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# The Freethinker

*The voice of atheism since 1881*

## Islamic nations unite to stifle Universal Human Rights

"FOR the past eleven years the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), representing the 57 Islamic States, has been tightening its grip on the throat of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In March 2008, they finally killed it."

So declared Geneva-based Roy W Brown, of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, in a statement issued after a crucial UN vote at the end of March.

Said Brown: "With the support of their allies including China, Russia and Cuba (none well-known for their defence of human rights), the Islamic States succeeded in forcing through an amendment to a resolution on Freedom of Expression that has turned the entire concept on its head.

"The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression will now be required to report on the abuse of this most cherished freedom by anyone who, for example, dares speak out against Shariah laws that require women to be stoned to death for adultery or young men to be hanged for being gay, or against the marriage of girls as young as nine, as in Iran.

And he pointed out "There has been a seismic shift in the balance of power in the UN system. For over a decade the Islamic States have been flexing their muscles. Now they have struck. There can no longer be any pretence that the Human Rights Council can defend human rights.

"The moral leadership of the UN system has moved from the States who created the UN in the aftermath of the Second World War, committed to the concepts of equality, individual freedom and the rule of law, to the Islamic States, whose allegiance is to a narrow, medieval worldview defined exclusively in terms of man's duties towards Allah, and to their fellow-travellers.

"The Sri Lankan delegate explained clearly his reasons for supporting the amendment: '... if we regulate certain things minimally we may be able to prevent them from being enacted violently on the streets of our towns and cities.'"

In other words, said Brown: "Don't exercise your right to freedom of expression because your opponents may become violent. For the

first time in the 60-year history of UN Human Rights bodies, a fundamental human right has been limited simply because of the possible violent reaction by the enemies of human rights.

"The violence we have seen played out in reaction to the Danish cartoons is thus excused by the Council: it was the cartoonists whose freedom of expression needed to be regulated. And Theo van Gogh can be deemed responsible for his own death.

"Freedom of expression is that right which uniquely enables us to expose, communicate and condemn abuse of all our other rights. Without freedom of expression and freedom of the press we give the green light to tyranny and make it impossible to expose corruption, incompetence, injustice and oppression.

"The wafer-thin sham of an international consensus on the promotion and protection of human rights has finally been exposed for what it was: a sham. The fragmentation of human rights now appears inevitable.

"The proposed Islamic Charter on Human Rights (read Duties towards Allah) will certainly go ahead, as will the creation of a parallel Islamic Council on Human Rights. But the OIC will nevertheless continue to attend and dominate the UN Human Rights Council, thereby ensuring its continuing emasculation and descent into total irrelevance."

He concluded: "States who are genuinely concerned with human rights should immediately withdraw from the Council until such time as all member states as well as those offering themselves for election agree to honour their pledges, and undertake to expel any member state which, having been put on notice regarding its human rights record, fails to put its house in order within a reasonable timescale."

Just a few days before the vote, on March 22, Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, addressed the French Society of Freethinkers (Libre Pensée) in the French Parliament. He told delegates that, "towards the end of last year I was privileged to take part in some formal meetings of the United



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## Freethinker editor Barry Duke questions a highly suspicious statistic

HERE'S a statistic that may stagger you: 83 percent of patients want their GPs to address their "spiritual" needs.

Well, I didn't believe it either, and I immediately used the "listen again" facility on the BBC Radio 4 website to check whether I had heard Dr Peter Saunders, General Secretary of the Christian Medical Fellowship, correctly.

Indeed I had. Saunders, in a "You and Yours" programme which set out to examine how the religious convictions of doctors might affect their relationships with patients, claimed that 83 percent of patients "desire spiritual guidance from their doctors".

Given that "You and Yours" was examining UK trends, I assumed – as did LibDem MP Dr Evan Harris, an honorary associate of the National Secular Society, who took part in the programme – that Saunders was talking about British patients.

Harris indignantly responded: "I do not think it can be allowed to be said that there is ANY role for a doctor to provide spiritual guidance. A doctor can say to a patient, by all means, go and see your priest, because that's the job of a priest ... but as soon as doctors go down that path [of providing spiritual guidance] they will be at real risk of breaching new General Medical Council guidelines."

Saunders also claimed that "there is a lot of literature linking faith with good health. People who have religious faith live longer lives with less illness, and enjoy better physical and mental health. They have less divorce, less suicide, less alcohol and substance abuse – this is very well documented."

All Harris could say before being interrupted was "I don't think that is true ..."

*You bet it ain't!* I immediately began digging for evidence in support of Harris, and quickly uncovered a report from *The Times* of September 27, 2005. Headed "Societies worse off 'when they have God on their side,'" Ruth Gledhill, the paper's religion correspondent, wrote: "Religious belief can cause damage to a society, contributing towards high murder rates, abortion, sexual promiscuity and suicide, according to research published today."

"According to the study, belief in and worship of God are not only unnecessary for a healthy society but may actually contribute to social problems."

The study she was referring to was a paper published in the *US Journal of Religion and Society*, which refuted the view of believers that religion is necessary to provide the moral and ethical foundations of a healthy society.

It compared the social performance of relatively secular countries, such as Britain, with the US, where the majority believes in a

creator rather than the theory of evolution.

Many liberal Christians and believers of other faiths hold that religious belief is socially beneficial, believing that it helps to lower rates of violent crime, murder, suicide, sexual promiscuity and abortion. The benefits of religious belief to a society have been described as its "spiritual capital". But the study claims that the devotion of many in the US may actually contribute to its ills.

The study reported: "In general, higher rates of belief in and worship of a creator correlate with higher rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy and abortion in the prosperous democracies. The United States is almost always the most dysfunctional of the developing democracies, sometimes spectacularly so."

Gregory Paul, the author of the study and a social scientist, used data from the International Social Survey Programme, Gallup and other research bodies to reach his conclusions. The study concluded that the US was the world's only prosperous democracy where murder rates were still high, and that the least devout nations were the least dysfunctional. Paul said that rates of gonorrhoea in adolescents in the US were up to 300 times higher than in less devout democratic countries. The US also suffered from "uniquely high" adolescent and adult syphilis infection rates, and adolescent abortion rates, the study suggested.

Paul added: "The study shows that England, despite the social ills it has, is actually performing a good deal better than the USA in most indicators, even though it is now a much less religious nation than America."

He said that the disparity was even greater when the US was compared with other countries, including France, Japan and the Scandinavian countries. These nations had been the most successful in reducing murder rates, early mortality, sexually transmitted diseases and abortion, he pointed out.

Paul added that the evidence accumulated by a number of different studies suggested that religion might actually contribute to social ills. "I suspect that Europeans are increasingly repelled by the poor societal performance of the Christian states."

"Non-religious, pro-evolution democracies contradict the dictum that a society cannot enjoy good conditions unless most citizens ardently believe in a moral creator. The widely held fear that a godless citizenry must experience societal disaster is therefore refuted."

Extrapolating data from A Pew Trust survey, a US website – [www.liberallikechrist.org/about/graphs.html](http://www.liberallikechrist.org/about/graphs.html) – points out that "conservatives are great at talking about morality

but what the facts show is that contrary to what you would expect from all of their 'holier than thou' speechifying, they are lousy when it comes to acting morally. When you compare the way conservative v liberal states act, you find that the more liberal states are, the fewer abortions, teen pregnancies, suicides and murders they have; and the more conservative states are, the more abortions, teen pregnancies, suicides and murders they have."

Furthermore, the ten most conservative US states have the highest divorce rates, while the 11 most liberal states have the lowest.

Prior to a US Supreme Court ruling in 2005, which outlawed the execution of persons under the age of 18, of the 19 states that did allow the execution of children, 16 were considered conservative. "So, not only do conservative 'values voters' have higher rates of divorce, murder, and teen pregnancy, they were also more likely to execute children," says LiberalslikeChrist. "The notion that Conservative voters have higher moral standards is a myth, and is not supported by the facts."

As for that 83 percent figure, Saunders later pointed out via the *Freethinker* website, that "the reference for my claim that a recent US (note not UK) study showed 83 percent of patients desiring spiritual inquiry from physicians in certain situations is as follows: McCord, G *et al*, 2004. "Discussing spirituality with patients: a rational and ethical approach." *Annals of Family Medicine* 2(4), 356-361."

In the light of stark religious differences between the UK and the US, why did Saunders not mention that his figure had come from an American source? Had he done so – and then, perhaps, claimed that some US Christians also believe that Jesus Christ possessed three testicles, I would not have raised so much as an eyebrow, let alone a query.

EARLIER this year I expressed my indignation over the suggestion that the famous Pussy Parlure Spiegelent, due to be set up shortly as part of this year's Brighton Festival, might have to censor its name to placate St Peter's Church leaders (see *Freethinking Aloud*, March).

All hell broke loose when the parish council got arsy over plans to locate the delightful, burlesque-styled Pussy Parlour on council-owned grounds adjoining this useless old church, and for a while it looked as if the venue would have to locate elsewhere.

In a placatory move, the Pussy Parlour's owner said he was prepared to drop the word "Pussy", even though it innocently referred to cats. It appears that this grovelling gesture has worked. Last month I learned that the venue will be set up next to the church, but that the word "Pussy" had been expunged, and all acts will now take place in the "Parlure".

This is outrageous! Yielding to pressure from a church is bad enough, but capitulating to one typified by its profusions of phallic projections and named after a Peter – an old-fashioned slang term for penis – is intolerable.



## Protests take the gloss off Pope's US visit

WHILE His Opulence Pope Benedict XVI was packing all his finery in preparation for a visit to the the United States, his minions were quietly panicking over the fact that the trip might not be the unqualified success they were praying for.

At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, angry Roman Catholic activists in the US were refining their plans to rub the old tyrant's nose in his sexism, his homophobia, his failure to curb child abuse among the clergy, and the Vatican's continued ban on contraception.

According to a report in *Worldwide Religious News* on April 15, "on the eve of his arrival, supporters of women's ordination will host what they are calling 'an inclusive Mass' at a Methodist church in Washington, presided over by Catholic women – including two who were recently excommunicated."

Said Sister Donna Quinn, coordinator of the National Coalition of American Nuns: "We cannot welcome this pope until he begins to do away with the Church's continuing violence of sexism."

Gay Catholic activists, meanwhile, were planning to demonstrate along the papal motorcade route in Washington. They had compiled a list of statements by Benedict during his career which they consider hostile to gays and lesbians. These include forceful denunciations of gay marriage and of adoption rights for same-sex couples.

Said Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of Dignity USA: "He has issued some of the most hurtful and extreme rhetoric against our community of any religious leader in history, and we want to call him to account for the damage that he's done."

Another divisive issue planned on being raised was the Vatican's ban on contraception. Gay rights groups and others say the ban undermines programmes promoting condom use to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS.

In a conference organised by Catholics for Choice, four Catholic theologians examined the impact of the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which defined the Vatican's opposition to artificial birth control.

Said Catholics for Choice president Jon O'Brien: "Catholics wonder why there's this huge disparity between what the hierarchy says we should do in regard to contraception and what Catholics on the ground actually do."

He termed the ban "a great tragedy ... a policy that lacks compassion and understanding."

For many American Catholics, the most distressing church-related issue of recent years has been clerical child sex abuse. Thousands of molestation allegations have been filed against Catholic clergy, and dioceses have paid out more than \$2 billion in claims since 1950.

David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said "It's as plain as day that three years into his papacy, Benedict has done literally nothing to protect the vulnerable or heal the wounded."

Clohessy said his group planned to make use of the papal visit to press for tough disciplinary action against bishops who covered up abuses by their priests and to urge pre-emptive steps by the Vatican against abuse by priests in other nations.

These and other planned protests angered the Vatican's envoy to the United States, Archbishop Pietro Sambi. He complained: "Even in the Catholic church, nobody has the right to instrumentalise the visit of the Pope to serve their personal interests. The problem is that there are too many people here who would like to be the Pope ... and who attribute to themselves a strong sense of their own infallibility."



## Ritually-slaughtered meat slipping into the UK food chain'

FOOD and Farming Minister Lord Rooker provoked controversy last month by expressing his opposition to halal and kosher meat, which he said should not be allowed to slip into the country's food chain.

"I object to the method of slaughter," Rooker said. "My choice as a customer is that I would want to buy meat that has been looked after and slaughtered in the most humane way possible," according to an *Independent* report.

His opposition comes despite religious slaughter being exempt from the provisions of Britain's Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, which insist that animals such as cows, goats and chickens should be stunned first.

The veteran minister said he accepted the legality of religious slaughter, but added that customers should be warned when they might be eating meat killed in such a way.

"The country, source of origin and method of slaughter for meat ought to be on the label because that way I could stop the bloody halal meat that is excess to the industry's requirements being slipped into the food chain without people being told," he said.

This echoes recommendations made in sub-

missions from the National Secular Society to DEFRA, the relevant Government department.

The UK government no longer keeps statistics on animals slaughtered under religious methods, but figures in a Meat Hygiene Service report in 2004 suggested 114 million halal animals and 2.1 million kosher animals are killed in Britain each year.

The NSS has asked for a parliamentary question to be put down to have these figures compiled and published in future.

Ritually-slaughtered animals bleed to death in what government advisers say is "very significant pain". Certain cuts such as the



A sheep is subjected to ritual slaughter

hindquarters of cattle, however, are deemed inedible by religious teachings and are sold back into the general food chain.

Lord Rooker's comments were welcomed by the RSPCA, which is concerned about the experience of animals killed for Jews and Muslims.

Julia Wrathall, the head of the RSPCA's farm animal group, said she hoped the Government would follow through on the criticism. "We are delighted that Lord Rooker has raised this. We very much hope that the Government will now progress what it has claimed to do before, which is to work with religious groups and look at the area of labelling."

• According to a *Times* report (May 21, 2007), "McDonald's has been testing halal chicken burgers at its diner in Southall, West London. Boots is running a trial of halal baby food in 30 stores. Tesco, which, like other supermarkets, sells meat certified by Islamic organisations at some stores, is looking to include new products, such as ready meals. All are chasing what could be, according to the advertising agency JWT, Britain's biggest untapped niche market."





## Jack Hastie: God doesn't like fruit salad

IDLY browsing the internet the other day, I lighted on the Christian Reconstructionist website "Dominion Theology Ministries", clicked on "Articles" and found an intriguing piece by one John Piper, entitled "If God wills disease why should we try to eradicate it?"

From just four short biblical quotations Piper comprehensively concludes, "God governs all calamity and all disease. Satan is real and has a hand in it ... but he can do nothing but what God permits. And God does not permit things willy nilly. He permits for a reason. There is infinite wisdom in all He does and permits. So what He permits is part of His plan just as much as what He does more directly. This raises the question; if God wills disease why should we try to eradicate it?"

To answer this question Piper proposes a subtle distinction between God's "Will of Command" and His "Will of Decree." His Will of Decree is "whatever comes to pass"; for example the betrayal, mocking, flogging and killing of Jesus, all of which God willed. In contrast, His Will of Command is what he wants mankind to do, which is not to harass and harm innocent people, but to "love your neighbour" and "do unto others as you would

have them do unto you." Three further biblical quotations prove this.

Now you might find it a trifle inconsistent for God to decree, ie do, things himself which are morally the opposite of what he commands all the rest of us to do. But John has an explanation for this: "The disasters God ordains are not aimed at paralysing His people with indifference, but motivating them with compassion."

John goes on to recommend that Christians should undertake medical research. "This is not fighting against God. God is as much in charge of the research as He is of the disease. You can be the instrument of His hand. This may be the time appointed for the triumph that *He wills to bring over the disease that He ordained.*" (Italics mine)

This profundity numbed my reasoning powers, but eventually it brought back two memories.

The first was of an elderly, earnest Jehovah's Witness who parked himself on my doorstep and patiently explained God's steadfastness of purpose throughout nature and history. When I pointed out that the dinosaurs had lived and bred, evolved and proliferated for a hundred and eighty million years, only to be extermi-

nated by earth's chance encounter with a large meteorite, he solemnly told me that the dinosaurs had been put in place to destroy the forests. I can't now recall whether the prospect of an almighty and omniscient deity first creating forests which he didn't want and then dinosaurs – which he didn't really want either – to get rid of the forests, and finally a massive meteoric impact to get rid of the dinosaurs, so bemused me that I failed to point out the conceptual difficulties of such a scenario.

My second memory is of an old joke. A man is sitting in a railway carriage with two bowls in front of him. One contains whole, unpeeled fruit; the other is empty. As the train speeds on its way, and in full view of the other passengers he peels and chops the fruit and puts it in the empty bowl. However periodically he opens the carriage window and tips the chopped fruit out.

At last one of his fellow passengers can contain his curiosity no longer and asks, "What on earth are you doing?"

"Making fruit salad."

"But why are you throwing it out the window?"

"I don't like fruit salad."

## I Am The Very Model of an Anglo Vicar General

I am the very model of an Anglo Vicar General  
By God in charge of all things, biological and mineral.  
I'm Primate of All England, Metropolitan of Canterbury,  
And grace the House of Lords, by law, as it's divinely meant to be.  
I'm *primus inter pares*, Apostolically Successional,  
And lead the other prelates in magnificent processional;  
So you can hardly wonder how I've come to feel, like Hannibal,  
The master of creation, biological and mineral.

Inside the Lords I only speak to forward Christianity,  
And outside speak of everything with learning and inanity.  
I piously intone the creed of God as triune deity,  
Of virgin birth, eternal life, hellfire and suchlike lunacy.  
I dole out plonk and wafers, bless and label them a Eucharist,  
But caviar and champagne are what dominate *my* shopping list:  
In opulent regalia I preach modesty and poverty,  
No wonder I'm remembered as the master of unclarity  
And fit to govern all things, biological and mineral,  
As Row, the very model of an Anglo Vicar General.

– David Tribe  
(With apologies to W S Gilbert)

## Quick Quips

CATHOLICS are against abortions. Catholics are against homosexuals. But I can't think of any group who has fewer abortions than homosexuals! – *US comedian George Carlin*. How many atheists does it take to change a light bulb? Two. One to actually change the bulb, and the other to video the job so that fundies can't claim that God did it.

## God's entry in *The Universal Dictionary of Biography*

**Age:** Eternal.

**Full Name:** God. This generic personal name signifies that God is the One True God – though some devotees obfuscate "One" as Three-in-One. Paradoxically, he (an honorary male) is a self-confessed "jealous god". Nevertheless, for the sake of company, and to boost his self-esteem, he created a host of lesser spirits, programmed to form a celestial choir and sing his praises in perpetuity.

However, for divertisement and sheer devilment, he allowed one of them to rebel against him and become the Prince of Darkness.

Even so, eternity hung heavily on God till he thought up the beguiling pursuit of physics, thereupon inaugurating the "laws of nature" together with space, time, and matter. A big bang, and the first wave/particle became an expanding universe.

On one small planet of a nondescript sun in an inconspicuous galaxy, he conjured up creatures with evolving consciousness, to a level where they can amuse him with speculations as to his existence and attributes.

**Progeny:** One putative son (illegitimate; executed at 33).

**Publications:** Many – but largely discrepant, and all ghosted.

**Aka:** The Word, Brahma, Zeus, Jupiter, Jove, Yahweh, Jehovah, Jah, Lord of Hosts, Allah, Rock of Ages.

**Recreation:** Devising local disasters (known as "acts of God") – thus testing the tenacity of belief in his benevolence, in spite of the overwhelming evidence against it.

**Residence:** Everywhere.

– Barbara Smoker  
([www.Barbara.smoker.freeuk.com](http://www.Barbara.smoker.freeuk.com))



## Islamic school likened non-Muslims to 'monkeys and pigs'

A FORMER teacher at an Islamic school, who alleged that it taught an offensive and racist view of non-Muslims, has been awarded £70,000 by an employment tribunal after winning his case last month for unfair dismissal.

Colin Cook told the tribunal in Watford that pupils were taught from Arabic books that likened Jews and Christians to "monkeys" and "pigs" at The King Fahad Academy, which is funded and run by the Saudi Arabian Government.

The tribunal ruled that Mr Cook, a British Muslim, was unfairly dismissed from his £36,000-a-year post at the school in Acton, West London, in December 2006 after blowing the whistle on systematic cheating at a GCSE exam.

The panel found that the school created a "smokescreen" to try to justify his dismissal after 18 years' unblemished service. It awarded Cook £58,800 in compensation for loss of earnings and £10,500 for injury to feelings. But it rejected his claim that the school discriminated against him on racial grounds.

Cook told the hearing that after leaving the school another member of staff gave him extracts from an Arabic textbook, which encouraged students to believe that all religions other than Islam were worthless.

The books referred to "the repugnant characteristics of the Jews". Another passage said: "Those whom God has cursed and with whom he is angry, he has turned into monkeys and pigs. They worship Satan." Cook said that the books were spreading race hatred. "They should not be brought into this country and they should not be used in this country". The school denied ever teaching any form of racial hatred and insisted that the offending passages in the books were "misinterpreted" and were never used in class. But it later got rid of the books.

The school was established in 1985, with the aim of providing a high-quality education acceptable to the Saudi and British authorities for the children of Saudi diplomats and other Muslim families in London.

Some of the children of the jailed extremist clerics Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Qatada are pupils at the school, which charges fees



Colin Cook, a victim of the religion of 'peace and honesty'

of up to £1,500 per year for day students. When he queried how Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada could be paying school fees when they were said to be on benefits, he was told to mind his own business.

Cook of Feltham, West London, taught English as a second language at the school. Giving evidence to the tribunal, he said that some pupils "talked as if they did not live in London at all", and that when he had once made a complaint about the way an exam was conducted, he was told "This is not England. It is Saudi Arabia."

He also claimed the school was seen as an extension of the Saudi Embassy rather than part of Britain, with Saudi teachers even enjoying diplomatic immunity.

The tribunal panel found Cook to be a respected teacher, with an 18-year unblemished record. It ruled that the impact of his dismissal had been "nothing short of life-changing" for Cook. He had received a "harsh punishment for doing what he thought was the right thing to do", it concluded.

Cook told *The Times*: "I have been accused by people at the school and outside the school of lies and distortion. The school implied that I had endangered pupils with my allegations. The evidence speaks otherwise. I told the truth all along. Islam teaches peace and honesty. Hopefully, my accusers will now realise that I acted justly and for the good of the school."

## Atheists 'a danger to children' says US politician

AN astonishing attack was launched last month on prominent Illinois atheist Rob Sherman by State Representative Monique Davis, a member of the fundamentalist Trinity United Church of Christ, who said his atheism represented "danger to children".

Davis's hysterical outburst occurred when Sherman testified before an Illinois legislative committee against State Governor Blagojevich's plan to donate one million tax dollars (£500,000) to Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago.

Sherman, who is standing for election to the Illinois Assembly later this year, insisted that the donation was unconstitutional. Sherman described his encounter with Davis thus:

"Representative Monique Davis responded for the committee. She accused me of hating God. She said that the state should donate the cash to Pilgrim Baptist Church because the people of Illinois believe that there is a God.

"At a time when we are in the midst of a decades-long pervasive epidemic of Roman

Catholic priests raping America's children. Representative Davis said that I was a danger to the children of Illinois because I tell them that there is no God."

Davis's actual words were: "I'm trying to understand the philosophy that you want to spread in the state of Illinois. This is the land of Lincoln. This is the land of Lincoln where people believe in God, where people believe in protecting their children ... What you have to spew and spread is extremely dangerous ...

Sherman: "What's dangerous, ma'am?"

Davis: "It's dangerous to the progression of this state. And it's dangerous for our children to even know that your philosophy exists!"

Sherman added: "She then ordered me out of the witness chair, screaming, repeatedly, 'Get out of that seat'. It made me feel like Rosa Parks, who also was told, 'Get out of that seat', and arrested when she didn't give up her seat on the bus to Whitey.

"Now that negroes like Representative Monique Davis have political power, it seems

that they have no problem at all with discrimination, just as long as it isn't them who are being discriminated against.

"I'm sure that my boyhood hero, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., would have been appalled at Davis's bigotry. (Sherman's encounter with Davis occurred on the 40th anniversary of King's murder.) Later, on the local current affairs TV show *Countdown*, a newsman said that Davis had made "a damn fool of herself" and named her that day's "Worst Person in the World."

He also accused her of having no knowledge of history, pointing out that "Right here in Springfield, when Lincoln ran for Congress in 1846, the future great President was accused of being an atheist by his opponent!"

• As the *Freethinker* went to press, we learned that Davis has apologised to Sherman.



Illinois assembly-woman Monique Davis: 'A damn fool'



# Islamic nations unite to stifle Universal Human Rights

Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva as an International representative of IHEU. But what I found there in the meetings still troubles me deeply, and I want to share my concerns with you.

"I had expected to find a secular institution engaged in healthy debate. What I found was that the speeches were dominated by the fifty to sixty countries who are members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC). They were blaming everyone else for anti-Islamic feeling and calling for laws to silence Islamophobia, as they call it. One soon got the impression that to mention Human Rights

(Continued from p1)

abuses in Islamic countries in the Council chamber would be regarded as a kind of blasphemy.

"Much is made there of a document called the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam. How does the Cairo Declaration compare with the Universal Declaration on Human Rights? Everything – yes everything – in the Cairo document is subject to Shariah law. It actually says so. So lawyers agree that it is completely incompatible with the Universal Declaration.

"The Cairo Declaration was ratified by the

OIC back in 1990, when it was regarded simply as a guide for Islamic countries on the application of Human Rights. Gradually, since then, the OIC has succeeded in raising its status and I am convinced that their intention is for it to supplant the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, at least in Muslim countries.

"Ironically, many of the disadvantaged people whose voices are suppressed in OIC countries are those in most need of the protection of the Universal Declaration.

"So-called apostasy is punishable by death in just six countries, all of them Islamic. They include Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Afghanistan. In Iran apostasy will additionally become a capital offence in civil as well as Shariah law later this year. The list of countries where homosexual acts are capital offences is similar. In Nigeria, the death penalty for homosexual acts applies only in the 12 Northern provinces, the same twelve which have Shariah law.

"What I found most shocking of all in Geneva was that opposing voices were depressingly few. Most of the Western nations seem simply to have given up. The United States, for example, says very little.

"The Human Rights Council is itself a second attempt by the UN to oversee Human Rights. Prior to this, a Commission was charged with the task, but it became totally discredited. Sadly, the Council that has replaced it is doing no better.

## Defamation of religion

"The principal object of the OIC countries at the moment is to press for legislation in as many countries as it can to outlaw what they describe as 'defamation of religion', which seems far wider in scope than even blasphemy. I am convinced it would seriously compromise freedom of expression, interfere with democratic debate and allow extremists to silence their critics.

"References were repeatedly made in Geneva by OIC delegates to the so-called Danish cartoon crisis, although they were careful not to mention that the crisis was fomented by Islamic clerics long after the original publication of the cartoons, and was certainly not created by the Danes. But referring incessantly to the cartoons enables the OIC countries to paint themselves as victims in need of protection by further anti-freedom of expression laws.

"Roy Brown, former president of IHEU, works tirelessly in Geneva under huge pressure on these matters. I pay tribute to his fortitude, and his vision. I am working with IHEU to alert politicians and diplomats in international organisations such as the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the Inter-Parliamentary Union, to try to raise awareness of this cancer in our Human Rights machinery.

## A closer look at the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam

OPHELIA Benson, of the excellent Butterflies and Wheels website (motto: "Fighting fashionable nonsense") invited readers to take another, closer look at the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, focusing on certain aspects of it. She points out that this is not a selective excerpt, "this is one that pulls out certain words and ideas, so it's not fair in the sense of quoting a fair sample in context. Be sure to look at the Declaration itself – there is plenty of sensible stuff in it. But it's startling and interesting what a large amount of non-sensible stuff there is in it – what a lot of Allah there is and what an enormous amount of Shariah there is."

Here is her excerpt:

*Keenly aware of the place of mankind in Islam as vicegerent of Allah ... Recognising the importance of issuing a Document on Human Rights in Islam ... Reaffirming the civilising and historical role of the Islamic Ummah which Allah made as the best community ... to affirm his freedom and right to a dignified life in accordance with the Islamic Shariah ... fundamental rights and freedoms according to Islam are an integral part of the Islamic religion...they are binding divine commands, which are contained in the Revealed Books of Allah ...*

*All human beings form one family whose members are united by their subordination to Allah ... All human beings are Allah's subjects ... it is prohibited to take away life except for a Shariah-prescribed reason ... Safety from bodily harm is a guaranteed right ... it is prohibited to breach it without a Shariah-prescribed reason ... provided they take into consideration the interest and future of the children in accordance with ethical values and the principles of the Shariah ... The State shall ensure the availability of ways and means to acquire education ... so as to enable man to be acquainted with the religion of Islam ... Islam is the religion of true unspoiled nature ... Human beings are born free...there can be no subjugation but to Allah the Almighty ... Every man shall have the right, within the framework of the Shariah, to free movement ... unless asylum is motivated by committing an act regarded by the Shariah as a crime ... Everyone shall have the right to enjoy the fruits of his scientific, literary, artistic or technical labour ... provided it is not contrary to the principles of the Shariah ... There shall be no crime or punishment except as provided for in the Shariah ... Everyone shall have the right to express his opinion freely in such manner as would not be contrary to the principles of the Shariah. Everyone shall have the right to advocate what is right ... according to the norms of Islamic Shariah. Information ... may not be exploited or misused in such a way as may violate sanctities and the dignity of Prophets ... Everyone shall have the right to ... assume public office in accordance with the provisions of Shariah ... All the rights and freedoms stipulated in this Declaration are subject to the Islamic Shariah ... The Islamic Shariah is the only source of reference for the explanation or clarification of any of the articles of this Declaration.*

"That," says Benson, "is a human rights document. Human rights, human rights, human rights – provided it is not contrary to the principles of the Shariah. And who decides what is contrary to the principles of the Shariah? Ah ... that would be telling."



Please do anything you can to raise awareness of the problems I have outlined relating to defamation laws, the Cairo declaration and the Council itself.”

Keith concluded on a much happier note, saying: “I have always been embarrassed that the mediaeval blasphemy law remains in force in England and Wales. The UN Special Rapporteur on Religion and Belief criticised the law in a recent report. Of course they used to execute people for contravening it. And even in the 20th century, one of Terry Sanderson’s predecessors as President of the NSS, G W Foote, was imprisoned. One of our supporters, an old man, died prematurely because he was jailed with hard



*If flag-burning was an Olympic sport, Muslim nations would head the list of gold medallists*

labour, ironically also for a supposedly irreligious cartoon. Let us pause for a moment of silence to remember the many victims of blasphemy law, throughout the centuries and throughout the world – including your own Chevalier de la Barre.

“Now the good news, for which you have been waiting so patiently. I am delighted to tell you that our House of Lords voted for abolition of blasphemy law in England and Wales earlier this month, so the abolition is now assured. And I am proud to tell you that it was one of our Society’s sponsors in the House of Commons and my sponsor in the House of Lords who forced Parliament into making this long-overdue reform.”

## At the core of *all* faith lies fanaticism

IN the first of a series of lectures organised by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Tony Blair last month called for religious faith to be rescued from extremism and put at the centre of solving the world’s problems.

The former prime minister said that in an increasingly globalised world, the role of faith was “especially important”.

Religion could “awaken the world’s conscience” and help to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to eradicate poverty and hunger, he said.

In his speech on faith and globalisation at Westminster Cathedral, Mr Blair warned against the “extremist and exclusionary tendency in religion today”, saying “in the last ten years we have also been reminded sharply, in acts of terror committed in the name of faith, that we ignore the power of religion at our peril.”

But, writing in *The Times* under the headline *Schoolboy error: Tony Blair doesn’t understand that the core of faith is fanaticism*, columnist Matthew Parris pointed out that, while Blair was correct in asserting that religious revivals were under way across the globe, “the problem for his analysis is this: where faiths are reviving, they are tending towards fundamentalism and intolerance.

“Even in the Catholic Church, it’s the reactionary bits that seem to be the most muscular. Likewise the US Bible Belt. Not to speak of Islam. The two halves of Mr Blair’s argument (1: faith advancing – hooray! And 2: faiths can be tolerant – hooray!) are therefore at war with each other.

“The bedrock of Mr Blair’s argument is that, worldwide, faiths have more in common than divides them, and that they are all, in an important sense, on the same side. And you know what? He’s right – but not in the way he thinks he is.

“Throughout history, faith resurgent, the Church militant – be it Islam, Christianity or

Judaism – tends as it gains enthusiasm to become more extreme. It goes back to basics. It strips the modifications of modernity, delving for a core.

“That core is fundamentalist. So, yes, from the Bible Belt to the Vatican, from the West Bank to Helmand, a comparable muscle is being flexed, it is profoundly reactionary, and all faiths do share it. In some deep and inchoate way, these human tendencies are indeed ‘all on the same side’.

“But it’s not my side, and it shouldn’t be yours; and a secular political class of the kind that produced our current generation of leaders, including Mr Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron, should think long and hard before throwing so much as a scrap to this tiger – let alone riding it.”

When Blair announced last year that he was about to embrace Catholicism, *The New York Times*, on November 25, carried an informative piece by Geoffrey Wheatcroft, who pointed out:

“We British not only don’t do God, we are effectively a pagan nation – and that goes for our politicians. Even when England was truly Protestant, that was more in terms of hostility to Catholicism than theological precision or zeal, and to this day the public displays of piety that are normal enough in America would be embarrassing here.

“No British prime minister has been a Catholic, and it would have been politically very difficult for Mr Blair to convert when he was in office (think of Northern Ireland, apart from anything else).

“A neglected footnote to our history is that a majority of prime ministers for the past century were by origin Protestant Dissenters, in the old term, from outside the Church of England: H H Asquith grew up as a Congregationalist; David Lloyd George, a Baptist; Neville Chamberlain, a Unitarian; Harold Wilson and Margaret Thatcher, Methodists.

“More to the point, only a minority of 20th-



*Blair and Pope Benedict XVI. Rumour has it that the former Prime Minister is soon to apply for the position of God.*

century prime ministers were Christians as adults, having any serious personal religion. The impious majority includes Winston Churchill.”

Churchill was influenced by Winwood Reade, “who wrote a once-famous book published in 1872. *The Martyrdom of Man* was called ‘a bible for secularists’, though Nietzsche-and-water might be better: Churchill learned from Reade that God is dead and that man is master of his own destiny in a cruel world”, observed Wheatcroft.

“Of course, Churchill paid lip service to the outward forms – christenings, weddings and funerals in church – and he would invoke the Almighty rhetorically. But neither he nor other British pols ever made an open parade of faith, certainly not in the way that United States presidential candidates are obliged to. And it’s very hard to imagine an American equivalent of Norman Tebbit.

“As cabinet minister and Conservative party chairman in the 1980s, Mr Tebbit was one of Mrs Thatcher’s most effective lieutenants, a tough, populist right-winger – and a self-proclaimed atheist.

“Even the believing prime ministers kept politics and religion separate: Harold Macmillan was a pious High Churchman, and he used to say that if the people want moral guidance they should get it from their bishops, not their politicians.”



# Edwin Salter: Education and Evidence – Towards an Empirical

There seems to be comfort in accepting any explanation and any authority rather than having none – and the gods of religion fit such emptiness with the perfect adaptability of the wholly unpredictable and unevidenced. These psychological tendencies are well established, and perhaps have an evolutionary origin. In a crisis any hypothesis which prompts change will probably introduce some better changes, and any response which enables co-operation may be more successful than dispute.

So even now the design of questionnaires has to balance out our tendency to agree. And manipulators of all kinds, from salesmen to tyrants, therapists to evangelists, proceed by creating some confusion and then offering a way to resolve it, a cognitive closure. It may be the general preference of secularists that humans should be entirely rational, but the facts are otherwise. The defect has saving graces such as humour and art, exceptional courage and compassion, and the residual capacity to play a wild card in a seemingly impossible situation. But its consequences also include neurosis and superstition, the fatuities of compulsive behaviour and psychic revelation. The worst irrationality of all is on show in the wish-driven, sometimes vile and violent, world of fundamentalism.

Fortunately civilisation has found a way to constrain unreason and to guide purpose. It is called education. My own secularist group certainly has a preponderance of teachers who regularly lament that our educational system is so misguided. Above all, this is because nowadays it itself refuses to learn, refuses to examine the evidence (such shabby confusions as “league tables” are deployed instead). The ideology of education imitates, even if more feebly, the way fundamentalism and other nonsense flourish in wilful ignorance, in the emotional indulgence of rhetoric rather than the clear observation of reality. An obvious current example is the fallacious and deceptive argument for faith schools in this government’s document entitled, with apt slime, *Faith in the System*.

Education is, along with its positive aspects, arguably also the best means of restraining our more disastrous propensities (evidenced at least by a negative correlation between academic level and supernatural beliefs). The only theoretical difficulty lies in sorting out education proper from empty learning and mere training. Collecting good evidence and testing explanations for their simplicity, adequacy and fruitfulness do count: reciting an authority or performing a ritual don’t (“Morality, Magisteria and the Manner of Science”,

*Freethinker* July 2007). The only practical difficulty is persuading people to get on board with a process that initially seems unobvious, even purposeless, rather than having immediate use or gain. Chemistry and choreography alike have their delight and function, but the knowledge and imagination required need long and careful fostering.

In much of the world, formal schooling is minimal in content and method – simple literacy, numeracy and culture (often religion) mostly acquired by rote. Here the main education is from family and community which give language and customs, work and other skills, the family tasks of household and of child rearing. In our society this is much impoverished. Parents who should easily be able to support children in the content of primary education do not do so, and nor do they transmit the competencies of family and work.

Often not even the common sense of money and health is available, let alone useful hobbies or thought-out values. So many parents are inadequate or misguided that a toxic childhood results with child and society the ultimate victims. Profit goes to the purveyors of instant distraction and relief for all ages and tastes, from frenetic cartoons to porn, junk food to drugs, kitsch toys to charismatic fervour.

Such parents are the same people who themselves never learned to learn or to see beyond the immediate, for whom the content of the curriculum even if understood was largely wasted. The core of education has to lie in sustainability, in creating learning which continues by its own momentum. Without that most of the effort is lost. Science teaching, for example, should encourage looking for evidence amidst the uncertainties of life generally and not merely in the peculiar circumstances of ‘the experiment’ (often contrived and merely confirmatory).

Lifelong learning is also lifelong teaching, however informal, and the motivation and skill required must become central values. Too many lives are a progressive narrowing and loss of potential rather than an attempt to celebrate each age by making the best of it. General or multiple expertise seems suspect, almost a contradiction in terms, compared to the complacency of specialism. Again there is a residue of religion’s confirming people in their situation or caste (“the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate”) as god’s will to favour the favoured, an approval much welcomed by religious capitalism.

One of the great claims for education has been its enabling social mobility. But our own society is increasingly stretched top to bottom (even more so international comparisons), and

the aim becomes to provide purchasable skills rather than the status of being a well educated person.

Another clear finding of modern psychology is the extent to which our behaviour is not tied to innate personality (again the “so-and-so did it” explanation) but depends on experience and context. Put ordinary people in the situation of prison guards or tell them that punishment is necessary and they become obligingly brutal. Set the rich or the religious on a pedestal and people will obligingly worship. Equally, however, an experience of kindness or open-mindedness is carried on to the next interaction; and good models, whether parents, teachers, momentary exemplars in life or enduring figures of history or literature, may be remembered forever. And atheists would best rebut their (likely) stereotype by kindly care, cheerful charm etc – easy really.

Most of us automatically translate education as schooling with the option of further and higher education, that is as a system limited to formal institutions concerned with the young. These boundaries are inappropriate – we can learn in many ways throughout life – but it is fair to expect that the bulk of effort will lie within that system which therefore requires the greatest prudence and expertise.

But expertise is precisely what it does not get. Education has always been strongly influenced by the accidents of history – the educated class of priests, the grammar schools and the emphasis on classics. In the 19th century this stifling was gradually countered by the advance of education without regard to religion or sex, the irresistible progress of science and engineering. But ancient formulae – the 3 Rs, back to basics – ignorantly endure.

Not so long ago British teachers could proudly boast of great freedom in the classroom. As professionals they could work with the children in pretty much whatever way seemed educationally appropriate, with only distant targets (school-leaving exams) as guides: and it is a fair enough contract that society should indicate the essentials to be achieved (somehow, sometime) in the course of schooling. Child development, psychology, sociology and philosophy were essential parts of teacher education. No more. Politicians know best, so many of them having that minimal skill of lawyers to sound persuasive in an adversarial system where truth is only with luck a by-product.

One would not ask a politician to carry out heart surgery or build a bridge, but to education they bring a winning prejudice because it is widely shared. As adults we are conscious



# ical Curriculum

of learning in a focal systematic manner, we can begin a new subject with books that proceed logically from basic principles to particular cases. So literacy and numeracy are clearly prior essentials and must be taught and mastered first, then come the foundations of the various forms of knowledge, and so on.

But this is not how children learn, any more than it is the way knowledge developed historically. In many ways we begin with instances and proceed gradually to often subtle generalities. Even worse, children's minds and potentials are very different from those of adults. We waste enormous time struggling to teach fractions to young children who would instead brilliantly learn another language, who given half a chance at dance or music will happily outperform their parents by miles (and how some adults resent losing their chance for bullying superiority!). Teachers and children are locked together in failure and for some (on both sides) there is a vicious circle of antipathy and bitter hopelessness. Yes, fractions and much else must be learned, but at the right time for swift and easy mastery.

This pragmatic argument has an ethical counterpart which can be based on the notion of rights. Children are not merely adults in the making any more than adults are only waiting to age (how sad those who look forward to retirement and pension or even the dodgy possibility of eternal justice). Children have rights to their own distinctive interests and abilities, to development as children in their present time. Looking out for their future is a different matter. The notion of children as born bad, sinful, and therefore to be compelled to conform to adult propriety by the elimination of all that is fittingly childlike is another appalling legacy of some religions: as God the father harshly teaches us to obey rather than comprehend the capriciousness of life in his universe, so we must discipline our children.

It is important to emphasise that the assertions made here about learning are either founded on established evidence or can be so tested. Why should there not be equivalents of the double-blind trial to decide what teaching methods and curriculum sequence produce the best results, including of course measures of happiness, motivation and social contribution as well as achievement in terms of facts and skills? Why should we not learn from the current influx of foreign children which of their educational systems has merit? Why indeed should we not search the world to gather best practice? Without such an empirical approach we are merely shouting slogans in the dark.

It would be equally revealing (and very easy) to re-test competent adults in their

school-leaving examinations. What of that content, acquired with such effort, has been retained because interesting or useful? Plainly schools have to lay foundations for the many alternative specialisms of life, but how is the balance between such preparation for some against wastage for others to be optimised? What are the commonplace demands of life that a collection of our daily diaries would reveal? One suspects that, alongside varied practical skills, the key essentials for quality and success include getting on with others, having sensible habits and some genuine enthusiasms. Much cannot be directly instructed but must be taught and inspired by other methods.

This empirical spirit applies equally to further education and training. What is it, for example, that most dentists actually do most of the time? Would it be better to recruit students with good fine motor skills and a caring attitude for a more focused training: might selection by academic results and then long study be wasteful and even counterproductive (unhappy workers being less diligent and more grasping)? And what in any particular job distinguishes the best practitioners? We all experience that some plumbers, some mothers, some counsellors, are far more successful than others. Yet there is little examination of performances with an attitude both scientific and humane which will reveal the true differences and allow the best to become models of excellence for training others.

The dead hand of political thinking turns teachers into tools of ideology. Their task is increasingly bureaucratic, to manage, assess and report. The teacher is no longer focused on the best action given these particular children in this situation but on serving a hierarchy of command. The underlying idea is that the teacher (or often a cheaper assistant) says it, the pupil learns it, the examiner checks it (all in a cheat of packaged accord) – and if this doesn't work someone is to blame. But that is not how learning proceeds most fully. So often the best learning is through discovery or peer and group activity, methods which are open ended, not fully controllable, and all the more effective because of that.

Less able children are especially failed and alienated by the present system with its demand to move on through an inappropriate syllabus regardless of whether pupils can keep up. Add the vast disappearance of manual and routine jobs which gave employment and decency to much of the population only a hundred years ago, and the difficulties for purposive education are clear. The deceptive cult of celebrity pretends that all can be rich, sexy and famous, and if you don't make it to president, well that's your fault (and you deserve no help). How are the most disadvantaged young people, for example, supposed to cope in such a situation? Their energy inevitably finds disastrous outlets for themselves and, at a certain level of preponderance, overwhelms their

communities. Labelled as useless and evil, if they do not give up in hopelessness they may do anything, believe anything. Reason seems of little use because their plight is unreasonable.

Developing the potential of each child falls behind notions of citizenship, of readiness to suit the prejudices of employers and the inclination of government for compliancy. Now even liberal adult education founders pointlessly into tests and certificates, vocational targets. Buttoned-down methods can be effective within limited objectives, but as instruments to engender an intelligent, creative and happily productive society there is no evidence that they work – and indeed we would not expect them to do so.

This programme requires only a willingness to look at evidence – and perhaps some valuing of children for their own sake. It certainly does not require or entail atheism (and hopefully those religious may find its care for human nature worthy in their own terms). An empirical curriculum is no more than the best design of teaching in terms of timing, content and method. It carries no ideological badge. That is part of its strength as an approach of demonstrable efficiency and effectiveness.

It presents problems only to those of such fundamentalist opinion that they wish to control everything, for example their own children as religious property (and women too when viewed as inferior, serving men and the multiplication of the faithful, inappropriate for education). Interestingly, such rigid faiths often seek not progress for humanity but to re-establish the past, however impoverished, when their dogma and promises succeeded.

**T**he matter of religious education deserves some comment. Fundamentalists would have nothing taught but their own beliefs and some secularists would exclude religion from schools. But it seems as right to teach the diversity of world views as any other facts about society, and at least as important. Religious and irreligious views from agnosticism to Zoroastrianism, including current major faiths, should be taught alongside the political outlooks from capitalism to communism, simply as fact that such and such beliefs once existed or are still important. Again, the young have an ethical right to be informed and eventually to think for themselves. Withdrawing children from such a non-partisan education should not be permissible in a society based on tolerant evolution rather than an enduring pluralism of ghettos.

From a secular point of view an empirical curriculum is surely appropriate. We might also predict that becoming fully aware of the discordant range of beliefs, historical and present, will allow civilisation to gradually advance from the cruel and blinkered rule of old books and failed ideologies. And that a bet-

*(Continued on p10)*



## John Radford: An open letter to the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks

DEAR Sir Jonathan,

I was interested in your article in *The Times* on Saturday March 1, 2008, entitled "Lose faith in God and we will lose faith in humanity".

You start by quoting two statements about the human race. The first is by the Renaissance scholar Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494). He imagines God telling the first human that he, God, is giving him the power either to sink to the level of animals, or rise to the divine. In contrast is a statement issued by members of the International Academy of Humanism in 1997. I must give the quotation you do for the benefit of any readers of this open letter.

"As far as the scientific enterprise can determine, *homo sapiens* is a member of the animal kingdom. Human capabilities appear to differ in degree, not in kind, from those found among the higher animals. Humankind's rich repertoire of thoughts, feelings, aspirations and hopes seem to arise from electrochemical brain processes, not from an immaterial soul that operates in ways no instrument can discover."

Nothing objectionable or even controversial there, one might think. You, however, argue that to say that the "repertoire" arises from brain processes implies that that is all they are.

This is a fallacy, as you immediately point out. The origin of something cannot be equated with the thing itself. An acorn is not an oak-tree. But a *non-sequitur* then follows, that the quoted view means "the sheer loss of the sense of grandeur and possibility that drove Renaissance humanism".

I cannot see the connection. The sun rising is no less glorious because we know that it is caused by the earth turning in relation to a small star, which is not a mysterious fiery object set in a celestial sphere, nor Phoebus driving his chariot.

In fact I, like many, find it even more wonderful. But then, further, there is no reason to think that we are less capable of sinking to a lower or rising to a higher level (though I would not call the latter divine), than did della

Mirandola's hypothetical first human. For me, exactly the opposite is the case. Wickedness is probably much as it always was. But we know vastly more about the conditions that make for degraded or exalted behaviour than he did, and we have the option of reducing the first and enhancing the second. Furthermore, it seems to me far nobler, and far more human, to grasp these possibilities for ourselves, than to imagine they are offered to us by some supposed supernatural entity.

You conclude this section with the ancient question, what does it profit humanity if it gains the world and loses its soul. A great deal, is my reply, if "the world" includes knowledge and understanding of it, and "soul" means some unobservable, unmeasurable, indefinable entity inside us for which there is no evidence whatever.

You go on: "The odd thing is that dignity seems to go hand in hand with humility." If this were a student essay, it would require more red ink than you have used black. Why is it odd? It depends on how you define them, which you do not attempt. Dickens's Uriah Heap made a career out of being "umble, but of dignity he had none. Once defined, one would need evidence that they go together. Where is this evidence?

It gets worse. "Only when people discovered that they were not gods were they able to reach their full stature as human beings." When did humans ever imagine they were gods? (apart from a few individuals). I know of no such society, historical or contemporary. "Finding God, humanity found itself." Which god do you mean, of the thousands humans have "found"? Presumably, the Jewish one.

Jews constitute about a quarter of one per cent of the human race. Have the rest of us not found ourselves, and reached full human stature? Perhaps we are to take Jehovah as identical with other gods. The front-runners would be the Muslim and Christian ones. Clearly Jewish and Christian gods are not the

same, since the latter includes God's son, the Messiah whom Jews still await. The Koran does refer to what seems to be the Jewish god, but also repeatedly states that Allah is unique and solitary.

Gods of other religions, such as classical Greek, Hindu, the very numerous indigenous creeds and so on, are wildly different in their attributes from the Jewish one.

Then there are all those who have no specific belief in a god – atheists, agnostics and some faiths – somewhere between 20 and 25 percent of the human race. Are these not fully human? Or perhaps any god will do. Those of the Aztecs demanded frequent human sacrifice. Did this enhance human stature, either of the victims or the officiants? Many more have required animal sacrifices, including your own, until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE.

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**Jews, if I may mention it, cut off the foreskins of male infants. Not by the wildest distortion of thinking can ritual mutilation of children be considered compatible with human dignity, or other than a relic of primitive barbarism**

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"When human beings lose faith in God, they lose faith in human beings. They abandon their moral qualms about abortion" (and about euthanasia, eugenics and "designer children"). What is the evidence for these generalisations?

They are certainly not true in my own experience. Most of those I know personally, or know of, who work hardest to better the human lot, who manifest the human qualities of compassion, responsibility, and, yes, both dignity and humility, have had no faith in God or gods.

Of course, that is because I move mainly in non-religious circles. But it gives the lie to the notion that faith in God is necessary. Nor, of

can destroy not just despised others but everyone. Even our natural environment is measurably on the brink of catastrophe.

Fortunately, thanks to long selection, most people are innately half decent and half sensible, quite good actually. With a better education and more plain facts they can go a long way.

**Postscript:** In the 1970s our education system was widely respected. But politicians from Thatcher to Blair have endlessly denigrated and manipulated it. In 2007 UNICEF reported on child well-being in 21 rich countries. Netherlands comes out best and the Nordic countries do well. The UK treats its youngsters worst of all. Yes, we are bottom (just under our mentor the USA). What chance a sane and happy society?

## Edwin Salter: Education and Evidence

ter education which consistently encourages the examination of evidence to guide thought and decision will favour our own reasoned inclinations.

Humanism had its origin in the Renaissance, rationality its celebration in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Spirit and mind were in turn freed from ancient authority. The excitement of such progress must have made it seem that there could be no turning back, no more obscuring of factual truths and worthy aspirations by dogma. Philosophers and education-

alists from Locke and Rousseau onward have marked a path of reason and sympathy. Yet our own country is busily destroying what was a good educational system and even inviting any wealthy individual, business or church to impose their prejudices on the hapless community by buying an academy (and it is very cheap at the price). In the world at large Britain helps to turn vulnerable nations back to barbarity, stimulating religion which is deeply intolerant and irrational; and we refuse to see that supporting self-righteousness and greed





Sir Jonathan Sacks

course, is it sufficient, since there have been innumerable religious believers who have murdered, tortured, enslaved and generally shown contempt for the worth of others.

Jews, if I may mention it, cut off the fore-

skins of male infants. Not by the wildest distortion of thinking can ritual mutilation of children be considered compatible with human dignity, or other than a relic of primitive barbarism. It is, I understand, considered in some bizarre way to be significant of the supposed covenant of God with the Jewish people. It doesn't say much for God.

You refer to the change between the two quotations at the start as a "history of the descent of Man". The lifetime of Pico della Mirandola certainly saw fine cultural achievements. It also saw vicious religious wars, torture and burning of heretics and supposed witches, and the banning of Jews from various countries including England. You are a little better off now.

You conclude that "Faith" (which faith?) agrees (with whom?) that we are "but a random concatenation of genes, a handful of dust". But faith adds that "there is within us the breath of God ... lose this and we will lose all else. We will have knowledge without wisdom ... choice without conscience". Thus, in short,

your article boils down to two well-worn, indeed threadbare, themes. The human race is sinking downwards from a once much better state, and our moral or ethical sense comes from God. For neither of these propositions is there the slightest evidence. On the contrary, anthropology, biology, genetics, history, all the sciences of the human race, show ever more clearly how what we are now has developed out of what we have been, including our sense of right and wrong and everything we look on as our finer qualities.

It is far from a steady progression, but neither is it a decline. We have more capability for good, even if we use it too little. There is nothing at all to indicate even the existence, let alone the agency, of a God or gods.

You, Sir Jonathan, took a first-class degree in philosophy at Cambridge, where Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein once taught. Whatever is offered there now, it seems to have left you, if I may say so, unable to distinguish fact from fiction.

I hope all this has not offended, but you have, after all, had the privilege of publication in a still prestigious national newspaper.

Yours sincerely  
John Radford  
Emeritus Professor  
of Psychology,  
University of East London.

## Plane crazy: Orthodox Jews riot over in-flight film

A KEY figure in Hasidic Jewish life is Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) "who placed great stress on living with faith, simplicity, and joy". He encouraged his followers "to clap, sing and dance during or after their prayers," according to his Wikipedia entry.

The Rabbi is venerated by the ultra-Orthodox, and once a year thousands converge on Uman, in the Ukraine, to visit his grave.

But ultra-Orthodox passengers bound for the grave on an El Al flight last month showed no signs of joy when screens unfolded on the plane in preparation for the screening of a film. In fact, they were as mad as hell and started a riot. They had been told that no films would be shown during the flight, and when the screens began to unfold the men went wild.

According to witnesses, they began shouting and physically trying to prevent the movie screens from unfolding.

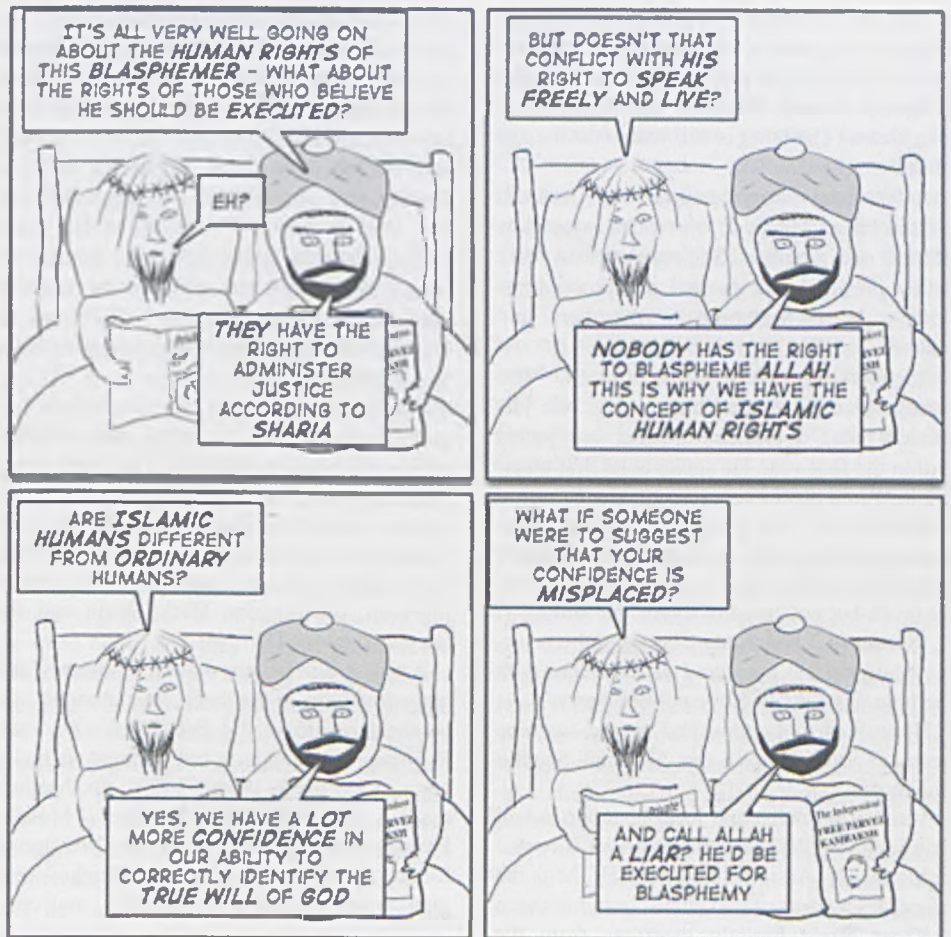
This is not the first time that El Al has encountered problems with ultra-Orthodox people on board flights to religious sites.

In 2002, a flight crew tried to prevent an ultra-Orthodox passenger, flying from Israel to Britain, from wrapping himself in plastic bags. A struggle ensued, and the pilot was forced to return to Ben Gurion International airport where the passenger was ejected.

The man, a Cohen, wrapped himself in plastic bags because he feared that the plane would pass above the Holon cemetery, and he would consequently be rendered "impure".

His fear apparently stemmed from a ruling by Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv, leader of the Lithuanian Haredi community in Israel, who declared that anyone called Cohen must not fly over a cemetery, lest they become "impure".

Later the Rabbi decided that cemetery-induced "impurity" could be avoided if one wrapped oneself in thick plastic bags whenever a plane flies over a graveyard.





# Brighton and Hove Humanist Society celebrates it's 50th anniversary

THIS year marks the 50th anniversary of Brighton and Hove Humanist Society, which continues a tradition of organised unbelief in Brighton that dates from the 19th century. It developed around an influx of railway workers and the growth of the Co-operative movement.

Prominent freethinkers who lived here included G J Holyoake, Herbert Spencer, Peter Kropotkin and Ernestine Rose.

The Society was formed (as the Brighton and Hove Humanist Group) at the end of the conformist and oppressive 1950s. It was a time when the death sentence was still being imposed and carried out despite "mistakes"; attempted suicide was a criminal offence as was male homosexuality; women died or were seriously damaged by kitchen table abortions; stage shows were censored by a senior member of the Royal Household (the Lord Chamberlain); Sunday was depressingly boring; children born to unmarried women were stigmatised.

On March 18, 1958, nine enlightened residents met at the home of social historian D L (Daisy) Hobman, of 66 Tisbury Road, Hove. The Humanist Group came into existence and has continued through the efforts of dedicated voluntary workers.

The first meetings were held in members' homes but a growing membership encouraged the committee to go public. Speakers included Kingsley Martin, Leonard Woolf and H J Blackham. (The latter is still with us at the age of 105.)

A 50th-anniversary celebration at The Lord Nelson Inn on March 15 was much enjoyed by old and new members. Society chairman Mike Jelley presided and opened the proceedings with a warm welcome to members and visitors.

Speakers included Denis Cobell, who remembered the Society's early days. He just missed being a founder member but joined within the first year. He spoke at its first meeting held in a public venue.

Born locally into a religious family, Denis recalled suffering the usual childhood illnesses prevalent at that time. "I had measles and scarlet fever, but got cured of them," he said.

"Similarly, I had Santa Claus and the resurrected Jesus, but got cured of them too, with the help of books in Hove public library."

He moved to London and served for nine years as President of the National Secular Society.

Veteran journalist and local historian Adam Trimmingham told guests that atheism is rooted in his family. An unbeliever himself, he is the proud descendent of two atheist grandmothers.

Karen Boyd brought greetings from the

British Humanist Association, to which the Society is affiliated. She read a message from the Association's president, Polly Toynbee:

"I want to congratulate you on your 50th anniversary. This is a wonderful achievement that really proves how the work of local people like you helps to keep humanism alive at local level.

"It is the hard work of people like you which keeps humanism visible and gives the opportunity to come together and celebrate humanist thoughts and ideas. I am especially pleased to see a local group in Brighton and Hove marking this important occasion.

"I hope you enjoy the festivities and am delighted to send my support. I wish you every success for the next 50 years!"

Anna Behan, Vice-President of the National Secular Society, to which we are also affiliated, said we were also celebrating the abolition of blasphemy law following a long campaign. The reform had been resisted by religious institutions and individuals. But while welcoming the recent vote in Parliament, she warned that at international level, pressure is being exerted by the religious lobby to introduce a Defamation of Religion law which could apply throughout Europe.

## Jim Herrick reviews D M Bennett the Truth Seeker, by

DEROBIGNE Mortimer Bennett (1818-1882) was an American freethinker of strength and integrity. He founded the oldest freethought magazine still in existence – *The Truth Seeker* – and wrote and lectured prolifically. He was imprisoned for sending "obscene" material through the post; in his later years he travelled the world and developed an interest in Theosophy.

During the first half of his life he was involved with a religious community called the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming, better known as the Shakers. These people were simple and sincere and Bennett certainly gained some of his plain directness and honesty from them. He gained skills in printing and in medicine: he was a herbalist and later homoeopathy physician for some years. When the community went through an Era of Manifestations and created a much more severe regime, Bennett with a group of members eloped and he established a business as a physician.

Bennett was strongly of the anti-slavery party and slowly developed anti-religious views. He found it difficult to get such opinions represented in the press and decided to set up his own journal *The Truth Seeker* in 1873. It gained a readership, in due course including well known figures such as the agnostic Ingersoll, the novelist Mark Twain and the lawyer Clarence Darrow.

It was at first largely written by Bennett and had something of the same characteristic as a personal record as did Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*. Although it has endured, it had a very rocky patch in the 1970s. Its heading reads: "Devoted to Science, Morals, Freethought, Free Enquiry and the Diffusion of Liberal Sentiments". Bennett debunked religion, wrote of the need for ethics, and criticised the hypocrisy of churches and priests.

Although dubbed the Golden Age of Freethought it was also the Scarlet Age of persecution. Comstock, head of the Post Office, used laws controlling the contents of mail to prosecute obscene or irreligious matter. It was the period of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice formed by Comstock, who claimed that the three great crime-breeders in America were "intemperance, gambling and evil reading, and the greatest of these is evil reading." It was also the period of the National Liberal League, a political force leading the call for freedom of speech, a secular republic emancipated from church domination, and free mails.

Bennett's freethought colleague Ezra Heywood was prosecuted for sending out *Cupid's Yokes*, a polemic in favour of free love – meaning to freethinkers not so much promiscuity as relationships which were not yoked by law. This pamphlet was sold in *The Truth Seeker*. Heywood was found guilty and sentenced to prison, but pardoned by President Hayes after a huge petition. Soon it was Bennett's turn. Two tracts caught Comstock's attention – Bennett's *An Open Letter to Jesus Christ* and Bradford's *How Do Marsupials Propagate Their Kind?*

Bennett was prosecuted for obscenity, though I would have thought in the case of the former pamphlet blasphemy would have been more appropriate. Judge Benedict was about as biased as it was possible to be. No defence of the merit of the works was allowed nor was the argument that other such material was freely permitted. Bennett was found guilty and sentenced to a fine and 13 months hard labour in prison. Bennett was especially indignant that one of the judges at the appeal was the biased judge who had originally tried him. He was also saddened that efforts to secure his pardon by the President failed.



## Anniversary in grand style

"NSS representatives on European bodies are resisting attempts to bring back blasphemy law under a new guise," she said. "In the field of employment, opposition is growing to those who are endeavouring to disadvantage the non-religious. Opt-out provisions for religious bodies from equality legislation are also being vigorously opposed," Dr. Behan declared.

This anniversary year the society has much to celebrate. Important social reforms have been achieved in the teeth of religious opposition. Now they must be defended. Those attending were told "we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. Privileges still enjoyed by the

religious include Church Establishment, legally-required broadcasting time, the state funding of chaplaincy services and faith schools, and a prominent role in State ceremonies. Islam is a new and growing threat to freedom of speech.

"An active freethought movement at national and local level is vitally important. Let us ensure that Brighton and Hove continues to be the least religious city in England and Wales."



Pictured at the Brighton group's 50th anniversary celebration is, from left, Denis Cobell, Karen Boyd, editor, BHA News, and Anna Behan, Vice President of the National Secular Society. Photo: Margaret Sweatman

## Prison, by Roderick Bradford

Prison was tough and he suffered some ill health, while not making shoes. But he did succeed in writing long letters to the Truth Seeker. When released he was given a resounding reception and returned for a while to *The Truth Seeker*. He was invited to the Congress of the Universal Federation of Freethinkers in Brussels and developed a taste for travel. In the UK he met Bradlaugh and admired Mrs Besant. (The author, as often happens, mangles the account of Bradlaugh's struggle to enter Parliament.)

In his last year he was persuaded to take a world tour. He spent some time in India – a continent which seems to appeal to freethinkers, including me. Somewhat surprisingly Bennett was attracted to Theosophy and the dictum "There is no religion higher than truth".

However, the belief in contact with higher beings, the Mahatmas, non-material beings able to express great truths, is surprising for freethinkers. Annie Besant went along that route and there was wide interest in spiritualism among freethinkers. Bennett wrote: "I strongly incline to the opinion that there are forms of matter and forces of which they [Materialists] know very little."

In his 63rd year he died and was lost to the cause. Even in death he was controversial – an argument ensuing about the nature of his monument. The memorial included the words "The Defender of Liberty and its Martyr".

This is a fitting epitaph, and the writer Roderick Bradford has done us a great service in bringing Bennett back to life in this book.

• *D M Bennett, The Truth Seeker* is published by Prometheus Books. ISBN: 1591024307. Hardcover. Available from Amazon.co.uk for around £14.00

## Points of View

### The historicity of Jesus

STEUART Campbell in his letter (*Points of View*, March 2008) accuses me of taking statements out of context. There is always an element of this in any quotation unless giving a whole chapter. It is of course a classic tactic used by those unable to refute an argument.

He completely fails to understand my argument that it does not matter if we know nothing about Plato, but just assess the works attributed to him. As far as I know few if any people have been put to death for criticising Plato and no one worships him. In contrast millions have been killed for not accepting the gospels. If either Steuart or I had voiced the opinions we hold at any time during the dark or middle ages we would both have been burnt at the stake.

I did not attempt to answer all of the attacks he makes on Wells, because I was writing a letter not a book. I just focused on his faulty reasoning concerning the date when the story of a mythical Jesus would have to be set, if it was to gain acceptance in the second century. He makes no attempt to answer my rationale for saying that the early 30s AD, as suggested by Wells was the natural date for the creators of the Jesus myth to choose. If he cannot answer points like this he should give up writing letters.

The passing reference to the Dead Sea Scrolls on page 186 is only in an appendix, not the main book, and they are not given in the index. Steuart Campbell's total lack of understanding is demonstrated by the phrase on page 186: "Most extraordinary was Barbara Thiering's belief (1992) that ... The Dead Sea Scrolls could interpret the gospels," and the claim in his letter that they belong to a sect cut off from normal life. This is a 1950s view of the Scrolls pushed by the Catholic Church.

If he had taken the trouble to study the works of the eminent biblical historian

Professor Robert Eisenman he would realise just how out of date his opinions are. Professor Eisenman in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the First Christians* shows beyond reasonable doubt that the Teacher of Righteousness of Qumran and James the Righteous, claimed by Christians as the first Head of the Church in Jerusalem and as a brother of Jesus, are one and the same person. He also shows that he was a man of great influence in the 40s and 50s AD and possibly the people's alternative High Priest, but certainly a zealous Jew.

Professor Eisenman also demonstrates that the man referred to in the Scrolls as The Liar is the Apostle Saulus/Paul and that he was almost certainly a descendant of Herod the Great to add to his other attributes of Agent Provocateur, Murderer and Roman Spy. That two such important people claimed by Christians as founders were actually members of a Jewish zealot sect has very profound consequences for our view of early Christianity. That Steuart Campbell ignores the Scrolls invalidates all his arguments.

It is also noteworthy that Steuart Campbell ignores the Gnostic Gospels, Philip, Thomas and Mary Magdalene, which have to be fitted into the puzzle somewhere. The Canonical Gospels are just the ones that met the needs of Catholic Christianity.

CHARLES DOUGLAS  
Galloway

HAVING read fairly extensively in the period of history which saw the rise and eventual spread of the Christian religion, may I point out to Steuart Campbell (*Points of View*, March 08) that our knowledge of the historical Jesus is literally next to nil; so much so, in fact, that the entire New Testament is far more consonant and more consistent with Jesus being a myth than with Jesus being a definite historical personage.

For more than thirty years I have subscribed to the mythical thesis which maintains that Jesus is a late 1st-century invention, created initially by St Paul and clearly based on his



obvious familiarity with the Ancient Mediterranean “Dying-and-Saviour-God” cult/syndrome, for St Paul was born in a part of Asia Minor where the saviour-god (Mithras) had been worshipped for many centuries. It was later on that St Paul’s Dying-and-Saviour God (Jesus) was given a *human* biography by four unknown men who had never once set eyes on someone called Jesus.

“The plain fact is”, wrote the late historian, Prof Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre), “that we know nothing whatever about the historical Jesus. The gospels, after all, tell us nothing but palpable rubbish. The Church created Christ.”

Before I retire from this controversial arena (I rather think we’ve reached an impasse), I would like to ask Mr. Campbell two questions to which I have yet to receive satisfactory answers.

The first question is this: biblical scholars and theologians tell us that Jesus was twelve years of age when he debated with scholars in the Temple but thenceforth Jesus disappears completely into total obscurity for 18 years. He later reappears in the drama when, as a thirty-year old rebel and blasphemer, he is arrested and tried by the Sanhedrin on a charge of blasphemy for which he was later executed. Can Mr Campbell tell us where and with whom Jesus spent those 18 unaccounted years, which is surely a huge gap in anyone’s life.

My second question is this. If Mr Campbell does not believe in the physical ascension of Jesus into Heaven (and I’ve yet to meet a Christian who does!) will Mr Campbell inform us as to where and with whom Jesus lived out the rest of his life, bearing in mind that he was only 33 years old when he was executed. I find it quite extraordinary that such a charismatic and spectacular miracle worker could sink without trace and simply vanish from the face of the earth.

I’m sure that biblical scholars and historians will be grateful to Mr Campbell if he can answer both questions with, of course, the necessary incontrovertible evidential facts. Dare I go on to ask whether Mr Campbell can also tell us where Jesus was subsequently buried.

The ball, Mr Campbell, is in your court.

MARTIN O’BRIEN  
Gwent

### The paranormal

BEFORE I start my argument I would like to say that I am a humanist, which means (1) no God (2) no afterlife (3) no ghosts (as denizens of the afterlife) and (4) a trust in the scientific method. However, I have been a psychical researcher for most of my life. For me it was the final straw when William Harwood accused the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* of being equivalent to the *Journal of the Flat Earth Society*.

Has he tried to get an article published in JSPR? The argument that parapsychologists have just set up their own journals simply because the articles in them were not scientific

is rather like suggesting that *The Astrophysical Journal*, *The Journal of Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* and *The Journal of Sound and Vibration* were set up for the same reason. Ever heard of “publish and be damned”? Or communication between members of a specialist scientific subculture?

W H clearly has not read JSPR, which is a fierce defender of the scientific method. The work published is double-blind, statistical, and does not always publish positive results. I notice that W H quotes C E M Hansel’s definitive debunking of parapsychology’s best evidence called *The Search for Psychic Power: ESP and Parapsychology Revisited*, which was published in 1989. That’s, hold on I’m counting on my fingers, nearly 20 years ago. Read Paul Loader’s article in *New Scientist* (03 April 2004).

The case for scientists taking Psi seriously has been made hands down. Read Kittenis *et al* (2004), “Distant psychophysiological interaction effects between related and unrelated participants”. Naturally precognition “is problematic because it violates causality” (Kaku M, *New Scientist*, April 5, 2008). If you are looking for the latest best evidence against Psi try Samuel *et al* (2008): *Using Neuro-imaging to Resolve the Psi Debate*. You see, this psychical researcher could not care less if Psi exists or not; all I’m interested in is the evidence. Now a few words about that genius Albert Einstein for whom I have considerable respect.

If he could not recognise the existence of quantum mechanics then I’m afraid he was not competent to speak about ESP. However, you were right about SCICOP: they examine, evaluate and annihilate! But I rarely read that this pressure group has carried out any meaningful experiments of their own. The idea that parapsychologists are witless morons who cannot accept their mortality is, in the least, bizarre and outdated.

Modern parapsychologists are exploring the idea (true or false) that human beings, or at least some, may have abilities greater than previously suspected by biology or psychology. What is the problem with that? What is wrong with testing these ideas out? Personally, the idea of surviving into an afterlife and ending up with all those relatives that I thought that I finally had seen the back of, is one of the most frightening concepts in the entire multiverse.

DR GEORGE GREGG

Humanist & Psychical Researcher  
Worcestershire

### Immigration, race & religion

I WAS pleased to see – at last – an intelligent response in the April edition to the difficult but pressing questions I have posed about immigration, race and religion. Dan J Bye’s honest and detailed article “Another look at secularism, politics and race” partly rejects, partly confirms and certainly advances the debate, that I (together with a few others), have struggled to initiate, in the teeth of opposition from

pinched left-wingers, timid NSS types, and fair-weather humanists.

It was particularly interesting because Dan identifies himself as an anarchist, a position I once shared. This commitment to political Victoriana may also account for his slightly imperious tone in places. However, I think he’ll find that maturity brings with it the realisation that anarchism is too simplistic and shaky a political philosophy on which to peg the security and well-being of our collective future, in a dangerous and uncertain world. This is why I now occupy the solid centre ground, politically, whilst maintaining a fiercely independent and sceptical outlook. I will admit that my polemical discourse is often troubling and – I hope – entertaining (hence the occasional hyperbole Dan complains about), but the *Freethinker* is supposed to be a lively ideas forum, not a bone-dry, peer-reviewed, academic tract.

When I described as “dehumanising and hateful” the BNP’s reference to asylum seekers as “cockroaches”, I think it is fairly obvious that I was condemning the use of that term (in this context or any other), not just pointing out a legal technicality that it doesn’t qualify as a “race-hate” crime. Dan seems to fall short of making this cognitive leap. What is “ambiguous” about my condemnation of this hate speech? Perhaps he thinks I approve of dehumanising and hateful things, though this would somewhat negate my humanism!

It seems that, like many “rigid rationalists”, implied meanings, irony, witticisms and cognitive cues seem to pass Dan by, perhaps because, unless they are laboriously spelt out to him in a very literal way, they escape his apprehension (a kind of intellectual Asperger’s syndrome). Even so, as an anarchist, he must surely share my opposition to an intrusive Orwellian legal system that not only seeks to gag freedom of speech and punish every unguarded or silly remark, but also tries to second guess the transgressor’s motives?

I suspect that Dan will eventually follow me back to the political centre, but if he thinks that attacking the doctrinaire Left does not advance the secular cause “one jot” he is deeply mistaken. The Left – with a few honourable exceptions like Nick Cohen and the rest of the Euston Manifesto Group – is the principal obstacle to advancing secularism, having either cynically conscripted, naively appeased, or slavishly kow-towed to the Islamists’ agenda and those of other, less aggressive, “faith groups”. Socialist deadwood within the atheist movement is undeniably holding it back, while most non-socialist atheists are too scared to excise this deadwood for fear of causing a schism that has basically already happened.

Wake up, Danny Boy – it’s clear from your article that you already suspect that the “anti-racist” ideology, to which you feel obliged to subscribe, has become corrupt and foolish. Modernisers in the centre-Left and centre-Right parties have seized back all the secular





initiatives from the Left, formulating pragmatic non-racist solutions to the immigration free-for-all and all its attendant problems, including religious extremism. It's time to ditch the juvenile conceit of calling oneself an "anarchist" and move on. The last copy of *Class War* that I read – a publication produced by the anarchist Class War groupuscule your article endorses – called upon firemen to ignore 999 calls from "posh neighbourhoods" and urged readers to attack the police with condoms packed with shit. Stupid, unworkable and pointless, not to mention dehumanising and hateful. Come on, Dan, you're better than that!

**DIESEL BALAAM**  
London

### The Middle East situation

GRAHAM Livingstone is certainly entitled to express his views on the situation in the Middle East. However, in my opinion, he should try to avoid making pronouncements comparing events of which he knows little.

May I add that he does not reply to Derek Wilkes' reference to the British and European colonisation of North America as well as South Africa.

With regard to the freedom of expression in Israel, I suggest he should read the book *Exodus to Humanism*.

**DAVID IBRY**  
London

### Homoeopathy

THE tendency for those whose silly beliefs are ridiculed to whine and complain about being offended is familiar enough to those who watch the antics of the pious. It seems homoeopathy devotees are also sensitive about having their stupid delusions challenged.

According to C A M Aitchison (*Points of View*, April) my letter in August, which described homoeopathy accurately ("barking" and "bollocks") was a "diatribe" using "intemperate language" in which by "convoluted reasoning" I accused him "of equating qualifications with credibility". Truth hurts. I guess.

Now if Mr Aitchison was not trying to equate qualifications with credibility, it begs the question why the second paragraph of his July letter was devoted to emphasising the point that homoeopathic practitioners are highly qualified?

As for his current letter, only someone determined to suppress all their critical thinking faculties (or someone without any to suppress) could possibly imagine that the anecdotes he furnishes constitute "evidence" for homoeopathy. They all boil down to "My mum and I had big zits in various places which went away after taking homoeopathic treatment".

It is dismaying that one should have to point out the obvious – they would have gone away anyway. It is telling that the only "proof" Mr Aitchison can offer is a series of anecdotes. Any snake oil salesman can furnish impressive tales of miracle cures from satisfied customers. But can they furnish double-blind clinical trials?

No amount of anecdote can substitute for proper scientific studies that eliminate spontaneous remissions, wrongful diagnoses, selective memory, placebo effects and all the other pitfalls and weaknesses of mere stories.

And it is precisely these studies the homoeopaths lack. The efforts so far conjured up tend to be poorly controlled, small scale and weak. Homoeopathy is an evidence-free zone.

**STEPHEN MORETON**

Warrington

C A M Aitchison makes a series of classic blunders in his belief in homoeopathy.

First, he recounts a number of anecdotes; scientifically, anecdotal evidence is of very little value.

Second, he may have made the error of selection thinking, remembering mostly only the times that the treatment apparently worked. However, he seems partly to redeem himself by pointing out a couple of instances where neither homoeopathic nor allopathic remedies appeared to work.

Third, he has made the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* error: the patient got better after the treatment, therefore the treatment was the cause of the patient's recovery. Most minor medical conditions clear up whether or not they are treated.

Homoeopathy gained adherents in the days when often the supposed "cure" was worse than the condition, for example bloodletting and pulling out eyelashes. Whenever homoeopathy has been tested using rigorous scientific methods, using large sample sizes, double-blind tests, etc, the effect is no better than a placebo.

This is what you would expect when what you are doing is in effect administering sugar pills. The reason that many people believe in homoeopathy is the much more sympathetic and unrushed hearing that they receive from homeopaths than from their overburdened GP: a very powerful placebo.

It amazes me that a supposedly rational *Freethinker* reader can believe in preposterous claims like "the more dilute the dose, the more effective the treatment." By similar reasoning, the less water applied to a house fire, the quicker the fire is extinguished. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proofs.

How would he view a letter published in the *Freethinker*, similar to his own, with prayer substituted for homeopathy?

**STEWART WARE**

London

### More Muslims than Catholics

THE Vatican has just announced that there are now officially more Muslims in the world than Catholics. A spokesman said: "For the first time in the history of the world, we are no longer the largest religion."

These few words neatly encapsulate two very frequent features of religious pronouncements: arrogance and ignorance. To the observer, the Roman version of Christianity is

not a separate religion, merely one of the multitude of variations under that head, albeit currently the largest. Most, if not all, claim to be the one true faith.

History, strictly, refers to the written record, which shows religions existing thousands of years before Christianity. For far longer, archaeology indicates what we would certainly regard as religions. After Christianity's invention, it remained a minority faith for a long time. Even after its official adoption by the (Western) Roman Empire, it was probably still outnumbered by, for example, Hinduism and Buddhism. The dominant position may well not have come about before extensive European colonisation and conquest.

Ignorance and arrogance reflect a distorted view of reality, which all religions perpetuate to a greater or less extent.

**JOHN RADFORD**

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.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Wed, May 7, 8pm. Alex Kennedy: *The Folly of Faith Schools*. Wed, June 4, 8pm. Ted McFadyen: *The National Press Today*.

**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. Court House, Berkhamsted. Tues, May 13, 8pm. Alan Wilde: *Why Does Religion Endure*.

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

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

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

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

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

**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: John Coff: 0161 4303463. 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 (except January, July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Next meeting on May 14 will be the AGM, followed by a discussion: *Does humanism demand a green agenda?* Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

**HaVERING & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

**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, May 13, 7.30pm.

Richard Parker: *The Unwoven Rainbow*.

**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 Secular and 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. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Wed May 7, 7.30pm. John Hasland: *Robert Owen, Co-operator and Secularist*.

**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).

**Think Humanism:** An independent discussion forum for anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought - [www.thinkhumanism.com](http://www.thinkhumanism.com)

**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.