or emotion which arises in the mind and cannot be explained, which cannot be examined and reasoned about) is no more than a baseless chimera – a mere fantasy of the religious mind. Of course the *godmatic* believer on the other hand advances such experiences, such convictions, as proofs or at least manifestations of his (highly improbable and altogether unprovable) God. However, I see no reason at all why the atheist should not accept the existence of so-called "spiritual" experiences, while not in the least accepting that such experiences are a proof or manifestation of some supernatural power.

Many things about life, and indeed existence itself, we don't yet understand, and some things we may never understand (by "we" I mean of course mankind as a whole). But this is no reason for embracing the plainly *irrational*, as against accepting the fact of a-rational – or *sur-rational* convictions. (That is to say, those for which no rational explanation can be offered).

In respect of these matters I find lines from the poet Robert Browning to be very pertinent when he writes, in his *Bishop Blougram's Apology* (that intriguing if somewhat loaded account of a battle in a believer's mind between religious faith and doubt):

*Just when we are safest [ie from the idea of spiritual values] there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower-bell, someone's death,  
A chorus ending from Euripides  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as Nature's self,*

*To rap and knock and enter in our soul,  
Take hands and dance there, a fantastic ring ...*

It may be asked: What do I mean by spirituality and spiritual experiences? I mean no more and no less than that uplifting of the spirit (or awareness if you like) which raises it above that purely selfish or self-regarding state of mind that normally holds sway and prevails as we seek good or benefit or advantage for ourselves and ours – though not of course necessarily entailing harm to interests of others – and which, however occasioned, unites us to a sense of joy and reverence for life in any or all of its varied shapes and forms. In my opinion it is this state of mind, evoked perhaps by nature or art or by being touched by human sympathy, which is often enough taken to be proof of the supernatural when in fact it is proof only that the mind is capable of rejoicing in life and its wonders – whether natural or man-made.

ALBERT ADLER  
London

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## Events & Contacts

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

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

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St. Brighton. Wed, April 2, 8pm. Ken Humphries: *The Resurrection – Fact or Fable?* Wed, May 7, 8pm. Alex Kennedy: *The Folly of Faith Schools*.

**Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com)

**Central London Humanist Group:** Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: [rupert@clarity4words.co.uk](mailto:rupert@clarity4words.co.uk) Tel: 02075804564.

**Chiltern Humanists:** Information and programme: 01296 623730. Wendover Library, Wendover High St. Tues, April 8, 7.45pm for 8pm. Annual General Meeting.

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

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

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

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

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

**Dorset Humanists:** Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website [www.dorsethumanists.co.uk](http://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](mailto:secretary@galha.org). Website: [www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org). Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Sq, London WC1. Fri, March 14, 7.30pm. The London Mayoral Election. Speakers to be announced.

**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](http://www.hampstead.humanists.net)

**Harrow Humanist Society:** Meetings second Wednesday of the month at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Next meeting March 12. Subject: *Why post-mortems?* Speaker: Dr Julie Crow, former consultant histopathologist. Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

**Havering & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgore Cres, Gidea Park. Thurs, March 6, 8pm. Bob Cant: *From the Wolfenden Report to Civil Marriage*. Thurs, April 3, 8pm. Ralph Ison: *The Bible as Folklore*.

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

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

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

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

**Edinburgh Group:** 07010 704775, [edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk)

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

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

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

**Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:** Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009. Swarthmore, Woodhouse Sq, Leeds. Tuesday, April 22, 7.30pm. Annual General Meeting and Paul Dean: Early Religion – *The Beliefs and Monuments of Neolithic and Bronze Age Britain*.

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

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

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

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** Information: Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Third Thursday, 8pm

**Liverpool Humanist Group:** Information: 07814 910 286. Website: [www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/](http://www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/). E-mail: [lhghumanist@googlemail.com](mailto:lhghumanist@googlemail.com). Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.

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

**Marches Secularists:** A local pro-secular movement covering the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire and Powys in the Welsh Marches region of England and Wales. Membership is free. Website: [www.MarchesSecularists.org](http://www.MarchesSecularists.org). Contact: Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

**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](mailto:enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk)

website: [www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](http://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, April 2, 7.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

**South Place Ethical Society:** Weekly talks/meetings, Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4. E-mail: [library@ethicalsoc.org.uk](mailto:library@ethicalsoc.org.uk). Monthly programmes on request.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or e-mail [edward@egwinnell.orange-home.co.uk](mailto:edward@egwinnell.orange-home.co.uk)

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

[www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhumanists.org.uk)

**Sutton Humanist Group:** Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: [www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com). E-Mail: [BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net](mailto:BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net).

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

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

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

website: [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://www.nirelandhumanists.net)

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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