

£1.25

Vol 128 No 8
August 2008

The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Bible 'design defect' leads to a multi-million dollar law suit

AN international Christian communications company which specialises in publishing "pimped up" Bibles, has been hit with a \$60-million law suit.

A Michigan man last month filed the suit against Zondervan Publishing, claiming that the company had published some editions of the Bible that portrayed homosexuality as sinful.

This, said Bradley LaShawn Fowler, 39, had led him to suffer discrimination, emotional pain and mental instability.

He is suing another Bible publisher, Thomas Nelson Publishing, for \$10-million for the same reason.

Fowler said the defendants "wilfully caused me to endure acts of hate, discrimination, and loss of sleep and appetite, by structuring their *New King James Bible* to reflect God's distaste of homosexuals.

"By designing this product to promote hate and violence toward homosexuality, because such product is promoted as being the 'authentic word of God,' it is a design defect," says Fowler's lawsuit.

Fowler is alleging that Zondervan Bible references to homosexuality as a sin have made him an outcast from his family and contributed to physical discomfort and periods of "demoralization, chaos and bewilderment".

The suit against Zondervan claims that 1982 and 1987 editions of the publisher's Bible declare homosexuality to be wrong in 1 Corinthians 6:9: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders."

Fowler claims the term was edited out of the 1989 and 1994 editions, but consumers were not informed.

"This misrepresentation is a wilful and deliberate tort. Fraudulently imposing a written defamation or libel in order to prevent me from marrying someone of the same sex in this state," his lawsuit states. "This obvious coerced method of mind control and social dictatorship violates the religious [sacred] laws which prevent anyone from adding to the biblical scriptures or from taking any words away from the text."

Fowler levels similar allegations against Thomas Nelson regarding the company's earlier versions of the *New King James Bible*.

The intent of the publisher was to promulgate a point of view to cause "me or anyone who is a homosexual to endure verbal abuse, discrimination, episodes of hate, and physical violence ... including murder," the lawsuit continues.

Fowler said the editions of the Bibles he cites have destroyed his relationship with his family who refuse to support him because the Bible says homosexuality is a sin.

Zondervan, which describes itself as an "international Christian communications company with a heart for helping people find and follow Jesus Christ by inspiring

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Married to bigotry:

Tribunal rules in favour of Christian registrar



Lillian Ladele

A TRIBUNAL's decision last month that a devout Christian registrar had been discriminated against by Islington Council because she refused to conduct same-sex civil unions has been roundly condemned by the National Secular Society.

Outraged by the judgment in favour of Lillian Ladele, Terry Sanderson, NSS President, said: "This is catastrophic, not just for gay people but for the wider community. It appears to place the religious 'conscience' of registrars above their legal duty to carry out parliament's legislation.

"Ms Ladele now seems to have won

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Freethinker editor Barry Duke crosses swords with a Roman Catholic pillock

A ROMAN Catholic lawyer called "Steph" – she doesn't reveal her full name on her website but says she is "a criminal lawyer currently on a career break" – is *so* not happy with me ever since I named her "Pillock of the Week" on the *Freethinker* website a few weeks back.

I pointed out at the time that "Steph" was probably the only non-Muslim on the planet "who thinks that the award of £4,000 to the egregious little opportunist Bushra Noah was a good thing".

You will recall that Noah, the "Ugly Betty" of the hairdressing world, was awarded £4,000 by a tribunal for "hurt feelings" after she failed to land a job at Sarah Desrosiers' funky King's Cross salon. "Steph" – an Islamophile whose slogan is "Viva L'Anarchia!" – immediately sprang to Noah's defence, saying that the headscarfed little horror should have received a great deal MORE!

"Steph" argued that "Desrosiers went running to the press and publicised the story, which led to Noah receiving hate mail. For some reason the tribunal didn't take that into account when awarding compensation".

What really infuriated me was "Steph" likening the vivacious Desrosiers to "a cheap crack whore" – and I pointed out that, in a tortuously mangled, badly punctuated paragraph, the lawyer ranted:

"She [Sarah Desrosiers] is whining to the press that she has done nothing wrong and that she has lost £40,000 of her salon's annual income but it was entirely self-inflicted, her argument that she refused to employ Noah because wearing the headscarf would have a negative impact on her business's stylistic integrity was obviously not true, apart from the fact that Desrosiers' unkempt, poorly dyed pink hair, and jailhouse tattoos, don't ooze style, there are plenty of successful stylists and salons with observant Muslims working in them. Also, Desrosiers, commenting on Noah being turned down for other jobs because of the headscarf, said 'Well, what do you expect?' – which is pretty good indication that she doesn't think employers should employ observant Muslim women ..."

Phew. You need four extra-strength Anadin and a long lie-down in a darkened room after untangling that little lot ...

"Steph" continued: "Desrosiers' remark that 'people's feelings get injured every day' completely misses the point – when people's feelings are injured by an employer, who needlessly discriminates against them: they have a right to sue.

To which I retorted: "No Steph, it's YOU who is missing the point – by a mile. One of the thousands of supporters who left messages

of support for Desrosiers on dozens of blogs in the past week made this very valid point: 'If someone has a fundamental imperative to keep every thread of hair on their head covered up, why would they want to devote their professional life to helping others to do precisely the opposite?'

Call me cynical, but I think that Noah – like so many others who insist on rubbing people's noses in their imbecilic piety – saw a chance of jumping on the gravy train. There is every indication that she (or someone manipulating her) knew full well that, by playing the 'religious discrimination' card, she had an excellent chance of forcing the PC-driven authorities to docilely roll over and cough up the cash.

"Steph" quickly got wind of my posting on the *FT* website, and repounded on her own site: "I've no interest in the *Freethinker*, the piece was rude and ill-informed ... I'm not aware of secularists who work for co-existence. Secularists tend to want to oppress the majority by suppressing all public expression of religious belief, which is a million miles away from co-existence. It's just as illiberal and fundamentalist as any religion."

Then the fun *really* began when "Valdemar" posted this message on "Steph's Blog":

"Erm, oppress the majority? The vast majority of people in the UK are not religious in any meaningful sense. Going to church (or a temple of some kind) on a regular basis is a fair definition of religiosity, and on that basis faith is very much a minority pursuit.

"Religious knowledge, another obvious test, is a no-brainer. Ask ten people on the street to give you a few facts about the life of Jesus, say, and you'll get a mishmash of the Bible, the Da Vinci Code and possibly a bit of the Muppets Christmas Carol thrown in.

"I'm surprised you missed the chance to belong to a persecuted minority, there, Steph! Tsk tsk."

He added: "Re: secularists. What we want (I think) is for religion to be confined to the private sphere and kept out of politics. Which it rather obviously is not at the moment.

"Also, I resent paying taxes for faith schools. If we're to have selective schools, fine, but stop this contemptible masquerade of giving the best state places to middle-class people who are better at faking piety than chavs.

"And while I'm on the subject – religious tolerance is impossible in a genuinely religious society, which Britain was until the mid-Victorian era. In my home town is a church. It's not a very imposing or lovely building, but it has the distinction of being the first Catholic Church built in England after the Reformation. I hope you take the point. But for those



Lawyer 'Steph'

who don't get it: secular, democratic, Enlightenment values – the kind many politicians and lawyers seem all too keen to undermine for their own short-term gain – protect religious minorities. The agnostic majority provide a kind of 'buffer zone'. Where this doesn't exist you get persecution, as in the terrorism directed at Christians in Muslim countries on a fairly routine basis."

"Steph" fired back with this breathtaking piece of nonsense: "Most people in the UK believe in God and atheists are a minority. As a pluralist, I support your right to your views on religion: it's a pity you can't extend that courtesy to others. Prohibiting others from practising their religion in public or private is oppressive, illiberal and essentially fascist. Democracy and enlightenment have nothing to do with secularism – fascism does though. Religious intolerance is no different from any other form of xenophobia."

And, demonstrating a lamentable level of ignorance, she challenged "Valdemar" over his claim that Christians suffer persecution in Islamic countries with these words: "*Actually, there is very little anti-Christian violence in Muslim countries.*" (My italics.)

Soon afterwards, this report, the latest of many in recent years, appeared on the internet: **The mainly Christian village of Horale in Indonesia was attacked on the night of May 2 by a mob from the neighbouring village of Saleman which is predominantly Muslim. The Muslims burnt down 120 houses, three churches and the village school. Four Christians were killed and 56 wounded. Fifteen hectares of crops were destroyed as well as 20 fishing boats and 2 motor-cycles.**

Three of the four victims had their throats slit, but all were attacked in other ways as well. Mrs Welhelmina Pattiasina (aged 47) was first tortured, and her granddaughter Yola (6) had her stomach cut open. Edward Unwaru (84) was burned to death after his throat had been cut. A fourth victim, Josef Laumahina (39) was cut and then burned.

Horale village is home to 175 families, a total of around 2,300 people. Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, International Director of Barnabas Fund, said: "Horale is situated in a remote area on the island of Seram in Maluku province. Such areas have seen a number of similar incidents over the last five months. Maluku province experienced intense anti-Christian violence between 1999 and 2001, and it is alarming to consider that this may be starting again. Please pray for a return to harmonious and peaceful relations."

Indonesia is regarded as the most "enlightened" of Islamic states (see page 10 report).

Blasphemy heads for oblivion in Ireland

MORE bad news for the Catholic Church in Ireland, which has suffered a number of setbacks in this increasingly sceptical country: the offence of blasphemy is likely to be dropped from the Irish Constitution.

According to the *Irish Independent*, the joint committee on the Constitution said last month that changes to the Constitution in the areas of freedom of expression and blasphemy are required, and should be voted on in a future referendum.

Committee chairman, Sean Ardagh, said the Constitution should be amended along the lines of Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights in order to ensure greater emphasis on the freedom of speech.

Said Ardagh: "The committee is of the view that amendment is not immediately necessary but recommends that change be made when an appropriate opportunity presents."

He added that changes could be made alongside another referendum vote. However, he stressed there was no urgent requirement to make the changes.

A constitutional reference, which deems the publication or utterance of "blasphemous, seditious or indecent matters" as an offence punishable in accordance with the law, should also be deleted, according to the report.

However, the committee noted that recent incidents highlighted that religious offence is still something which can cause genuine distress. It cited the performance of Tommy Tiernan on the 'Late Late Show' and his now infamous 'Lamb of God' routine in which Tiernan joked, in typically surreal style, that the Lamb of God was

an actual lamb bounding around a field full of his own self-importance because he was chosen by God.

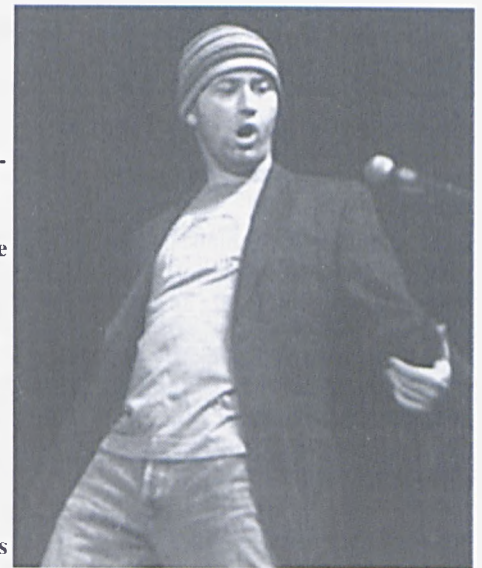
"The front page of the *Evening Herald* in Dublin had a headline that the show was going to be sued for blasphemy – it was great," said Tiernan.

The committee also referred to accusations of blasphemy directed at *Jerry Springer: the Opera* in the UK, and the publication of controversial cartoons in Denmark. Notwithstanding this, it is the committee's view that the specific reference to blasphemy should be deleted from the Constitution.

Meanwhile, New Zealand rationalists are urging their Government to follow Britain's example and take blasphemy off the law books.

The New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists says the charge gives religious doctrine special protection that other ideas and beliefs do not have.

The group describes the crime as a threat to freedom of speech.



Irish comedian Tommy Tiernan was accused of blasphemy for his take on 'The Lamb of God'

Yet another Muslim kills his daughter

JUST weeks after we reported the case of an Iraqi man who beat his daughter to death in an 'honour' killing, comes the news that a Pakistani man is behind bars in the USA after strangling his daughter. He was said to be upset that Sandeela Kanwal, 25, wanted to leave her arranged marriage.

Chaudhry Rashid, 54, has been charged with strangling his daughter with a bungee cord at their home in Jonesboro, Georgia.

Rashid's wife, Gina Rashid, 49, called police just before 2 am on the Sunday and told them she had been awakened and heard screaming.

Rashid was being held without bond in the Clayton County Jail.

Gina Rashid did not attend the hearing. But she told police that her daughter wanted to end her arranged marriage and had not spoken to her father in two months because of their disagreement on the matter.

Police said Chaudhry Rashid owns a pizza parlour in Clayton County, while his daughter worked at a Wal-Mart.

When police arrived at the family's home, Rashid told them simply, "My daughter is dead". When police asked him how Rashid knew she was dead, Rashid reportedly said nothing and hung his head.

According to a *National Geographic* article: "...Where most marriages are arranged by fathers and money is often exchanged, a woman's desire to choose her own husband – or to seek a divorce – can be viewed as a major

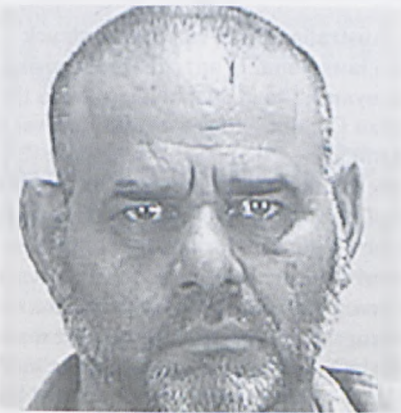
Mormon excommunicated over topless male missionary calendar

THE Mormon creator of a calendar featuring topless male missionaries was excommunicated last month after a disciplinary meeting with local church leaders in Las Vegas.

Chad Hardy said he bears no ill will toward the council of elders from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"I felt like I spoke my truth," the 31-year-old entertainment entrepreneur said. "Bottom-line, they still felt the calendar is inappropriate and not the image that the church wants to have."

"Men on a Mission," which has sold nearly 10,000 copies at \$14.99 each, included pictures of 12 missionaries wearing black slacks, but not their trademark white shirts.



act of defiance that damages the honour of the man who negotiated the deal."

The magazine quoted Tahira Shahid Khan, a professor specialising in women's issues at the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, who, in 1999, wrote *Chained to Custom*, a review of honour killings:

"There is nothing in the Koran, the book of basic Islamic teachings, that permits or sanctions honour killings. However, the view of women as property with no rights of their own is deeply rooted in Islamic culture.

"Women are considered the property of the males in their family irrespective of their class, ethnic, or religious group. The owner of the property has the right to decide its fate. The concept of ownership has turned women into a commodity which can be exchanged, bought and sold."

Defective Bible

(Continued from p1)

them with relevant biblical and spiritual resources”, was in the news last year when it unveiled a fresh plan to jazz up new editions of the Bible – a book that around 91 percent of all households in the United States already own.

“A lot of people read the Bible because it’s obligatory, something to keep God off their backs,” Paul J Caminiti, a vice-president of the company told the *LA Times*.

“We’re looking to turn them into Bible lovers ... so it becomes part of the warp and woof of their being.”

The paper revealed that the first wave of “sexing up” Bibles came in the 1980s, when Zondervan, Thomas Nelson Inc, Tyndale House and other publishers began to create Bibles aimed at specific groups, such as teens or newlyweds. These editions contained the whole Scripture, but with added commentary, prayers and tips for spiritual growth.

Five years ago, a supplier came to Zondervan headquarters in western Michigan with a new imitation leather. Soft and supple, it could hold

fancy stitching and vibrant colours.

“I remember [the chief financial officer] saying, ‘Let’s not go too crazy. Let’s start with two-tone, tan-and-brown and tan-and-black’,” Caminiti says. “Then we ventured out into red and yellow and they just took off. Everybody wanted them.”

The splashy look snagged prime display space not just in Christian retailers, but in secular bookstores, Wal-Marts and Costcos.

Zondervan began churning out limited-edition, one-season-only Scripture: a thin checkbook-shaped Bible with jazzy blue and silver stripes for \$30, a square Bible in meadow green for \$35, a pocket-size edition in soft browns and oranges for \$20.

At least a third of Bibles are purchased as gifts, and Zondervan made sure there was one for every occasion – even sorority rush. (The light-pink and apple-green colors of Alpha Kappa Alpha have been a big hit.)

But Zondervan has turned down some ideas – a 3-D pop-up Bible, for instance – that it found too gimmicky. “There is a line, because it’s God’s word,” Scharp says.



Two Zondervan executives showing off their range of pimped-up Bibles

Zondervan recently published a Celebrate Recovery Bible for alcoholics. (The commentary notes that Adam showed an addict’s skill at denial when God scolded him for eating the forbidden fruit.) For kids, there’s a comic-book Bible in Japanese manga style. (One panel shows elderly Isaac and Rebecca praying for a child. In the next panel, Rebecca’s stomach pops out – to a “WHAM! BIFF! POW!”)

Holman Christian Standard offers the Golfer’s Bible, a compact hardcover that intersperses the Gospel with advice on proper grip. Thomas Nelson puts out BibleZines – including the New Testament packaged as a glossy teen magazine, complete with beauty tips and quizzes. There’s even a waterproof Bible with pages that fold out, map-style.

All this has raised predictable concerns.

Said Phyllis Tickle, a noted Christian author. “I find it really, really distressing to think that young people may have their first impression of Christian Scripture presented to them in an almost pandering way.”

Shopping in a Christian store in Grand Rapids, Kurt Forrest looks almost dizzy at the selection. He’s trying to find a Bible for his 7-year-old son among more than 300 titles, including some that break up the Scripture with science projects or descriptions of gory battles.

“I want the full-blown Bible,” Forrest says, frustrated, “something he can carry with him all the way out into his teen years.”

Nearly 20 minutes later, he’s still browsing.

Which points up a flaw in the Bible-for-every-interest strategy: Half of all customers who walk into a store intending to buy a Bible leave empty-handed, according to Brenda Lugannani, a vice-president of Family Christian Stores, the nation’s largest Christian chain.

“When they look at what’s available,” she says, “it begins to confuse them.”

Protesters given the all-clear to annoy Catholics

AN Australian court last month struck down laws banning anyone from causing “annoyance” to people taking part in the Roman Catholic church’s youth festival in Australia.

The ruling handed down on the opening day of the six-day World Youth Day festival paved the way for activists to protest against the Pope’s visit on July 19.

Three federal court judges upheld a challenge to special regulations that made behaviour that caused annoyance or inconvenience to participants in the festival punishable by fines up to 5,500 Australian dollars.

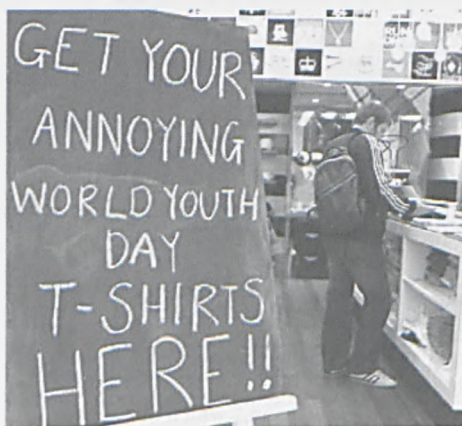
The judges ruled that the regulations limited freedom of speech and were invalid under Australia’s constitution, upholding a legal challenge brought by two activists from the NoPope Coalition, a group of gay rights and secular activists.

The coalition’s rally attracted activists wearing T-shirts condemning the Pope. They handed out condoms and coathangers to pilgrims taking part in a procession through Sydney. The coathangers were meant to symbolise illegal abortions the activists say some Catholics are forced into because the church disapproves of terminating pregnancies.

“We now have a lot more confidence to take to the streets to condemn Pope Benedict’s policies against condom use,

against contraception, against homosexuality,” said Rachel Evans, one of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit. “We are glad that the court has ruled that we do have the freedom of expression to communicate our political views on Saturday.

The New South Wales state government introduced the regulations for July only, saying they were the same sort of powers authorities normally have to quell potential trouble at big sporting events. Sydney Archbishop Cardinal George Pell said the church had not asked for the special rules, and had no problem with the right to protest legally.



Sydney saw a brisk trade in ‘annoying’ anti-Catholic T-shirts in the run up to World Youth Day in the city

'Freedom of speech stops when dealing with Islam'

RACISM is to be deplored, and any organisation effectively fighting this canker which, regrettably, runs through so many societies, is to be lauded.

Unfortunately, Durban II – a conference on racism scheduled to take place next year in South Africa – looks as if it will be nothing more than another attempt to cocoon Islam from any form of criticism.

Durban I, staged in the coastal city in 2001, was little short of a disaster. It rapidly descended into an anti-American, anti-Israeli spectacle.

"While the then Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat delivered rants on the conspiratorial and racist goals of Israel, others handed out flyers celebrating Adolf Hitler," Republican Representative Ed Royce, a senior member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and former House representative to the United Nations, pointed out in a piece he penned last month for the *Washington Times*.

Durban I was set up to address what some saw as growing trends in hate speech and discrimination. But UN Watch said that it "degenerated into a festival of hate, with virulent anti-Semitic street demonstrations and physical attacks, leading the US and Israel to walk out. Canada recently announced it will not participate in what has become known as 'Durban II,' citing concerns that the process

was heading once again in harmful directions.

"Those of us trying to prevent a recurrence of the 2001 violence and hatred are alarmed by the prospect of holding the sequel in the same country," said UN Watch executive director Hillel Neuer.

Royce added: "Like the first Durban conference, some of the worst human-rights violators will serve on Durban II's panel. Participating members were selected by the gravely disappointing UN Commission on Human Rights – the same commission that has passed light condemnations of the regimes in Burma and Sudan.

"Participants will likely seek to shape international norms, attempting to push restrictions on basic freedoms of speech to prevent 'Islamophobia'.

"A recent resolution passed by the UN Human Rights Council to investigate instances where freedom of expression may have discriminated against race or religion – Islam – is an indication that this is just what participants at Durban II have in mind.

"The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a 57-member voting bloc, will be able to set much of the agenda for Durban II. Already it has helped Libya secure the top position.

"Recent statements from the top OIC officials are telling. The Secretary-General of the

organisation, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, recently boasted of sending a 'clear message to the West regarding the red lines that should not be crossed' in regards to the Danish cartoons and the Dutch film deemed to be offensive to Islam. He went on further to say that the West must 'look seriously into the question of freedom of expression from the perspective of its inherent responsibility'. In other words, freedom of speech stops when dealing with Islam.

"Freedom of speech is already being chipped away, even in liberal Canada. Take for example the case of noted political writer Mark Steyn, who is on trial before the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal for violating a hate-speech law. What grievous crime did Mr. Steyn allegedly commit? Having excerpts of his best-selling book *America Alone* published in *MacLean's*, a prominent Canadian magazine. The Canadian Islamic Congress took offence at sections of his work, calling it 'flagrantly Islamophobic'.

"If the OIC has its way, publishing works such as Mr. Steyn's, or drawing cartoons of Mohammed, will be strictly forbidden. Durban II may be just another stepping stone towards attaining that goal.

"While we can expect the same denunciations of Israel and the United States that we saw in 2001, Durban II may prove to be even more harmful," said Royce.

Reach for a tissue: Christian Voice director faces bankruptcy

STEPHEN Green thought he was doing God's work when he tried unsuccessfully to prosecute the BBC for blasphemy after it screened *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. But his God evidently thought otherwise, for Green now faces bankruptcy over legal fees incurred as a result of his vindictive action.

Green's Christian Voice website revealed last month that he had been saddled with a "grotesque" costs order.

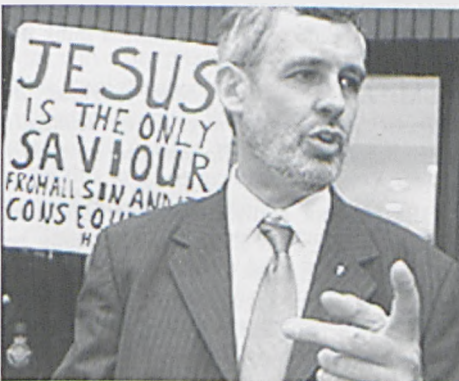
The BBC's Mark Thompson and Jonathan Thoday, producer of JSTO, were awarded costs totalling £90,000 against Green. The BBC's solicitors were awarded £55,000 and Olswangs Solicitors, who acted for Thoday, got an order for £35,000.

In a breathtaking display of effrontery, he wrote to both Mark Thompson and Jonathan Thoday asking them to waive their costs "in the interests of goodwill and justice".

This is the same Christian fanatic whose organisation BLACKMAILED a cancer charity into refusing money raised on its behalf by JSTO, and had repeatedly used harassment and intimidation in its campaigns against

JSTO, the BBC – and numerous gay organisations it disapproves of.

Wailed Green: "*Jerry Springer: the Opera* portrayed Jesus Christ as a nappy-wearing sexual deviant, who said he was 'a little bit gay'. It called Mary a rape victim, said the birth of Jesus was because 'the condom split', ridiculed His wounds on the cross and the sacrament of Holy Communion, had God as an ineffectual old man who needed guidance from Jerry Springer and finished up with Springer as



a counterfeit saviour of mankind who told Jesus to "grow up for Christ's sake and put some fucking clothes on.

"It should be enough for Mark Thompson and Jonathan Thoday that they got away with blasphemy, insulting God and the Lord Jesus Christ, at least in this life. For these rich, powerful men to pursue me into the bankruptcy courts over money I don't have would be vindictive."

Green then started an online petition asking for public support to have the costs waived. That went horribly wrong from the off. Around 50 percent of those who signed his petition used it to heap scorn on Green, and demand that the costs NOT be waived.

At the same time, a counter-petition was started. At the time of the *Freethinker* going to press, 1,351 people have signed Green's petition, while 1,180 have signed the counter-petition.

Given that half of Green's signatories are virulently opposed to the waiving of costs, by our calculations only 675 are for Green, while those against total 1,855.



Ophelia Benson

OPHELIA Benson, co-author of *Why Truth Matters* and *The Dictionary of Fashionable Nonsense*, and associate editor of *The Philosophers' Magazine*, is perhaps best known for her website, *Butterflies and Wheels*, where since 2003 she has taken delight in verbally scourging, flaying, and generally humiliating any relativist or religionist unfortunate enough to catch her eye.

Thousands of devoted readers log on every day to *Notes and Comments* to watch her dispatch her latest deserving victim with her trademark combination of humour, erudition, and cool, clear reason.

Although Ophelia is located about 6,000 miles away from *Freethinker* HQ, we contrived through the miracle of electronic communications to ask her a few questions, which she graciously answered.

Here, in this world exclusive is the result of our exchange:

DM: *B&W's* tagline is "Fighting fashionable nonsense", a reference to the anti-science, relativist thinking prevalent in academia and a certain section of the left. But half the website – and more than half of the blog – is concerned with the idiocies and contradictions of organised religion. Is this a deliberate shift of focus? Or are the two targets closely related?

OB: It's not exactly a deliberate shift of focus in the sense of having been decided in advance; it was more of an evolution. I think the two targets are closely related, in various ways – they both have a wilful, chosen quality that interests me. Just getting things wrong is one thing, but being deliberately credulous is another.

It's not always possible to know which is

Dave McKeegan: Ophelia Benson, not much of a believer

which, of course, but there are some obvious markers. Making a virtue of faith and a vice of reason is one; talking pityingly about the "reality-based community" is kind of a give-away. I'm interested by people who in some sense ought to know better, deciding to believe things for no very good reason and then making careers out of defending these not very well-warranted beliefs. In that sense popes and postmodernists have a lot in common.

More specifically, I kept finding more and more material about cultural relativism and especially about the tension between cultural relativism and women's rights, and that subject is inseparable from religion. What cultural relativism turns out to mean, nearly all the time, is being protective of religion at the expense of women's rights. The more I bumped up against irritating sentimental blather about 'faith communities' when the faith communities in question seemed to consist entirely of men, the more worthwhile it seemed to point out that the truth claims that underpin 'faith communities' are not based on much of anything. Once I started doing that, it became something like a continuing investigation. I'm still interested – fascinated, really – by the fact that people like to claim that grown-up religions are sophisticated and reasonable, when day after day, month after month, the top clerics in the mainstream religions publish articles in newspapers and say things on tv and radio that are ... not well reasoned. I'm still waiting to see something impressive and convincing from a priest or an imam or an apologist. I keep being surprised by how consistent it all is, how consistently thin and unargued and contorted and ad hoc and unconvincing. So – when a fresh example turns up, I tend to add it to the pile. It has a shooting-fish-in-a-barrel aspect, I suppose, but I don't really care, because clerics do get a hell of a lot of unearned deference and attention and credence, they do get their voices heard on abortion and stem-cell research and 'family values,' they do get seats on ethics committees despite a total lack of expertise and even ability to think clearly, they do have a wildly disproportionate ability to tell people what to do – so however easy it is to keep saying 'Why should we believe that?' I think it's worth doing.

DM: *Have you ever been religious, or believed "implausible things for epistemically questionable reasons" (to use your own pithy phrase)?*

OB: No, not really. Not since childhood anyway, when what I did couldn't really be called believing, I just took in what I was told (which was rather vague in any case). I detested Sunday school and wasn't made to go for long (in my memory it seems to be no more than twice, but I'm not sure that's right). I also

loathed church, and we didn't do that much either, and not at all after I was about 8.

I feel as if I really ought to come up with at least one implausible belief, because it seems so conceited to say no. I've had silly political beliefs – I used to be way too uncritical about underdog nationalism (the IRA, other separatist groups, that kind of thing), for instance – but I can't think of any big implausible factual beliefs. That can't be right; I must have had some; you're welcome to assume that I'm flattering myself. But I can't think of any. That's not because I'm so damn clever – I think it must be more a matter of temperament. I think I'm just not much of a believer in general, by temperament. (Which perhaps means I ought to be kinder to priests and imams, who have different temperaments, which is not their fault. All very well, but they lay down the law in public, so the rest of us get to push back.) I'm a minimalist about belief, I think, so odd ones don't tend to stick to me.

'I hate dishonest manipulative language of all sorts, and I spend a lot of time sniffing it out and then making fun of it'

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

OB: I'm not sure I really have anything as grand as a personal philosophy – I think I have more of a methodology. It could be boiled down to not wanting to be taken for a sucker, or in more philosophical language, to a dislike of bullshit. I hate dishonest manipulative language of all sorts, and I spend a lot of time sniffing it out and then making fun of it.

But on the affirmative side, I am in favour of a lot of things, if that adds up to a philosophy. It might be more what the philosopher Rebecca Goldstein in her novel *The Mind-Body Problem* called a "mattering map". Freedom and autonomy matter to me, as do rights. So do poetry, music, stargazing. Like Richard Rorty trying to unite Trotsky and wild orchids, I'm not sure how to connect the two – so I just put them on the mattering map.

DM: *Please describe your typical working day.*

OB: The working day starts with some reading and writing before I go near the computer. There's a different feeling to that, and I like it and try to hang on to it. I've always liked writing longhand best, and when I'm writing for publication I usually do the first draft in longhand.

After that first two or three hours, it's all type type type, read read read, edit edit edit. I look for news for *Butterflies and Wheels*, maybe write a post, maybe edit and format an

article for B&W, maybe do some work for *The Philosophers' Magazine*, maybe work on a book. God it sounds boring. It's interesting to do, but boring as hell to read about!

DM: *So is there no truth in the rumour that you moonlight as a barmaid in the pub patronised by Jesus and Mo?*

OB: Oh, I'm not going to say that. I get far too much innocent pleasure from the rumour to do anything so silly as to deny it. Anyway, for all I know I am the barmaid. No one can prove that I'm not...

DM: *Is it true that your upcoming book, Does God Hate Women?, was turned down by the first publisher because it was too critical of Islam?*

OB: Yes, a publisher did turn it down for

that compelling reason. It wasn't exactly the first publisher since it never actually accepted it, but it was very interested, got Jeremy [Stangroom, the co-author] in to have a chat etc (I live six thousand miles away or I would have gone along for the chat too, whether they'd invited me or not) – then said they'd decided no because one mustn't criticize Islam.

DM: *How did you feel about that at the time?*

OB: A mix of amusement and disgust, I think – amusement at the docile predictability, disgust at the crawling. I also felt even more convinced that the book was needed, precisely because a publisher would turn it down for such a reason. What publisher, you wonder? Verso.

DM: *Does God hate women?*

OB: The God of most of the people who think there is a God certainly hates women. The God of some of them hates women with a weirdly obsessive neurotic hostility – so weird and petty and obsessive that one wonders what this god would make women for if it hates them so much.

If it wants them covered up all the time, why didn't it make them out of a bale of cloth? If it doesn't want men looking at them, why didn't it make men without any eyes? These are deep theological questions.

DM: *And with those deep theological questions we will leave you pondering. Do not forget, you can get your daily dose of OB on the B&W blog.*

Jesus Crust, it's the Great Corpus Crispie Kerfuffle

AN American student and a university professor were bombarded last month with hate mail and death threats over an "abducted" communion wafer.

The story began in Florida when the student, Webster Cook, snatched the "body of Christ" at a Catholic mass held at the University of Central Florida, and kept it in a Ziplock plastic bag for a week before surrendering it.

Outraged Catholics accused Cook of a "hate crime" for holding the Eucharist "hostage", and before you can say "transubstantiation" he began receiving death threats, and calls for his expulsion were made to the university.

Hatred was then widened out to include atheist professor P Z Myers, of the University of Minnesota Morris, who has a hugely popular internet blog called Pharyngula (<http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/>).

Myers' hideous crime was to write a piece entitled "It's a Frackin' Cracker":

"There are days when it is agony to read the news, because people are so goddamned stupid. Petty and stupid. Hateful and stupid. Just plain stupid. And nothing makes them stupider than religion.

"Webster Cook says he smuggled a Eucharist – a small bread wafer that to Catholics is symbolic of the Body of Christ after a priest blesses it – out of mass. He didn't eat it as he was supposed to do, but instead walked off with it.

"This isn't the stupid part yet. He walked off with a cracker that was put in his mouth, and people in the church fought with him to get it back ... It is just a cracker!"

Myers continued:

"Would you believe this isn't hyperbole? People around the world are actually extremely

angry about this – Webster Cook has been sent death threats over his cracker. Those are just kooks, you might say, but here is the considered, measured response of the local diocese:

"We don't know 100 percent what Mr Cook's motivation was," said Susan Fani, a spokesperson with the local Catholic diocese. "However, if anything were to qualify as a hate crime, to us this seems like this might be it. We just expect the University to take this seriously," she added "To send a message to not just Mr Cook but the whole community that this kind of really complete sacrilege will not be tolerated."

"Wait, what? Holding a cracker hostage is now a hate crime? The murder of Matthew Shephard was a hate crime. The murder of James Byrd Jr was a hate crime. This is a goddamned cracker. Can you possibly diminish the abuse of real human beings any further?"

"Get some perspective, man. IT'S A CRACKER."

Myers added:

"Would you believe that the mealy-mouthed president of the University, John Hitt, is avoiding defending his student, and is, instead, playing up the importance of the Catholic Church to the University? Of course you would. That's what university presidents do. Bigger the students, keep the donors and the state reps happy.

"Unfortunately, Webster Cook has now returned the cracker. Why? Webster just wants all of this to go away. Especially now that he feels his life is in danger.

"That's right. Crazy Christian fanatics right here in our own country have been threatening to kill a young man over a cracker. This is insane. These people are demented fuckwits.

"I find this all utterly unbelievable. It's like Dark Age superstition and malice, all thriving

with the endorsement of secular institutions here in 21st-century America. It is a culture of deluded lunatics calling the shots and making human beings dance to their mythical bunkum.

"So, what to do. I have an idea. Can anyone out there score me some consecrated communion wafers? There's no way I can personally get them – my local churches have stakes prepared for me, I'm sure – but if any of you would be willing to do what it takes to get me some, or even one, and mail it to me, I'll show you sacrilege, gladly, and with much fanfare.

"I won't be tempted to hold it hostage (no, not even if I have a choice between returning the Eucharist and watching Bill Donohue [President of the Catholic League of America] kick the Pope in the balls, which would apparently be a more humane act than desecrating a goddamned cracker), but will instead treat it with profound disrespect and heinous cracker abuse, all photographed and presented here on the web.

"I shall do so joyfully and with laughter in my heart. If you can smuggle some out from under the armed guards and grim nuns hovering over your local communion ceremony, just write to me and I'll send you my home address.

"Just wait. Now there'll be a team of Jesuits assigned to rifle through my mail every day."

Within hours, Myers' piece went ricocheting throughout the internet – and Donahue reacted by calling for Myers to be sacked from his university post.

Bellowed Donahue:

Paul Zachary Myers ... has pledged to desecrate the Eucharist ... It is hard to think of anything more vile than to intentionally desecrate the Body of Christ. We look to those who have

(Continued on page 8)

John Radford: A Moral Compass

I have no direct evidence, but I suspect that when in 1521 the conquistadors of Hernán Cortés ended the Aztec religious tradition of human sacrifice, the local priests were seriously worried. For everyone knew that without sacrifice the gods would withdraw their favour, and the world would come to an end. Probably, when their capital city of Tenochtitlan was destroyed, including the great pyramid temple, later replaced by a cathedral, they asked how the people would order their lives, without the proper rituals and rules of behaviour.

As it turned out, the world did not end, and the new Christian religion was adopted and to some extent adapted. Life went on. Much better documented are the similar events when Christianity took over from the ancient Greek and Roman ways. It seemed to many a matter of grave moral concern. Libanius, born just about the time when Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire (312), was perhaps the last of the great sophists, the public teachers who had exemplified classical culture for almost a thousand years.

He denounced the “black-robed throngs” of Christian votaries destroying all that was not of their faith. He bewailed the neglect of the old religious rites and festivals, the closure of

temples and confiscation of their property, the enmity towards philosophy and learning and persecution of those who followed them, the increasing ignorance of Greek, the very language of civilization. Libanius died about 394.

Finally in 529, the Emperor Justinian forbade the teaching of all philosophy. The endowment of the philosophical schools at Athens, dating back to Plato and Aristotle, was confiscated, and all grants of public funds in the interests of learning were withdrawn.

Now the boot is on the other foot. It is Christianity that is declining, at least in most of Europe, though it is not suffering anything like the total destruction that it has visited on others in the past. (Of course there were attempts to suppress it in the French, Russian and Chinese revolutions.) It is no surprise that Christian leaders are up in arms. The Pope laments that the numbers of the faithful are falling, while those who remain are disinclined to obey the strict rules.

That rather turbulent priest, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester, speaks of a “moral vacuum” in Britain, which he dates to



the Right Reverend Dr Michael Nazir-Ali

the 1960s (*Standpoint*, June 2008). The Church of England has just (June 2008) produced a report, *Moral, Without a Compass*, calling for a much greater recognition and support for its role in society. The present Government, the

report says, is concerned about moral issues, but lacks a compass, presumably that supplied by the C of E. Dr Nazir-Ali claims that Britain was built upon Christian foundations. Nothing else could have united “a rabble of mutually hostile tribes”, created one nation, and brought about democracy and freedom. This is, to say the least, dubious. Christianity came to Britain as a minor sect under the Romans, who had unified the Mediterranean world without its aid, by conquest and administration. Many other powers have achieved unity without Christianity, for example Islam, the first Emperor of China, Genghis Khan, the Incas of Peru.

Later, indeed, Christianity came to be the dominant religion here, after a long struggle. By 800 or 900 Britain was pretty solidly Christian, and remained so to the 20th century. For a thousand years we did not, presumably, suffer a moral vacuum. We had the benefit of a Christian compass to guide us, the Roman form until the 16th century, then the Anglican and then all the other variations, Methodists, Quakers and others more bizarre such as Sandemanians, Joanna Southcott and so on. Despite this, there was no shortage of everyday crime, murder, robbery, rape etc.

The country suffered endless wars internal and external, slavery and serfdom, feudalism and autocracy, trials and torture for heretics and witches, persecution of Jews and homosexuals, rudimentary medicine and general superstition, illiteracy and ignorance. These were alleviated gradually, then more rapidly with the onset of the Enlightenment and modern thought. There was a complex interaction of religion with other factors. In the 18th century many Christians opposed slavery, for example, but others supported it, as the early Church had done.

Democracy finds perhaps its earliest English roots in the folkmoths of pagan Germanic tribes, and its growth in contests for power, between king and nobles (producing Magna Carta), later between monarch and Parliament over raising taxes.

The Church hierarchy was built into the governing structure of feudalism, which is why its bishops still sit in the House of Lords, who are spiritual and temporal. An incidental contribution to democracy came via

The Great Corpus Crispie Kerfuffle

oversight responsibility to act quickly and decisively.

Earlier, Donahue complained: “For a student to disrupt Mass by taking the Body of Christ hostage – regardless of the alleged nature of his grievance – is beyond hate speech. That is why the UCF administration needs to act swiftly and decisively in seeing that justice is done. All options should be on the table, including expulsion.”

So why, precisely, did Cook snatch the Corpus Crispie? His intention, he said, was to show it to a friend “who was curious about the Catholic faith”.

“When I received the Eucharist, my intention was to bring it back to my seat to show him. I took about three steps from the woman distributing the Eucharist and someone grabbed the inside of my elbow and blocked the path in front of me. At that point I put it in my mouth so they’d leave me alone and I went back to my seat and I removed it from my mouth.

“She came up behind me, grabbed my wrist with her right hand, and with her left hand grabbed my fingers and was trying to pry them open to get the Eucharist out of my hand.”

The storm in the communion cup escalated

into a full-blown tempest when a formal complaint was made by the diocese against Cook, who retaliated by alleging that unnecessary physical force was used against him. Church members then filed individual complaints of disruptive conduct against Cook. Punishment could result in suspension or expulsion.

Said Cook: “The church feels that I’m the problem here. The problem is actually that this is a publicly-funded religious institution. Through student government here, we fund them through an activity and service, so they’re receiving student money.”

Cook was angry that more than \$40,000 in student fees had been allocated to support religious organisations on campus for the 2008-2009 school year.

While he was still holding the Corpus Crispie in captivity, the diocese’s Father Migeul Gonzalez said the diocese was willing to meet with Cook and help him understand the importance of the Eucharist in hopes of him returning it. He added that intentionally abusing the Eucharist is classified as a mortal sin in the Catholic church, the most severe possible. If it’s not returned, the community of faith will have to ask for forgiveness.

Methodism, with its rejection of bishops, and self-government by chapels. As the report stresses, many schools and hospitals, though far from all, had religious origins. They did tend to come with strings attached, of belief or at least conformity. And those that maintain their religious character still do. Many parents are suddenly becoming very keen on church attendance in order to get their children into a "good" faith school. Again, very many people of Christian faith have always done good in countless ways, but then so have others of all shades of opinion.

And other cultures, such as Islam. Both the Bishop and the C of E report are concerned that the Government favours minority faiths, of which Islam is the most prominent, over Christianity. Dr Nazir-Ali thinks it will come in to fill the vacuum left by the Church's decline. This is taken by some Muslim spokesmen (specifically Mohammed Shafiq, of the Muslim youth organisation, the Ramadhan Foundation), as yet another attack on Islam. "Everything this man says is based on fiction and promoting intolerance and fear among communities. Islam is on the rise because people recognise and are inspired by the trueness of our faith" (*The Times*, May 29 2008).

Since the Bishop and his Church also have the truth, it seems hard to avoid at least a little local difficulty. The trouble is not that we have no religious compass, rather we have far too many, all pointing at random in different directions. Tony Blair has announced that his mission is now to reconcile different faiths. It might be said of him, as it was of Gladstone, our other most devout Prime Minister, that "he could persuade most people of most things, and himself of anything". But he may have his work cut out here. When people have attempted such reconciliations, they have come up with ideas on which there is agreement. But they are so general that they match what all people accept, regardless of religion.

The superstructures of the various faiths remain incompatible. Pretty well all would agree that in general it is wrong to kill others. But what about the death penalty, war, euthanasia, abortion, suicide, "honour killing", martyrdom? These are difficult questions, but in seeking answers I think reason and empirical enquiry are more useful than revelation and myth. Religious compasses are of little use because unlike real ones they cannot be calibrated to give a consistent and reliable answer. They are based only on texts or traditions, interpreted according to individual conviction. President George W Bush, a devout Christian, opposes abortion but has no problem with the death penalty. Tony Blair is against capital

punishment, but committed troops to military ventures, on grounds many consider at best questionable. We have his word both that he prayed for guidance, and that he regrets no decision he made as Prime Minister. Such men are dangerous.

There is some truth in the idea that the collapse of one religion leaves a vacuum which another may fill. The gap may be social and personal rather than moral. All religions, and all individuals, have some system of morals, some sense of what is right and wrong, whether consciously formulated or not (and however bizarre in individual cases). My guess is they would continue to do so without any church.

But the C of E report is correct in saying that the Church is a major provider of social support, education and so on. Whether this is desirable or not does not alter the fact. And it provides a kind of fall-back system of which many people make use, for weddings, funerals, carol services, and what have you. There would surely be a massive vote for "Christmas" rather than "a mid-winter holiday", however tenuous belief in the myth of a divine birth may be. Rather like the monarchy with which it is so closely linked, some are strongly opposed, some just as strongly supportive, and probably a large number are mild-

ly positive towards this venerable part of the fabric of society. The Anglican Church has developed a tradition of relatively tolerant inclusion, with room for many variations, some almost outside Christianity itself. The Archbishop of Canterbury has called the Christmas story "a myth". But very many people prefer certainty to doubt, in their leaders and their religion.

This is part of the appeal of Roman Catholicism, of the flourishing evangelical movements, and of Islam. Islam offers a total package, as it were. The faithful are told exactly how to pray, and how many times; and how many to wipe their backsides (three, or a multiple of three, following the example of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him). World-wide, Muslims now number more than Catholics, though this is largely due to high birthrates in some communities.

One can quite understand why the C of E feels we should "always keep a hold of Nurse /For fear of finding something worse". It seems all too likely that we may. But some may feel it is time to walk without Nurse, and find our way without a spurious religious compass, which generally seems only to lead us around in circles.

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

A patron saint for closeted Catholic gays?

THE ghoulish Catholic Church is about to dig up the corpse of the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, who was buried in August 1890.

The disinterment, part of the process of making Newman a saint, is to be done in secret. But so far, the Church has not said what they intend to do with the body of Ambrose St John, who shares Newman's grave.

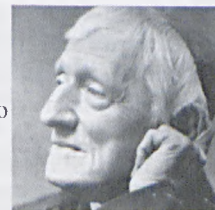
When the story was reported in the *Times*, an American reader, Donald Lowery, left this comment on the paper's website: "Cardinal Newman was buried beside his gay lover at his own request. Are they going to disinter Ambrose St John and keep the happy couple together? Perhaps the Roman Church is going to loosen up its opposition to gay unions? The pair would make lovely patrons for closeted Gay Roman Catholics."

According to online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*, Newman "shares a grave with his lifelong friend, Ambrose St John, who had converted to Roman Catholicism at the same time as Newman. Inseparable in death as in life, the two men have a joint memorial stone that is inscribed with the words he had chosen: *Ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem* ("Out of shadows and phantasms into the truth").

Catholics hope that Pope Ratzinger will issue a decree declaring Cardinal Newman as Blessed in December. This would pave the way for beatification next spring. The final step would be for the Cardinal to be canonised as a saint.

Said Father Paul Chavasse, Provost of the Birmingham Oratory: "One of the centuries-old procedures surrounding the creating of new saints by the Catholic Church concerns their earthly remains. These have to be identified, preserved and, if necessary, placed in a new setting which befits the individual's new status in the Church. This is what we have been asked to do by the Vatican with regard to Cardinal Newman's remains."

Cardinal Newman's new resting place will be in the Oratory Church in Birmingham. Cardinal Newman – an Anglican-turned-Catholic – died in Edgbaston August 11, 1890, aged 89.



Cardinal Newman

William Harwood: Indonesian Muslims – are they more evolved

ACCORDING to Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*, reporting on his trip to Indonesia, a country believed to contain 200 million Muslims, "Indonesian Muslims are by no means anti-Western. There are fundamentalists in Indonesia, to be sure, but they account for roughly one in every ten citizens there. The overwhelming majority of Indonesia's Muslims are moderates, and about one in five are progressives."¹

At the risk of being accused of naïveté, I am going to assume that Prothero was not manipulated into seeing what his tour guides wanted him to see, and that his observations can be trusted.

In support of that assumption is the May, 2008 report of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute that "Islamist parties have failed to attract votes." And a Gallup poll released in 2008 indicated that 88 percent of Indonesians believe that a woman should be allowed to do any job for which she is qualified, including the role of prayer-leading imam.

Add to that Prothero's observation that he did not see a single woman anywhere in Indonesia wearing the black body tent that

Iranian women are forced to wear to avoid being murdered by their fathers and brothers, and that many women in rural areas wore no head covering at all, and it becomes a reasonable conclusion that most Indonesian Muslims have indeed evolved as far beyond Khomeinism as most Christians are beyond Torquemadaism.

But does that mean they are capable of recognizing passages in the Koran as the product of a less civilized age, not to be treated as a guide to present-day behavior? Most Christians and Jews recognize parts of their Bible as the product of pre-civilized bigots and, despite the explicit instructions in Leviticus to do so, very few murder gays on sight, wave signs at gay funerals declaring that, "God hates fags," or demand the executions that happen on a regular basis in Iran. Have Indonesian Muslims outgrown Koranic literalism, or have they simply never learned that their holy book is as unmitigated a paean to evil as the Tanakh and the Bible? In other words, do Indonesian Muslims, like American Christians, accept their sacred book as moral and inerrant simply because they have never read it?

Muslims are brainwashed from birth that right and wrong are whatever the Koran says they are. And the Koran orders them, "Slay the pagans wherever you find them. Make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. When you encounter the unbelievers, strike off their heads."² "Strike

terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah."³

Even in the Middle East and Pakistan, only a minority of Muslims religiously follow those precepts, for the logical reason that the majority are unaware of them. It is a safe prediction that, if a jihadist preached to even the most moderate congregation and told them what their Koran instructs, every single hearer of such preaching would from that instant become a terrorist. And there is solid evidence that all Middle East Muslims are terrorists in their hearts.

Voters in occupied Palestine overwhelmingly elected to be governed by Hamas, an organization that openly stands for the annihilation of Israel and the completion of the Final Solution started by Adolf Hitler. Iranians overwhelmingly voted for a president who they were well aware pretends that the Holocaust was a Jewish fiction, who advocates the

Peter Arnold: Ah, Souls

"SOUL" seems to be a word whose meaning is whatever its user wishes it to mean – but the idea of a soul has been vitally necessary for religious shepherds to explain heaven and hell to their flock. To control flocks of people it is necessary to make them anxious, and even to terrify them if they are stubborn, and then offer them an escape in return for loyalty and payment.

Some of the flock can be so inspired by religious or political propaganda that they give up all their possessions and former way of life to follow their leader. In the worst stages of government and religion there are followers who are willing to torture and murder anyone critical of the regime. Even at the centre of power the leader can be so anxious of his power to control that he will have any possible rival murdered. Communist leaderships seem particularly prone to this. Hitler's more crafty method appears to have been to appoint more than one person to leadership of the same department so that they were too busy watching each other to be a threat to him. Perhaps this tendency arises from the same primitive part of the human brain that causes many adolescents to become anti-social and destructive, maybe an internal battle

between their new-found awareness of independence and their anxiety about relationships, about finding or establishing their position among their contemporaries. Cattle do it, indeed most animals as well as chickens establish their pecking order.

Only a century ago in England, and maybe in most of Western Europe, people could be made anxious about the consequence of their choice of behaviours through their religious and ideological traditions. Today the influence is partly through the threat of punishment set by law, but at any time a community can become aware of the harm being done to it through the bad behaviour of some of its members, equally anything that benefits a community can be termed good behaviour. Religions put emphasis on the importance of the soul as a passport to heaven or to hell. One's behaviour was said to decide the destination of one's soul after death. There is little evidence that loss of religious belief makes any difference to human behaviour. Indeed it could be the opposite, because without a religious rule-book we have to decide for ourselves, using reason and the influence of our neighbours, whereas religious faith and ideological conviction are capable of such distortion of logic that black can seem to be white, and we are rewarded for our loyalty for supporting the pecking order.

Today the preacher sometimes blames bad behaviour on the loss of belief in a soul.

Law-makers blame lack of respect for the law. Ecologists blame human ignorance and stupidity, but it looks to me as though governments and religions ought to be working flat out to help ecologists relieve mankind of ignorance and stupidity. This is because there seems to be very little time left before human over-population and over-exploitation of the Earth's resources puts an end to human civilisation. Survivors will have to start again, with many fewer resources and a far poorer natural environment.

The technological emperor has no clothes: in other words, human civilisation does not depend on each new technological product but on what we do with it. If it allows every human infant to survive, then the human race needs fewer live births. Religions and ideologies belong to a period of human history when the size of the population under their leadership provided the wealth and manpower to dominate neighbouring populations and therefore to provide the best chance that territory and trade could be protected. An increasing population is fiercely supported by Islam and the Roman Catholics – yet the only chance for the human race to survive for more than a few more decades is to start to reduce human population, and if this cannot be achieved by humane means, biology is likely to kill us rapidly and nastily. Belief in a soul seems to me to allow humans to hope that their imaginary god has everything

ed than Arabs and Western adherents to Islam?

destruction of the state of Israel, who believes that his dead Mahdi at the time of his second coming in 2010 will lead Iran in a nuclear war that will exterminate all non-Muslims on earth, and whose refusal to accept Russian aid to produce peaceful nuclear energy destroys any pretence that he has some other objective than building nuclear weapons. Nobody votes for a terrorist except another terrorist. It is therefore transparently obvious that virtually all Palestinians and Iranians are terrorists, and the only reason all Arabs are not terrorists is that they have never learned what their Koran really says.

So why are Indonesian Muslims overwhelmingly moderate, willing to live in harmony with adherents of other religions, grant women an equality that the Koran specifically repudiates,⁴ and even intermarry with Christians,⁵ a capital offense in countries ruled by a sharia composed when the entire human race was a millennium less morally evolved than it is now?

There are two and only two possible explanations. Either Indonesians have never read the Koran, and would be terrorists if they did; or they are indeed as far evolved beyond Arab

and western Asian Muslims as Prothero concluded. The answer to that may determine whether Indonesia joins the allegedly Holy War (oxymoron) against the civilized world that admirers of Osama bin Laden are plotting the instant they acquire the nuclear weapons to delude themselves that they can "win."

1 *USA TODAY* June 23, 2008. All information about Indonesia is from this source.

2 Koran 47:4; 4:89.

3 Koran 8:60.

4 Koran 2:228; 2:282; 4:34; 17:40.

5 Prothero, *ibid*.

Editor's note: Robert Hefner has written *Civil Islam*, which tells the story of Islam and democratisation in Indonesia.

Democratic in the early 1950s and with rich precedents for tolerance and civility, Indonesia succumbed to violence. In 1965, Muslim parties were drawn into the slaughter of half-a-million Communists.

In the aftermath of this bloodshed, a "New Order" regime came to power, suppressing democratic forces and instituting dictatorial controls that held for decades. Yet from this maelstrom of violence,

The guidelines, to be published this year, were designed to cover mosques but have been extended to include other buildings.

The report says that where Muslims object, officers will be obliged to use sniffer dogs only in exceptional cases. Where dogs are used, they will have to wear booties with rubber soles.

ACPO said: "We are trying to ensure that police forces are aware of sensitivities that people can have with the dogs to make sure they are not going against any religious or cultural element within people's homes. It is being addressed and forces are working towards doing it."

Problems faced by the use of sniffer dogs were highlighted last week when Tayside police were forced to apologise for a crime prevention card featuring a German shepherd puppy, in response to a complaint by a Muslim councillor.

That this is just another example of the authorities falling over themselves in a bid to take offence on behalf of Muslims was highlighted by Ibrahim Mogra, one of Britain's leading imams, who dismissed the measures as unnecessary:

"In Islamic law the dog is not regarded as impure, only its saliva is. Most Islamic schools of law agree on that.

"If security measures require to send a dog into a house, then it has to be done. I think ACPO needs to consult better and more widely."

repressed by the state and denounced by conservative Muslims, an Islamic democracy movement emerged, strengthened, and played a central role in the 1998 overthrow of the Soeharto regime. In 1999, Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid was elected President of a reformist, civilian government.

In explaining how this achievement was possible, Robert Hefner emphasises the importance of civil institutions and public civility, but argues that neither democracy nor civil society is possible without a civilised state. Against portrayals of Islam as inherently antipluralist and undemocratic, he shows that Indonesia's Islamic reform movement repudiated the goal of an Islamic state, mobilised religiously ecumenical support, promoted women's rights, and championed democratic ideals.

Bill at 80

BILL McIlroy, a former editor of the *Freethinker*, and a key member of the Brighton & Hove Humanist Society, turned 80 on July 4 – and a day later celebrated his landmark birthday with Society members and family and friends at a party at the Lord Nelson Inn in Brighton.

A prolific writer, Bill has become a recognised voice of secularism in the city as a result of the many letters – humorous and ascerbic – he frequently has published in local newspapers.



Bill McIlroy: GET image

under control regardless of the evidence to the contrary, and therefore they can continue breeding like bacteria. Homosexuality was unpopular because it did not produce babies, but today this could be in its favour. The world's human population is out of control, and without a rapid and effective human reaction it will bring about collapse of our species, to the great relief of all the others.

Police dogged by political correctness

FOLLOWING the news last month that the Tayside Police issued an apology for issuing an information card deemed offensive to Muslims comes reports that police sniffer dogs are to be kitted out with booties to be worn when entering Muslim areas.

According to the *The Times*, police sniffer dogs will have to wear booties when searching the homes of Muslims so as not to cause offence.

The report reveals that guidelines are being drawn up by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) urging awareness of religious sensitivities when using dogs to search for drugs and explosives.

Lillian Ladele: married to bigotry

Continued from p1

the right to be exempt from some of her duties on the grounds that she is a Christian. Putting religious rights and gay rights under the same legal umbrella when they are incompatible was bound eventually to lead to confrontation. This decision appears to show that religious rights trump gay rights, and that should leave gay people quaking in their boots.

"If it sets a precedent, this entirely wrong decision will have major implications for the Government's equality and human rights agenda. This raises all kinds of implications far beyond the gay community. What other duties will religious people now claim exemption from? We have already seen pharmacists refuse contraception on religious grounds and supermarket check-out attendants refuse to handle alcohol or pork products. Others demand that they should not be required to work on holy days.

We urge the Council to appeal and hope the decision is rapidly overturned.

And, writing in *The Times*, under the headline "Lillian, the marriage registrar who's wedded to bigotry", Rod Liddle said:

"Ladele, a bigot, aged 47, does not much like the idea of homosexuals doing anything with each other, let alone getting married. Officiating at such a ceremony was in direct contravention of her beliefs, the tribunal decided.

"Crucial to its judgment was Ladele's 'Christian faith' which, she insisted, precluded her from giving a professional blessing to sodomites. I don't know what would have happened if she had told the tribunal that she wasn't a Christian or a Muslim or of any other faith but just hated poofs. Probably she'd have lost.

"But the fact that she can append her bigotry to a minority view within a church attended by a vanishingly small section of the British population apparently swung the day.

"There is a double irony here: civil ceremonies, for both gays and straights, are supposedly the secular alternative to a church service, so it is a bit iniquitous to find God – or at least Ladele's own, personal, vengeful vision of God – poking his big nose in by proxy.

"Further, there is a large swathe of the Christian church which finds quite invidious all marriage services conducted beyond the reach of Jesus Christ, which is why the Church of England fought long and hard to ensure that, by law, the Bible must not be quoted at these ceremonies.

"Perhaps Ladele can reconvene the tribunal and tell them that, as a Christian, she objects to all secular marriage ceremonies and therefore cannot, on account of her religion, officiate at any of them. To make her do so would be discriminatory, as would sacking her.

"She has the human right to be a marriage registrar and refuse to sanction all secular marriages; to just sit at her desk playing online Sudoku all year while feverishly rubbing her crucifix.

"A compromise might have been to force her to officiate at gay civil partnerships, as required in her job description, but to allow her to shower gay couples with virulent abuse as soon as the formalities were over.

"Perhaps she could scream at them, as they kissed, 'If there is a man who lies with a male as those who lie with a woman, both of them have committed a detestable act, they shall surely be put to death'. (Leviticus 20:13) This, I think, would get the reception going nicely and would be a good talking point for the guests.

"Members of the right-wing press have seen Ladele's case as a "victory for common sense" against the political correctness of Islington Council, which employed this woman.

"It seems to me quite the reverse and the very apogee of political correctness. (Incidentally, can you imagine the *Daily Mail* and others taking the same sort of view if Ladele had happened to be a Muslim?).

"The victory for common sense would have been achieved if Ladele had resigned from her post because she felt that it was no longer compatible with her private beliefs since the legal approval of civil partnerships for gay people in 2004.

"Instead, out of a desire to pay obeisance to any and all forms of religious bigotry, rather than insist to individuals that their views are stupid and medieval, the tribunal has opened the doors to a whole array of nutters with terrible sensibilities to plead their cases.

"Ladele was not expected to endow gay couples with a Christian blessing – indeed she would be forbidden from doing so. She should have either resigned or got on with her job without discrimination, reserving her dislike of homosexuals for her private moments."

But Britain's official centre for bigotry, the Christian Institute which funded Ladele's case, is cock-a-hoop over her victory. The CI's head of communications, Mike Judge, gleefully declared: "... Gay rights should not be treated as trumping religious rights. The law [now] clearly recognises this." Judge added: "If we really believe in equality before the law, that means respecting people who have sincerely held religious beliefs on sexual ethics. The witch-hunt against those who disagree with homosexual practice has to stop."

In its judgment, the employment tribunal found that Miss Lillian Ladele was directly discriminated against by Islington Council after she asked to be allowed not to perform civil partnership registrations.

The tribunal accepted that Islington Council had been able to deliver a "first-class" service to homosexual couples seeking civil partnerships, without Miss Ladele's involvement. Therefore, the Council's decision to require Miss Ladele to perform civil partnership registrations, contrary to her conscience, was an unlawful act of indirect religious discrimination.

The Council's actions also amounted to unlawful harassment. The judgment found that the Council "disregarded and displayed no respect for Ms Ladele's genuinely held religious belief," and it created an "intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for her on grounds of her religion or belief."

Ladele told the *Daily Mail* that as soon as the Civil Partnership Bill began to be debated in the Commons, she knew it would have an impact on her working life, as she had been promoted in 2002 to the position of registrar.

She said she tried to address her concerns by raising the matter with Helen Mendez-Child, the Superintendent Registrar – and her manager. "I told her I would not be able to conduct civil partnerships because it states in the Bible that marriage occurs between a man and a woman, not people of the same sex, and, as a Christian, I try to follow what the Bible teaches.

"I was trying to bring the matter up as soon as possible so we could find a way to work around it.

"I'm not homophobic. I've never had a problem with gay people or their lifestyle – as far as I'm concerned we are all God's children. I worked with several gay people at the Council and had always been friendly with them.

"My issue was purely that I did not want to be the one to facilitate same-sex civil partnerships because I do not agree with them."

• As we went to press, we learned that Islington Council is to appeal against the ruling, saying: "The decision was taken after careful consideration of the legal ruling made by the London Central Employment Tribunal."

Councillor John Gilbert said: "We believe an important question is at stake and the law must be clarified. Islington Council, like all councils and employers, needs to know whether we can expect employees to provide services to all sections of the community, regardless of who they are."

Meanwhile PC Graham Cogman has accused Norfolk Constabulary of discrimination, alleging that their support of gay rights runs contrary to his beliefs that homosexuality is a sin. He said: "The blatant support for homosexual rights in Norfolk Police makes being a Christian officer extremely difficult."

David James reviews *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel C Dennett

DANIEL C Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* traces the growth of religion from folk traditions to its present-day position in global conflict. It seems religion has always been with us, from witch doctors to cardinals, from ritual human sacrifices to suicide bombers. Yes, God has a lot to answer for. Except of course that, as we "brights" know, He exists only as an idea, a meme, a cultural artifact that evolves according to society's needs. ("Brights" is Dennett's term for atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, secular humanists and other non-theists, a term flattering to our readership but by implication somewhat pejorative to believers.)

The "Spell" that Dennett attempts to break is that of magic, the supernatural belief that fascinates children and the simple-minded, that shackling of freedom of thought that fosters the delegation of freewill and personal respon-

Pray and display

A "pray and display" parking permit has been introduced in Barnet, north London, to help priests and other religious officials visit members of their faiths more easily.

It will allow drivers on religious duties to park in residents' bays without being fined or clamped. Under the scheme members of 11 recognised faiths will be able to apply for the community permits if they can provide a letter of support from their place of worship and a description of the religious duties they must carry out.

The scheme was set up by Barnet Council to help religious leaders reach sick and vulnerable members of their congregations more easily. Priests seeking to administer last rites to dying parishioners, or other religious leaders visiting the sick and needy were said to be struggling to find spaces.

But the council, which is believed to be the first to run such a scheme in Britain, said it would also consider applications from new religions. The idea sparked speculation that the borough could soon become a hotbed of new faiths.

The list of recognised religions includes Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Unitarianism, as well as Baha'i, Jainism, Rastafarianism, and Zoroastrianism.

A spokesman said they were the faiths recognised by the 2006 Equalities Act, adding: "There isn't a limit. If a new religion sprang up overnight and became recognised it would be considered."

The annual permit will cost £40.00

sibility. Religion, Dennett insists, must be as open to enquiry as any other natural phenomena; there is no "holy soil", no hiding place. Thus religion's rituals, elaborate ceremonies, taboos, terrifying threats and punishments for heresy or apostasy are exposed for the frauds they are – tricks to catch the needy and the gullible, tools of those whom Karl Popper would call the enemies of the open society.

Valuably, the author disposes of that old chestnut that religion is essentially connected with morality. The Abrahamic religions' notion that man needs both a carrot (Paradise) and a stick (Hell) to be moral is seen as "a demeaning view of human nature". God the Policeman is not needed in modern democracies, and neither is God the Role-model, the pattern of a loving, caring Creator to whom one looks for support and guidance. Furthermore, Dennett exposes the myth that moral good is in essence spiritual as opposed to the "moral evil" of scientific materialism. As Dennett puts it, conventional wisdom insists that "we materialists are the bad guys, and those who believe in anything supernatur-

al, however goofy and gullible the particular belief, have at least this much going for them: they're 'on the side of the angels'."

Religion, as Dennett shows, has evolved, but it doesn't have to be good for us. It can be a balm, but it is also addictive and can be poisonous. And there is no God gene that has somehow promoted human survival; religion seduces but it is also dangerous to health. The solution? Education, according to the author, is the only answer, beginning with mixed sex and open schools competing with faith schools for pupils. Far from banning religious education from the syllabus, as in the American public schools system, he suggests that through education and rational analysis "we could start to change the climate of opinion that holds religion to be above discussion, above criticism, above challenge."

The trouble is, you don't create an open society overnight; it takes years, centuries even, to evolve an antidote to religious toxins. *Breaking the Spell* demands as much faith and dedication as we "brights" can collectively muster.

• Daniel C Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin Books, 2007. £9.99.

Jesus and Mo



Christianity and Western Civilisation

IT IS frequently claimed that Western civilisation and its core values are rooted in Christianity. The evidence suggests otherwise.

The industrial revolution brought about profound changes in the nature of society and its political institutions. It is to these changes that we owe the emergence of secular parliamentary democracies and the core values of freedom, tolerance, and equal rights for all citizens.

A new class of industrial capitalists emerged who challenged the political and economic dominance of a land-owning aristocracy. The pressure, for the extension of the franchise, first to an emerging middle-class, and then to a growing working-class of town labourers, and eventually to women. The pressures for reform came not from the influence of the Church, but from grass-roots secular movements such as the Chartists, trade unions, and suffragettes. The extension of the franchise by the 1832 Reform Act was actually opposed by the Bench of Bishops in the House of Lords.

Furthermore, Christianity seeks to limit the fundamental right to freedom of speech by its claim to a privileged status, protected from major criticism by blasphemy laws.

The fight for freedom is an expression of the human spirit. It is secular parliamentary democracy which safeguards freedom, tolerance, and equality under the rule of law. It owes nothing to the influence of Christianity.

PROF STEPHEN COTGROVE
SUFFOLK

Secularism

IN reply to David Flint (*Points of View*, June), for a very long time – most recently in my entry on “secularism” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* – I’ve used “secularism” to denote secular humanism and “secularity” to denote the separation of Church and State. Though this usage does not appear to have caught on, nobody to my knowledge has ever questioned it.

Incidentally, though I and all secularists I know personally are atheists, the NSS has never been an officially atheist society.

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

God hates Fags

SURELY the two little girls in the April, 2008, issue, with “God Hates Fags” on their fronts, are merely demonstrating for TAT (“Toddlers Against Tobacco”).

NI BARNES
London

The “Rapture”

THE “Rapture” (July *Freethinker*) raises many questions ... as well as Christians. For example, will those Christians having a shower or a bath at the time be whisked, naked and wet, into the sky?

If indoors, will they leave by a door or a window before ascending, or soar straight through the roof?

The gathering will take place according to Luke (ch17 v37) where “...the eagles be ...” so one has a vision of Christians whizzing (at what speed?) across the sky at a few thousand feet, for up to thousands of miles.

For Christians with a fear of flying, home insurers and air-traffic controllers, it will be a particularly bad time.

The article says that the “Rapture” is “a ludicrous belief held by some evangelicals”. I’m not sure how you can be an evangelical and not believe it.

RAY MCDOWELL
Co Antrim

Quotes to share

FOLLOWING Barbara Smoker’s suggestion in the June edition of *Freethinker*, here’s a telling little nugget from Isaac Newton:

“Tis’ the temper of the hot and superstitious part of mankind in matters of religion ever to be fond of mysteries, and for that reason, to like best what they understand least.”

JOHN RIDDELL
London

Race, religion and immigration

UPON reflection, I think I was perhaps a tad too harsh on Dan J Bye when I first responded to his attempt to engage me in a dialogue about race, religion and immigration. As he has also been brave enough to address these issues (a political minefield, populated with hysterics from both the racist and anti-racist lobbies), he deserves the clear and unambiguous response he demands in his July letter. So here it is:

First off, Dan wants an answer to my alleged link between immigration and religious extremism. Well, if he returns to my original article *Why Freethinkers Should Proceed From Race Fact, Not Race Fiction* (December 2007), he will see that a very topical example was provided at the time, namely the immigrant Muslim doctors who engineered last summer’s car bomb attacks in London and Glasgow. Then there are a host of notorious others – do the names Qatada, Hamza and Bakri not sound chillingly familiar? These are rare examples of ultra-extremism, it’s true, but they readily found a small but significant following among the Muslim population, most of them first or second generation immigrants themselves. And that’s before we get to the much bigger pool of Muslim immigrants who live within the law, but who harbour some very unpleasant beliefs and draconian restrictions that they want to force on the rest of us. These people are only here because the liberal elite who run this country have so mismanaged immigration, as Dan, himself, concedes.

This is not to say that I am hostile to Muslims or immigrants in general. Like most people in Britain, I think it is important to be fair, tolerant and welcoming to anyone who comes here from overseas, whether permanently or temporarily. Providing they are here legally, “keep their nose clean”, contribute something to society and don’t try to force

their own way of life on the rest of us (and “the rest of us” includes settled immigrants already living here), as far as I am concerned, “My country is your country – enjoy!” However, if they seriously abuse that welcome, by selling drugs to our kids, by promoting racism, or by bringing terror to these shores, for example, they should do their time in prison and then be deported without further ado. This is not unreasonable: in fact, in cases where we are not royally shafted by so-called “human rights” lawyers, it often already happens.

When I started writing on this topic in 2005, the proportion of foreign prisoners in our jails was 1 in 8. It is now 1 in 7. This figure does not include naturalised or second generation immigrants. This is just one of many empirical barometers by which it is possible to gauge the immigration “free-for-all” that Dan denies has occurred. He also thinks I must be “living on another planet” if I believe that modernisers in the Labour, Liberal and Conservative parties are advancing the cause of secularism. So who does he think abolished the Blasphemy law then? The Socialist Workers Party? *Earth calling Dan! Earth calling Dan!* If you want to advance the secular cause, the first thing you have to do is support a grown-up, mainstream political party that has some credible chance of achieving power, not some dwindling *ad hoc* association of Left-wing losers. Anything else is just pissing in the wind.

DIESEL BALAAM
London

CHRIS Barker, in his courageous article airing the controversies surrounding race, religion and intelligence (*Analysis, Freethinker*, July) opines that the decline in religious beliefs in developed countries is linked to a rise in intelligence. Optimism is a fine quality with which to view the world, but I fear he – and Prof Richard Lynn, whom he quotes extensively – could be wrong on both counts.

The dramatic decline of Christianity in Britain is not matched by similar declines in competing religions, minority or mainstream, nor in irrational belief in general, and is probably due to the influence of scientific reasoning filtering up and down the food chain, not an increase in intelligence *per se*. And in the United States belief in God is a requisite for social acceptance more acute now than at any time since the Constitution was written (Susan Jacoby, 2005).

For decades scientists have been warning about the disruptive dangers of religious fundamentalism, also that dysgenic breeding (low intelligent women bearing more children than the highly intelligent) will lower national average IQs. Sanctioning either social trend, let alone allowing a combination of the two (a natural affiliation) to run riot, is a recipe for disaster. As Dr David Starkey said years ago when a panelist on the BBC’s *Moral Maze* (before it was dumbed down by the inclusion of a faith perspective), “It’s a cultural insanity to encourage people with an IQ less than a



hundred to assert themselves." A truism that has resulted in the indiscipline inciting much that is fractious in society. The latest book I've read that tackles these emotive and related economic issues is Richard Koch's and Chris Smith's *Suicide of the West* (2007).

Twenty-five years ago, Raymond Cattell (1983, pp 175) listed eleven predictions for the consequence of a downward shift in the intelligence distribution curve of a society. In Britain and America, all are coming true. To quote a few: 1. A fall in academic standards ... 6. A rise in the frequency of delinquency ... 7.(b) [A]n increase in religious expression. 10. A shift of cultural and recreational interests to cruder tastes ... 11. A check to the growth of social and political freedom and a reversion to a more detailed prescription of individual behaviour.

Politicians seem to be in denial of or are muted by the enormity of these issues and their causes, choosing instead to deal with the consequences by the "creeping normality" of, for example, increased surveillance, checks, controls – and multi-faithism. Has a mosque gone up near you lately?

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

Historicity of Jesus

IN the February 2008 issue, Robert Morrell queried my claim that no historian questions the historicity of Jesus (*Jesus: man of mystery or merely a myth?*). He then made nonsense of his scepticism by assuming something I never claimed: that all historians believe the gospel, swallowing it whole. He claimed contradictorily that "lack of evidence does not mean that there is none". Actually the "old saying" is that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence", a rather different matter. The point here is that the lack of a historian who denies the existence of Jesus does not mean that all historians accept it. Most historians have probably never had an interest in the matter.

Mr Morrell could perhaps have refuted my claim by exhibiting a historian who accepted the Jesus Myth Theory. Instead he exhibited the controversial views of a 73 year-old theologian, Prof Thomas Thompson of the University of Copenhagen. Thompson and others in the biblical minimalism movement hold that the Bible cannot be trusted as history. But what do they know of history? They are not historians. The publication of one of Thompson's books led to his sacking by the Roman Catholic Maquette University and another provoked a storm of vituperation from archaeologist Prof William Dever. One of his critics observed that Michel Foucault's dictum that "all history is fiction" echoed throughout Thompson's work.

In my book, I noted that the problem of Jesus is basically historical, but with associated problems in ancient languages and religions. Nevertheless, as the French historian Camille Jullian observed, historians may have

to speculate, to connect the rare details which remain of the past, although they should carefully distinguish between such speculation and the data to be handled.

In preparing my book, I especially looked for the views of historians on the historicity of Jesus. In fact, there is a whole chapter (*Did Jesus exist?*) devoted to this question. Among the authors I quoted there, were historians like Charles Guinebert and James Mackinnon, neither of whom doubted Jesus' existence. What about Jewish historians?

Surely their view should be paramount. Joseph Klausner and Geza Vermes had no doubt that Jesus existed, as did the contemporary historian Josephus. Hyam Maccoby, whom Morrell described as a "Jewish historian", but who was not actually trained as one, also accepted Jesus' historicity. The foreword to my book was actually written by a historian of religion (James Thrower); he expressed no doubt about historicity.

Were those who denied Jesus' existence historians? Notable mythicist George Wells certainly was not; he was a German scholar. Do modern historians deny Jesus' historicity? If so, let Mr Morrell produce one.

Mr Morrell seems to believe that because Christianity was developed by Paul (I accept this), it had no foundation in a historical Jesus. This does not follow; indeed, it is a dangerous assumption.

I am a loss to understand the purpose of Mr Morrell's article. The title indicates that he seeks to determine whether or not Jesus existed. However, he does not address that question. Rather he rambles through matters that he can find treated in depth in my book. I recommend it to him, and to all those of your readers who are inclined to accept the simplistic idea that the story of Jesus is a myth. Those disinclined to study the matter should beware of jumping to conclusions and accepting mythicist notions. Jesus did exist but he did not intend to create Christianity. He was a Jew who mistakenly thought that he was the expected Messiah.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Kidnapped Eucharist

THE story of the kidnapped Eucharist in Florida last month reminded me of a song written by the American satirist Tom Lehrer almost fifty years ago. Responding to news that the Ecumenical Council in Rome, known as Vatican II, planned to make the Church "more commercial" by "introducing the vernacular into portions of the mass, to replace Latin, and to widen somewhat the range of music permissible in the liturgy", Lehrer said "I feel that if they really want to sell the product in this secular age, they ought to redo some of the liturgical music in popular song forms. I have a modest example here. It's called the Vatican rag."

Here, to my mind, are the three best verses:

*Get in line in that processional,
Step into that small confessional,
There, the guy who's got religion 'll
Tell you if your sin's original.
If it is, try playin' it safer,
Drink the wine and chew the wafer.
Two, four, six, eight,
Time to transubstantiate!
So get down upon your knees,
Fiddle with your rosaries,
Bow your head with great respect,
And genuflect, genuflect, genuflect!
Make a cross on your abdomen,
When in Rome do like a Roman,
Ave Maria,
Gee it's good to see ya,
Gettin' ecstatic an'
Sorta dramatic an'
Doin' the Vatican Rag!*

ARNOLD TANNER
Florida

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

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Summer programme available.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.nrlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Sept 3, 8pm. Michael Irwin: *Embryos and Abortion – Victory in 2008?*

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.

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

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

Derbyshire Secularists: Meet at 7.00pm, the third Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of Derby. Full details on website www.secularderby.org

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

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

Hampstead Humanist Society: Information: N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Website: www.hampstead.humanists.net
Harrow Humanist Society. Meetings usually second Wednesday of the month (except January, July and August) at 8pm at HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. There will be no evening meeting in August. Instead, on August 20th, we will be having lunch together (12pm) at the Preston pub near Preston Road station. Non-members welcome. Further information from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House. Balgores Cresc, Gidea Park. Thurs Aug 7, 8pm. John Bridge: *Darwin's Dangerous Idea..* Thurs, Sept 4, 8pm. Norman Dannatt: *The Joys of Teaching.*

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:

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

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Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com.

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

Lancashire Secular Humanists: Meetings 7.30 on 3rd Wed of month at Great Eccleston Village Centre, 59 High St, The Square, Great Eccleston (Nr. Preston) PR3 0YB. www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk. Information: Ian Abbott, Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ. 01253 812308. Email: ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk

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

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

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: Maureen Lofmark, 01570 422648 mlofmark@btinternet.com

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@nlononhumanists.fsnet.co.uk website: www.nlononhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

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

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

Sheffield Humanist Society: Information: 0114 2309754. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Public Meeting first Wednesday of the month, 7.30pm.

South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689. Email: info@southhantshumanists.org.uk

website: www.southhantshumanists.org.uk

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 & Secularists: 5 Hadleigh Road, Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828. www.suffolkhands.org.uk. Email: mail@suffolkhands.org.uk

Sutton Humanists: 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.wmhhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

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

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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