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Shame on them! Cowardly publishers cave in to religious intimidation

By Barry Duke

A SHAMEFUL apology made to a vile British hatemonger, and the ditching of a burqua-ripper of a novel about the love life of the Prophet Mohammed's child bride Aisha, are just two examples in the last month of a growing tendency to capitulate to religious intimidation.

First, the *South Wales Echo* proved a disgrace to journalism when it issued an apology to Stephen Green after it had published a piece by its award-winning columnist Dan O'Neill (See page 7).

Beneath the headline *If God considers gays an abomination why did he create them?*, O'Neill tore into Stephen Green, who heads a homophobic evangelical outfit called Christian Voice.

Green was furious. He managed to muster a pathetic handful of cronies who picketed the *Echo's* offices, demanding an apology for the offence it had given Christians. He also insisted that O'Neill's column, posted on its website, be removed.

The mouthy zealot complained that "O'Neill firstly declares that the Bible is not the word of God. It was written by 'a wild-eyed Bronze Age nomad'. Then, in a remarkable display of ignorance of the social mores of the Holy Land in the 1st Century, he remarks that Jesus Christ could be accused of homosexuality because the Apostles were all male. Not content with that, he says it is 'suspicious' that Jesus 'picks up small boys and girls and puts his hands upon them'."

In what must be one of the most shameful capitulations in modern journalistic history, the spineless *Echo* removed the piece from its website, and rushed into print with this grovelling apology: "It has come to our attention that in an article on Wednesday, July 16, headlined 'If God considers gays and abomination why did he create them?' our columnist Dan O'Neill offended a number of Christians. We would like to apologise for any offence caused to those people who believe the article insulted the Christian faith, Jesus Christ and the Holy Bible."

When O'Neill upset some readers in an earlier column about the Eisteddfod, the paper's then editor wrote: "A light-hearted columnist like Dan SHOULD be able to poke fun at something like the Eisteddfod. Just as he should any other subject, be it Christianity, Islam, politics, sex, the colour of your socks. As long as he is acting within the law he, and every other writer, should be allowed the freedom to write and to provoke discussion."

But all it took for the current editor, Mike Hill, to ditch his predecessor's admirable defence of free speech was one pathetic demonstration by a testy bunch of delusional

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'Blasphemy' surfaces in Canada in a new guise

DESPITE determined efforts by various Muslim groups to instigate charges against European editors who had the guts to publish (and republish) the now infamous Danish cartoons of Mohammed, the only Western publisher brought to trial for the "crime" was Ezra Levant, pictured below.

Although Canada still has a blasphemous libel law, originally imported from the UK, Levant – then editor of the *Western Standard* – was not brought before a criminal court to face charges. Instead, his case went before the Alberta Human Rights Commission, where he was accused of "discrimination" for publishing cartoons that were "stereotypical, negative and offensive".

According to Kathy Shaidle, of *The American Spectator*, "Levant is a brash conservative provocateur in a nation of smug liberal wimps. He has been mak-



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Freethinker editor Barry Duke shines a light on the gay king of Buganda

EACH time I begin the monthly production cycle of the *Freethinker* – something I have now been doing for over a decade – it is in the fervent hope that I might produce at least one issue in which there is no cause to mention homosexuality.

Some hope! There is simply no way of dodging the subject, as it runs through contemporary theological discourse at all levels like the marbling in a wedge of Stilton.

There are days, in fact, that I wake up with the feeling that if homosexuality did not exist, the churches would fall silent for want of anything at all interesting to bang on about. They'd be stuck in a perpetual loop of banal, flaccid Thoughts for the Day.

Let's face it, if they were to drop homosexuality and switch their pulpitic wrath to, for example, picking up sticks on the Sabbath, congregations – or what threadbare old tufts of them survive in this country – would roll their eyes, snort with derision and trip over themselves in a frenzied totter to the exits.

Why? Well the boring "sin" of violating the Sabbath in this manner, which, according to *Leviticus* merits the death sentence, is unlikely to induce the same *frisson* of excitement that sex does. Especially sex between (or among) two or more males, the idea of which certainly ignites the passions of a certain Stephen Green. Why else would this creature haunt every Gay Pride gathering in the land?

But when it comes to lesbianism, Christians are pretty well up a gum tree, as dear old abomination-laden *Leviticus* – or *Death-dealing for Dummies*, as it might now be called – signally fails to mention women "lying" with women.

The most recent example of homosexuality dominating religious debate came during the latest Lambeth conference, where it almost brought about a schism in the world-wide Anglican Communion. In fact, I have to rack my brains to think of anything else the bishops dealt with of note, apart from that other hot potato, women priests.

The most homophobic of the Anglican bishops, not surprisingly, were from Africa, where homosexuality, they say, was "unknown" until recently.

Unknown my arse! A while back, while doing some research into African attitudes towards homosexuality, I came across this observation by the black American writer and activist, Keith Boykin, a former Clinton aide, on gay issues:

"African homophobia is not much different from the homophobia in the US, but what makes it noticeable is the assertion that homosexuality belongs solely to other cultures. The

leaders of these anti-gay campaigns seem to share a common belief that homosexuality is somehow un-African, a vestige of European colonialism. But 'culture and values are changing things', says Cary Alan Johnson, a representative for an American relief and development agency, who has been working in Central Africa since 1993.

"Some would argue that multi-party democracy, gender equality and restrictions on child labour are also un-African", says Johnson. 'That doesn't mean that they haven't been embraced and integrated into African jurisprudence.'

"Johnson has written several published essays about homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa and points to 'the growing academic research' on the subject as evidence that gays and lesbians existed in Africa long before the Europeans.

"Much of the modern anti-gay rhetoric, however, is based on Christianity, which white Europeans introduced to Africa. If African homosexuality existed freely before the Europeans, then it seems that homophobia, not homosexuality, is what the Europeans actually brought to the continent. Thus, anti-gay rhetoric makes the African leaders less revolutionary, and more evolutionary, as they evolve into the same prejudiced culture of their oppressors."

Of the African countries that have set their faces most strongly against homosexuality, Uganda is one of the most vociferous in its condemnation. But ironically, the country's last king was an openly gay young man called Mwanga II Basammula Ekkere.

Uganda, not surprisingly, comes over all coy when Mwanga's name is brought up, for not only was one of its rulers homosexual, he also had a very low opinion of competing Anglican and Catholic Christian missionaries who were hell-bent in their efforts to convert his people. He realised that the sophisticated culture of what was then Buganda would be destroyed by the missionaries, and he bitterly resented the fact that members of his own court had fallen under Christianity's baleful influence. They took to warning others in his court, notably his pages, not to indulge in gay sex with the king, for to do so would be a "sin" – "sin" being a new and exciting concept which new converts seized upon with glee.

Mwanga also spurned the attention of Muslims, because to convert to Islam would mean that he would have to have his penis mutilated. He had a horror of circumcision, so told the Muslims to buggery off, and take their vile practice with them.



King Mwanga II of Buganda (1868-1903)

So, with a plague of missionaries to the left, Muslims "round-heads" to the right, his sex life in chaos, and his country about to slip out of his control, Mwanga resorted to a little blood-letting. Between 1885 and 1887, he had a number of converts killed, 22 of whom had become Roman Catholics. The "Uganda Martyrs" as they are now known, were canonised by Pope Paul something-or-other in 1964.

On October 29, 1885, Mwanga had the English Archbishop, James Hannington, knifed to death. Hannington, from Westpierpoint in Sussex, was on his way to Buganda to support the "persecuted" missionaries, but was apprehended and sent to glory before he managed to enter the independent kingdom. The meddling fool really ought to have seen it coming.

The British were not best-pleased at Hannington's death, and had the king overthrown as a prelude to claiming Buganda (now Uganda) as a colony.

If you can get Ugandan Christians to acknowledge the fact that they had a gay king in pre-colonialist days, they will probably hiss, splutter and choke before claiming that Mwanga was a predatory paedophile; a lustful pederast who preyed on his young pages.

Well, they *would* say that, wouldn't they?

And, no doubt, so would our "friend", the twisted Stephen Green.

On August 2 a bedraggled and deranged-looking Green, together with a pathetically small band of damp, sodomy-obsessed Christian "witnesses," clustered under a grey, drizzly sky in attempt to communicate their collective misery to the hundreds of thousands of revellers who took part in the annual Brighton Gay Pride event, which had an "around the world" theme.

Observed Green: "The participants were, as usual, overwhelmingly white. Perhaps the funniest example of the lack of any real 'around the world' involvement was the 'Free Zimbabwe' float, which had not one African participant.

"Homosexuality, of course, is completely beyond the pale in African culture – as it was in ours until fairly recently."

What really was funny was the fact that the sun came out for the main festivities in Preston Park – to which the the soggy Jesus junkies were refused access by the organisers!

'Broken' Church of England should be disestablished

THE 650-odd bishops who attended the once-a-decade Lambeth conference went home with open schism between the liberal and conservative wings of the worldwide Anglican Communion averted. But only just, for the split may merely have been postponed.

"But at least the unedifying spectacle of comrades in Christ tearing strips off each other over gay sex will vanish from the headlines for a bit," observed *The Economist*, which then posed the question: "Does it matter if Anglicans fall out?"

"Most churches are riven by tensions ... But Anglicans lack the glue that binds [other] churches together: the power of the Pope to impose discipline on straying Catholics; the body of undisputed theology that unites Orthodox believers even when they quarrel.

It added: "As a secular newspaper that supports gay marriage and believes in a firm line between Church and State, we can hardly claim to be a neutral observer in this. Yet trying to look at the Communion from an Anglican perspective (or that of most of them), two things stand out. First, schism might not be a bad thing. And disestablishment would be a very good thing.

"The first point is simple realism. Too many angels have danced on too many pins as prelates struggle to embrace mutually incompatible beliefs. The rock on which the Anglican Communion is breaking is ostensibly the consecration of openly gay clergy, especially bishops, and blessings for same-sex unions. Only a small minority in America's well-groomed Episcopal churches or the Church of England's underpopulated pews finds clerical homosexuality non-negotiably bad nowadays. Many in Africa and other parts of the 'global South' do – and they see efforts to enforce liberal values as 'colonial'.

"So why haven't liberals and conservatives gone their separate ways before now?

"One reason is the sheer weight of history, but this is less important than it was. Another is that most upstarts would rather take over an existing business than go off and start their own – and in Britain, at any rate, Anglicanism's heirs are in for some serious real estate too. A third is the fact that the Church of England, alone of the Communion, is an established church, its practices and values intertwined with the state and nation it serves. Its peculiar status has inclined it to

fudge the argument.

"Establishment brings fewer material advantages to the Church of England these days than the Lutherans, for example, enjoy in much of Scandinavia. And a creeping disestablishment is under way. Yet centuries of crowning kings, burying princesses, celebrating the nation's victories, running a lot of its state-funded schools and getting Parliament to cast an eye over the decisions of its ruling General Synod have made the Church of England what it is. It prides itself on keeping the door open to all comers, though few pop in. It stresses inclusiveness and stands up for a public space for all faiths. Admirable stuff – but its numbers are falling.

"Compare that with churches in America, or Africa. No theocrats they, but fishers of men in competitive waters. Their messages must be more sharply defined to win souls. But by keeping the focus soft, as an established church must, the Church of England, which dominates this least authoritarian of associations, has blunted the contest of ideas and distorted debate within the Communion (and its own ranks). Time, surely, for all sides to fight their corner, free of the shackles of the state."

Christian cult starves 'demonic' toddler to death – because he wouldn't say 'Amen' after meals

YET another story has just broken of extreme child abuse by demented Christians. The latest horrific report concerns the death of two-year-old Javon Thompson, whose remains were found in a suitcase after he was starved to death by members of a US religious cult – including his mother – because he refused to say "amen" after meals.

His mother, Ria Ramkissoon, 21, has been charged with first-degree murder, and Baltimore police said three other members of a group called 1 Mind Ministries have also been charged.

Police and Ramkissoon's family say the group is a cult. Members did not seek medical care for Javon when he stopped breathing and the boy died in his mother's arms, according to court documents that described police interviews with a confidential informant and two children. He would have been about 19 months old when police say adults stopped feeding him in December 2006.

Ramkissoon is being held in the psychiatric ward of Baltimore's Central Booking and Intake Centre, and a bail review was postponed. The three other people charged in connection with Javon's death – Queen Antoinette, 40, also known as Toni Ellsberry or Toni Sloan; Marcus Cobbs, 21; and Trevia Williams, 21 – were already in custody. They

were arrested in May in New York City on unrelated charges. A fifth alleged cult member, Steven Bynum, has been charged with first-degree murder but remains at large.

Ramkissoon's family said she should not be held responsible for her son's death. Her stepfather, Craig Newton, said she "had no control over that situation at all", and her mother Seeta Khadan-Newton claimed it wasn't her daughter's decision not to feed the boy. "My daughter was a victim. Just like my grandson. Somebody made that decision to not feed the child, and my daughter had to follow instructions."

According to the court documents, Ramkissoon joined 1 Mind Ministries after Javon was born.

The documents show police interviewed two school-age children who had been part of the group but were taken away from members by Philadelphia police. The children told investigators that members stopped feeding Javon in December 2006, in part because the boy refused to say "amen" after dinner. Members also viewed Javon as "a demon."

Another unnamed informant told police that, after Javon died, Antoinette left the boy's body in a room for more than a week, claiming that "God was going to raise Javon from the dead".

Afterwards, Antoinette placed his body in a green suitcase. Police recovered the suitcase in



Javon Thompson, starved to death

April after a tip-off. The remains of a small child were inside. DNA tests are pending to confirm the boy's identity.

Meanwhile, in Mobile, Alabama, a judge ruled last month that there is probable cause to charge a part-time evangelist – 37-year-old Anthony Hopkins – with the murder of his wife, Arletha Hopkins.

District Judge Charles McKnight was told that Hopkins buried his wife in a shallow grave, dug up the body and put it in the freezer when the bloating body began to crack the ground. The 36-year-old wife had not been seen for at least three years before her body was found on July 28 in a freezer at the couple's home in north Mobile.

Hopkins is also charged with rape, sodomy, incest and sexual abuse in an alleged attack on a female relative. Investigators testified that the woman is five months pregnant and claims Hopkins is the father.

Cowardly publishers cave in to religious intimidation

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loons. When I learned of this cowardly capitulation, I immediately launched an online petition, still running, at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/southwalesecho/index.html> calling on the *Echo* "to show some backbone and publicly retract the apology."

"We also call on the paper to reinstate O'Neil's column on its website".

I also used the *Freethinker* website to publicise the petition. Within hours, websites around the country had cottoned on to the story.

The prominent US writer, Ophelia Benson (featured in last month's *Freethinker*), was among the first to pick up on the story, and succinctly summed up the issue on her hugely popular site:

"Do we want 'Christian Voice' telling newspapers what they can publish? No, we damn well don't. We don't trust 'Christian Voice' to choose wisely; we prefer to take our chances with competent newspaper editors rather than with puffed-up, publicity-seeking, tiny-minded religious zealots.

"Any columnist is bound to offend a certain percentage of readers. One who is determinedly bland and boring in order not to offend anyone simply offends all the people who don't like bland boring writing.

"It's no good trying to put out a newspaper that won't offend anyone! 1. It can't be done, and 2. It damn well shouldn't be done. And it certainly shouldn't be done when what is supposed to have been 'insulted' is 'the Christian faith, Jesus Christ and the Holy Bible'."

And on his site, Cynical Dragon observed: "This is absolutely disgusting. Why is a reputable paper like the *Echo* apologising to a fanatical group of hate-filled morons? Why do they bother employing a provocative writer like Dan O'Neill if they cave in to extremists so readily?

"What is the *South Wales Echo* apologising for exactly? The main Christian disagreement with the article was that Jesus may have been gay. This is, of course, upsetting to Christians, but why should anyone apologise for making the suggestion. Does the *South Wales Echo* support the idea that the suggestion that Jesus was gay is blasphemous because homosexuality is a sin? Are they siding with Christian Voice and their ilk?

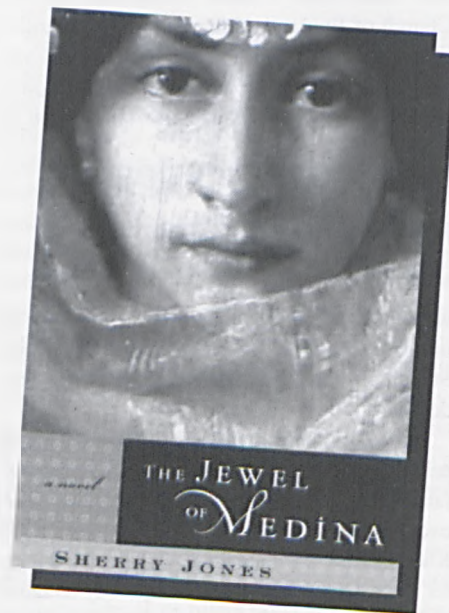
The Humanist Society of Scotland lost no time in tracking down the "vanished" article, and published it on its website.

The worst aspect of the *Echo's* apology is the message it sends to writers and publishers: "Mess with the religious at your peril!" The apology was an outrageous betrayal of journalistic principles. As one petition signatory put

it, "In a free society there should be no right to not be offended by an opposing point of view. Rolling over like this simply encourages the religious to keep demanding that we behave and think in a way they approve."

The second breathtaking capitulation to religious bullying took place in the US, when Random House Publishing decided last month to pull the plug on Sherry Jones' novel *The Jewel of Medina*, a racy piece of historic fiction centred on the love life of the Prophet Mohammed's under-aged bride Aisha.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, "Thomas Perry, deputy publisher at Random House Publishing Group, said that it 'disturbs us that we feel we cannot publish it right now'. He said that after sending out advance copies of the novel, the company received 'from credible and unrelated sources, cautionary advice not only that the publication of this book might be offensive to some in the Muslim communi-



ty, but also that it could incite acts of violence by a small, radical segment'.

One of those "credible sources" is Denise Spellberg, an associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Texas in Austin.

Ms Spellberg was deeply upset over the manuscript, and went wailing to Shahed Amanullah – a guest lecturer in Ms Spellberg's classes and the editor of a popular Muslim website. She claims the novel "made fun of Muslims and their history ... It is very ugly, stupid piece of work ... a declaration of war ... explosive stuff ... a national security issue."

Spellberg also asked Amanullah to warn Muslims about the book. Random House immediately took fright and cancelled the novel.

Ophelia Benson was incandescent with rage, and commented:

"Denise Spellberg, self-appointed censor and destroyer of books: you should be embarrassed at yourself. You should go into a very different line of work, right away – you should not be allowed anywhere near students, and you should never get another book or article published."

Equally outraged was journalist Andy Armitage, who observed: "What we have allowed into our world now is something very dark, very sinister, something that will, if we're not very careful, soon have us culturally hogtied, appealing – before we dare to publish a word – to some bloody fatwa committee of bearded, grizzled old men who wouldn't know a good piece of fiction if they ever reached far enough into the real world to take it down off the shelf."

Now a British barrister has called on Random House US to pay "substantial compensation" to Jones.

According to a report in the *Guardian*, Geoffrey Robertson QC, whose latest book *The Tyrannicide Brief* is published by Random House US and who was under terrorist threat whilst acting for Rushdie, said: "We can't be over-critical of American publishers for cowering under terrorist threats. After all, the *Guardian*, like every other British newspaper, lacked the gumption to publish the Danish cartoons. But all who care about free speech have a duty to make this sort of censorship counter-productive. Random House should pay this author substantial compensation, and the book should be placed on a website so everyone can read it."

In a statement, Random House said: "We stand firmly by our responsibility to support our authors and the free discussion of ideas, even those that may be construed as offensive by some. However, a publisher must weigh that responsibility against others that it also bears, and in this instance we decided, after much deliberation, to postpone publication for the safety of the author, employees of Random House Inc, booksellers and anyone else who would be involved in distribution and sale of the book."

Postpone? Until Muslims finally grow up and stop throwing childish tantrums? Well, that's not going to happen any time soon.

When Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* was published in 1988, attempts were made on the lives of his Norwegian and Italian publishers, and the Japanese translator of the novel was killed.

Jones said she did not believe there was any risk involved in publishing the book. "Frankly I'm more afraid of global warming than of terrorist attacks," she said. "I did expect my book would be controversial, just because I'm a pink



Lead vocalist Green, right, with his band, Hookers for Jesus, picket the offices of the South Wales Echo. Photo: Nicked from the Christian Voice website.

woman writing about a culture that was not my own and a religion that is not my own ... [but] my aim was not to provoke, it was to portray the difficulty of being a woman in that era, and to portray this wonderful heroine who overcame obstacles to become a prominent figure in Islam."

A wonderful heroine? An under-aged abuse victim more like!

Jones skirts around the edges of Aisha's sexual relationship with Mohammed without going into graphic details. "This was the beginning of something new, something terrible. Soon I would be lying on my bed beneath him, squashed like a scarab beetle, flailing and sobbing while he slammed himself against me. He would not want to hurt me, but how could he help it? It's always painful the first time."

The author compared the novel, which was described as "soft-core pornography" by one

academic, to works such as Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*, which retells the story of the rape of Dinah from Genesis chapter 34. "My portrayal of Mohammed is extremely respectful" she said. "Mohammed says in the Koran that he was a mortal. I assume he did all the things a man does. He had 12 wives – I'm sure he had sex with them."

Publisher Andrew Franklin, director of Profile Books, said that Random House should not have been deterred from publishing by imagined threats of Islamic extremism. "It's absolutely shocking. They are such cowards," he said. Franklin pointed to Penguin's publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988. "I think Penguin acted with great integrity," said Franklin, who was working for Penguin at the time. "They behaved as any publisher in the West should do, and upheld freedom of publication and freedom of speech. They stuck by

their guns at not inconsiderable risk to their senior executives. These are the principles we should live and die by."

It's not only Christian zealots and Islamic scholars who are building a bulwark against free expression – it's rabbinical ones too.

Last month we learned that Amazon has banned Michael A Hoffman's *Judaism Discovered: A Study of the Anti-Biblical Religion of Racism, Self-Worship, Superstition and Deceit*, which was due to be officially released on August 10. The ban will stay in place, Amazon has indicated, "until rabbinic objections are lifted".

Hoffman, according to *Wikipedia*, "doubts that execution gas-chambers existed in the Nazi camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, and claims that the term 'Holocaust' is Orwellian Newspeak imposed beginning circa 1978 in order to confuse and distract from debates about the numbers of Jewish deaths that can be attributed to Nazis. Hoffman doubts that six million Jews were killed by the Nazis and asserts that most of the Jewish deaths in WWII were from typhus, malnutrition and shootings perpetrated by some units of the SS on the Eastern front.

Say what you like about Hoffman, but the fact remains that Amazon appears to have been the victim of rabbinical bullying, and that simply cannot be tolerated.

Geert Wilders speaks out on Radio 4

THE "unique" danger posed to the West by radical Islam was spelled out last month by the controversial Dutch politician Geert Wilders, when he was interviewed by Michael Buerk on Radio 4's *The Choice*.

According to the online *New English Review*, "it is very unusual, although not unknown, for the BBC to air any views critical of Islam. The World Service, in particular, is careful not to offend our 'friends' the Saudis by doing so. "As you might expect, Buerk was less than sympathetic to Wilders' views. It is one thing to play devil's advocate – a good interviewer should do this – but quite another to take the devil's side. Listeners were in for the usual idiocies.

"For example, when Wilders states that Israel is "too soft" on the Palestinians, Michael Buerk calls this view "extreme". He accuses Wilders of demonising all Muslims and "tarring all Muslims with the same brush", despite Wilders' clearly argued case that it is Islam the ideology, not Muslims the people, that are the problem. Buerk trots out the usual platitudes

about violence in the Old Testament, and even states, laughably, "You've read the Koran; you know that much of it is blameless," making it obvious that he himself has not read the Koran.

"To be fair, despite these failings, Buerk gives Wilders plenty of opportunity to speak, and it is Wilders, not Buerk, who makes this programme worth listening to.

"Wilders handles the interview admirably; indeed it is his calm, level-headed but determined response that causes Buerk to lose his composure somewhat. He makes all the points he needs to make: Islam is uniquely dangerous, 'not just another fruit on the tree'; its adherents are growing in numbers (from 54 in Holland 100 years ago to one million today); there is no moderate Islam; neighbourhoods are unsafe; Western civilisation is at stake and the matter is urgent'."

Buerk tackles Wilders over his making of the controversial anti-Islamic film, *Fitna*, by asking: "Wouldn't you have achieved more by making a film that



reached out to Muslims, rather than offending them?"

Wilders acidly replies: "We've reached out to Muslims since the end of the sixties. We've pampered Muslims in every possible way, with social security, not asking them to speak Dutch, giving them housing – and never asking anything in return. The time of reaching out is gone ... If Muslims want to continue to live here, it must be on our terms."

Free speech under attack in Canada

ing enemies for almost all of his 36 years, and they'd savour his ruination.

"A defamation lawyer and one-time Conservative Party insider, Levant took over Canada's only conservative magazine in 2004. Two years later, with violence breaking out worldwide over mediocre drawings of Mohammed, Levant chose to reprint them in his *Western Standard*, assuming his publication would be one among many to do so.

"He turned out to be wrong about that. Levant said 'As we came closer to our production deadline, it dawned on us that no large-circulation publication and no TV station in the country had done so, and none would'.

"That seemed crazy to him because the cartoons 'were the central artifact in the largest news story of the month'. Levant wondered, 'How could any self-respecting news outlet ... not display them?'

"He was soon to receive an answer. Two local Muslim groups promptly filed complaints against Levant with the Alberta Human Rights Commissions."

Although the Commission last month cleared Levant of the charges – he claims he lost the case, nonetheless.

"Some 900 days after I became the only person in the Western world charged with the 'offence' of republishing the cartoons, the government has finally acquitted me of illegal 'discrimination'. Taxpayers are out more than \$500,000 (£252,000) for an investigation that involved fifteen bureaucrats or more.

"The legal cost to me and the now-defunct *Western Standard* magazine is \$100,000 (£50,000).

"The case would have been thrown out long ago if I had been charged in a criminal court, instead of a human rights commission. That's because accused criminals have the right to a speedy trial. Accused publishers at human rights commissions do not.

"And if I had been a defendant in a civil court, the judge would now order the losing parties to pay my legal bills. Instead, the Edmonton Council of Muslim Communities won't have to pay me a dime.

"They managed to hijack a secular government agency to prosecute their radical Islamic fatwa against me – the first blasphemy case in Canada in over 80 years. Their complaints were dismissed, but it is inaccurate to say that they lost: they got the government to rough me up for nearly three years, at no cost to them. The process I was put through was a punishment in itself – and a warning to any other journalists who would defy radical Islam.

Levant points out that "exactly two months before I was acquitted, another Albertan was sentenced by the HRC on exactly the same charge: 'discrimination' in a newspaper. Five years ago, Reverend Stephen Boissoin wrote a

controversial column about gay rights. But Rev Boissoin was fined \$7,000 (£3,500) and banned for life from giving sermons or even sending private e-mails that were 'disparaging'. To top it off, he was ordered by the HRC to write a public renunciation of his faith.

"It's obvious why I was acquitted and Boissoin was convicted. I've been a political pain in the neck for the HRC. Rev Boissoin? He was quiet, so he's roadkill. But neither of us is free – we both have to have our views checked out by the Government.

"Of course I'm glad to be done with this malicious prosecution – though my antagonists can still appeal my acquittal.

But two years ago, the HRC told me if I paid a few thousand dollars to my accusers and gave them a page in our magazine, I'd be set free. Most victims of HRCs accept deals like that, and it's certainly cheaper than a 900-day fight. But getting the approval of the HRC's censor is morally no better than their shake-down attempt.

"Whether I have to pay off a radical imam or appease a meddling bureaucrat, it's still an infringement of our Canadian liberties."

Levant's acquittal came just weeks after the Canadian Human Rights Commission dismissed a Muslim group's complaint against *Maclean's* magazine.

The long-running case came before the Commission after the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC) complained that the highly-regarded magazine published an article in October 2006 likely to expose Muslims "to hatred and contempt".

The article, entitled *The Future Belongs to Islam*, by Canadian writer and commentator Mark Steyn claimed that Muslims were on the verge of taking over Europe and the West because of demographic shifts.

The article said that their greater numbers will eventually allow Muslims to dominate Western countries, pointing out that "Muslims are reproducing like mosquitoes".

In January this year, Steyn, writing in the *Calgary Herald*, said: "That line certainly appears in my text, *but they are not my words*. Rather, they were said by a prominent Scandinavian Muslim, Mullah Krekar, to a respectable Norwegian newspaper. The imam was boasting at how Islam would outbreed Europe ...

"This is the nub of the complaints against *Maclean's*: They're objecting to a Canadian magazine quoting accurately the statements of leading Muslims. And at least two of Canada's 'human rights' Commissions, to their shame, have accepted their absurd proposition that accurately quoting leading Muslims is somehow 'Islamophobic'."

The CHRC concluded that the views in the article, when considered as a whole and in con-



Mark Steyn celebrates the Canadian Human Rights Commission's verdict. Photo: Deborah Gyapong

text, were not of an extreme nature, as defined by the Supreme Court.

However, the Commission noted that Steyn's writing is "polemical, colourful and emphatic, and was obviously calculated to excite discussion and even offend certain readers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike."

Though gratified by the decision, *Maclean's* continues to assert that "no human rights commission, whether at the federal or provincial level, has the mandate or the expertise to monitor, inquire into, or assess the editorial decisions of the nation's media."

Dan O'Neill: If God consider

YOU just can't shut Stephen Green up, can you? Nope, not even when his tedious, self-serving drivel gets ever more predictable.

Our Carmarthen-based zealot was at it again this week. Outraged at the appearance in Britain of Gene Robinson, the American bishop blanked by the CoE because he's openly gay (as opposed to being secretly gay like dozens of his peers), the Prophet Green of Christian Voice thundered: "It is a sad day when you get a bishop in a church preaching something that God himself called an abomination."

No God didn't. Some wild-eyed Bronze Age nomad did. Anyway, that's by the way.

But it made me wonder. How would this fanatical Hammerer of Homosexuals, leader of a bunch of annoying bigots, have interpreted events in Palestine a couple of thousand years ago?

"This Jesus feller swans around all day with a dozen other blokes. No women. Mark that, no women. And he wanders off into the mountains now and again to spend quality time with his, uh, favourites (Mark.9:2). He picks up small boys and girls and puts his hands upon them (Mark 10:16) And he was seen in a garden when one of his mates came up and kissed him (Matthew,26:48). Suspicious, eh?"

Ah yes, bigotry is blind and knows no bounds. But if, as the Prophet Green so frequently claims, God considers gays an "abomination", why did he create them in the first

Canada's last convicted 'blasphemer' was an Anglican vicar

CANADA'S last reported prosecution for blasphemous libel took place in Montreal in 1935. Amusingly, the man brought before the beak was an Anglican vicar who took a pop at papists.

In his 2008 study, *Not Dead, Just Sleeping: Canada's Prohibition on Blasphemous Libel as a Case Study in Obsolete Legislation*, Jeremy Patrick, a student at Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, Toronto, writes that "in a classic case of inter-denominational rivalry the Rev Rahard, minister of an Anglican church in predominantly Catholic Montreal, put a poster up on the wall of his church titled *Sermon by An Old Monk* that said, in part: 'Judas sold Christ but did not kill Him, the priests attempt to sell Him and immolate Him. Judas sold Christ for a large sum of money; the Roman priests sell Him every day and even three times. Judas repented and threw his money away; the Roman priests do not repent and keep the money. Now what do you think of the papist religion?'"

Indicted for blasphemous libel in a

Quebec court, the minister's defence was that "Blasphemy is a crime by English common law which exists only in an attack against the Divinity or Christianity in general; and the writing attacks neither the Divinity nor Christianity".

On the other hand, the Crown argued that: "[The statute] gives every freedom of opinion upon any religious subject whatever ... provided that this publication is made in good faith and in agreeable language, in such a manner as not to offend either by its terms or expressions the feelings of others who are not of the same opinion or point of view and finally to keep from disturbing the peace through offensive or injurious terms."

The trial judge found that the terms used by Rahard were "offensive and injurious to the Roman Catholics" and found the minister guilty.

Only five known cases of blasphemous libel have been tried in Canada. The first and most notorious of these was the trial of atheist editor Ernest V Sterry of the *Christian Enquirer*, in 1927.

According to the original *Time* magazine report, Sterry "went to jail at Toronto last week, as he expected he would do when he called God 'an irate old party', 'this touchy Jehovah'; snorted at His preference 'for roast cutlet to that of boiled cabbage' (competitive sacrifices of Abel and Cain), 'His whims, freaks and fancies', 'His frenzied, megalomaniac boastings'. This constitutes blasphemous, indecent and profane libel against the Christian religion and the Bible, said Crown Attorney (prosecutor) E J Murphy of Toronto, at last week's preliminary trial. He would not have been so provoked if Editor Sterry had kept to the 'decencies of controversy', for 'if the decency of controversy is observed, even the fundamentals of religion may be attacked without the matter being blasphemous'. Editor Sterry's stay in jail is but technical, until through his lawyer, Lionel Cross, able Negro, he can make appeal to the higher Canadian courts."

Sterry, who lost his appeal, had also published this piece about the Almighty:

"Read your Bible, if you have not done it before, and you will find in it hundreds of passages relative to the Divine Being, which any moral and honest man would be ashamed to have appended to his character ... The God of the Bible is depicted as one who ... thunders imprecations from the mountain or mutters and grouches in the Tabernacle, and whom Moses finds so hard to tame, who in his paroxysms of rage has massacred hundreds of thousands of His own Chosen People ... This touchy Jehovah, whom the deluded superstitionists claim to be the creator of the whole universe, makes one feel utter contempt for the preachers and unfeigned pity for the mental state of those who can retain a serious countenance as they peruse the stories of His peculiar whims, freaks and fancies and His frenzied megalomaniac boastings."

Sod environmental concerns – Jesus has already saved the planet

MINNESOTA Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, a Republican Christian Right champion has attacked the Democratic Leader of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, for her environmental concerns.

Bachmann told the right-wing news site *OneNewsNow*: "[Pelosi] is committed to her global warming fanaticism to the point where she has said that she's just trying to save the planet. We all know that someone did that over 2,000 years ago, they saved the planet – we didn't need Nancy Pelosi to do that."

ers gays an abomination ... ?

place? To give Green and his kind a platform for their intolerance?

But then again, can anyone make ANY sense out of religion? We are glutted with tales of Muslims massacred by Christians, of Christians crucified by Muslims, of Buddhist and Hindu making war – all in the name of God. But smaller stories speak of the evils perpetrated in his name.

Abortion

Florina Vranceanu is an 11-year-old Romanian girl. She was raped by her teenage uncle, and the resulting pregnancy was ended at 22 weeks in a London hospital.

Why London? Because abortion in Romania is illegal after 14 weeks, although the Romanian government ruled later that Florina could have the abortion because of "exceptional circumstances."

But predictably, that country's pro-life brigade insisted that this child should herself have a child, so she was brought to London. Luckily, to a hospital not in thrall to religion. Remember, Britain's top Catholic, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, barred doctors from performing abortions (or giving contraceptive advice) in a London hospital run by his Church.

Thankfully, that Church is not as powerful here as in Nicaragua, where it forced an end to all forms of abortion, even to save a pregnant

woman's life. Or in Poland, where it fought to eliminate rape or incest as grounds for termination. Florina Vranceanu was the victim of rape and incest. Wonder how the Cardinal feels about her?

For 16 years Eleuna Englaro has been in a coma in an Italian hospital. Her father finally won permission to remove the feeding tube that kept his 37-year-old daughter alive. With startling prescience, Eleuna said before the accident that left her a vegetable: "It's better to die than remain motionless in hospital at the mercy of others, attached to a tube."

Naturally, the Vatican disagreed, insisting that "the court decision was euthanasia, and no-one can take it upon themselves to put an end to the life of a person."

Which brings us to George W Bush, certified born-again buffoon. He was at the forefront in the fight to prevent the removal of a feeding tube from Terri Schiavo, a 39-year-old woman left in a coma for 13 years.

The usual suspects joined in – the Catholic Church, the rampant religious right, the proliferators – none of whom, as far as I know, protested when Bush, as Governor of Texas, "took it on himself" (in Vaticanspeak), to end the lives of dozens on his state's Death Row.

Hypocrisy. Hysteria. Summed up for me by the tale of the Irish bishop who fathered a child. At least, said his parishioners, he was a good Catholic. He didn't use a contraceptive.

John Radford: Credo

"I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ his only Son ..." So begins the Christian creed, from "credo", Latin for "I believe", a short statement of essential doctrine.

In Islam, "There is no god but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet" serves a similar function. Islam, however, emphasises performance – repeating the mantra, observing Ramadan, making the Hajj, etc. – while Christianity stresses personal belief. Other religions mostly do not have creeds as such, I think.

The four Noble Truths of Buddhism are perhaps more of a convenient summary. What they all do have is beliefs in some sense. But in what sense? The word "belief" is commonly used in very different ways. The creeds are both statements of personal certainty, and a kind of oath of membership. But "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows" is a poetic fancy. "I believe my neighbour is an accountant" is a supposition. "He said he did not take the money, and I believe him" is a judgment. "I believe England will win the next World Cup" is a (rather optimistic) hope. If that last were said seriously one would want some very good reason, or put the speaker down as at least eccentric.

Some beliefs, such as that one is influenced by electricity, or that a favoured few would be taken up into a spaceship in the wake of comet Hale-Bopp, can be called pathological. (In passing, it seems that some who had this idea bought an expensive telescope to track the spaceship, but when they could not see it, asked for their money back.)

How far religious beliefs are pathological is too complex a question to pursue here. President George W Bush, in a speech in Cleveland, Ohio, July 17 2007, said "I believe" 75 times. Among other things, he believed that the USA's economy is strong, in balancing the budget without raising taxes, and in information technology (www.huffingtonpost.com).

Tony Blair told the House of Commons that he believed "with every fibre of my being" that weapons of mass destruction would be found in Iraq, before it became apparent that they would not. Both Bush and Blair of course believe devoutly in the Christian religion. They remind me of the Duke of Wellington, then probably the best-known man in England, when a stranger accosted him with "Mr Jones, I believe". His famous reply was "If you believe that, Sir, you'll believe anything".

There appear to be several similar thought processes often labelled "belief" or "faith", which ought to be distinguished. I am not trying to say what such terms "really" mean, but to distinguish the processes, which need sepa-



Forever praying: G W Bush

rate labels. One could name them Flopsy, Mopsy, Cotton-tail and Peter, but using the same label is confusing.

Here is the Right Reverend Geoffrey Rowell, Bishop of Gibraltar in Europe (is there another Gibraltar elsewhere?), in *The Times*, April 12, 2008. "We live by faith because we can live in no other way, the only question is, what is the faith by which we live? The cult of celebrity, political ideology, the amassing of possessions, the addictions that drive us, can in a broad sense all be thought of as instances of faith. So too, more positively, can the searching understanding of the scientist, the imaginative horizons of the artist or composer, and the deep commitments of friendship and marriage."

I regard myself as a scientist, I am trained in scientific method, and I don't work by anything I would call "faith". I do make what I consider reasonable assumptions, such as that events have causes, and these are in principle discoverable; that results to be reliable need to be checked against independent evidence; that intuitions and common sense are valuable sources of ideas, but that those ideas must be tested; and so on. Such assumptions are reasonable, because they have been shown overwhelmingly to work.

Nor would I call what artists do "faith". Artists seem to me to work from delight in exercising skills, and desire to express their feelings and ideas, plus usually a hope of communicating with others (or sometimes just for cash). The central feature of real friendship and partnership, I think I would call "trust", a justified reliance on others. Of course it is perfectly possible to love untrustworthy people. Love has many dimensions, but none that I would call "faith", I think.

The cult of celebrity, amassing possession, and addictions, seem to me to have no element

that I would label "faith". Political ideology is nearer, at least when it is unquestioned, or defies evidence. But it can also consist in a more or less coherent and reasoned set of values and opinions. What I would call "faith" is holding to a view regardless of alternative possibilities, and of argument or evidence (or the lack of it) to the contrary. This process seems often to be found in religion, in fact some make it the central feature.

As the Bible has it, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews, 11:1). Here, faith is a kind of specialised belief, as seen in the Christian creed. It has no ground except belief itself. It is not a reasonable assumption, nor an honest mistake like that of the Duke of Wellington's interlocutor, nor a mere fancy. Possibly the beliefs of messrs. Bush and Blair were of this sort, if they were not simply expressions of hope or opinion.

Beliefs involve both conscious and unconscious processes, and have both cognitive and emotional foundations. We don't normally choose them, though we can sometimes choose to question them, and to accept evidence for or against. Beliefs tend to form a sort of framework or scaffolding of personal truth which provides meaning, certainty and identity. The emotional importance of this system often leads us to ignore or distort contrary evidence, and to vilify or attack those of a contrary view.

Daniel Dennett has discussed the prevalence of "belief in belief", the idea that it is somehow a good idea to hold certain things to be true, regardless of contradictory facts. The founding fathers of the United States proclaimed certain principles to be "self-evidently" true. One was that all men (we can allow them to have meant people) are created equal. But they (we) are manifestly not, for example, non-controversially in equal physical strength and health. Nor did the belief stop the fathers from owning slaves. What they should have said, to my mind, is that everyone *ought* to be considered equal in various essential respects.

Similarly today people often say they believe in democracy, or the rule of law. Such "beliefs" are really, it seems to me, statements of values. As such they can, and should be, debated, challenged, and defended. We make no progress by taking them either as self-evident or as matters of faith. If we do so, they have no firmer grounds than their opposites. All too often, the urge to believe entails forbidding any questioning, and suppressing, even violently, those who question. Faith must be protected. A famous study, *When Prophecy Fails*, examined one of the many groups who have predicted the imminent end of the world. When the world went on, they simply assumed their calculations were wrong, and chose another date. (Eventually, however, believers dwindled.) Early Christians thought the end would come in their lifetime, but their successors sensibly postponed it *sine die*, as the Jews

have done with the coming of the Messiah, and as Muslims do. The belief is untested, and remains intact.

I have sometimes put to religious proselytisers the point that others are equally certain of their own faith. The answers are often "If you read our holy book, you will see it is true. The others are not", or "Other people may be certain they are right, but they are not. We are right." It is impossible to continue any discussion. Thomas Jefferson, one of the wiser founding fathers, said "It is always better to have no ideas than false ones; to believe nothing, than to believe what is wrong."

This means that one must always allow for the possibility of being wrong. Faith rejects this – "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark, 9:24).

Dr Rowell, to return to him, states that the faith in God expressed in the creed is seen to be true because of the existence of the world and ourselves, which also shows that God is personal, and (for Christians) has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and loves us. All this is totally unsupported assertion, but on the basis of it he continues: "To say Credo – I believe – is to open ourselves to the deepest possibility of our lives." I see why he feels this as a Christian, he means getting closer to God, but to me it appears almost exactly the opposite. On the one hand, I know of no argument or evidence, and I have had no experience, that suggests to me that any supernatural being exists, let alone a personal God.

On the other, it seems to me that the "deepest possibilities of our lives" lie, precisely not

in faith, but in developing those human characteristics that are generally esteemed, pretty well regardless of what religious doctrine, or none, is held. These are values, not beliefs or articles of faith. They include preferring life over death, helping others over harming them, tolerance over enmity, generosity over greed, honesty over deceit, and, I would add, reason over prejudice and authority, evidence over hearsay, and open enquiry over faith. I could go on. Bertrand Russell put it more simply when asked what lesson he would wish to transmit to posterity. He said "Love is wise; hatred is foolish". That was not from faith, but from reason, experience, and human feeling.

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

'Fred the Frog' croaks on a cross – and Catholics are hopping mad

THERE was outrage back in May when the Bolzano museum of modern art in Italy acquired a sculpture by the late German artist Martin Kippenberger depicting a frog on a cross.

Local bishop Wilhelm Egger moaned: "The crucified frog has shocked many visitors and has hurt their religious feelings. Even if this was not the intention of the artist or the *Museion*, there is a law in place that says religious feelings should be respected.

"Today the symbols of Christian faith are often held in contempt, and an exhibition of works like this one does not help to create peace between cultures and religions."

Last month the row intensified when it was announced that the Pope was taking a summer break in the mountains of northern Italy at a location close to the Museum – and for that reason Catholics were demanding that the piece, part of Kippenberger's Fred the Frog series, should be removed forthwith.

According to *The Times*, local Catholics complained to the police that the work, depicting a warty, pop-eyed amphibian nailed to a cross with a frothing mug of beer in one hand and an egg in the other, is a "public obscenity".

Under pressure from Monsignor Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bolzano and Bressanone, the museum curators moved the frog from the museum entrance to the third floor, but have so far refused to remove it altogether. They said the work was not an attack on Christianity but rather a reflection of the artist's "state of profound crisis" at the time he created it.

Meanwhile, a British Christian, Emily Mapfwa, is bringing a private prosecution against the Baltic Gallery in Gateshead, which exhibited Terence Koh's Jesus with a hard-on. The charge is that the gallery offended public decency and breached Section 5 of the Public Order Act 1986. The first hearing is due in September.

We then learned that a row erupted in Australia when Blake Prize judges fell out over the selection of a painting of the



crucifixion.

One of the judges, academic Christopher Allen, resigned from the panel over his vehement objections to Sydney artist Adam Cullen's work. The triptych shows Christ on the cross with the inscription "only women bleed", inspired by a line from an Alice Cooper song.

Cullen, who won the Archibald Prize in 2000, couldn't see what all the fuss was about. "It's just a Jew on the cross," he said.

Commenting on the row, our man in Australia, Nigel Sinnott, said:

"Well, over the ages lots of religious art has given offence to different people. Muslims and Jews, for example, find or found representations of God offensive. The Taliban fundamentalists found historic statues of the Buddha offensive. Sixteenth- and 17th-century puritans found "Popish" images of Jesus and the saints offensive, and so on. As an atheist, I find some old Spanish religious art macabre and masochistic (the glorification of crucifixion and suffering).

"Also, what is acceptable in a particular culture changes over the generations. I am old enough to remember when 'bloody' was regarded as a very naughty expletive, even though it has no obscene or overtly religious connotations.

"Acceptability can also change the other way. One of my possessions is a Bible, treasured because of some valuable inscriptions of hatches, matches and dispatches in a branch of my family a few generations ago. It was printed by the very respectable Oxford University

Press in about 1880. Facing the title page is an engraving by Rolls (from a picture by Copley) of a patriarch dropping a curved knife that he was going to plunge into a virtually naked teenaged boy. The picture illustrates Genesis 22: 12, and is captioned 'Lay not thine hands upon the lad.' That's the angel of the Lord speaking, the patriarch is Abraham, and the boy, of course, is Isaac.

"And facing page 285 is an engraving by Freeman from a painting by Opie. It shows another patriarch about to plunge a dagger (a straight one this time) into a blindfolded, bare-breasted teenaged girl. It illustrates



Judges 11:39 and is entitled 'Who did with her according to his vow.' The patriarch is Jephthah the Gileadite and the sacrificial victim is his only child.

"I should perhaps mention that Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was cancelled because, according to the angel of the Lord, 'for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me'. A last-minute reprieve was not, alas, forthcoming in the case of the only child of Jephthah the Gileadite, which seems a bit sexist to my irreverent infidel mind, but no doubt the Bible's sublime morality moveth in mysterious ways.

"Evidently pictures like these were within the bounds of good taste 120 years ago, but can you imagine the public outcry if a modern artist produced paintings of similar scenes and actions, whether or not they were given titles that put them in a biblical setting!"

James Merryweather: A message of gratitude to ministers of the Free Ch

I WISH to proffer my gratitude to three ministers of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) for inspiration I have acquired from them. Under their generous but unwitting influence my life has changed significantly for the better and I have achieved clarity of understanding and purpose that had eluded me during the first half century I spent on this beautiful planet.

Firstly, I thank Rev Graeme Craig (Ardelve and Glenelg) for a seminal conversation we had by the post box in Auchtertyre in the autumn of 2004 – and again in my garden late in 2007. I am an experienced biologist, but with a single phrase, “I don’t believe in evolution”, he jolted me into stark recognition of the limits of my not inconsiderable understanding of the natural world.

It was that wake-up call I had needed for a long time, and I relished the challenge it provided. Until I accepted guidance from this professional demagogue, I was unaware of how little I knew about my own subject and was inspired to embark on a journey of learning and understanding, the intensity and joy of which I have never before experienced.

Scales fell from my eyes and at last, after

voracious exploration of the Bible, just one among many books, I discovered new insights into nature that has provided me with so much fascination and pleasure since the age of five. It is through Rev Craig’s munificent counsel that I now know that the universe is approximately six thousand years old and that dinosaurs and Homo sapiens once concurrently roamed the Earth.

I was surprised to find myself drawn (was I led?) to listen to fascinating sermons (recorded for posterity and available to all at www.sermonaudio.com), the most influential of which was surely the masterly discourse by Rev Allan Murray (the incumbent in the Highland parishes of Brora, Scourie and Assynt) on *The Creation-Evolution Debate*, based upon Hebrews 11:3 “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.” Whenever my thoughts return to this thought-provoking sermon, I can hear in my imagination Mr Murray’s voice stridently proclaiming: “The debate is over!” and “... the defences of the evolutionary lobby have been seriously undermined.” and “Never let science or reason

take the place of faith! My mind sees it through faith, not through reason.”

My passion for enlightenment was re-ignited and I set about the laborious but truly gratifying task of accumulating information.

I listened to many more online sermons by, for instance Rev Ian Brown, Dr Alan Cairns, Kent “Dr Dino” Hovind, Dr Terry Mortenson, Matthew Duerr and the astonishing screaming preacher Chris Russell, from all of whom I learned a great deal about the use and abuse of thought.

I also learned, to my relief, from the aforementioned Rev Murray, that we need not worry about the predicted outcome of climate change. We may ignore the unequivocal evidence from science, and our own senses and intellect, for “There is no connection between global warming and greenhouse gases” ... “There is no evidence whatsoever that global warming will bring an ecological disaster”. Why is he so confident of his contrary message? Because a Bronze Age scribe once wrote that “While the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:22).



Expelled: another dotty ID-iotic documentary

A federal court in Manhattan denied Ono’s request for an injunction against the film that would have forced it out of theatres nationwide. *Expelled*, starring Ben Stein, faced being pulled out of theatres if Ono had won her case.

One of the film’s producers, John Sullivan, noted: “We had many individuals and groups who had planned to see this film, but decided not to because of the cloud of doubt this lawsuit brought to the film.”

Earlier, the movie pissed off Prof Richard Dawkins, who agreed to be interviewed for a film called *Crossroads*. He then found himself in a production with a completely different name – *Expelled* – which is pure propaganda for creationism’s kissin’ cousin, Intelligent Design.

And it certainly pissed off Prof P Z Myers, who was also conned into appearing in the film. Myers was subsequently threatened with arrest if he didn’t remove himself from a screening of the film back in March.

Immediately after his expulsion, Myers revealed: “I went to attend a screening of the creationist propaganda movie, *Expelled*, a few minutes ago. Well, I tried ... but I was expelled! It was kind of weird – I was standing in line, hadn’t even gotten to the point where I had to sign in and show ID, when a policeman

pulled me out of line and told me I could not go in. I asked why, of course, and he said that a producer of the film had specifically instructed him that I was not to be allowed to attend. The officer also told me that if I tried to go in, I would be arrested. I assured him that I wasn’t going to cause any trouble.”

The irony was that Myers was accompanied by a guest who WAS allowed into the theatre. That guest was Richard Dawkins!

The film has courted controversy ever since its release. Writing in the *New York Times*, Cornelia Dean said: “The growing furore over the movie, visible in blogs, on websites and in conversations among scientists, is the latest episode in the long-running conflict between science and advocates of intelligent design, who assert that the theory of evolution has obvious scientific flaws and that students should learn that intelligent design, a creationist idea, is an alternative approach.

“There is no credible scientific challenge to the theory of evolution as an explanation for the complexity and diversity of life on earth. And while individual scientists may embrace religious faith, the scientific enterprise looks to nature to answer questions about nature. As scientists at Iowa State University put it last year, supernatural explanations are ‘not within

A JUNK-SCIENCE “documentary” which screams out for “Intelligent Design” to be given – at the very least – a status equal to that of evolutionary science has annoyed a great number of people since its release in the US earlier this year.

More recently, the movie has pissed off Yoko Ono, wife of the late John Lennon, who last month lost a copyright law-suit against the film’s producers for including Lennon’s song *Imagine* in their movie, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*.

Church of Scotland (Continuing)



Objective Ministries claims that "dinosaurs have been a favourite propaganda tool for evolutionists since the 19th century, and continue to be used to promote the pseudo-scientific religion of Evolutionism in the Secular media". Note: OM is a spoof website, though you'd never guess it.

in the pursuit of honest understanding.

It is absurd that, in 21st-century Britain as well as large chunks of the USA and Australia, so many otherwise sane people cling to, not only Iron Age Christian teachings, but also the literal "truth" in the mythology of Middle Eastern desert tribesmen, concocted in ignorance three thousand years ago. We humans have grown up massively since then and have a wealth of immutable knowledge these people obstinately deny because they are afraid to embrace it, under threat of imaginary hellish punishment. We must grasp every opportunity to expose just how infantile and barmy they and their beliefs are, and not shirk from showing them up as idiots.

• James Mereweather is the creator of the website *Blue-Skye thinkers* – "a meeting place for minds cluttered only with knowledge and the desire to use it properly." (<http://www.blue-skye.org.uk/>)

Sorry, Al Gore, but you only have the authority of science, unlike our Rev Murray who, like the original scribe, has a direct line to the Creator of all Things.

My next "Damascene" moment occurred when I opened the 2007 special edition of *Free Church Messenger* of which I am a spellbound reader (www.freekirkcontinuing.co.uk). There I found a fascinating article *The Theory of Evolution is Crazy!* by Rev William Macleod (Portree, recently translated to Thornwood, Glasgow). I became so enraptured by this extraordinary exposition that I spent a week exploring it in the minutest detail, extracting from it every pearl of the great man's wisdom for my instruction and intellectual improvement. I benefited immensely as I considered and checked each statement methodically, annotating each and amending, where necessary, the scientific concepts cited.

It must take a lot of courage to speak out with such conviction and apparent authority upon a subject in which, it is plain to see, the author has minimal knowledge of his own. It is evident from the hard-hitting discussion that professes to support his title that this minister is prepared to stand steadfast by what he

believes, even when it is untrue, inaccurate or iniquitously misrepresentative of facts that can be verified by anyone who has a modicum of biological knowledge.

The text of the article, which has a wearisome familiarity to anybody who has taken the trouble to wade through other creationist diatribes, loudly proclaims the author's shameless appetite for plagiarism.

I would like to share my critical commentary on Rev Macleod's two-page monument to partisan dishonesty and irrationality with both the author and all who might have read (or would care to read) but are not qualified to debunk *The Theory of Evolution is Crazy!*

I do not apologise for resorting here to a single pejorative judgment (that I diplomatically omitted from my too polite critique) to encapsulate this article's quality of argument and authority, for it is not at all inappropriate: bollocks.


So I heartily thank the three aforementioned pillars of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) for the many insights they have so ably if unintentionally shared with me along with the inspiration to assimilate new knowledge. I also acknowledge my many true teachers for the understanding they have imparted through personal instruction and, remotely, their publications. And gratitude to my parents for an upbringing in which curiosity, critical thinking and rational scepticism came naturally, gifts I have been able to apply to knowledge

the scope or abilities of science'."

And describing the film for *New Scientist*, Amanda Gefter wrote: "*Expelled* is pure propaganda, its style reminiscent of a sub-standard Michael Moore flick complete with voice-over narration and lots of aimless wandering around. Its selling point is that academic freedom in the US is threatened by a vast conspiracy of atheist scientists, hypnotised by what Stein labels in the film the 'Darwinian gospel'. Supporters of ID are fired from their institutions or denied tenure, the film argues, while journalists who report on ID are silenced or shunned. This is an old trick. By claiming their views are suppressed, proponents of ID hope to be protected from criticism. When someone argues that ID is bogus, all they need do is yell: 'See? Suppression!'"


Stein's response?: "Love of God and compassion and empathy leads you to a very glorious place. Science leads you to killing people."

No doubt *Expelled* will be surfacing in the UK sometime soon, and we expect creationism's drooling ga-ga brigade to greet its arrival with much rejoicing and swivel-eyed ecstasy. The rest of us, if we have any sense, will give it a very wide berth indeed – unless we feel compelled to sit through it purely for its comic content.


GEOGRAPHY: 

"INTELLIGENT DESIGN", OR "CREATIONISM", IS GAINING POPULARITY EVERY DAY. NOW GET READY FOR THESE EXCITING EDUCATIONAL REVOLUTIONS!


SEX ED:



LAW:



MEDICINE:



TO BE CONTINUED!

William Harwood reviews *Snake Oil Science: The Truth about Complementary*

"STUDIES employing credible placebo controls do not indicate positive effects for complementary and alternative medicine therapies over and above those attributable to random chance ... Research on any therapy that does not factor in the placebo effect will inevitably produce false results."

That excerpt from *Snake Oil Science: The Truth About Complementary and Alternative Medicine's* cover flap explains why such pseudo-medicine as acupuncture, homeopathy and hypnotherapy have been pronounced effective even by professional medical practitioners who should know better.

Sugar pills do relieve symptoms, at least temporarily, because patients who expect them to do so make their expectations self-fulfilling. And as Barker Bausell proves in spades, "complementary and alternative medicine" is indeed a sugar pill.

The definitive question is whether symptom alleviation that follows CAM treatment (*post hoc propter hoc*) was in fact caused by the CAM. And that question can be and has been

answered. As Bausell explains, "Fortunately, this logic is simple, involving nothing more than comparing one group of individuals who receive a therapy with another group who *think* they are receiving that therapy." That double blind methodology (meaning that neither the patient nor the therapist knows whether a particular patient is receiving the product being evaluated or a placebo) is *de rigueur* in all scientific research, and is the only methodology capable of answering the question, "Is any complementary and alternative medical therapy more effective than a placebo?" While Bausell takes 300 pages to answer that question and prove the correctness of his conclusions, the answer is an unequivocal NO!

Bausell points out early in his book that a common tactic of snake-oil peddlers was to invent imaginary ailments that their product could cure. When the Alka-Seltzer company was not finding sufficient customers with the stomach cramps its little tablets really could alleviate, it succeeded in conning large numbers that they suffered from a non-existent condition called the "blahs" that could be treated by – guess what? – Alka-Seltzer.

And to justify their existence, the chiropractic scammers declared that all ills were caused

by displaced vertebral subluxations that only a chiropractor could "adjust." Since chiropractic's basic technique was the same kind of muscle-relaxing massage provided by holistic hetaeras, not surprisingly patients tended to find such "adjustments" effective, even though medical doctors, anatomists and x-ray technicians are unanimous that the alleged "subluxations" do not exist. Anyone who doubts that non-existent ailments are still being concocted by drug companies to sell their little pink pills has only to watch a TV ad for the thing that is not. "Restless leg syndrome"? Oh come now.

So that there can be no dispute as to whether a perceived alleviation of symptoms is a placebo effect or a consequence of the body's innate ability to fight off most ailments with no treatment whatsoever, Bausell defines a placebo as "Any medical treatment that can have a therapeutic effect only if administered to a patient who is aware that he or she is receiving a medical treatment." If experimental group A is given, for example, a homeopathic treatment, control group B is given an inert similar-seeming substance, and control group C is given no treatment whatsoever, the difference between experimental group A and control group B results represents the therapeutic value of the homeopathic treatment (since both groups will experience equal placebo effects and equal spontaneous remission), and the difference between control groups B and C represents the degree to which improvements in group B are placebo effects rather than spontaneous remission. It should surprise only incurable believers that all properly conducted research has resulted in groups A and B having identical (within error of measurement) improved results over group C, while groups A and B had results identical with each other. Even homeopaths are not so reckless as to claim that they can cure the common cold, since their patients know full well that the cure rate after six days will be close to 100 percent due to spontaneous remission, and any claim that Granny Clampett's Remedy made a difference would expose them as what they in fact are – quacks.

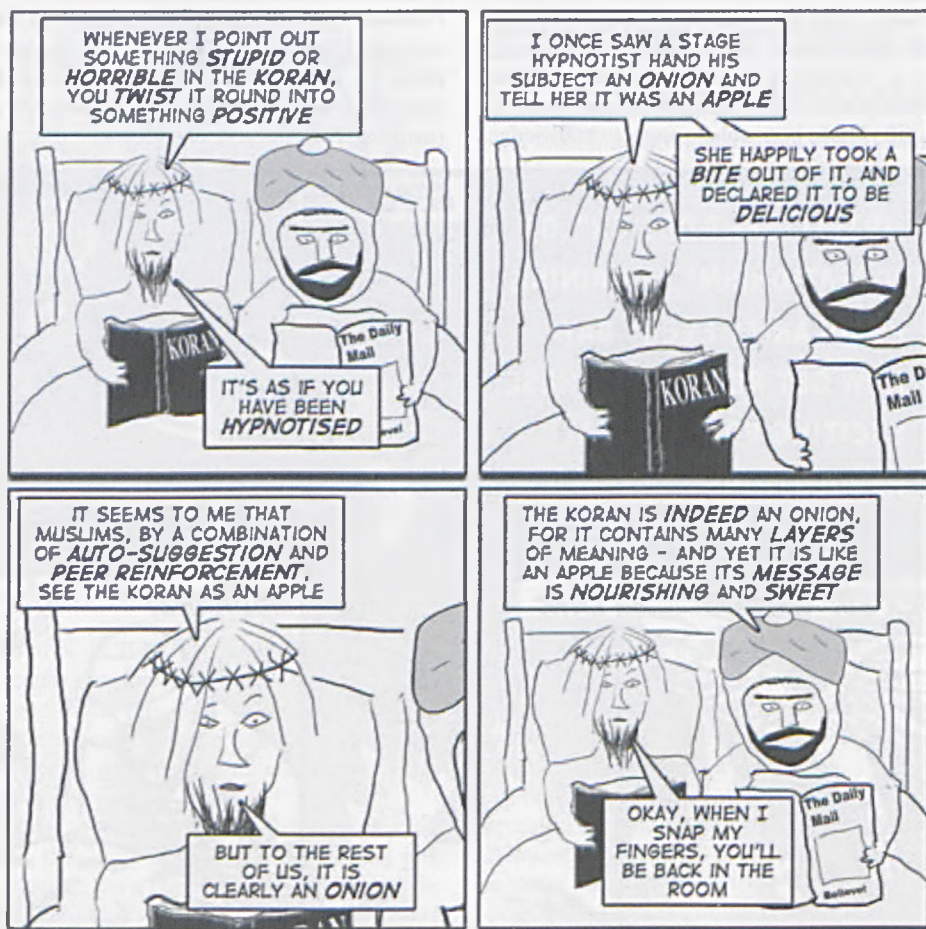
Bausell's findings on specific applications of glorified sugar pills are as follows.

ACUPUNCTURE: "Acupuncture appeared to be safe but without clear evidence of benefit."

CHIROPRACTIC: "Chiropractors ... believe that the body has an innate ability to heal itself and that one of the primary barriers to this ability ... resides in these [nonexistent] subluxations."

HERBALISM: "There is no firm evidence of efficacy of any medicinal herbs [for specified viral infections including HIV]."

Jesus and Mo



© Jesusandmo.net

tary and Alternative Medicine by R Barker Bausell

HOMEOPATHY: "The final product is so diluted, in fact, that in many cases not a single molecule of the original [poisonous] substance would be expected to survive in the final product."

HYPNOTHERAPY: "Hypnosis and the placebo share a good deal in common." After quoting a motivating speech by a hypnotist, Bausell comments, "Anyone who can distinguish between this quacking and that of the placebo duck is a lot more sensitive to animal sounds than your author." and "The effects of hypnotherapy on smoking cessation claimed by uncontrolled studies were not confirmed by analysis of randomized controlled trials."

MASSAGE: "I would categorise these procedures as more recreational than medicinal."

MEDITATION: "I believe most therapists advocate the practice more as a lifestyle or stress reduction technique than as a medical

therapy."

NATUROPATHY: "Their prescriptions undoubtedly have fewer side effects than those of most conventional physicians. This means they may be physiologically preferable for one extremely large group of patients: the worried well."

OSTEOPATHY: "There is no evidence for the effectiveness of therapies such as cranial manipulation, nor is there any firm rationale for why the body's natural healing processes need to be 'gently prodded', which is one of the rationales for the osteopathic approach to medicine."

PRAYER: "There was no difference in complication rate between the experimental and placebo group (group 1 versus group 2). Surprisingly, however, the group that knew they were being prayed for did significantly worse than the other two groups."

THERAPEUTIC TOUCH: "There is insufficient evidence that TT promotes healing of acute wounds."

Bausell's final summation of all of the evidence is "CAM therapies are nothing more than cleverly packaged placebos."

• *William Harwood is a contributing editor of American Rationalist. His 36 books include The Disinformation Cycle: Hoaxes, Delusions, Security Beliefs, and Compulsory Mediocrity, and other fiction and non-fiction. He is also the editor/translator of The Fully Translated Bible, described by the editor of American Atheist as "worth far more than its weight in bagels".*

Snake Oil Science: The Truth About Complementary and Alternative Medicine, R Barker Bausell, 2007, Oxford U P, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, ISBN 978-0-19-531368-0, 344 pp, hc, \$24.95.

Is having no truck with religion helpful to atheism?

IS Richard Dawkins – admittedly not as caustic as the other "Three Horsemen" – right to target *all* religion? **CARL PACKMAN** poses the question.

Last month, on Channel 4, Richard Dawkins made his latest attempt at weaning believers away from religion in his examination of *The Genius of Charles Darwin*. In 2006 his brutal and beautifully convincing exegesis *The God Delusion* tormented those whom Dawkins described as holding "beliefs that flatly contradict demonstrable scientific facts". In this vein, the first of Dawkins' three programmes was aimed to evidence how we can live without the looming shadow of God, and enjoy a world that rests entirely upon the accuracy of natural selection – the hitherto most important discovery in science since time began.

The programme reserves as its ambassadors for unreason and dogmatism a group of schoolchildren whom Professor Dawkins has taken on the task of teaching about the wonders of Darwinian evolution. Particularly grating for the Professor – and for the audience also – are the pupils who express their unquestioned belief in religious values encouraged by their parents, evoking the bitter response of how scandalous it is "how little our children are taught about evolution". As such, Dawkins and the schoolchildren embark on a fossil-hunting voyage of their own.

It's not very long before Dawkins cuts to the chase and explains how utterly irrational and dangerous spiritual beliefs are (indeed it was an amusing undertaking to see how long it was before Dawkins plunged his dagger into faith).

Drawing upon the vacant menace of creationism and its sister theory, Intelligent Design, Dawkins, in his inimitably composed manner, showed that hostility to rationality, free thought, homosexuality and women still owes its persistence to medievaesque subservience to theism, a vexation of science which should really have been promptly tossed away after the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, in which Darwin himself was a prominent figure.

But on the flipside, this element of Professor Dawkins' Darwinism was certainly not his most important contribution; in fact, I would suggest it was most definitely his weakest. What was really attention-grabbing about the exposition was his clarification of Darwinism's relation to matters of the economy in which Professor Dawkins drew a rather firm line on the difference between artificial and natural selection.

Dawkins has been the subject of a gross misunderstanding, which he brings to readers' attention in *The God Delusion*, pointing out an article from the *Guardian* noting that Jeff Skilling, the disgraced former CEO of the Enron corporation, currently serving a multiple-charge prison sentence, listed *The Selfish Gene* (1976) as his favourite book and "derived inspiration of a Social Darwinist character from it".

Dawkins' simple yet elegant address of Darwinism will surely mark the programme a success, yet his attack on religion still seems to be half-baked. Darwinism is under attack from creationist schools, denial of evolution in general and pure stubbornness. So it is precisely

these elements Dawkins should do battle against, and these elements, broadly speaking, are not an absolutely inherent part of religion.

Indeed, even dyed-in-the-wall atheists (among whom I count myself) like Bertrand Russell recognised some contribution religion has made to civilisation – notably when he illustrated that religion caused "Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses with such care that in time they become able to predict them".

Additionally, if one person believes that their morals are informed by God via a messenger recorded in a holy script (again, as Bertrand Russell pointed out in *Has Religion Made Any Useful Contribution to Civilisation?* Christ taught us to give to the needy, refrain from fighting, avoid going to church, and not to punish adultery); and another that morals are relative to the dictates of that society, then surely we should have to look further than just religion for producing anti-rationalisation, extremism and inequality.

If those who seek faith are just as susceptible to irrationality and ethically unsound acts as any atheist, then perhaps it is not the case that *Religion poisons everything*, as the American sub-heading to Christopher Hitchens' atheist text *God is Not Great* declares.

As Dawkins repeats throughout, the Bible got it wrong about pretty much every account of the origin of the earth and mankind, but nowhere in Darwin's texts does it mention that if the religious were to be enlightened tomorrow, whether that would change the way they are – be they extreme or moderate.

Perhaps it's time now to jump off this bandwagon.

More on the historicity of Jesus

MAY I make a somewhat belated further contribution to the on-going controversy on the subject of the historicity (or otherwise) of the historical Jesus, for it was my letter in the November 2007 issue in which I quoted the late Prof Bultmann on the subject of the historical Jesus which provoked the subsequent correspondence.

First and foremost, may I say that Mr Campbell is perfectly correct in saying that I have not read his book, for the very simple reason that it was not hailed on publication as a landmark in the field of modern biblical scholarship and I certainly have no recollection of reading a review of it in any newspaper/magazine/ journal.

However, the point I am particularly concerned to emphasise is that in my letter in the May issue of the journal I specifically posed two questions for Mr Campbell and I fully expected him to reply to those questions in the pages of the *FT*. To my utter amazement, Mr Campbell made no attempt whatsoever to answer my questions and directed me instead to his book, saying that the answers to my questions would be found therein.

I confess to being totally gobsmacked! I think it can fairly be said that in this instance Mr Campbell has shockingly and shamelessly demonstrated the art of the "cop-out".

I fully agree (and applaud) Charles Douglas (*Points of View*, February) in saying that Mr Campbell rarely misses an opportunity of getting a plug in for his book whenever letters are published on the subject of the historical Jesus. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, his book has had little or no impact on the world of modern biblical scholarship and one wonders for what readership the book was intended.

In these circumstances, therefore, I would strongly advise Mr Campbell that henceforth he should impose a strict Trappist silence about his book since otherwise he will be in danger of boring people witless with his constant references it in various correspondence columns.

Finally, may I express the hope that Mr Campbell will be good enough to observe the ground rules and extend to me the elementary common courtesy of replying to my questions in the correspondence pages of the *FT*.

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Gwent

IT IS strange that it has taken Stuart Campbell six months to reply to an article in the February issue. Is it because he wants to change the terms of the debate about Jesus, because he could not answer the criticisms of his book? I suspect that this is the case as his letter in August has all the hallmarks of one who cannot answer the arguments of his opponents and therefore resorts to distortion of what they said, personal attacks and vitriolic abuse of any source they have cited. He demands that an historian who supports the

myth theory should be named, but the problem is that he will not accept anyone who disagrees with him as a valid historian.

He also claims that the opinion of Jews should be paramount. Why? There is no evidence that Jews are more intelligent or their scholarship is any greater than that of the rest of us. The reason many modern Jews are keen supporters of an historical Jesus is simple, they are extremely proud that millions of half-witted gentiles worship a Jew.

I must challenge him directly on his assertion that Josephus believed in an historical Jesus. The passage is one of the most blatant Christian forgeries. Such a passage could not have been written by a devout Jew, and early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen knew nothing of this passage. If *Freethinker* readers are interested in a full debunking of this passage and of the views of some of Stuart Campbell's favourite writers, such as Guinebert and Klausner, I recommend that they read *Jesus – God, Man or Myth* by Herbert Cutner. It is worth noting the comment of Baring-Gould on this passage; writing in 1874 he wrote, "One may be, perhaps, accused of killing dead birds, if one examines and discredits the passage".

As I pointed out in my letter in February, Stuart Campbell has very low standards when it comes to forgeries in ancient authorities, saying in his book (page 36) "It matters little whether or not a Christian has interfered with the text". It is not surprising that someone who does not think forgeries matter reaches false conclusions.

Another interesting statement from the chapter he was pushing so hard in his August letter occurs on page 42, "the apostles preached a mythical Jesus," and on the next page "it did not matter...whether or not he was a real person." This is followed up further down the page with "Gnostic Christianity rejected the authority of the orthodox Church and with it the story of Jesus' life which the Church preached." So there were clearly many people at the time Christianity first appeared, both Jews and Christians, who did not believe Jesus was an historical person.

Muddled thinking seems to be the hallmark of everything Stuart Campbell writes.

CHARLES DOUGLAS
Galloway

STUART Campbell and Robert Eisenman both present reconstructions of Christian origins sufficiently different from my own (*Mythology's Last Gods*) that I cannot recommend either as a guide to what really happened, although I do urge readers to consult opposing views for comparison purposes. It has been my observation that letters in *PoV* criticising Campbell have come, not from competent scholars objecting to a particular interpretation, but from brain amputees who think that a book featuring a talking snake and a talking donkey is nonfiction. Any person

who uses the offensively Christian dating system, AD, that is a calculated insult to this planet's 5.5 billion non-Christians, rather than the scientifically neutral CE, is a bigot by definition.

WILLIAM HARWOOD
Canada

Correcting Harwood

ACCORDING to Matthew 19:21, Jesus advised a rich man to sell all this belongings and give the money to "the poor". However, William Harwood claims that the word used for "poor" was "*Ebionim*" and that it was the name of "Jesus' communistic cult" (in his review of Austin Daley's *The Secular Conscience*, June).

This is nonsense. The word used is "*ptochos*", which means "destitute" or "beggarly poor". In any case, as Harwood must know from my book (*The Rise and Fall of Jesus*), which he has reviewed, Jesus was the leader of a sect called "Nazarenes". It was dynastic rather than communistic and believed that the Jewish poor were destined to rule the coming kingdom. If "*ebionim*" means anything, it would be something like "the forcers" or "the defrauders". It's not a word found in the Greek New Testament.

STUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

Islam in Indonesia

WILLIAM Harwood's article on Indonesian Muslims (*Freethinker*, August) contains some of the most foolish and offensive criticisms of Muslims that I have come across. They are foolish because they are obviously wrong. They are offensive, not because they are about Muslims, but because they are about people.

Harwood says that "if a jihadist preached to even the most moderate [Muslim] congregation ... every single hearer would become a terrorist." He provides no evidence for his view that such preaching would overcome the common humanity of such moderate Muslims.

In fact the evidence is all the other way. For instance, several jihadist organisations operate in the UK and have preached to many people. The website of one, Hizb ut-Tahrir (<http://www.hizb.org.uk>) lists many meetings addressed by its leaders. Some hearers do adopt extremist views but only a tiny proportion become terrorists. That is, only a tiny proportion are really prepared to kill, rather than merely to shout, for their religion or politics. (The evidence is the tiny number who have killed or been convicted of terrorist offences.) So most Muslims are not terrorists despite the fact that many have been exposed to terrorist preaching.

He also says "... all Middle East Muslims are terrorists in their hearts". Here he does have evidence – the election victories of Hamas and President Ahmadinejad. But informed commentators agree that Hamas won the election because Fatah had proved unable to protect the



Palestinian people from the violence (which I would call terrorism) of the Israeli state and because Fatah was seen as corrupt.

Harwood says "no-one votes for a terrorist except another terrorist", but in that he's also wrong. When relatively moderate politics fails people will often vote for extremists – witness the increasing votes for the BNP in some UK constituencies. Hamas voters are no more all terrorists than BNP voters are all fascists. In the UK we call this "protest voting".

The situation in Iran is rather different because moderate candidates are largely excluded from elections. Ahmadinejad is a dangerous clown with crazy views and if Iran obtained nuclear weapons it would be a threat to the region. It's hard to believe, however, that he is likely to kill as many people as the UK-US invasion of Iraq has already done. It's not only religious folly and bad faith that produces massacres.

Harwood admits that the behaviour of Indonesian Muslims is peaceful. They are not unthinking bigots or natural terrorists; still less are they "more evolved". He should recognise that this is also true for most Muslims in most countries.

We should not pander to political Islam by accepting its claims to be the true voice of Muslim people. Those people, by their actions, show that they do not accept these claims but seek to live peacefully. In this they show their common humanity.

DAVID FLINT
Enfield

Stephen Green

HAVING been driven by your seemingly justifiably triumphant article about the financial imperatives placed upon Mr Stephen Green to visit his website, it occurs to me that had one set out to satirise the extremist British Christian movement, in the mode of the US site for the Landover Baptists (www.landoverbaptist.org/), one would have been hard pressed to do any better than the Christian Voice website. Can such publications as: *The Pink Swastika* by Scott Lively, which we are told: "exposes the deep roots of homosexuality in the Nazi party", really be seriously intended?

I know that Mr Green has been prominent and vocal in his activities, but this is as consistent with Borat-like satire as with his claimed convictions. Certainly, if he is let off the costs orders made against him, questions will need to be asked about what is going on. It may be that he is a currently unsung hero of secularism and a selfless campaigner against prejudice and intolerance.

Whatever the truth may be about Mr Green, I have to say that I would hope that the focus of the *Freethinker* might be more usefully focused not upon extremist nutters, but the "mainstream" of organised religion in the UK. The Lambeth Conference has recently finished without the expected fragmentation of the

Anglican Church, but with any pretence of respect for all of humanity from that Church in abeyance for a decade. Women are second-class citizens, unfit to hold senior office by reason of their uncleanness, and homosexuals appear to be third-class citizens by a small but significant margin.

This Church operates nearly 5,000 schools in England, influencing the education and social perspectives of over a million young people at a time. Whilst this is seen as respectable, untold damage is done to our society. The threat of more religious schools, given that other faiths are just as intolerant and prejudice-ridden, is something far more deserving of opposition than the rantings of such as Mr Green.

And at the end of the day, I suspect that the reason why the readers of the *Freethinker* are sufficiently opposed to religion to do more than stay away from places of worship is that intolerance and prejudice.

They ask why it is that devout male Muslims do not wear the burqa, despite there being no higher standard of "modesty" prescribed for men than women in the Koran, and why therefore burqa-wearing is being insinuated into our institutions. They query the idea that one's sexual orientation is relevant to one's employment. And they question why it is that the irrational beliefs of parents should determine whether their children should be educated in their local school or not. These are issues which affect our communities and which are seemingly guiding our future into directions many of us find uncomfortable. Whilst we spend our time and efforts dealing with extremism, we are not freely thinking at all, but being guided into diversions.

LAURENCE MANN
Twickenham

Belfast Pride Parade

ON August 2 several members of the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland participated in the Belfast Pride parade. We were given a warm welcome by all our friends in the gay, lesbian, and transgendered community and it was a total honour and privilege for us to walk shoulder-to-shoulder beside them.

The plethora of parties, pressure groups and secular and religious organisations which attended the event – with 7,000 participants, the biggest ever in the city – is testimony to a growing climate of opinion in Northern Ireland which rejects the bigotry, intolerance and narrow-mindedness of some of the more traditional elements in our society. It indicates how far out of touch with the modern world is the outlook displayed by the DUP and some churches in their persistent opposition to equality for gays, the rights of women over their own bodies, and the teaching of evolution in schools.

By contrast, we had a parade that was not relevant only to one culture or tradition but which united gay and straight, Protestant and Catholic, unionist and republican, believer and atheist, all

within the bonds of a shared citizenship.

Clearly, Ireland, north as well as south, is becoming a more diverse and plural society. Ethnic minorities are growing daily, women are acquiring more power and influence in all walks of life, gays and lesbians are emerging from the shadows, and secularists are sticking their heads above the parapet. All are contributing to a new and exciting melting-pot.

The most successful societies develop diverse cultures, divergent opinions and varied talents for the common good. They recognise the right to be different, while at the same time cherishing the universal values we all share as part of our common humanity. Positive things happen to positive humanists.

BRIAN MCCLINTON
Director, Humanist Association
of Northern Ireland

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Events & Contacts

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.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Sept 3, 8pm. Michael Irwin: *Embryos and Abortion – Victory in 2008?* Wed, Oct 1, 8pm. Anna Behan, Vice-President, National Secular Society: *The Equalities Debate and Secularism*.

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: Wendover Pubic Library, High St, Wendover. Tues, Sept 30, 7.45pm. Speaker: David Lidington, MP for Aylesbury. Information and programme: 01296 623730.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available, Details: 01268 785295.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA): Information: PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ, Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org. 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: Meets on the second Wednesday of the month (except January, July and August) at 8pm at the HAVS Lodge, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. September 10: Matthew Collins – *Religion and the paranormal – are they one and the same?* Further details from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.

Havering & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, Balgores Cresc, Gidea Park. 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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Glasgow Group: 07010 704776. glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

National Secular Society: Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, London WC1. Friday, Oct 24, 7.30pm. Terry Sanderson presents Rib Ticklers, an evening of vintage comedy from TV, radio, film and Music Hall. Tickets £10 from Rib Ticklers, PO Box 130, London W5 1DQ. Cheques payable to NSS.

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 Ollie Killingback on 01933 389070.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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