

£1.25

Vol 128 No 6
June 2008

The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

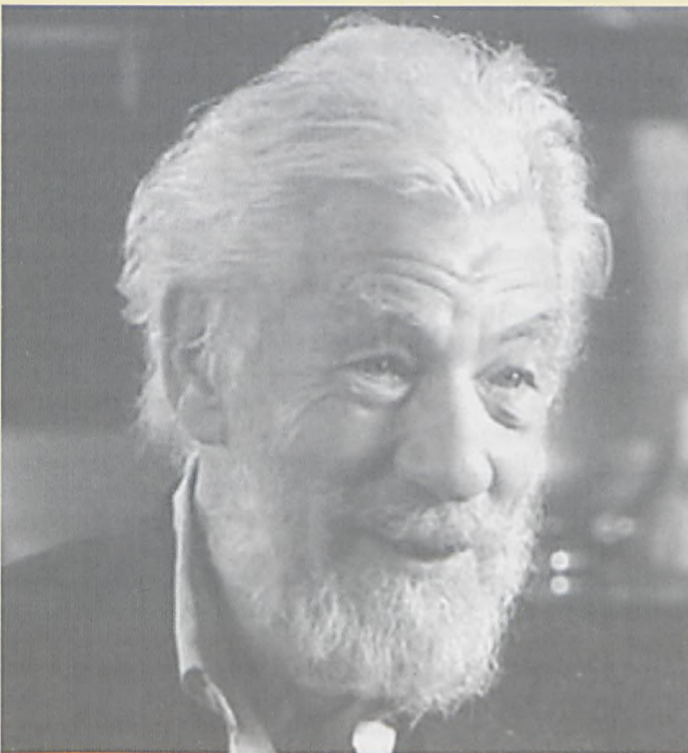
Sir Ian McKellen to read 'blasphemous' poem in the capital later this month

Top British actor will be the star of the National Secular Society's Bye-Bye Blasphemy party in London on June 21

IN an event destined to go down in the annals of theatre and freethought history, Sir Ian McKellen will read *The Love That Dares to Speak its Name* – James Kirkup's poem that led to the prosecution of *Gay News* for blasphemy in 1977.

The symbolic reading will take place at the NSS's Bye Bye Blasphemy Party later this month.

The party has been arranged to celebrate the end of the blasphemy law in the United Kingdom and will feature guest



appearances from both those who have fallen victim to the blasphemy law, and those who have fought to abolish it.

Sir Ian McKellen is one of the world's leading actors, both on stage and screen. He is the recipient of a Tony Award and two Oscar nominations. He is best known for roles such as Gandalf in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy and as Magneto in the X-Men films.

His work has spanned genres from serious Shakespearean and modern theatre to popular fantasy and science fiction. He was made a CBE in 1979, and knighted in the 1991 New Year Honours for his outstanding work and contributions to the theatre. In the 2008 New Year Honours he was made a Companion of Honour (CH) for services to drama and to equality.

When he starred in the *Da Vinci Code* (another film branded blasphemous by the Vatican), he was asked in an interview whether he thought it should carry a disclaimer saying it was a work of fiction, as some religious groups had demanded.

He replied: "I've often thought the Bible should have a disclaimer in the front saying 'This is fiction.' I mean, walking on water? It takes... an act of faith. And I have faith in this movie – not that it's true, not that it's factual, but that it's a jolly good story."

Terry Sanderson, president of the National Secular Society, said: "I am thrilled that Ian is able to be with us and to give this fantastic — one might say historical — rendition of the last literary victim of blasphemy. I am a great admirer of his courage and work for the equal rights of gay men and lesbians. He has carried out this work against all advice that it would put his glittering career at risk. He is truly a man of principle."

In 1988, McKellen came out as gay and became a founding member of Stonewall, one of the United Kingdom's most influential LGBT rights groups, of which he remains a prominent spokesman.

Regrettably, all tickets for the Bye Bye Blasphemy party are now sold. If you were lucky enough to purchase one but you can no longer attend, please let the NSS know so that they can offer the place to someone else. If you'd like to be added to the

(Continued on p4)

Bare-breasted embarrassment for Spanish Cardinal – p3
Canadian Muslims kick off over another 'offensive' cartoon – p5
Secularism makes impressive gains in the United States – p7
Farewell to outspoken Australian atheist Pamela Bone – centre pages



Freethinker editor Barry Duke applauds a delicious demolition job

DESPITE effectively kick-starting my faculties with near-lethal infusions of caffeine and nicotine each morning, I am finding it increasingly difficult to keep pace with all the religious bilge that comes in torrents out of my radio each day, thanks to the BBC's passion for giving barmy clerics disproportionate amounts of airtime.

On May 9, for example, it was the turn of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, leader of Roman Catholics in England and Wales, to invade my space with a barely coherent plea for religion to have a greater voice in policy matters in the UK.

Interviewed by John Humphrys on Radio 4's *Today* programme, Murphy-O'Connor contended that reason alone was "dangerous" to society; it has to be tempered with faith if we are to avoid repeating horrors committed by the likes of Hitler and Stalin.

Following a lecture he gave the previous day, the Cardinal lamented the fact that "the Christian voice" was increasingly being stifled in the UK, and made the astonishing claim that people in Britain *want* church leaders to speak out on key policy issues.

The Cardinal sounded less than pleased when interviewer John Humphrys bluntly put it to him that religious leaders, in the view of people like Professor Richard Dawkins – interviewed earlier on the programme – "talk rubbish", and should, therefore, not be permitted to poke their snouts into policy matters.

The Cardinal then went on to dish out some garbage about atheists "constructing God" simply in order to knock him down, and to repeat the claim that Britain was a "Christian country, with 70 percent of the population professing a belief in the Christian faith".

He added: "Britain should not be allowed to become a God-free zone."

In his lecture, the Cardinal said: "There are social currents today that want to isolate religion from other forms of knowledge and experience in order to marginalise it. One of the things which I challenge is the desire to separate Christianity from rational inquiry. Many of our 'new atheists' seem unable to cope with the notion of an intelligent, reflective Christian faith. But the Catholic Christian tradition is characterised by a close relationship between reasoned understanding and religious faith. Faith for us is the flowering of reason, not its betrayal."

Curiously, he also pleaded for a greater respect for atheists.

All of this was, understandably, like a red rag to Terry Sanderson, National Secular President, who bullishly responded with a brilliant rebuttal in the *Guardian*.

Where does one start with a speech as specious and self-serving as the one given by Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor in Westminster Cathedral?

The BBC headed its report of the event: *'Respect atheists', says Cardinal*. Can you imagine anything so utterly patronising than the leader of some rapidly diminishing religious sect (in the UK at least – with a 40 percent decline in attendance in a generation) telling a huge proportion of the population that he's prepared to tolerate them? And why is he prepared to tolerate them? Well, because even if they say they don't believe in God, God is still with them and, really, atheism is just a "distorted kind of Christianity".

But more worrying than that is Murphy-O'Connor's caricature of secularism as some kind of threat to people's personal beliefs. He conflates atheism and secularism, either through ignorance, or more likely deliberately, and then says that it is trying to rob people of their spirituality.

That is not what secularism is about. Murphy-O'Connor is nearer the mark when he says that secularists want to "privatise religion" and reduce its influence in the public arena. There is a difference between individual believers bringing their version of morality into the public debate, and a Church wanting to write its dogmas into law.

Faith is about believers having a personal relationship with their God. Religion, on the other hand, is about organising those believers and bidding for temporal power in their name. Secularists have no problem with the former, but they have a lot of problems with the latter.

And as for the claim that Christians are "denied a voice", take a listen to the *Today* programme, as broadcast on May 9. Richard Dawkins, who was personally attacked by Murphy-O'Connor in his speech, was given three minutes to tie John Humphrys in knots about the BBC's automatic deference to religious leaders. An hour later Murphy-O'Connor was allotted seven and a half minutes to repeat the unfounded assertions about non-religious people being incapable of living a full life, and about religion being denied a voice. Hopefully spurred by Dawkins' chiding, Humphrys did give the Cardinal a harder time than is usual with clerics on the BBC.

Murphy-O'Connor also speaks with forked tongue when he tries to portray the Catholic Church as some persecuted institution that means harm to no one. He says the Catholic Church is caricatured as "some heartless, insular institution that wants to deny people their freedom".

Cardinal – this is not a caricature. It is the truth. Your own actions and pronouncements confirm it. You have tried to deny human rights to homosexuals, you have tried to rob women of the right to choose contraception and abortion and thereby take control of their lives, you have tried (and continue to try) to interfere with scientific research that may lead to the alleviation of enormous suffering. You have attempted to manipulate the political process by pressurising Catholic MPs. On a personal level you – and your Church – try to control every aspect of your followers' lives, from telling them what to think, what to eat and when to eat it, to telling them who they can sleep with and even what they can and cannot do when they get between the sheets.

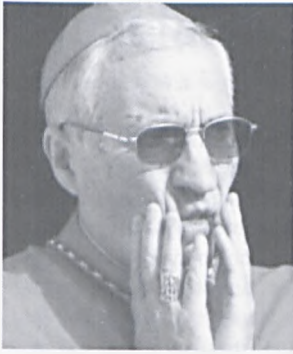
You have argued that Christian leaders should have privileged input to government policymaking. You have said that you should have unchallenged access to the BBC. You are a politician as much as a priest, but no one has elected you. It is you and your Church – not secularists or atheists – which are out of step with the people of this country.

Just how remote Catholic bishops are was illustrated in a YouGov poll for Catholics for Choice in November. Only a seventh of the population agreed with the Catholic bishops or Vatican position on abortion law, and only just over a quarter (27 percent) of Catholics. And there is little doubt that the bishops' line on contraception and homosexuality would be even more out on a limb. Yet it is the Pope's three-line whip that the Catholic MPs are forcing the government to accept.

You ask why the government continually thwarts your will – the answer is that they are elected to represent the people, while you take your orders from an unaccountable central source in another country.

You may bleat that people no longer believe – but that is their choice, and choice is the one thing that the Catholic church fears. As far as you are concerned, there is only one way – the Catholic way. Well, the country at large, and increasingly your own congregations, are telling you that the Catholic way is not their way, as this poll so clearly reveals.

Hats off to Sanderson for this delicious demolition job,



Bare-breast embarrassment for Spanish cardinal

THE right-wing head of Spain's Catholic church, Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela, has expressed outrage over just about every reform introduced by the country's socialist government – but nothing could have shocked this posturing old ninny more

than seeing a picture of his niece on the cover of a best-selling soft porn magazine, *Interviú*.

Topless and dressed in suspenders, Magdalena Rouco Hernández stripped off to embarrass her uncle, who is head of the Spanish Episcopal Conference and also a friend of Pope Benedict XVI.

According to the *Guardian*, the mother-of-two bared her breasts over eight pages of the magazine – which is a curious mix of female flesh and serious investigations.

The 27-year-old, who went to mass every day as a girl, said she chose to do the photoshoot to expose her uncle's "hypocrisy" following her father's death.

"My uncle never tires of repeating that the family is sacred and that you have to respect it. But then he does not respect it and abandons his own. When my father died, [Rouco] did not come to the funeral, didn't send flowers or tell my mother of his sorrow. He told us he had a meeting with Pope John Paul II, but it was not true."

Magdalena also claimed Cardinal Rouco did not call her family after her mother's death and failed to help her when her husband lost his job. "I wanted to bare naked the hypocrisy of my uncle," she said.

Cardinal Rouco, 72, leads a conservative wing of the Spanish church which has clashed repeatedly with the socialist government over social reforms including the legalisation of gay marriage, quick divorces, educational reforms and stem-cell research.

The Cardinal's hypocrisy appears to go further than just family matters.

It was recently revealed that he has been investing heavily in the pharmaceutical company Pfizer, which manufactures both Viagra and an injectable contraceptive, Dep-Provera, used by 30 million women worldwide.

Alas, as a result of the recent crisis over sub-prime mortgages, his investments of some 80,000 Euro a year have slumped by 20 percent.



Catholics disown bishop who condemned sexual abuse

THERE was bound to be trouble when retired Sydney bishop Geoffrey Robinson published *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church* last August, because it told the Catholic Church things they just did not want to hear.

So instead of dealing with the important issues he raised in his book, the Church decided instead to disown him.

The bishop believes that compulsory celibacy for priests and religious has contributed to sexual abuse, and must at least be on the table for discussion.

He says: "Some may speak all they wish of the benefits of celibacy for the Church, but others will not stop asking, 'How many abused children is celibacy worth'?"

He believes that celibacy could contribute to unhealthy psychology, unhealthy ideas, and an unhealthy environment.

"Within the Catholic Church, there is a constant insistence that on all important matters Catholics must look to the Pope for guidance and direction. Those older values have for a thousand years included secrecy, the covering over of problems and the protection of the good name of the Church," he said.

Australian bishops this week released a public statement suggesting that Bishop Robinson – as a bishop, a man chosen by the Pope to guard the teaching of Catholics – was wrong about the authority of Christ and the authority

of the Church to "teach the truth".

The statement was the first official response to Bishop Robinson's controversial book.

Bishop Robinson was a longtime member and chair of the Church's professional standards committee, established by the Australian bishops to deal with the increasing wave of complaints of sexual abuse. He resigned two years ago, disillusioned by the Church's handling of sexual abuse complaints.

Bishop Robinson, 71, who was abused as a child, headed the Australian Church's efforts to tackle clerical sexual abuse for a decade, until he retired in 2004 because he was so disillusioned.

The statement by 38 bishops commends Bishop Robinson's contribution to the life of

the Church, his "years of effort to bring help and healing to those who have suffered sexual abuse", and his work in establishing church protocols.

But, after correspondence and conversation with Bishop Robinson, "it is clear that doctrinal difficulties remain. Central to these is a questioning of the authority of the Catholic Church to teach the truth definitively", the statement says.



Retired bishop
Geoffrey Robinson

Religion? Einstein thought it was crap

A LETTER written by Einstein the year before his death says that God is the product of human weakness and that the Bible is "pretty childish".

The letter, auctioned in London last month, was written to philosopher Eric Gutkind in January 1954 – a year before Einstein died in New Jersey.

In it, Einstein said: "The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses, the Bible a collection of honorable but still primitive legends, which are nevertheless pretty childish."

He added: "For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions. Addressing the idea that the Jews are God's chosen people, Einstein wrote: "The Jewish people to whom I gladly belong and with whose mentality I have a deep affinity have no different quality for me than all other people."



Bye-bye blasphemy

(Continued from p1)

waiting list for returns, please email the office on admin@secularism.org.uk.

The vile "crime" of blasphemy was finally laid to rest last month when the House of Commons voted overwhelmingly to support the abolition of the common-law offences of blasphemy and blasphemous libel. This was the final stage in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill, and the amendment was carried by 378 votes to 57.

In a tetchy and bad-tempered parliamentary debate, Conservatives made a last-ditch attempt to block abolition, arguing that it represented a significant step in the secularising of Britain. Some raised the spectre of it being the beginning of a process that would eventually lead to disestablishment. Government Minister Maria Eagle MP assured MPs that there was no such "hidden agenda".

The NSS reports that other MPs were less shy about hoping for the disestablishment of the Church of England. David Howarth, Liberal Democrat shadow Solicitor General said: "It is the policy of my party to work

towards the disestablishment of the Church, and the separation of Church and state. I am fairly comfortable with that position."

Mr Howarth continued: "The principle of the separation of Church and state is not about the separation of religion and politics, which I think is impossible. We cannot separate people's moral, religious views from their political views. We are talking about the state, not about society, and about the religious commitments of the state, not about whether people in society are religious or not. In the course of debate we have heard three separate arguments against the idea of state neutrality in religion. One of them might be called the "this is a Christian country" argument.

"We do indeed have an established Church; we have Acts of Parliament such as the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, which mandates an act of broadly Christian collective worship in schools, and we have Prayers in this place. The trouble with that is that what is, is not necessarily what ought to be. It ignores the new circumstances in which we find ourselves, which make it important now more than ever to reject the idea of the mixture of Church and state, any notion of theocracy or any hint that the state should be built on a particular

religious view."

NSS honorary associate Dr Evan Harris, Lib Dem MP for Abingdon and Oxford (the original architect of this amendment), challenged Tory MPs who were arguing for the preservation of blasphemy laws.

In an earlier debate that evening on the same Bill they had argued that new proposals to outlaw hatred against homosexuals would unnecessarily restrict the right of religious people to make clear their disapproval of homosexuality.

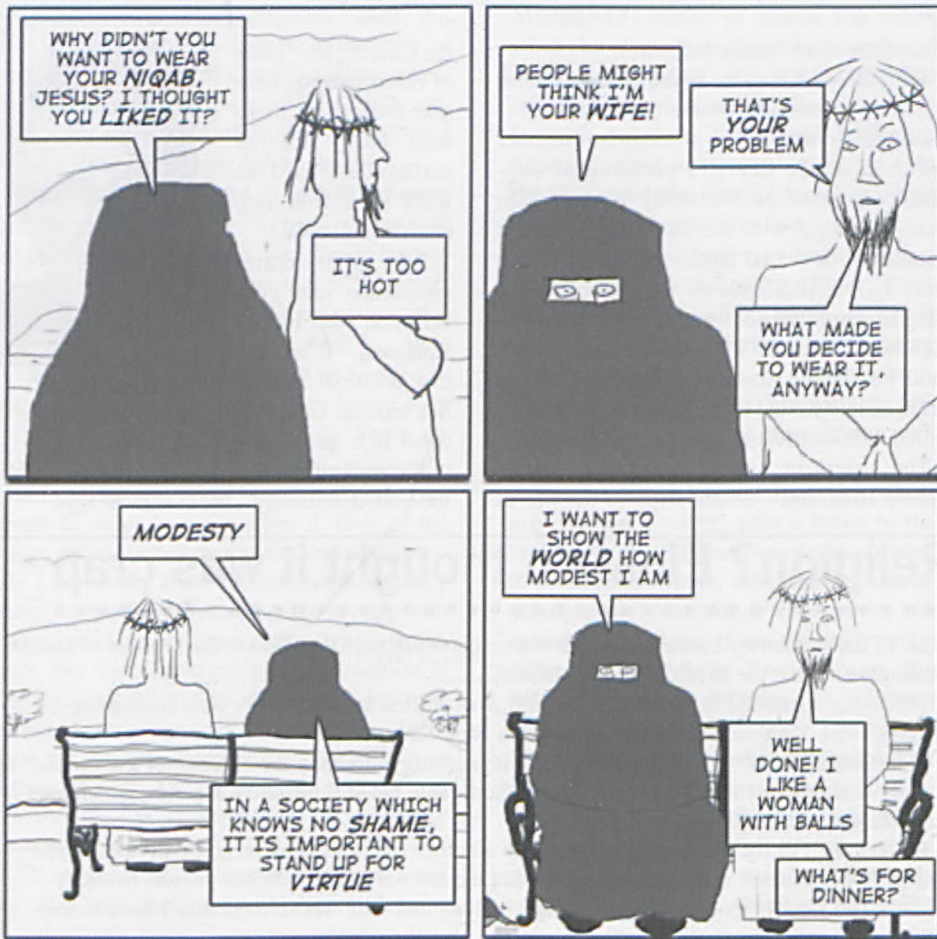
Now they were arguing that the blasphemy law was necessary to protect religious people against offence. It seemed that their defence of free speech was not entirely consistent.

Dr Harris said: "When it came to the issue of incitement to homophobic hatred, we heard a number of speeches and interventions from Conservative Members claiming that freedom of speech was critical, and that freedom of expression was under threat.

"Yet when it comes to an issue – blasphemy, as opposed to incitement to hatred – that causes individuals themselves no damage, making the case for proscribing it much weaker, those very same people argue that freedom of expression has to go in order to maintain their version of no change.

"They want to maintain some symbolic law or the safety of the UK constitution, which they fear may be shaken to its foundations by the abolition of these unnecessary and discriminatory laws."

Jesus and Mo



Priest qualifies for Darwin Award

CATHOLIC clergy are normally carried away with their own hot air – but it was helium that took batty Brazilian priest, Adelar Antonio de Carli, off the face of the planet in late April.

De Carli, 41, has been missing ever since lifting off from the port city of Paranagua strapped to 1,000 helium-filled balloons.

Although it is not yet certain that the priest is dead, he has become the most popular contender this year for a Darwin Award. The Darwin Awards were established to "salute the improvement of the human genome by honouring those who accidentally remove themselves from it."

The priest made the sign of the cross as he soared up into the air under a cluster of green, red, white and yellow balloons

Brazilian air-force planes flew over 5,000 square kilometers (1,900 square miles) of land and sea after de Carli vanished, but found no trace of the priest.

Canadian Muslims kick off over yet another cartoon

NOVA Scotian Cheryfa MacAulay Jamal is a 44-year-old convert to the Religion of Perpetual Outrage. And she is outraged over the fact that her husband Qayyum Abdul Jamal was arrested in 2006 in an anti-terrorism raid.

Now the Muslima in her one-woman tent says she “wants millions” in compensation from the federal government for the suffering her family allegedly went through as a result of her husband’s arrest. This demand prompted Nova Scotia’s leading newspaper, the *Chronicle Herald* to run a cartoon depicting a woman in a burqa holding a sign that reads: “I want MILLIONS! I can put it towards my husband’s next training camp.”



Dan Leger, the *Herald*’s director of news content, said the cartoon did not take aim at all Muslims. “The whole purpose of that cartoon was to comment on the outrageous demands of this individual for compensation long before any hearing into her case had ever been held.

“Our cartoonist MacKinnon depicted her exactly the way she looks and used her own words, and that’s the genius of cartooning

that you’re able to do that.”

Now the *Chronicle Herald* is being hauled before the province’s human rights commission for an alleged “hate crime”. More than that, the paper has been contacted by the police, too.

In his excellent blog, Ezra Levant revealed that the complainant here “is not Mrs Jamal, the money-grubbing wife of the accused terrorist. It’s Sheikh Ziaullah Khan, of Halifax’s Centre for Islamic Development”.

Levant also revealed that, when attractive Canadian teenager Aqsa Parvez was killed last year by her father for, amongst other sins, not wearing a hijab, Khan, in a YouTube video, did not focus his fury on Parvez’s father, but on the “hatemongers” in the media for covering the horrible story. Said Levant: “I’m surprised he didn’t file a human rights complaint against the media. Why is it that Khan, whose job description is the promotion of Islam in Halifax, has allied himself with the Jamals?

“It’s because, regrettably, too many imams in too many mosques in North America are radical themselves, and even if they don’t preach terrorism, they excuse it, or in this case, sympathise with the accused terrorist. If only the Khans of this world were as eager and angry to speak out against Muslim terrorism, instead of media coverage, or Canadian counter-terrorism efforts.”



Iraqi father claims ‘God is blessing him’ for killing his daughter

AN Iraqi father, who was “congratulated by police” in Basra after he beat his 17-year-old daughter to death because she had become infatuated with a British soldier, said in an interview in the *Observer* last month that “death was the least she deserved. I don’t regret it. I had the support of all my friends who are fathers, like me, and know what she did was unacceptable to any Muslim that honours his religion.”

Abdel-Qader Ali, who along with his two sons killed student Rand, said he was unrepentant about her death. His only regret is that he did not kill his daughter at birth.

“If I had realised then what she would become, I would have killed her the instant her mother delivered her.”

Abdel-Qader Ali was arrested after the killing, but released after just two hours in detention because this was an honour killing. Sgt Ali Jabbar of Basra police said: “Not much can be done when we have an ‘honour killing’. You are in a Muslim society and women should live under religious laws.”

Abdel-Qader, 46, a government employee, astonishingly said that the police actually congratulated him on what he had done. “They are men and know what honour is.”

Rand, who was studying English at Basra

University, was deemed to have brought shame on her family after becoming infatuated with a British soldier, 22, known only as Paul.

According to the *Observer* “It was her first youthful infatuation and it would be her last. She died on 16 March after her father discovered she had been seen in public talking to Paul, considered to be the enemy, the invader and a Christian. Though her horrified mother, Leila Hussein, called Rand’s two brothers, Hassan, 23, and Haydar, 21, to restrain Abdel-Qader as he choked her with his foot on her throat, they joined in. Her shrouded corpse was then tossed into a makeshift grave without ceremony as her uncles spat on it in disgust.

Said Abdel-Qader Ali: “I don’t have a daughter now, and I prefer to say that I never had one. That girl humiliated me in front of my family and friends. Speaking with a foreign soldier, she lost what is the most precious thing for any woman. People from western countries might be shocked, but our girls are not like their daughters that can sleep with any man they want and sometimes even get pregnant without marrying. Our girls should respect their religion, their family and their bodies.

“I have only two boys from now on. That girl was a mistake in my life. I know God is blessing me for what I did. My sons are by my



‘Honor’-killing victim Rand Abdel-Qadar

side, and they were men enough to help me finish the life of someone who just brought shame to ours.”

This sort of murder is not a rare phenomenon in Iraq. Forty seven women in Basra fell victim to “honour killings” in Basra last year.

This is proof – if proof were needed – that Islam is a vile, primitive religion that makes monsters of its adherents, and idiots of its apologists.

John Gower Davies: A little bit more of the Archbishop of Canterbury

ROWAN Williams' talk at the Royal Courts of Justice (7 February 2008) has had much publicity. Most of this was about his musings on the desirability and practicability of establishing two legal jurisdictions in this country – British law and Muslim sharia law.

This he regarded as the “larger theoretical and practical issue”. The Archbishop had, however, a second interest, a “plain procedural question ... about how existing courts function and what weight is properly given to the issues we have been discussing”. These “issues” can be seen in the context of an earlier talk or paper the Archbishop had given, about incitement to religious hatred.

In the February 2008 lecture he is seeking to extend a point he made there, so that questions “of offence need to be connected to issues of power and status”. He regards as “a very unsatisfactory account of political reality in modern societies” the legal assumption that “a citizen is essentially and simply to be under the rule of the uniform law of a sovereign state, in such a way that any other relations, commitments or protocols of behaviour belong exclusively to the realm of the private and of individual choice”. Courts, he is saying – the existing courts, be it noticed – should pay a “higher level of attention to religious identity and communal rights”.

The Archbishop, being both Welsh and a theologian, manages to spread a fair amount of confusion over all this: but no one should excuse him for that – it is his job to be clear, and pleas of “unclarity” are grounds to tell him

to shut up rather than to beg for further elucidation. If you stick your head into a bucket of porridge and blow, it is not surprising if your immediate surroundings lack clarity.

What the Archbishop is saying here, clearly, is that *existing courts* should base their decisions on the social or communal origins of the accused – or of the accuser – and that the courts – the existing British courts – should take into account the relative “power and status” of these several communities.

The plaintiff, and/or the complainant, that is, should be marked and measured, not by reference to his or her individual responsibility for

**‘If you stick your head into
a bucket of porridge and blow,
it is not surprising if your
immediate surroundings
lack clarity’**

the deed in question, but by reference to his or her membership for this or that community. The “deed in question” too, the alleged offence that is, should also be marked and measured in terms of its relationship to the relative “power and status” of the communal representative appearing, in whatever capacity, in front of the bench.

When the courts have done all this, through some extraordinary calculus of communal power and status, then the verdict, too, one has to assume, should also take such differential power and status into account.

For centuries, and through a long and arduous struggle, we have sought to establish two things: the *formal equality* of each of us before the law; and secondly the ineluctable responsibility of *each individual* for his or her actions.

Any differences in the relative power and status of social groups which result in different penal decisions for the same offence conflict with those two principles. An aristocrat could no more claim status-protection for shooting a man by claiming that the man in question was merely a peasant than could a peasant for shooting an aristocrat because his victim was merely an aristocrat.

Should the aristocrat use his power to control the decision, then this too conflicts with the two principles articulated above. No one is daft enough to think that these two principles, and these two principles only, automatically and routinely underwrite the actual day-to-day decisions of our judiciary: but, as we all agree, they should. We seek to relate actual squalid practice to the higher moral end, and to evaluate the former in terms of the latter. It does little credit to our Archbishop to have him seeking to re-introduce into our existing legal structures a justification for the legal practices of the Middle Ages or of the caste-based systems of India and much of the Muslim world. Can you imagine it:

Solicitor: M'lud: the accused is a Christian who killed a Hindu in Bradford, England.

Judge: Ah! What kind of Christian? A Roman Catholic? Hmm – less status than an Anglican ... Anglicans are after all a bunch of hegemony ... What kind of Hindu?

Solicitor: A Vishnaivite, your honour, with Hanuman leanings, living in Bradford, originally from Orissa.

Judge: Orissa? That's where Hindus have burnt churches recently – lots of power, they have, there ...

Solicitor: They were, M'lud, followers of Krishna, and of a Ganesh variety, a minority amongst Hindus in Orissa, but a major following in Bradford, England.

Judge: Ah, they are keen on reincarnation, so no big deal being dead, eh? Best out of Bradford, eh!

Need I go on? One of the great successes of secular Britain has been to steadily reduce the privileges “at law” of status and to steadily remove the abuses of power. To a greater or lesser extent, since Colonel Rainsborough asserted at Putney that “the poorest he that is in England has a life to live, as the greatest he”, this secular movement has been supported by progressive religious institutions. It is sad indeed to now see an Archbishop – and a Welsh archbishop at that – go pandering off in the wrong direction, and for what purpose?

Quotes to share

READING or re-reading freethought writings, from Thomas Paine to Christopher Hitchens, I find myself occasionally stimulated by a particular passage that impels me to copy it out and share it with everyone. It can be a fresh idea, but more usually it is a familiar one that is, simply, superbly well expressed.

Though I am not always in agreement with Sam Harris, there is one such striking passage in his book *The End of Faith* that gave me a mental orgasm. It deals with the so-called “problem of evil” more cogently, to my mind, than any other comment on it I have ever read.

Here it is.

“A close study of our holy books reveals that the God of Abraham is a ridiculous fellow – capricious, petulant, and cruel – and one with whom a covenant is little guarantee of health or happiness. If these are the characteristics of God, then the worst among us have been created far more in his image than we ever could have hoped.

“The problem of vindicating an omnipotent and omniscient God in the face of evil (this is traditionally called the problem of theodicy) is insurmountable. Those who claim to have surmounted it, by recourse to notions of free will and other incoherencies, have merely heaped bad philosophy onto bad ethics. Surely there must come a time when we will acknowledge the obvious: theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed, it is ignorance with wings.”

May I suggest that we invite *Freethinker* readers to send in such quotable passages that they have come across and feel they want to share with others – which can then be done in these pages?

– Barbara Smoker, www.barbara.smoker.freeuk.com

Secularism is making impressive gains in the US

SECULARISM in the United States is growing at an encouraging rate, with progress being made on a number of fronts.

For example, in Philadelphia last month, motorists were amazed to see a huge billboard – 20ft high and 60ft wide – which declared: “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone.”

The billboard was placed by a coalition of local and national humanist and freethought organisations, including the American Humanist Association and its independent marketing adjunct FreeThoughtAction, Atheist Alliance International, the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia, and Temple University Secular Students.

It was placed to coincide with the National Day of Reason, celebrated by humanists each year on the same date as the National Day of Prayer.

Speaking at a press conference at the Ethical Humanist Society of Greater Philadelphia, Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association, said: “Traditional religious billboards have abounded in the past. Something non-traditional like this is therefore needed to stimulate thinking.”

Joe Fox, president of the Humanist

Association of Greater Philadelphia, added: “The point of the billboard is to make non-theistic people, such as atheists and agnostics, aware that they aren’t alone.”

Fox added: “After all, a lot of people are frustrated with the power that traditional faiths have wielded, and they don’t know where to turn to find others who share that frustration. Now they will.”

Sally J Cramer, president of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia, declared: “Atheist and agnostic Americans have been made to feel marginalised. It’s time to change that. We’re here and we have a place at the table. We want people to know there’s a serious and meaningful alternative to the religious right that has been dominating American religious discussion.”

Shortly after the Day of Reason, the Secular Coalition for America, a lobbying body which protects and advances the rights of non-theistic Americans, announced that it had gained a new member organisation – the American Ethical Union. According to the SCA’s Anne Singer, this latest Coalition gain follows other growth milestones: the hiring in March of its second full-time lobbyist; the doubling of its electronic-activist base in the last year; and unprecedented

annual contributions from across the country.

The American Ethical Union is the umbrella organisation for ethical culture societies across the US.

The Coalition and AEU believe that every individual has the right to worship – or not worship – according to conscience, and that a secular government provides the best protection for all Americans to practise – or forego – religion and faith. The Coalition’s dual mission of increasing the visibility and status of non-theistic viewpoints in the US and protecting the secular character of government are goals which are shared by its member organisations.

“By joining this coalition,” said Ron Solomon, Treasurer of AEU and also Treasurer of the Coalition, “the American Ethical Union enhances the already impressive voice that the Secular Coalition for America has developed in Washington and enables the American Ethical Union to be part of an important effort by non-theists of all persuasions to help maintain the constitutionally prescribed separation of church and state in America. There is a real need in the non-theistic community for building bridges between our organisations and we are proud to be a part of that effort.”

Atheist soldier accused of being ‘immoral’, a ‘devil worshipper’ – and ‘gay’

A YOUNG US soldier who declared his atheism while on active duty in Iraq last year – and, as a result, was harassed and reviled – has filed a law suit alleging that his constitutional rights had been violated. The suit names Defence Secretary Robert Gates.

Since bringing the suit, Specialist Jeremy



Fundamentalist Christian Major Freddie J Welborn, who objected to an atheist meeting in Iraq

Hall has been called “immoral”, a “devil worshipper” and “gay” – none of which, he says, is true.

Hall said the pressure to believe in God was so strong that he “was ashamed to say that I was an atheist”.

The quietly-spoken soldier, dubbed “The Atheist Guy” eventually “came out” in Iraq in 2007, after he was involved in a gun battle.

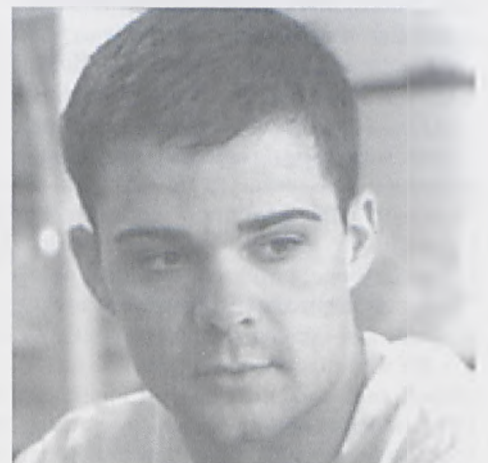
Hall was a gunner on a Humvee. Its protective screen deflected a hail of bullets. Afterward, his commander asked whether Hall if he believed in God.

Hall replied “No, but I believe in Plexiglas”. He added: “I never believed I was going to a happy place. You get one life. When I die, I’m worm food.”

The issue came to a head when, according to Hall, a superior officer, Major Freddy J Welborn, threatened to bring charges against him for trying to hold a meeting of atheists in Iraq. Welborn has denied Hall’s allegations.

Welborn is a fundamentalist Christian of the barking mad variety who has an exceedingly cheesy profile on the internet networking site, MySpace.

Hall then turned to Mikey Weinstein and



Jeremy Hall, who was harassed and reviled for his atheism

the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, and the lawsuit was filed. When fellow soldiers learned of the case, harassment of Hall began, and no-one did anything to stop it.

According to a CNN report, the Army told him it couldn’t protect him and sent him back to the US. Hall believes that his promotion to sergeant had been blocked because of his lawsuit.

Barry Duke: Pamela Bone, a fearless Australian atheist and a voice of

Thanks to the many despatches I have been receiving over the years from Our Man in Australia – former *Freethinker* editor Nigel Sinnott – I was introduced to, and developed, a deep appreciation of the writings of Pamela Bone, associate editor and columnist for *The Age* in Melbourne.

Pamela Bone fearlessly weighed in over a variety of controversial issues – but it was her incisive pieces about the dangers of multiculturalism and her attacks on the Left for perversely siding with Islamofascism that struck a particular chord with me.

Then, in December, 2005, I read a piece of hers that left me numb with sadness for days – for in it she revealed that she had been diagnosed as having bone cancer, and did not have long to live. This column, reproduced on the next page, was, she said, to be her last.

My sadness turned to fury when I discovered that several Islamic websites in Australia were carrying comments crowing over her illness. Example: “Her name is Bone and she now has bone cancer. Ha-Ha. God is great!” and “This is Allah’s punishment for Bone’s atheism and her disrespect for Islam.”

This April, Pamela Bone succumbed to the disease, dying peacefully at home in the presence of her family.

This is what the Atheist Foundation of Australia Inc said of her passing:

Atheism has few friends in the media who are willing or able to proclaim clearly, proudly and concisely secular ideas as a matter of urgency for humanity ...

One such person was Pamela Bone. With a passion born of understanding and a fierce determination resulting from witnessing large- and small-scale horrors, she reported it all with a humour defined by the need to remain sane in an often all-too-insane world. Pamela Bone projected thoughts onto paper as inspired artists represent every minute and important detail on canvas.

We will miss the cutting wit, the intelligent comment, the reasoned appraisal and, most of all, we will miss knowing that somewhere out there Pamela Bone is no longer working at making the world a better place for everyone.

Goodbye Pamela, we will not meet again. Your impact on all that is good lives after you. Your example begs imitation. Your life was more worthwhile than most of us can dream of equalling. Thank you for being on our side so effectively. Your blink in infinity is over. It will not be forgotten.

Although she said that her column in *The Age* was to be her last, Pamela continued writing, and, in 2007 penned a piece that touched

on a debate that has been weaving in and out of the *Freethinker* for some time now: that of the role of the Left with regard to such issues as Islam, human rights and multiculturalism.

Here is an excerpt from the *Australian* piece of February 1.

WHY is it, asks British journalist Nick Cohen, that apologies for a militant Islam, which stands for everything the liberal Left is against, come from the liberal Left? Why are you as likely to read about the alleged conspiracy of Jews controlling American foreign policy in a literary journal as in a neo-Nazi hate sheet? Why, after the bomb attacks in the London underground, did left-leaning British newspapers run pieces excusing the suicide bombers, these same young men who were motivated by “a psychopathic theology from the ultra-Right”?

Why, in short, have Left and Right changed places? Nick Cohen is not the first to write about the unholy alliance between Western liberals and extreme right Islamic fundamentalists, but he does it in a particular and powerful way in his new book *What’s Left? How Liberals Lost Their Way*.

The Left still claims the moral high ground, but it is rather harder these days to see that it still holds it ... When there is – rightly – condemnation of America’s many mistakes in Iraq but no condemnation of the terrorist outrages carried out by Islamic extremists; when there is – justified – criticism of Israel but no equal criticism of those whose stated aim is to wipe Israel off the face of the earth; when letters to the editor pour out compassion for one Australian held too long in custody, but there is nary a mention of the victims of a genocide that is going on right now in the Darfur region of Sudan, one suspects at best selective compassion, at worst, bad faith. One suspects that indignation over human rights abuses depends less on the extent of the abuse and more on who is doing the abusing.

There is something strange in attempts to establish a sinister connection between Jews and American power. There is something very murky going on when in certain Left-wing circles it is quite safe to compare Jews to Nazis.

Why is scarcely a word spoken by liberal commentators about the treatment of women under the Taliban rule – child marriages, stonings, absolute exclusion from public life ...

Why are Muslim feminists derided as apologists for imperialism, or “neo-

cons”? How in the world did the Left allow feminism to be hijacked by the Right, when it was always the Left that fought for women’s liberation and the Right that resisted it?

Of course what it means to be part of the Left is much less clear these days. Most people are left on some issues and Right on others. But it is not valid either to say these attitudes belong to only an extreme fringe. To greater or lesser degrees they are prevalent in mainstream liberal thinking.

The Left used to be about the future and improving the lot of mankind. The problem for it today, as Cohen points out, is that it has got most of what it wanted. Although there is still a way to go, the Left of a century ago would see the prosperity of today’s workers, the equal opportunity laws, the intellectual freedoms, as a paradise. It is harder today to see yourself as a victim of a pernicious system.

So the Left now is about resistance to material progress, to globalisation, and most of all to American power. There is plenty to criticise about Western lifestyles. Still, it should be obvious to all but the most blinkered that the system the US wants to impose on the Middle East is far better than the system the Islamists want to impose on us. Democracy is at least self-correcting. I hope the wearers of the “George Bush, World’s No 1 Terrorist” T-shirts, never have to find that out.

She also wrote *Bad Hair Days* (published by Melbourne University Press) – a book she described as “an account of a journey with cancer: two years of my life in which the state of the world at times seemed to be reflecting the state of my health, or – to be less solipsistic – my state of health seemed to be in a similar condition to the world’s. It is not an autobiography, though there are elements of that in it. It is not a textbook for cancer sufferers, although there are descriptions of cancer treatments and the various philosophies involved in treating cancer. It is about cancer, war, journalism, chocolate cake and a few other things.”

Pamela’s farewell

“YOU have multiple myeloma. It’s not curable, but it is treatable. The usual outlook is one to eight years.” In the bed next to mine an old man who’d had two toes amputated because of diabetes was crying loudly. I don’t know why they insist on putting men and women together in hospital rooms these days. I don’t think either sex likes it much.

of sanity in an insane world

I had never heard of multiple myeloma, which is cancer of the bone marrow. I'd been in Africa, was sick while I was there and sicker when I got home, and thought I had picked up some exotic virus. My doctor sent me to the Royal Melbourne Hospital, where after many blood tests the diagnosis was made.

The world of illness is a different world. Weeks later I stood before the mirror, 13 kilograms lighter, my head completely bald, a plastic tube burrowed into my chest, and saw myself a poor, diminished creature. I used to bustle about. Now I walked slowly, weakly. When I went out into the street I marvelled at how well and strong all the people looked. I felt no longer one of them.

I didn't cry, though I came close to it when my hair came out in my hands and lay in long strands on the floor of the shower. I didn't pray, and I didn't ask, "why me?" as others have told me they have. As far as I can tell there's no one up there handing out fairness; in any case, I wouldn't even want a God who would save me and let so many innocent children die. I am sure the parents of those hundreds of children buried under the rubble of the earthquake in Pakistan prayed.

All right, if I'm going to die, let's get it over with, I thought. But that was a year ago and I haven't died yet, despite my refusal to think "positive" thoughts. Why am I writing about this now? Partly because I couldn't before. But also because there is nothing unusual about my case. Multiple myeloma is fairly rare, but cancer is not. One in four, or even one in three people will get it. There's a whole community of us out there; we can be seen around the place in our headscarves and wigs and beanies, and we recognise each other and give each other sympathetic smiles. Please leave Kylie Minogue alone, I shouted silently to the media. She's one of us and I know how she feels: she just wants to be left alone.

What have I learned in my year of illness? That there is an amazing degree of kindness around. I have been overwhelmed by kindness: the kindness of family, of friends, of work colleagues; the kindness of people in shops and cafes in my local shopping centre; the kindness of the doctors and nurses at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, far beyond the requirements of their professions (oh, but the food at the RMH is an insult to sick people!); the kindness of my specialist, who tells me to stop talking about dying. There simply is a great instinct for kindness in most people. One thinks a system should be devised in which this is more strongly appealed to.

I have learned that this is a society in denial about death – hardly a revolutionary discovery, it's often been remarked on. On one level everyone knows they are going to die, but the

mind slides away from it. People change the subject. At first I was critical of this, but now I think it has to be this way. You can't spend your life being constantly aware of your death. Harder was the other realisation that struck me with force: not only will I die, but so will everyone else: every single one, every little baby with dribble running down his chin, every carefree teenage girl, every rich and powerful businessman.

All must die. What is the point then?

You have to learn again what you always knew. Life is more precious because it is brief and the only one there is (and really, who would want an eternity of anything, even paradise?). What matters – and I do apologise for this sentimentality – is that although every individual will die, the human race will go on. I believe it will, and I even believe it will get better. Notwithstanding the strange, apocalyptic times we are in, I still believe in the continuing, gradual, difficult, faltering improvement of the human condition. If I had space I could make a rational argument for this.

Fear of death is natural; it's what keeps us alive when we are young and strong. But for most older people, for whom death is no longer a remote, unlikely possibility, the fear is not so much of death as of what might precede it: prolonged pain and sickness and (especially) dementia. More than death, what most people fear is the prospect of being kept in some sort of half-life for years, being spoonfed and toileted in some nursing home, *sans* mind, *sans* personality, *sans* dignity.

What I have learned in this year of illness is that legislation for assisted suicide – for the right to die at a time of one's own choosing, and to have help to do so if necessary – will



Pamela Bone

and should come. It will come because the majority of the population wants it (according to opinion polls), and because those who protest so loudly every time the subject is mentioned are a minority. To know there is the means to end life peacefully and painlessly when they want to would be a great comfort to most old people. This is a kindness that we, as a society, need to extend to ourselves.

Last week when I walked into the hospital, which is now as familiar as a second home, some schoolchildren were there singing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. All year, music students come into the hospital wards and play instruments and sing. Others come to offer conversation and pastoral care, for those who want it. In the foyer, volunteers sell knitted toys and jams and raffle tickets to raise money to help the hospital. There it is again, that human kindness. It's all around, if you care to look.

This is my last column. It has been an immense privilege to have this space for so long, to have my say about things. I have not set out to be a "contrarian", as I have been described, but then, to offend no one you will say nothing. I do want to thank all of you who have read, either approvingly or disapprovingly, what I have written over the years. I will miss you.

Channel 4 vindicated over documentary

THE National Secular Society has called for a full public inquiry into the role of the West Midlands Police and the Crown Prosecution Service regarding Channel 4's *Undercover Mosque* documentary, screened last year.

Channel 4 was accused by the police of editing footage of hate preachers "to give them a more sinister meaning", and they claimed that the documentary had had a negative impact in the community and on cohesion within it. They wanted the programme makers prosecuted for stirring up racial hatred.

But the only hatred came from the preachers. Among the comments made by imams during the film were "Take that homosexual man and throw him off the mountain," and "We hate the kuffar" [non-Muslims]. Other quotes from preachers and teachers included "Allah created the woman deficient" and "by the age of ten, it becomes an obligation on us to force her to wear hijab and if she doesn't wear hijab, we hit her".

Last month, Channel 4 won damages of £100,000 from the police, who were also forced to issue an apology for the manner in which they maligned the documentary.

The NSS's Keith Porteous Wood revealed that "we have written to both the Attorney General and the Shadow Attorney General urging a full public inquiry into how what appear to be systematic policy and procedural failures at the Police and Crown Prosecution Service led to the justice system being brought into disrepute in this way".

James K Willmott: Edward Blyth – creationist or just another m

In early December, 2007, my hometown (Louisville, Kentucky) newspaper, the *Kentucky Courier-Journal*, published an opinion piece of mine concerning the newly opened creation museum in northern Kentucky.

As a former science teacher with a particular interest in the understanding and advancement of science in society, the article expressed my extreme concern that this \$27-million monument to the acceptance of blind faith over science and reason is exceeding attendance

expectations and gaining momentum in its mission to cast doubt, in whatever way it can, on evolutionary biology and the multitude of scientific theories that support it.

I went to the museum and toured it twice during its opening weekend in late May of 2007. While no one can argue with the high quality of the facility and its 103 animatronic dinosaurs, the museum, built by the Christian ministry Answers in Genesis, fraudulently claims that their biblical interpretations of creation are backed-up by scientific facts.

What is most disconcerting to me (and the reason I wrote the article) is that the museum has become a sort of *de facto* science center for the growing Christian home-school movement in the Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky areas, teaching thousands of children that the theory of evolution is incompatible with Christianity and that science can only be valid when viewed through the “lens” of Christian scripture.

Despite the fact that in the article I suggested Christians seek guidance on the subjects of evolution and cosmology from a Christian organization dedicated to the advancement of modern science (I even included the organization’s website URL), I was accused (in the *C-J* comments blog) of being an intolerant fascist, as well as being doomed to burn in hell.

One of the museum’s founders, Chief Communications Officer Mark Looy, responded to my piece with a letter to the *C-J*, suggesting that had I visited the museum (which I did) I would see that AIG is not anti-science and that I was one of the intolerant cabal of scientists and secularists who have pushed Darwinism on society and stifled dissenting faith-based scientific theories (oxymoron) on human origins.

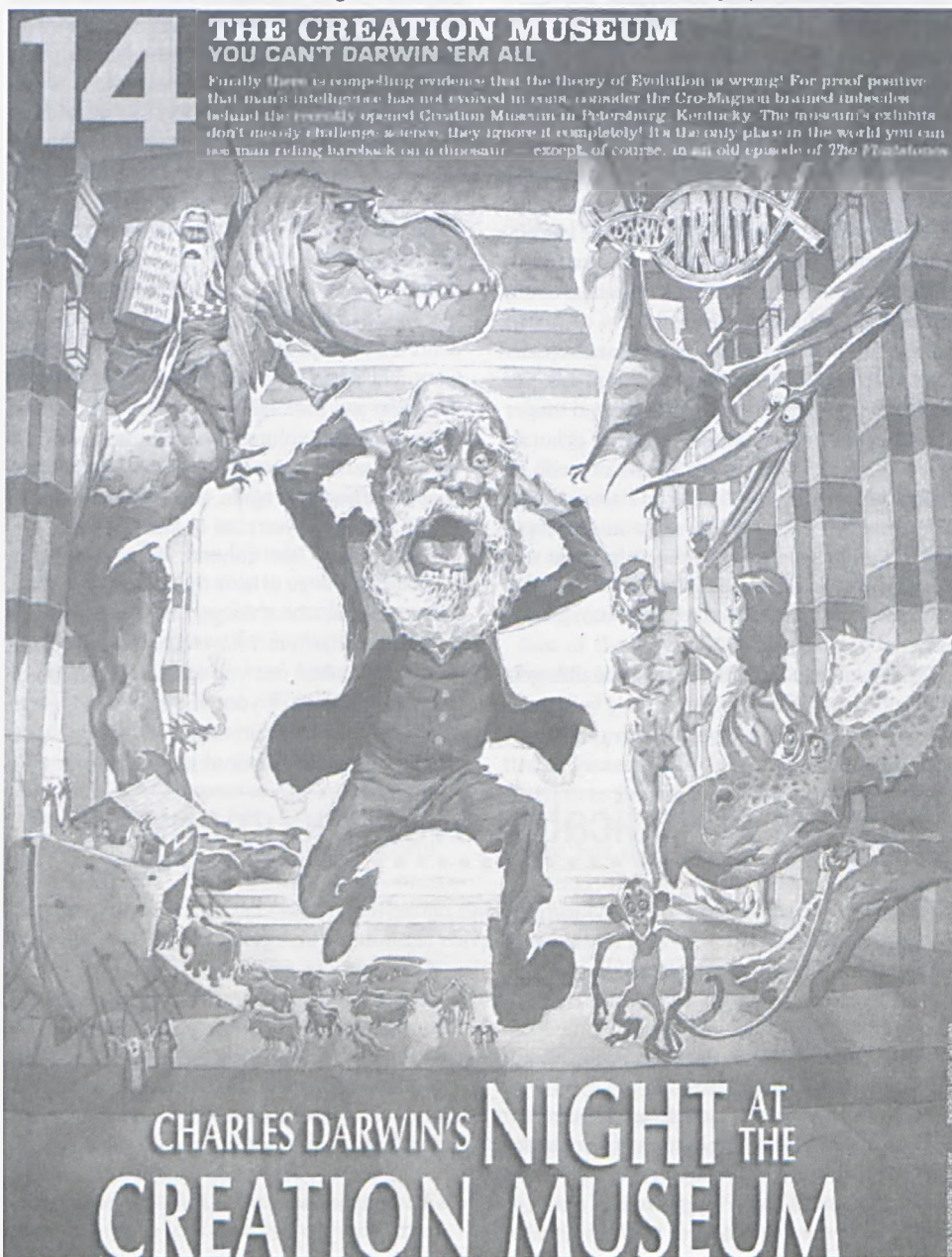
He stated that “Darwin was not the first to fully describe natural selection; it was a creationist, Edward Blyth, 24 years before *Origin of Species*. Darwin just popularized an already existing idea and tagged it onto his belief about origins.”

Looy also said that AIG is not anti-science and that I “conveniently” failed to mention that AIG has seven PhD scientists on staff.

Before addressing Looy’s (and other creationists’) canard that Darwin undeservedly received credit for the theory of natural selection at the expense of Edward Blyth, let me first mention that the reason I failed to mention that AIG has scientists among its staff is that while some of his personnel may indeed have PhDs, AIG does not *practice* science. AIG practices a form of religion which they masquerade as science. One need not look any further than their “statement of faith” on their elaborate website to see how anti-science this organization actually is: “No apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the Scriptural record.”

In addition, they believe “The view, commonly used to evade the implications or the authority of Biblical teaching, that knowledge for truth may be divided into “secular” and “religious,” is rejected.”¹

The creationist practice of beginning with all the answers from a supposedly inerrant source (scripture) and then disputing all evidence which contradicts their beliefs is about as far from science as one can get. As I men-



The satirical American magazine, *Mad*, recently ran a feature on the the 20 dumbest people, events, and things of 2007. The Creation Museum came 14th. Said *Mad*: “Finally there is compelling evidence that the theory of evolution is wrong! For proof positive that man’s intelligence has not evolved in eons, consider the Cro-Magnon-brained imbeciles behind the recently opened Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The museum’s exhibits don’t merely challenge science, they ignore it completely! It’s the only place in the world you can see man riding bareback on a dinosaur — except, of course, in an old episode of *The Flintstones*.”

misinterpreted scientist?

tioned in my original article, I have no problem if adults want to throw away reason and support this fraudulent temple of pseudo-science. What I object to is that thousands of children are being taught that this approach to science is valid, and that many of the major theories of evolutionary biology, geology, physics and astronomy, since they contradict AIG's belief in a six-, 24-hour-day creation, are not to be trusted or believed.

Now, on to Blyth. One of the tactics that creationists use to cast doubt on Darwin's theory of evolution is to cavalierly suggest that, at best, Darwin undeservedly received the credit for the theory of natural selection and, at worst, was a plagiarist of Blyth's (and others') work.

This claim is as false as the "science" of creationism itself. As anyone who has ever studied the history of science can tell you, new discoveries in science seldom emerge from a single source. Since many of the advancements of science occur when new knowledge, derived from a variety of sources, is blended together to form new theories, credit for scientific discovery is often a messy business. This was certainly the case with Darwin.

Contrary to Looy's claim, natural selection was first described not by Blyth (or Darwin for that matter), but by the ancient Greek philosophers Empedocles and Aristotle in the third and fourth centuries, BC. Many scientists and philosophers in the centuries that followed contributed to the understanding of the adaptation of species due to environmental and competition pressures: al-Jahith, Harvey, Paley, Linnacus, Buffon, Mathus, Lamark, and Darwin's grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, to name a few.² Blyth contributed to the pool of knowledge with his insightful observations of bird species (specifically the birds of India) and his analysis of selective breeding practices of domesticated animals.³

It is true that in his younger years (specifically 1837) Blyth believed, as did most of the biologists/naturalists of his day, in an "eternal and ever-glorious Being which willed matter into existence".⁴

He believed that while animal populations changed due to the influences of environmental conditions over geological time, the human species was created by God as it is. He reasoned that because modern humans are able to shape the environment to suit our purposes, we are exempt from the forces of natural selection. "Does not, then, all this intimate that, even as a mundane being, man is no component of that reciprocal system to which all other species appertain? — a system which for countless epochs prevailed ere the human race was summoned into being."⁷ While Blyth's writings

clearly disagree with young-earth creationists on the age of the earth ("It is needless to add, that a prodigious lapse of time is required here; and, to judge from data which past history of the globe abundantly furnishes, in legible records, wherever we turn our eyes...")⁵, he was firmly in their camp when it came to the origins of man. However, there is evidence that Blyth's thinking on human origins changed, possibly due to the influence of his good friend Charles Darwin.

In 1867, 30 years after Blyth's above quoted articles first appeared in the *Magazine of Natural History*, a very different Edward Blyth emerges from correspondence with Darwin. Blyth wrote Darwin at least 57 letters between 1855 and 1869, with Darwin, in all likelihood, responding to most, if not all. I have read all of Blyth's known letters to Darwin: 25 are posted on-line by the remarkable Darwin Correspondence Project⁶ while the other 32 were read during a blissful, wintry day spent at the manuscript room of the Cambridge University library.

In a letter dated February 21, 1867, far from believing that man was created "as is" by God, Blyth suggests to Darwin that humans descended from primates similar to gibbons. The complete letter follows (with my comments in italics). Be advised that Blyth's beliefs on man's origins were obviously influenced by the wide-spread racism of mid-19th-century Western culture:

My Dear Sir, (*Darwin*)

The remarkable resemblance in facial expression of the orangutan to the human Malay (*Blyth had spent time studying the wildlife of Sumatra in the Malay Peninsula*) of its native region, or that of the gorilla to the negro is most striking, and what does this mean? Unless a [*unreadable*] of anthropoid type prior to the specialization of the human similarity, while [*unreadable*] would imply a parallel series of at least two primary lines of human descent which seems hardly probable; and moreover one must bear in mind the singular facial resemblance of the [*unreadable*] [*unreadable*] (an [*unreadable*] form) to the negro; the resemblance can hardly be other than accidental. The accompanying diagram will illustrate what I suggest (rather than maintain); and about *Hylobates* (*genus of Southeast Asia lesser apes*) or gibbons, I am not sure that I place it right, for, upon the whole, the gibbon approximate the chimpanzee more than they do the orangutan, not withstanding geographical position. *Aryan* (*term used to describe the people of northern Europe*) I believe to be improve Turkman (*term used to describe the people of central Asia*) or

Mongol (*people of northern china and southeastern Russia*).

To appreciate the likeness of a Malay to an Orangutan, you should see an old Malay woman chewing [*unreadable*] (*probably betel, a palm seed/pepper leaf/ground limestone combination still commonly chewed in Southeast Asia*) and note the mobility of the lips, in addition to the general expression. However, to be explained, the likeness is much less [*unreadable*] in other races of the Turkman stock. We cannot call this a case of mimicry.

I remain, ever sincerely yours, E Blyth⁷

Might I suggest that Answers in Genesis, the Creation Institute, and others, in addition to correcting their claims that Edward Blyth was a "creation" scientist robbed of credit for the theory of natural selection because he was creationist, should also inform their devotees that Blyth changed his thinking in later years and suggested that all humans evolved from primate ancestors, with some races sharing near ancestry with orangutans while other races shared near ancestry with gorillas? Something tells me Chief Communications Officer Looy won't be jumping up and down to put this on AIG's website.

*DNA analysis and the fossil record show that Blyth was half right: Homo sapiens have a shared ancestor with the small Asian apes (gibbons) going back 18 million years, giving credence to the Out-of-Africa, Into-Asia, Back-to-Africa theory of ape migration. He was wrong however, in his hypothesis of two separate paths of Homo sapien evolution, one from an orang ancestor and the other from a gorilla ancestor. We now suspect that all humans share our nearest non-human ancestor with chimpanzees, going back 6 million years, with gorillas splitting off 7 mya and orangutans splitting off 14 mya.*⁸

Why did Blyth's thinking on human origins change? Judging from his published articles and his letters to Darwin, one can only conclude that his exposure to 30 additional years of scientific inquiry and evidence led him to reshape his philosophy on human origins (he was never a young-earth creationist) into one that recognized that transmutation of species was the logical extension of the theory of natural selection.

In fact, it is this theory, descent with modification over "countless epochs", creating totally different species, including mankind, that Darwin originated and popularized, with the already described theory of natural selection gaining additional acceptance due to Darwin's brilliant insights and writings. AIG's Looy states, "Blyth, though, did not believe that nat-

(Continued on p12)

Edward Blyth

ural selection could be a mechanism to produce new genetic information in creatures that could, over time, turn molecules into men.”⁹ Is Looy so sure of the validity of this statement since Blyth, in his later years, clearly believed that humans were the result of new genetic information passed along by our primate ancestors?

A fellow Louisvillian, Mohammed Ali, once said, “The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life.” I would bet that were he alive today, Edward Blyth would have this axiom as a banner on his website. He might also be asking AIG, Ken Ham, Mark Looy, William Dembski¹⁰, and other evolution obstructionists to quit using his earliest works to prop up their fundamentalist, nothing-to-do-with-science-but-we-want-you-to-think-it-does worldview. Unfortunately, Mr Blyth is no longer with us to prevent his considerable body of work from being misused by AIG. As Stephen J Gould (another great evolutionary biologist, no longer with us, whose writings and opinions have often been misrepresented and purposely misused by creationists) once wrote, “Shall we deprive millions of this knowledge and once again teach biology as a set of dull and unconnected facts without the thread that weaves diverse material into a supple unity?”¹¹

By not vigorously exposing and confronting the educational injustice that the creationist movement is inflicting upon an ever-increasing number of young people, will we regret our inaction when, as adults, this growing crop of fundamentalists become school board members, military personnel, journalists, teachers, and politicians? If we think the situation is bad now, wait until a creationist who also believes in the prophecies of the End Times¹² has their finger on the trigger of a nuclear weapon. Then the real fun will begin. Surely the radical Islamist/Koran literalists will make sure they have reciprocal powers in place. It will matter little if an ensuing Armageddon is due to self-fulfilling prophecy (reality) or God’s anger with the sinfulness of the human race (fantasy). The result will be a man-made extinction event (certainly small-scale, possibly large-scale)...something that would surely disappoint and anger Edward Blyth, Charles Darwin, and our other hard-working ancestors who were committed to the advancement of science and knowledge.

During the past one-and-a-half centuries, evolutionary biology and other modern sciences have given our species an unprecedented understanding of our existence, as well as increasing our profound appreciation for the responsibilities we have towards this amazing experiment we call life on Earth. It seems such a shame that the superstitious clap-trap which is creationism continues to flourish in the 21st

century, with the help of enormous expenditures of capital, both intellectual and economic. What is particularly insidious is that creationists’ chief tool for supporting their absolutist doctrine (besides their “cause the Bible tells me so” argument) is to attack the enormous collection of evidence supporting evolution, while supplying no evidence to support their own position. It is a practice, I am sure, that would be appalling to Edward Blyth, a credible scientist whose thinking “evolved” over the years due to Darwin’s Great Idea.

Will we allow the legacy of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution to be over-powered by tax-free, fundamentalist, pseudo-science institutions? Or will we stand up to their campaign of science disinformation and strongly re-advocate the advancement of science and reason in society? I suggest Edward Blyth would strongly support the latter position and firmly condemn the former.

Refs:

1. <http://www.answersingenesis.org/about/faith>
 2. http://evolution.berkeley.edu/evolibrary/article/0_0_0/history_index_01
 3. Blyth, E, *The Magazine of Natural History* Volumes 8, 9 and 10, 1835–1837
 4. Blyth, E, *Psychological Distinctions Between Man and Other Animals – Part 4, The Magazine of Natural History* Volume 10, 1837.
 5. Blyth, E, *Psychological Distinctions Between Man and Other Animals – Part 3, The Magazine of Natural History* Volume 10, 1837.
 6. Blyth, E, *Psychological Distinctions Between Man and Other Animals – Part 4, The Magazine of Natural History* Volume 10, 1837.
 7. Blyth, E, *Psychological Distinctions... – Part 4* <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/>
 8. Letter 5405 – Blyth, Edward to Darwin, C R, 19 Feb. 1867, Darwin Correspondence Project, Cambridge University
 9. Dawkins, Richard, *The Ancestor’s Tale, A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004)
 10. <http://www.uncommondescent.com/intelligent-design/was-blyth-the-true-scientist-and-darwin-merely-a-plagiarist-and-charlatan/>
 11. Gould, Stephen Jay, *Evolution as Fact and Theory, Hen’s Teeth and Horse’s Toes* (New York: W W Norton & Company, 1994)
 12. Even though Answers in Genesis claims the Bible is the Word of God “from the first verse”, they are strangely silent on the “inerrancy” of prophecies (eg Armageddon, the Apocalypse, the second coming) as described in the Book of Revelations and other gospels. “AIG doesn’t have an official position on a particular eschatological (the branch of theology that is concerned with the end of the world or of humankind’s position) except accepting there will be a bodily return of Christ.
- “AIG/Creation Museum doesn’t even talk about Armageddon,” says CEO Ken Ham in AIG’s newsletter dated December 4, 2007. He does say on his podcast of September 14, 2007, “The second coming is imminent.” The only text reference to the End Times or Consumption on AIG’s website is the relatively benign Revelations Chapter 21, verse 4: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” AIG may be choosing to dissociate themselves from the rest of the Book of Revelation and their claim that it is literally true since it appears quite likely that the author, John of Patmos (if he was indeed the author and if the text is a true accounting of his two visions) a) may have consumed large quantities of psychotropic plants or fungi prior to his visions or b) was experiencing some sort of serious psychotic break from reality, judging from the images described in this gospel.

William Harwood reviews

I HAVE long regarded philosophers as poseurs whose vocabularies have outstripped their common sense, enabling them to write 400-page dissertations on how many shrldu can umbriago on the qwerty of a spktkft. I have encountered exceptions, card-carrying philosophers capable of writing logical theses in comprehensible English – despite their being philosophers, not because of it.

Austin Dacey is not one of the exceptions. Just as Alcoholics Anonymous tries to replace the mind-crippling opiate of alcohol addiction with the even more mind-crippling opiate of god addiction, Dacey tries to replace the pathetic, oxymoronic doublethink of religion with an equally pathetic combination of doubletalk, mushroom fantasies, and fatuous clichés that for all the sense they make might as well have been written in Etruscan. Consider the statement “It was Augustine and Descartes whose cognitive spelunking ultimately led them to the inner light of the transcendent.” To that I can only say, “Duh?”

Dacey is not a biblical scholar. His interpretations of biblical passages stem from uncritical acceptance of theological propaganda. For example, he thinks that Jesus preached, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor.” But “the Poor,” *Ebionim*, was the name of Jesus’ communistic cult. What Jesus really preached was, “Sell all that you own and give the proceeds to my communal treasury.” Dacey declares that the Jews “were the first to see in all human beings the image of God.” But the Jewish Testament is as viciously anti-gentile as the Christian Testament is viciously anti-Jewish. The retroactively-named “ten commandments” spelled out how a Jew was to treat fellow Jews. They placed no restriction on how a Jew could treat a gentile. And the Talmud stated unambiguously that a Jew who, in trying to kill a gentile, killed a Jew, was to be deemed guiltless (Sanhedrin 78b).

In discussing the subjectivity of the value judgment that, “infidelity is wrong”, Dacey shows no awareness that the modern understanding of “infidelity” is far removed from the concept’s original meaning. Unfaithfulness, “adultery”, meant violating an exclusive breeding contract and thereby saddling a husband with a cuckoo’s chick. The present interpretation, that uses the word to include non-consequential recreation in an age of reliable birth control, makes as much sense as prohibiting watching television when one’s usual co-watcher is unavailable. And when Dacey suggests that “discouraging incest is a product of selection”, I can only point out that “incest” or “unchastity” is a purely religious concept that has no scientific reality, and recommend that he read the chapter on the origin and evolution of the incest taboo in *Mythology’s Last Gods*, as well as the rest of

vs *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life* by Austin Dacey

the book to cure his abysmal ignorance of all things biblical.

Dacey devotes three pages to the Redactor's amended version of the sacrifice of Isaac, blissfully unaware that in the original myth, by the Elohist, Isaac *was* sacrificed. In order to riffle together the E Torah in which Isaac was sacrificed as a child with the J Torah in which the adult Isaac features prominently, R interpolated a paragraph in which Yahweh intervened to prevent the sacrifice. Dacey's entire discussion presupposes that a biblical author was making a philosophical point, when in fact the Redactor had no purpose other than to harmonize incompatible sources.

Dacey discourses on the Christian perversion of the Golden Rule that transformed a perfect concept of morality – do not do to another whatever is hateful to yourself – into its impossible and immoral antithesis: Besides wanting a billionaire to give me a million dollars, I also want a supermodel to rip off my clothing and have her way with me in depraved indifference to my own wishes. The “golden rule” would have me do the same to her. Admittedly Dacey describes the Golden Rule as “neither evolutionarily nor morally sound”. But he completely misses its absurdity.

Dacey avers that “Theocrats are not idiots”. He reports that John Calvin executed a man for having the sanity to deny that Jesus was his own father (and therefore presumably a motherfucker...). But in defence of Calvin's non-idiot status he explains that Calvin earned a Doctorate of Law at the age of 23. By that reasoning, a talking chimpanzee with degrees from Harvard and Yale cannot be an idiot. Perhaps not – if one makes a distinction between an idiot and a moron. But if a person who thought that Jesus was his own father was not an idiot, then the term is meaningless.

All of that is not to say that, buried among his whole chapters of socio-psychobabble, Dacey does not make some valid points. He has some harsh words for “the misguided multiculturalism that keeps Western liberals from criticizing the oppression of women, religious minorities, and apostates [that happen] in Islamic societies for fear of being accused of ‘Islamophobia’.” He points out that, “Secular liberals are being asked to perform an act of cognitive contortionism, to object to the ‘consequences’ of conservative religion without rejecting the moral precepts that cause them.” In other words, it is politically correct to denounce Osama bin Laden for obeying his Koran's demand that he murder non-Muslims on sight, but not to denounce the book and religion that order him to do so. As Edmund Burke observed, “For evil to succeed, it is only necessary for good men to do nothing.”

“Freedom of thought means nothing unless it implies the right to blaspheme, for blasphemy

is a victimless crime. Why are so many Western liberals unwilling to say so?” Why indeed? Dacey does not believe that burying one's head in the sand instead of drawing attention to the reason religious extremists commit atrocities is the best policy, and neither should anyone else. With so many Western spokesmen apologizing to Muslims for exercising free speech, it is no wonder that the Allah cultists are convinced that all criticism can be suppressed by terror.

Dacey reports that, “80 percent of the Danish today say that religion is unimportant to their lives”, and that “at least 45 percent of Danes do not believe in the Christian God.” Yet the Danish People's Church was able to get away with claiming over 80 percent of the citizenry as members in 2006. With that kind of book-keeping, no wonder the alleged “news” media continue reporting a world population of two billion Christians, when the true figure is half that amount. The only belief system with two billion adherents, more than Christianity, Islam and Judaism combined, is non-theism.

On the imbecility and doublethink of fanatics who would grant pre-human tadpoles the same rights as self-aware sentient beings, Dacey writes “If any one of us were passing by an in vitro fertilization clinic in flames and we had the ability to save a five-year-old girl trapped inside, or save two or even ten thousand frozen embryos instead, no one would hesitate for even an instant.”

On religion's Big Lie that it cannot be evaluated by scientific standards, Dacey writes “In this age of bioscience, it is no longer credible that religion is private and free from objective inquiry. Religion and science are in conversation, and this would be impossible unless both could be held to publicly available standards of truth.” And he gives Stephen Jay Gould's “non-overlapping magisteria” the short shrift it deserves.

On religion's attempt to pose as science under the euphemism, Intelligent Design, Dacey notes that ID pushers have never attempted to harmonize autism with their ID theology. And in pointing out that almost every lifeform that has ever existed on earth is now extinct, he observes that “An engineer whose designs were this intelligent would not have a job for long”. As to why the Catholic Church “does nothing to get current gay priests to come out of the cassock”, he points to “the priest shortage” as the obvious explanation. With the number of gay seminarians ordained after 1981 amounting to 70 percent, up from 51 percent before 1960 (*Papal Sin*, by Gary Wills, pp. 190, 194), firing gay priests would be economically disastrous.

Nonetheless, despite its positive elements, *The Secular Conscience* is not a useful addition to such attempts to send a message of reality to

believers as *Toward a New Political Humanism; God: The Failed Hypothesis; and What Is Secular Humanism?*

• *The Secular Conscience: Why Belief Belongs in Public Life*, Austin Dacey, 2008, Prometheus Books, ISBN 978-1-59102-604-4, 296 pp, h/c, \$24.95.

Beware of God

SHALOM Auslander's collection of wickedly satirical stories *Beware of God* (Picador £7.99) is a delightfully entertaining book. One might almost call it a Godsend; it's certainly a God send-up.

Auslander is an Orthodox Jew wryly amused by the absurdities of his faith. *Beware of God* is the Book of Revelations we've all been waiting for. Like Philip Roth, Howard Jacobson and Isaac Bashevis Singer before him, Auslander shows the insidious power of religious belief, but here with the lightest of touches, making the Almighty a character with problems galore and bags of attitude.

In “The War of the Bernsteins” a married couple live their lives by separate ideals: Mrs B is feisty, practical, loves fine clothes and is essentially hedonistic – she wasn't going to waste her life securing a front-row seat in the afterlife for Mr B; her husband, by contrast, is a tortured soul, making bargains with God, obsessed with guilt, sin and eternal punishment. “The husband will be innocent of any wrongdoing!” shouts Mr Bernstein at his wife who threatens to divorce him. “But the woman will bear the consequences of her sin.” She is all prepared to jump ship, her valise packed with “two pairs of black tights, the red silk nightie, her jeans, a makeup bag, a pack of cigarettes, the spring fashion issue of *Vogue* and a bathing suit. Because you never know.”

“Somebody Up There Likes You” has a bored God with a migraine wearily going through the business of running a meaningless cosmos. He's just doing his job, he says as millions perish; his hands are tied but he has to keep the ball spinning. “Hamish Knows All” features a knowing dog who constantly frustrates the masturbatory urges of a callow youth, continually appearing at inconvenient times to remind the boy of his sin and the likely punishment in the hereafter.

“Lovingly blasphemous times, crackling with irreverence,” says *The Times* of this collection, and few would dispute that.

A message for our times if ever there was one, and, thank the Lord, a short, snappy and humorous one!

– Dave James

'Faith' schools

DOES Peter Arnold (*Points of View*, April) really think it is socially acceptable to segregate school-children in religious school ghettos and morally acceptable to con them about the existence of an imaginary (or, at the very least, unproved and disputed) deity? Parents cannot be prevented from passing on to their children whatever nonsense they themselves believe – with back-up, if they so wish, from their church, mosque, or synagogue – but publicly funded schools should not be party to this brainwashing.

It is, in fact, brainwashing of the first order; and those so brainwashed are those most likely, in later life, to carry out illiberal legislation and sectarian terrorism.

During my 25-year tenure (1971 to 1996) as president of the National Secular Society, we constantly proposed legislation to phase out the subsidies on religious schools, so as to reduce their number and the consequent denial of what we saw as a child's basic right: the right to come into contact with ideas at variance with those of the home background.

In that period, however, the situation worsened, as the burgeoning immigrant religions naturally demanded parity with Christianity – resulting in a proliferation of immigrant denominational schools.

On July 9, 1986, the *Guardian* published a letter urging politicians to halt the incipient proliferation of immigrant denominational schools – which would, the letter warned, "import to Britain some of the religion-based bitterness and strife that exist on the Indian subcontinent" and would "inevitably build up for future generations a greater degree of animosity and violence than we have seen even in Northern Ireland". Drafted by me as the then president of the National Secular Society, the letter was signed by 23 eminent thinkers.

To satisfy religious equity, it proposed legislation to phase out subsidies to all denominational schools – while recognising that this would need political courage and an "all-party determination to grasp the nettle".

Far from heeding this warning, succeeding governments have accorded permits and state-funding to more and more "faith schools", as they are now termed. That name, incidentally, is one of Blair's neologisms designed to popularise whatever he espoused – in this case, expansion of the state-funded sector of religious schools. Such establishments used to be called religious schools, church schools, sectarian schools, or denominational schools – which is what they are – whereas the attractive word "faith" can also mean faith in people and all sorts of acceptable things.

Peter Arnold's touching faith in faith schools "developing pupils' knowledge, understanding and awareness of the major religions represented in the country" is pie in the sky. Such schools are generally divisive.

BARBARA SMOKER
Bromley

Islam

JEMIMA Khan intends to take the jihad out of Islam. Mr Colin Cook seemed to hope he could take Saudi Arabia out of British Islamic schools (*Freethinker* report, May). People as informed as Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society and Roy Brown of the International Humanist and Ethical Union appear to believe there might be some point in accepting a convention that the sovereignty – *hakimiyya* – invested in Islam might be debated as freely as any topic at an Oxford Union debate.

This, when scholars as different as David Hume, Patricia Crone, Montgomery Watt, Roger Scruton and Gilles Keppel spell things out; when the Koran and hadiths themselves are clear descriptions of the universal sovereignty of the representatives of Allah; when there's no shortage of humble devotees of the cult prepared to sacrifice their lives so readily.

What we must get people to take on board is the fact that Islam is about seizing control of the whole ship. What is needed to get through to people – as, obviously, explosions in railway stations are limp statements – is that, just as Hitler meant what he said, so do the spokesmen for Islam.

I think everybody will agree that there is no easier way to lose the battle to keep our expensively-won freedoms than by pretending there is no battle, no contested territory ... no problem. Is it only the likes of Ophelia Benson of Butterflies and Wheels who truly accept that Muslims are out to get us?

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

FOR Muslims to insist that their beliefs should not be questioned is to betray an underlying fear of the truth. If scientists, who reveal real truths, were to demand that their theories should be accepted without rigid testing and verification, who would believe them?

Yet imams teach that Allah lives in the Seventh Heaven above Jerusalem, reached by ladder (The Night Journey hadith). Heaven/paradise/the happy land, populations billions, cannot, conveniently for believers, be shown to exist anywhere in the sky or the universe despite the hundreds of satellites, space vehicles, telescopes, surveying the Earth and the universe. Where are they – and Hell?

They are no more than virtual realities, religious fiction imposed on believers by religious authorities using the stick and carrot of all religions – believe what we say, you will go to heaven, disbelieve and "depart from me ye accursed into the eternal fire...".

W K HARPER
Stoke-on-Trent

Historicity of Jesus

IT DOES seem that, as Martin O'Brien claims (*Points of View*, May), "we've reached an impasse" over the historicity of Jesus in these columns. However, it is an impasse brought about by the obstinacy of my critics. For example, from his provocative questions, it seems

that Mr O'Brien has not even read my book.

The answers to his questions can be found there. I would agree that Paul invented Christianity and the "Dying-and Saviour God" is at its centre. However, he did so on the back of stories about a historical Jesus before the Gospels were written. As the Church later discovered, the Gospels are, in many respects, inconsistent with Paul's new religion.

Regarding Mr O'Brien's report of an unourced remark by Prof Hugh Trevor-Roper (Lord Dacre) that we know nothing about the historical Jesus, I must draw his attention to the latter's comment in *The Spectator* (Feb 27, 1971) that the fact that the evangelists resorted to explanations suggests a historical basis for the Gospels. I noted this in my book. If there is a historical basis, then it is inconsistent to claim that we know nothing about Jesus.

To all my critics, I say that trying to explain the origin of Christianity without a historical Jesus is even more difficult than trying to explain it with one. As Prof Vermes puts it in the foreword to his recent book (*The Resurrection*), "the difficulties arising from the denial of his [Jesus'] existence ... far exceed those deriving from its acceptance". This has been evident since the idea that Jesus did not exist was first suggested about 200 years ago by the French *philosophes*. Indeed, that prompted the Oratorian Peres to mock them in a pamphlet that demonstrated that Napoleon never existed.

Charles Douglas's obscure letter deserves little attention. He accuses me of not answering questions that are fully answered already in my book. As to the Dead Sea Scrolls, which he now admits I do mention in my book, anyone who thinks that the community at Qumran could have anything to do with Jesus confuses Essenes with Pharisees. The Jewish sects in Palestine, as Josephus made clear, could hardly speak to each other. The fact that I ignore irrelevant sources or peoples hardly invalidates my arguments. Nor is there anything wrong in accepting the Early Church's view of what was and what was not a reliable source. Even a brief examination of the so-called Gnostic Gospels shows them to be unhistorical.

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Homoeopathy

THE letter from C A M Aitchison (*Points of View*, April) clearly demonstrates why believers in homoeopathy and other placebo therapy tend to be incurable.

Quite simply, they place personal experience or anecdotal testimony ahead of statistical and research evidence. If I followed that practice, I would never wear a seatbelt. In my only severe automobile accident, when I wrapped a Volkswagen around a one-metre-diameter guide post at 100 km/hr, I was flung through the windscreen and did not break a single bone. An examination of the wreck left no doubt that, if I had been wearing a seatbelt, I



would have been killed. But I am aware that, in the overwhelming majority of such situations, seatbelts save lives. So I wear a seatbelt, and do not attach an unwarranted significance to a statistical anomaly in which I was personally involved. Testimony similar to Aitchison's has been offered in support of Scientology. That does not make it any less of a scam.

WILLIAM HARWOOD
Canada

The paranormal

IT IS with some amusement that I admit to being the "True Believer" cited in William Harwood's attempted debunking of parapsychology (*Religion and the paranormal*, April.) As such may I correct some of the false impressions conveyed by the piece?

In his opening paragraph the author implies that he knows what is impossible and what is possible. Good for him!

He then goes on to misrepresent the quality of the parapsychological literature. The journals I cited (*Points of View*, Oct 2007) are peer reviewed and report research carried out by academic staff in departments of reputable universities. They are part of mainstream dialogue within the academic community and Harwood's "Flat Earth" analogy is inappropriate. He might have noted here that in 1969 the Parapsychological Society was granted affiliation with the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

To be fair, Harwood supports his contentions by referring to "the definitive debunking of parapsychology" by C E M Hansel. Hansel, in the publication cited, deals "definitively" with only experimental research conducted in laboratories. He correctly points out that replicability of results has not been achieved in this field and identifies weaknesses in experimental design, though his assumption that trickery, while technically possible, did in fact take place sometimes seems fanciful, as in the so-called Pearce-Platt experiments with clairvoyance in 1933-4.

The experiments Hansel discusses, particularly those conducted using random number generators, are complex and the results sometimes statistically controversial, but even if his conclusions are accepted totally, they apply only to experimental research. When it comes to non-experimental investigations Hansel is far from definitive. He quotes the fraudulence of physical mediums such as Eusapia Palladino, but has nothing to say about the mental mediumship of Mrs Leonora Piper or Mrs Osborne Leonard, or the so-called Cross Correspondences.

On the subject of psycho-kinesis he does not deal with the Enfield poltergeist investigated on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research by Maurice Grosse and Guy Lyon Playfair. The Cardiff poltergeist was investigated by David Fontana in 1989 after Hansel went to press. None of these cases amounts to "anecdotal evidence" which Hansel rightly rubbishes.

Harwood next invokes the magician, James Randi. Randi is a stand-up entertainer whose most notable successes have been the exposure of other stand-up entertainers like Uri Geller, phoney televangelists like Peter Popoff and third-rate mediums fishing for information. He has evaded challenges to consider the Enfield case and has not commented on the phenomena reported by Robertson and Roy which I cited in my letter (*Points of View*, Oct.2007). It should be noted that, as an entertainer, Randi has an interest in appealing to a particular audience at least as much as a concern for the truth.

Harwood goes on to ridicule the suggestion that "psi is shy". He is, of course, correct to insist that psi can no more be shy than gravity or magnetism. But, unlike these forces, it operates through human vehicles. If I can offer a football – sorry, soccer – analogy to a Canadian, the fact that David Beckham can score with a free kick from 30 yards doesn't mean that he could repeat the feat with the World Cup at stake and Heavy Metal music belting into his ear at 140 decibels.

Harwood concludes with the statement that "the proof that believers are not sparking on all neurons" is that they go beyond extra-sensory perception and accept precognition. Further on he refers to their "desperation to avoid the terrifying reality of death". ESP and PK are one thing and may be explained in terms of as yet undetected sub-atomic particles: spirit survival and precognition are another matter entirely and each would necessitate a major paradigm change in the sciences. Both are highly controversial within the discipline and I am convinced of neither. To imply that those of us who accept the evidence for paranormal occurrences also believe in spirits and fortune telling does us a grave injustice.

JACK HASTIE
Scotland

Alpha course

WHATEVER the shortcomings of the Alpha Course. I fear that Robert Stovold's opinion of the evidential value of the New Testament Gospels is simply crass (*Freethinker*, March).

Two of the best recent assessments come from New Testament professors at St Andrews University. Richard Bauckham in *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006), and Marcus Bockmuehl in *Seeing the Word* (2006) have produced thoroughly argued, up-to-date studies that no-one with a serious interest in the subject can afford to overlook.

DAN O'HARA
Saltburn-by-the-Sea

Danish cartoons

The *Freethinker* keeps mentioning the Danish cartoons without dealing with the intellectual riposte. Iranian artists sent anti-Jewish cartoons to each newspaper that had reproduced the Mohammed one, with a request for publication to achieve balance. Not one newspaper published the Iranian cartoons.

This demonstrates one of two propositions:

1. The publication of the Danish cartoons was motivated by hostility to Islam, not freedom of expression, or
2. Judaism is specially protected because it is a race as well as a religion.

E GOODMAN
Surrey

Defining secularism

DENIS Cobell (*Freethinker*, January) is right to note the ambiguity about the word secularism. The Humanist Philosophers Group uses it to mean supporting a secular state.

The NSS, however, is clearly an organisation of atheists who support a secular state. So the NSS has made secularism mean atheism.

We need a distinct term for the support for a secular state, a view that may be held by those of any religion or none. Could we call this "political secularism"?

DAVID FLINT
London

The Freethinker

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote
UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher:

Freethinker/G W Foote & Co Ltd
P O Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD
Tel: 01273 680531

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged. Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Overseas subscribers are requested to obtain sterling drafts from their banks, but if remittance is in foreign currency (including Republic of Ireland) please add the equivalent of £5.00 sterling or USA \$8.00 to cover bank charges. Alternatively, send at your own risk currency notes, convertible in the UK, plus bank charges equivalent to USA \$3.00

Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to the *Freethinker*, PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see 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, June 4, 8pm, Ted McFadyen: *The National Press Today*. Sunday, June 29. Visit to Down House, Downe, Kent, home of Charles Darwin.

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

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

Chiltern Humanists: Information and programme: 01296 623730. The Library, High St, Wendover. Tues, June 10, 8pm. Pepper Harrow: *BHA Local Development Projects*.

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 Multifunction Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists: Information: Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046. E-mail: info@devonhumanists.org.uk Website: www.devonhumanists.org.uk

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506. Website www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

Ealing Humanists: Information: Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741 7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group: Information: Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: Information: Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Essex Humanists: Programme available. Details: 01268 785295.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ, Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org. Conway Hall Library, Red Lion Sq, London WC1.

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: Information: John Coff: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wed, June 11, 7.30pm. Penny Mawdsley: *The Sea of Faith and Humanism*.

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

Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings second Wed of the month (except January, July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. Next meeting June 11: *Baha'ism, the world's newest religion*. Joint meeting with the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Harrow. Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

Haslemere & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Cresc, Gidea Park. Tues, June 5, 8pm. AGM. Speaker: Phil Ivory, *Exploring Language*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perth Group: 07017 404776. perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: Information: Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

Isle of Man Freethinkers: Information: Muriel Garland, 01624 664796. E-mail: murielgarland@clara.co.uk. Website: www.iomfreethinkers.co.uk

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group. Information: David Broughton on 01983 755526 or e-mail davidb67@clara.co.uk

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780. Email: Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com.

Website: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/>

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250. Full programme of events on website: www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

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

Liverpool Humanist Group. Information: 07814 910 286. Website: www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/. E-mail: 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. Contact: Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

Mid-Wales Humanists: Information: Howard Kinberley 01982 551736

Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group. Information: Vince Chainey, 4 Mill St. Bradenham, Norfolk IP25 7QN. Tel: 01362 820982.

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

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

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

North London Humanist Group: Monthly meetings. Contact: Derek Marcus, 47 Birch Grove, Potters Bar, Herts, EN6 1SY. Tel: 01707 653667 email: enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk website: www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

Oxford Humanists: Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, will ask *How effectively is the UN supporting [The Universal Declaration of] Human Rights?* Oxford Town Hall's Court Room – Thurs 19 June, 7 for 7.30pm. Further information : John White 01865 891876.

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Wed June 4, 7.30pm. Public Meeting.

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

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

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

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

Sutton Humanists: The Prince of Wales. Malden Rd, Cheam. Wed, June 4, 8pm. Naomi Phillips: *Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations*. Wed, July 2, 8pm. Keith Gimson and Alan Gandy: *Keep the Political Arena a Religion-Free Zone*. Information: 0208 773 0631. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com. E-Mail: BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

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

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

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

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

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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