

£1.25

Vol 128 No 10
October 2008

The Freethinker

The voice of atheism since 1881

Mickey Mouse recruited in the battle against creationism

HOW do you begin to reverse the religious stupidification process that has left millions of Americans, and a sizeable number of Europeans and others wallowing in a nonsensical belief in creationism, or its ugly sister, "intelligent design"?

In a fascinating, albeit depressing *New York Times* article – *A Teacher on the Front Line as Faith and Science Clash* – journalist Amy Harmon concentrated on the efforts of one teacher in Florida, David Campbell, 52, who introduces evolution with pictures of Mickey Mouse.

In February, Harmon points out, the Florida Department of Education modified its standards to explicitly require, for the first time, the state's public schools to teach evolution, calling it "the organizing principle of life science".

Spurred in part by legal rulings against school districts seeking to favour religious versions of natural history, over a dozen other states have also given more emphasis in recent years to what has long been the scientific consensus: that all of the diverse life forms on Earth descended from a common ancestor, through a process of mutation and natural selection, over billions of years.

But in a nation where evangelical Protestantism and other religious traditions stress a literal reading of the biblical description of God's individually creating each species, students often arrive at school fearing that evolution, and perhaps science itself, is hostile to their faith.

The poor treatment of evolution in some state education standards may reflect the public's widely held creationist beliefs. In Gallup polls over the last 25 years, nearly half of American adults have consistently said they believe God cre-



ated all living things in their present form, sometime in the last 10,000 years.

But a 2005 defeat in federal court for a school board in Dover, Pa., that sought to cast doubt on evolution gave legal ammunition to evolution proponents on school boards and in statehouses across the country.

With a mandate to teach evolution but little guidance as to how, science teachers are contriving their own ways to turn a culture war into a lesson plan. How they fare may bear on whether a new generation of Americans embraces scientific evidence alongside religious belief.

Campbell starts with Mickey Mouse. "Mickey evolved. And Mickey gets cuter because Walt Disney makes more money that way. That is 'selection'."

Later, he gets to the touchier part, about how the minute changes in organisms that drive biological change arise spontaneously, without direction. And how a struggle for existence among naturally varying individuals has helped to generate every species, living and extinct, on the planet.

Says Campbell: "Evolution has been the focus of a lot of debate in our state this year. If you read the newspapers, every-

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Birthday and anniversary celebrations are un-Islamic says mad Muslim cleric

THE Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz al-Shaikh, of Saudi Arabia, has issued a declaration condemning the celebration of birthdays and anniversaries, saying that the marking of events like these "would put Muslims on par with people of other faiths, including Jews and Christians".

According to a Reuters report, Shaikh entered the celebrations debate when a more enlightened Saudi cleric, Salman al-Awdah, told a TV audience that birthdays and anniversaries were not against Islam.

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Museum defies Pope over 'crucified' frog – p11



Retirement? Chance would be a fine thing, says *Freethinker* editor Barry Duke

"YOU know those things will kill you?" Although the remark was directed at around half-a-dozen latter-day pariahs defiantly dragging on their fags outside a pub, the huffy item who made it was glaring directly at me when she spoke, so I felt impelled to respond.

"I bloody well hope so, honeypuddle. I have invested a great deal of cash in tobacco over the years as part of an early exit plan, and I will be incredibly annoyed if it doesn't do what it says on the tin."

Without a further word – words would be difficult as the prodnose now had her nostrils tightly pinched between thumb and forefinger – she jetted off into the night, leaving behind a vapour trail of self-righteous disapproval.

I was only half-joking when I made that remark. A while back, a quick, back-of-an-envelope calculation presented me with a sobering revelation: retirement is a luxury well beyond my means. I will simply have to keep tapping at this keyboard until the day I drop.

It also occurred to me that, were I to heed the words of the gospel song *You Better Change Your Way of Living* – brilliantly performed by blues singer Alberta Hunter who died aged 89 in 1984 – cleaning up my act may leave me clinging miserably to the perch long after I had lost the ability to earn my keep.

When I was at school a careers advisor asked me what I intended becoming when I grew up. "A burden on society, miss" I shot back, which earned me one *very* old-fashioned look, and loud applause from my peers. Almost half-a-century on, those words look more like an accurate prediction than a joke.

But – unless straitjacketed and heavily sedated – I don't plan to be a *docile* burden. I picture myself a cantankerous old demon, fizzing with fury over the fact that I was being kept alive against my will. Deprived of anything worth inhaling or imbibing I will lash out at carers with all gums blazing, yank out drip feeds, and hurl objects.

Where, for pity's sake, is the dignity in that?

That's the question veteran columnist Katharine Whitehorn, 80, addressed last month on Radio 4's *A Point of View* when she drew attention to some very scary statistics.

"Some people who live long enough to receive a card from the Queen on reaching 100 – or even mere chicks of 80 or 90 – lead vigorous and fulfilling lives. But an awful lot don't. So it's small wonder that the question of how they live comes up more and more often. It's not surprising either that Mary Warnock, who has had to wrestle with the issues regarding the start of life – embryos and all that – and Elisabeth Macdonald, a distinguished oncologist

at Guy's Hospital in London, have turned their attention to how we should die – how and if life should be brought to an end – in a book they have written, *Easeful Death*.

"There has been more than one bill defeated in Parliament that was designed to make it easier for a really awful life to be ended, but they [W & M] think that, despite the difficulties, our views on life generally have developed enough for such a bill to succeed now.

"Until relatively recently," Whitehorn pointed out, "people only lived a short time after retirement – now they may easily live on for another 30 or 40 years.

"If you are educated, or have enough money, or obsessed by bridge or golf or grandchildren, you can have a good time – until your health packs up. If you suppose your life then is utterly meaningless, you can count on suicide. Not that it's easy, as Dorothy Parker wrote:

*Razors pain you,
Rivers are damp,
Acids stain you,
And drugs cause cramp.
Guns aren't lawful,
Nooses give,
Gas smells awful--
You might as well live.*

"Difficult and dodgy, even when you are reasonably healthy and have most of your marbles.

"But along with the statistics about how long we are all going to live – in about a dozen years or so half the population will be over 50 – comes the chilling projection that the very old can look forward to ten years of chronic illness. I know it depends on what kind of chronic illness. Properly cared for, invalids and disabled people can lead worthwhile lives, but many long-term illnesses are simply horrific in spite of good hospices and 'living wills'."

Whitehorn revealed that her mother had died in her sleep while visiting friends, "but another relative starved herself to death – a horrible way to go – so fed up was she with constant, intractable pain, and in spite of really good care. It's a myth that all pain is controllable. And when we saw another relative in a nursing home the day before he mercifully died, we came away saying that if he were an animal, you wouldn't let it go on.

"Incredibly telling to me is a phrase from American philosophy professor Sam Gorowitz, who wrote a book on medical ethics. He tells of a young man who begged the doctors to give his agonised dying mother more morphine. He was told no, that it might suppress her breathing. The man accepted this at first, but then came back and said: 'Where is

it written that cancer has some right to be the cause of death – that the doctors' job is to keep the patent alive until the tumour can cash in its claim?'

"Some European countries have some form of assisted dying, but in spite of the optimism of Warnock and Macdonald, I had always thought that it wouldn't work here because we are so inefficient. If we can't even ensure that a miserable old lady gets her disgustingly soiled sheets changed, if a hospital can send a very elderly lady with dementia back home with no-one to control her heart pills, how could we ever be sure that we would get it right whenever a sick person really wanted to go? Warnock and Macdonald have hopes that the time has come for it, even so.

"When Terry Pratchett was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and said he would rather have cancer, there was outrage. You can't say you want to die of cancer; yet Alzheimer's is arguably worse, but attracts a fraction of the amount of research money than cancer does. We are not used to thinking that people have a choice about how they die.

"And we're not supposed to make jokes about it either, such as 'I want to die peacefully in my sleep like my father, not screaming with fear like his passengers'. Yet even his passengers' plight may be better than the long, drawn-out alternatives."

Whitehorn then tells of two retired medical missionaries who would cycle around Britain on a tandem, raising money for a hospital in South Africa where they had worked. The day after their golden anniversary, they decided to have one last ride around the British Isles. They were hit by a lorry and killed outright.

"Everyone wrung their hands and said how awful it was, but what could be better than a very swift death together, without the long agony of one losing the other; operations and care homes, hearing and sight gradually going wrong, pain only just controlled, if that?"

"I used to have a sort of Hollywood vision of my deathbed. I would lie on my pillows, pale but brave, and forgive my enemies on the grounds that nothing would infuriate them more."

Whitehorn concluded: "I know now that I am more likely to be half-senile in hospital, hung about with tubes and drips, confused and hurting. It may be very difficult to form a law that would give me an easy death, but I just hope they manage it before it's my time to go."

The horror that is state nannyism cares as little about dignity as it does about freedom of choice. It is blindly obsessed with keeping people alive well past their sell-by dates, but with no thought at all as to the *quality* of their lives, or who the hell is going to pick up the tab for their continued existence. I can't help feeling that there must be many a geriatric now cursing the day they decided to pack in the fags, moderate their drinking and take lots of exercise.

Now top up my scotch and roll me another bloody fag.

Evils of religion spelled out in gay discrimination hearing

"RELIGIOUS intolerance has generated more wars, misery and suffering than any other type of disorientation or bias. In the name of this or that deity, for the glory of a divine cause or in order to settle abstruse theological disputes, human blood has been shed for thousands of years."

Those were the astonishing concluding remarks of South African senior counsel, Ronel Tolmay, in a landmark case in the Pretoria High Court where a gay music teacher has won damages from the Dutch Reformed Church in Moreleta Park, Pretoria.

Organist Johan Strydom was booted out of the church after it was discovered that he was gay. As a result of his treatment, he brought a civil action against the DRC under the Promotion of Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act.

Tolmay said the right to freedom of religion could only be protected if tolerance of opposing opinions was shown.

She acknowledged that people honestly held certain opinions – like believing that it was a sin to be a practising homosexual – but she also cited a case in which a fundamentalist group some time ago wanted to stone an adulterous woman to death because she acted contrary to their religious beliefs.

"This is what happens when honestly held



opinions are allowed – and this is the reason why we have a constitution to protect people."

Tolmay asked Judge Dion Basson to follow the law and the provisions of the constitution, which clearly indicated that Strydom was discriminated against.

But senior counsel for the church, Johan Louw, argued that equality considerations should not be allowed to trump the core beliefs of spiritual leaders.

Louw said that the congregation had interpreted the Bible as saying that homosexuality was a sin. He said in light of its right to freedom of religion, it was thus irrelevant what others' interpretation of the Bible may be.

He said Strydom must have been aware that the church regarded homosexuality as a sin and expected a celibate life of all homosexuals in leadership positions, including the lecturers in the music academy.

One of the congregation's ministers, Dominee Dirkie van der Spuy, said it was stated clearly in the Bible that homosexuality was wrong.

When it was pointed out to him that the DRC – principle architect and stout defender of racial segregation – had preached for decades that the separation of the races had been ordained by God, van der Spuy replied that homosexuality was clearly condemned in the Bible, but that it never mentioned apartheid – a surprising admission that the DRC had LIED to its congregations right up to the point when a democratic, multi-racial government came into being in 1994.

Judge Basson concluded that Strydom had been unfairly dismissed, and ordered the church to apologise unconditionally to Strydom. He said the constitutionally-protected right to equality outweighed the church's right to religious freedom, and he ordered the church to pay Strydom almost R87,000 (£6,000) for the impairment of his dignity, emotional and psychological suffering and loss of earnings.

During often stormy proceedings, the court heard that the Pretoria Church wanted their gay music teacher to "free himself" from his "sin" – either by changing his ways or living a celibate life without impure thoughts about men.

'Cancer-stricken' pastor was a lying porn-addict

IS THERE no depth to which some Christians will sink?

An Australian pastor-cum-singer who rose to fame with the claim that he was suffering terminal cancer – which inspired him to write a hit evangelical pop song – has just been exposed as a fraud ... and a man with "a severe porn addiction".

Michael Guglielmucci, of Planetshakers Church in Melbourne, told worshippers, friends and his own family that he was likely to die from the disease.

He claimed his hit song Healer, which was included on mega-church Hillsong's latest album, came to him as a "gift from God" on the day the diagnosis was revealed.

It propelled Mr Guglielmucci, formerly a pastor with Melbourne-based church Planetshakers, to the forefront of Australia's Christian youth movement.

His "suffering" even led one fan to tell his story on the internet thus: "[His cancer] struck him pretty bad till at one point there were about 30 bones fractured in his body due to the disease. He was in pain all over his joints and bones. At that time, the doctor told him that he could live another 3 months plus.

"One thing for sure, Mike didn't give up on

God. His faith was taken to a higher level and he never ceased to praise God undoubtedly. Even in a wheelchair, he has written even more beautiful songs to worship God and one of it is Healer. Mike has so much faith in God and even if he has to be called home early, he accepts it as God's will.

"Today, I see a whole new Mike. He could even preach and sing in the most recent Hillsong Conference. This has proved to many of us that God is alive and He can do ALL things POSSIBLE!"

But the pastor's story was an out-and-out lie.

A statement from Australian Christian Churches Vice-President Alun Davies said Guglielmucci, now living in Adelaide, had admitted to fabricating his cancer claim.

Representatives of the National Executive for the Australian Christian Churches recently met with Michael Guglielmucci. At this meeting, he read a statement indicating that his claim to have cancer was untrue. His credential with the Australian Christian Churches was immediately suspended.

His deception was so great his wife quit work to care for him, he forced himself to vomit regularly at night and even lost his hair to fool his family and the public about the



Michael Guglielmucci

extent of his illness.

Guglielmucci's parents established Edge Church International, an Assemblies of God church. After the hoax had been exposed, his father said Guglielmucci's problems stemmed from his "porn addiction". Later, in a frank interview, the pastor said he fabricated a terminal cancer battle to hide his 16-year obsession with pornography.

"This is who I am – I'm addicted to the stuff, it consumes my mind."

Police are now investigating disgraced pastor Michael Guglielmucci over the collection of public donations to his cancer cause.

Abuse victim's mother said 'no priest would ever do that'

A TEENAGE girl was slapped by her mother when she complained that she was being abused by a Catholic priest.

"No priest would ever do something like that", Mary Dougherty was told by her angry mother.

Now, more than 40 years on, Dougherty, 55, of Claymont, Delaware, is suing the Catholic Diocese of Wilmington and Holy Rosary parish for the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of the Rev Leonard Mackiewicz when she was about 13 years old.

The lawsuit is the first filed in Delaware on behalf of a female survivor of alleged priest abuse.

Dougherty claims that she was abused by

Mackiewicz, and that he also abused at least nine other children.

Mackiewicz was removed from the ministry in 1987 and died in 1994.

The lawsuit claims church officials knew that Mackiewicz was abusing young boys and girls but did nothing to protect them while allowing him to serve as a priest for 30 years. The suit seeks compensatory and punitive damages.

Mackiewicz was an assistant pastor at Holy Rosary from 1964 to 1967. According to the lawsuit, he also served as director of the parish's Catholic Youth Organization and as a longtime Boy Scout chaplain.

Dougherty claims that Mackiewicz began making unwanted sexual advances against

her in 1966, including groping her and other young girls underwater at a Catholic Youth Organisation pool party, and pinning her against a wall and rubbing himself against her in the church basement during a CYO meeting.

The alleged abuse culminated in an incident during a CYO trip to Indian River Inlet on Delaware's southern coast, where Mackiewicz allegedly tackled her on a beach and tried to rape her.

The lawsuit claims Mackiewicz tore at her clothes and repeatedly said: "This is power."

Dougherty said she was eventually saved when the Rev Leonard Kempinski, another Holy Rosary priest, happened upon the scene and pulled Mackiewicz off of her.

"If it hadn't been for Rev Kempinski, she would have been raped," said Dougherty's attorney, Stephen Neuberger. "Rev Kempinski is still alive, and we will be depositing him."

Dougherty, whose family includes three aunts who were nuns and an uncle who served as a priest, said her mother had become furious when she reported the abuse.

Dougherty claims the abuse stopped after she confronted Mackiewicz in the church confessional the following week and threatened to kill him if he ever touched her again.

The madness of Muslim clerics

(Continued from p1)

"Oh yes they are", brayed Shaikh. Declaring such celebrations contrary to Muslim "righteousness", he firmly contradicted his colleague's views.

Shaikh, who embraces the hardline Islamic doctrine of Wahhabism, said that only two occasions merit celebration in the Muslim world: Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the fasting month of Ramadan, and *Eid al-Adha*, which marks the end of the annual haj pilgrimage.

Shaikh's remarks came just days after another loony Saudi cleric Muhammad Al-Munajjid again kicked off about Western decadence.

Al-Munajjid had been watching the Beijing Olympics – and was appalled at all the exposed flesh he had seen. Female flesh, that is.

According to the *Australian*, in an interview aired on Al-Majd TV and translated by the Middle-East Media Research Institute, the twisted cleric slammed the Olympic Games – past and present – for its debauched display of women's bodies.

"The world's worst display of women's clothing is the women's Olympics. No exposure of women's private parts on a global scale could make Satan happier than Olympic games that include women's sports."

The fool ranted on: "What women wear in the Olympic games are among the worst clothes possible. The inventions of Satan, with regard to the exposure of the body in gymnastics, in swimming, in whatever, in tennis ... Women have never got naked for sports like they do in the Olympics. It is aired to billions of people worldwide. The problem is not just



Muhammad Al-Munajjid in full rant

with the spectators who are present. The whole thing is aired on TV..."

In 2007, the lunatic got his knickers in a twist ... over knickers. In an interview aired on Iqra TV on July 26, 2007, Al-Munajjid declared: "There are rules of shari'a in everything. We have counted almost 70 rules about how to urinate and defecate. In contrast, how do those beasts in the West answer the call of nature? They stand in front of other people, in toilets at airports and other public places. They do not care about covering their private parts. Even their underwear is coloured and not white, so it can conceal all that filth.

Oh, and: "Humanity can have no happiness without Islam. Humanity can enjoy no goodness, unless the sun of monotheism, the Koran, and the Sunna shines upon it. The world without the sun of the divine revelation is a place of eternal darkness, as we can see today – a world of frustration, collapse, injustice, arbitrariness, and wrongdoing. The world today is a jungle – a world of barbarism of all kinds. People in many parts of the world are not happy, because they do not walk in the path of Allah."

Muslim community leader jailed for abusing girls

A PROMINENT Muslim community leader who sexually abused girls aged 14 and 15 has been jailed for nearly four years.

Mosque leader Farooq Hussain – who prays five times daily – was jailed for 45 months after a jury yesterday found him guilty at Perth Sheriff Court.

Jailing the charity worker, Sheriff Lindsay Foulis told him that he took into account that Hussain had tried to blacken his young victims' names.

Hussain, 56, will also face a 30-month period on licence at the end of his jail term and will remain on the sex offenders' register for an indefinite period.

Mr Foulis noted that the girls had been doing casual work for the restaurateur and that he had abused a position of trust.

"You were convicted, in my opinion, on the clearest and most compelling evidence. As a result of going to trial, the two girls were required to give evidence."

Obama's running-mate is the wrong sort of Catholic ...

LATEST sounds of outrage over a political decision comes from Catholics in the US who are rallying to condemn Barack Obama's running mate Joe Biden.

Biden is himself a Catholic – but the WRONG sort of Catholic, as he won't toe the Vatican line on abortion.

The Roman Catholic group, Fidelis, said the choice was "a slap in the face to Catholic voters" and poses a major challenge for American Catholics.

Fidelis president, Brian Burch, said that Obama had "re-opened a wound among American Catholics" by picking a pro-abortion Catholic politician like Joe Biden.

According to this report, the row raises a major problem for Catholic groups, as just last week the Vatican reaffirmed its policy that Catholics who support abortion would not be allowed to take Communion.

During the recent Democratic primary campaign Biden said: "I am a long-standing supporter of Roe v Wade and a woman's right to choose."

Wailed the interfering Burch: "Senator Biden is an unrepentant supporter of abortion in direct opposition to the church he



Vice Presidential Democratic candidate Joe Biden

claims as his own. Selecting a pro-abortion Catholic is a slap in the face to Catholic voters."

According to Burch: "The American bishops have instructed Catholic voters to consider many issues, but have

characterised the defence of human life as foundational and have explained that the issue has a special claim on the conscience of the Catholic voter. This means that a political candidate like Biden, because of his strong support for abortion rights, forfeits any claim for support despite his views on other issues like health care and the economy."

Mickey Mouse's evolution

(Continued from p1)

one is arguing, 'Is it a theory, is it not a theory?' The answer is, we can observe it. We can see it happen, just like you can see it in Mickey."

Campbell deflects public criticism that his courses do not include alternative explanations for life's diversity, like intelligent design, thus: "We also failed to include astrology, alchemy, and the concept of the moon being made of green cheese, because those aren't science, either."

Science explores nature by testing and gathering data. It can't tell you what's right and wrong. It doesn't address ethics. But it is not anti-religion. Science and religion just ask different questions.

Asked by one pupil, "Is there a God?", Campbell replies. "Can't test it. Can't prove it, can't disprove it. It's not a question for science."

Another pupil, Bryce, a boy of 16, from a strong Christian background, says: "But there is scientific proof that there is a God. Over in Turkey there's a piece of wood from Noah's ark that came out of a glacier."

Campbell chose his words carefully: "If I could prove, tomorrow, that that chunk of wood is not from the ark, is not even 500 years old and not even from the right kind of tree – would that damage your religious faith at all?"

The boy thinks for a moment, and replies "No".

Campbell replies: "Faith is not based on science. And science is not based on faith. I don't expect you to 'believe' the scientific explanation of evolution that we're going to talk about over the next few weeks. But I do expect you to understand it.

Bryce is unconvinced: "Evolution is telling you that you're like an animal. That's why people stand strong with Christianity, because it teaches people to lead a good life and not do wrong."

... and McCain's is a frothing fundamentalist

"RELIGIOUSLY, Sarah Palin is George Bush unbuttoned. The latter manages much of the time to disguise the evangelical passion of his political mission. Palin possesses the same zeal, but lays it on the line for all to see. There is no artifice, no subtlety. It's all right there. If this woman is right for the vice-presidency, then evangelical Christianity is even more pervasive and powerful than I feared."

So wrote Richard Silverstein in the *Guardian*. Profiling the Christian zealot named as Republican John McCain's running-mate, he points out that the Governor of Alaska has a tendency to run off at the mouth about GOD and JEEE-SUS! at the drop of a blueberry muffin.

Palin is particularly popular with the fundies because of her opposition to sex education in schools. Unless of course, it's of the abstinence-only variety. Which might explain why she now has a 17-year-old daughter who's irretrievably up the duff.

After boasting that her 19-year-old son Track had enlisted in the military and was about to be deployed to Iraq, Palin said:

"Pray for our military men and women who are striving to do what is right. Also, for this country, that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending [US soldiers] out on a task that is

from God. ...

That's what we have to make sure that we're praying for, that there is a plan and that that plan is God's plan."

Then, after listing the tasks she can do as governor to make the state a decent place to live in, she added: "None of that is gonna do any good if the people's heart isn't right with God. We can work together to make sure that God's will be done here in Alaska."

Said Silverstein: "I can perfectly understand why evangelicals are overjoyed with her nomination. But I can't understand why McCain was as well. Did he not think that statements like this might disturb non-evangelicals, not to mention non-Christians, of which, believe it or not, there are a few in this country?"

He added: "Frankly, candidates like Palin are the Jews' worst nightmare. The sentiments she expresses are part of a vestigial memory we internalise about what intolerance and bigotry sounds like.



Atheist blues musician Billy Jenkins becomes a BHA Officiant

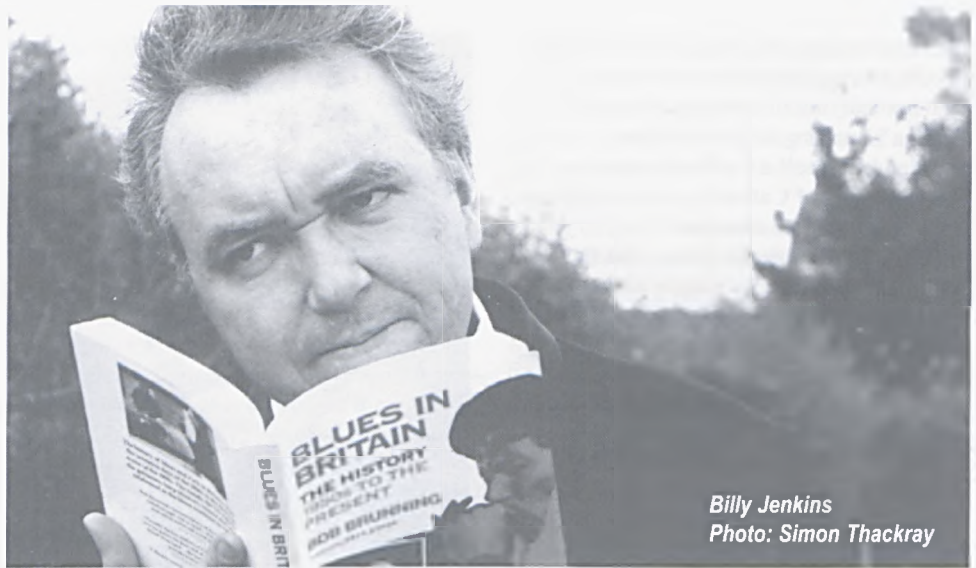
ATHEIST blues musician Billy Jenkins – who mischievously calls his free and fast flowing instrumental ensemble since 1981 The Voice of God Collective, has widened his horizons to become a Probationary Humanist Officiant accredited by the BHA to conduct non-religious funerals.

Jenkins, who says the blues is an “affirmation of life”, describes himself as a man who fully accepts that there is but one life, with no “Invisible Friend” to guide one to “the Promised Land” and supposed eternity.

Add a thorough grounding in backstage antics as a pre-pubescent C of E choirboy (“great music, crap lyrics...”), and it comes as no surprise that the now “properly grown-up fiftysomething” Jenkins should decide to study and train with the British Humanist Association.

“I have nothing against those who need spiritual guidance to help them through life, although I draw the line when religious fundamentalists evoke what I describe as the ‘Three Cs’: Conning, Controlling and Killing,” says Jenkins.

“My work as an officiant will complement



Billy Jenkins
Photo: Simon Thackray

my performance and recording. Most of my music is a celebration of existence. I let musicians express themselves through my music.

“Now, thanks to the insightful and thorough BHA training, I can be of service to those who find death has suddenly hit them smack between the eyes. The role does not involve me as a musician, but with my experience as a facilitator of live events, I will be able to, hopefully, assist in celebrating the life of a per-

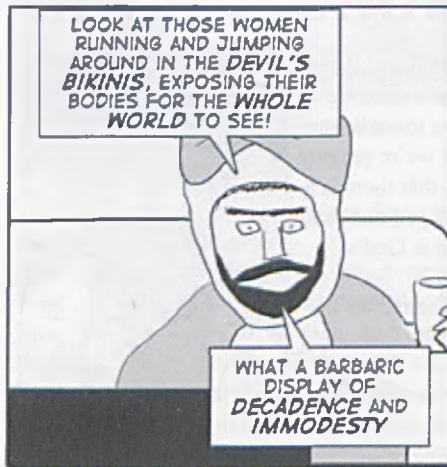
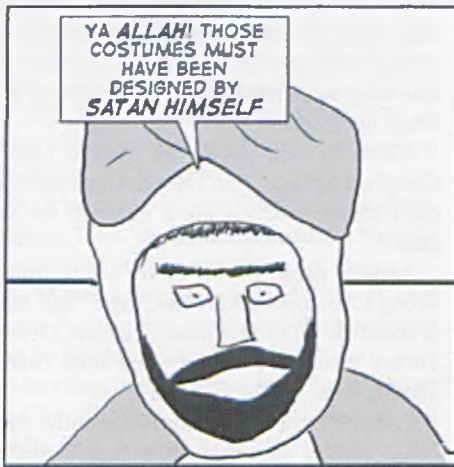
son whose death has left a terrible hole in the lives of those who knew and loved them.

“A fitting funeral ceremony can do so much to assist and accept closure and to open the door to the initially painful and empty path of life one has to continue with. It is a threshold that has to be crossed.

“Amazingly, too many people are still unaware that a funeral can be non-religious and I recommend you find out more about the work of the BHA and their ceremonies (they also officiate at weddings, baby namings and civil partnerships) at www.humanism.org.uk.”

Jenkins will be mostly conducting funerals in and around SE London and you can reach him via the BHA website (type in “funerals” and “SE” for the postcode) or by return email.

Jesus and Mo



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Muslims can't get their h

LAST year, 138 Muslim scholars published an open letter to religious leaders called *A Common Word Between Us and You* that appealed for peace and reconciliation between Muslims and Christians.

Rowan “Dumbledore” Williams, who has yet to find a formula for peace and reconciliation between his very own warring Anglicans – currently hissing and spitting like cats in an alley – has only just managed to respond to it.

He welcomed the letter, of course. But he pointed out a thorny problem Muslims will always have with Christianity: the concept of the Holy Trinity, which is: “... difficult, sometimes offensive, to Muslims [but] I believe that for the sake of open and careful dialogue it is important to try and clarify what we do and what we do not mean by it.”

As the report, from which we gleaned the Archbishop’s response, did not say whether “Dumbledore” planned to follow through his

Beware Israel's 'virtuous' vigilantes

ISRAEL'S "modesty guards" – a "virtuous" band of ultra-Orthodox Jewish vigilantes working to eradicate so-called immodest behaviour in Haredi areas – are growing more aggressive, according to a recent *Haaretz* report

With aims similar to those of Saudi Arabia's Committee for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (the Mutaween), they are going so far as to break into the homes of those whose lifestyles and dress they disapprove of.

One of the guards has been arrested for an attack by several of the vigilantes on a secular Jewish woman, whose home they entered.

In a rare TV interview, a member of the Modesty Patrol – which has also been accused of roughing up women who refuse to sit at the back of buses – claimed the organisation enjoys the support of rabbis and the police.

A strong critic of the Modesty Patrols, publisher Dudi Zilberschlag of the newspaper *Bakehila*, has lashed out at the vigilantes.

Zilberschlag – an ultra-Orthodox Jew himself – wrote an editorial called *The cult of censure and negation*, in which he condemned the activities of the Modesty Patrols and called those behind them "members of a cult" and "a lunatic fringe".

Meanwhile, in Mexico City, a Catholic priest has caused outrage among some Mexican women, who say the Roman Catholic Church is making it easier to justify sexual violence against women by suggesting that those in mini-skirts were prostituting themselves.

According to Yahoo News, the Rev Sergio G

Roman warned against miniskirts in an online publication to prepare Catholics for a church family-values forum next year in Mexico City.

"When we show our body without prudence, without modesty, we are prostituting ourselves," he declared.

Mexican newspaper columnists lampooned the article, and women's rights advocates have attacked it.

Guadalupe Loaeza, a renowned Mexican social commentator, said she worries the priest's statements will be taken seriously and make it acceptable to blame the victim.

"It gives rapists permission to say, 'Well, she had on a miniskirt'. What the church says has credibility – that's why this type of statement is so dangerous."

Roman's statements echo recent comments by government authorities elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A police superintendent in Jamaica called on women last week to dress with greater modesty to curb rapes on the island.

After an 8-year-old girl was gang-raped by five men at a market in Montego Bay, Steve McGregor blamed rapes this summer partly on girls wearing short shorts and tiny bathing suits.

McGregor was criticised by a Jamaican group that monitors the portrayal of women in the media.

Said Afola Shade the director of Women's Media Watch, "It's time we stop penalising the victims.

"There are men raping babies. Can babies dress skimpily? I think it's time we stop this foolishness now."

Councillors told not to eat during Ramadan

TOWER Hamlets Council in East London told non-Muslim councillors that they must not eat or drink in committee meetings while Muslims were fasting during Ramadan last month.

According to the *Telegraph*, all members of the council were sent an email asking them to abide by the restrictions observed by strict Muslims during the "holy" month.

They were also told that the town hall's business agenda would be reduced throughout Ramadan to accommodate Muslims, with only seven committee meetings scheduled and special prayer breaks included in the evening events.

Tower Hamlets Council has previously insisted that staff call their Christmas meal the "festive lunch", replaced Bonfire Night celebrations with a show based on a Bengali folk tale, and taken hot cross buns off school menus.

Some councillors on the Labour-run authority claim it is favouring one religious group over the others. Cllr Stephanie Eaton, leader of the Lib Dem group, said she would be ignoring the new Ramadan regime and added: "I was rather disconcerted to see that the arrangements put in place for Ramadan, which we support for Muslim colleagues, have been imposed upon all councillors. We object to the request that non-Muslim councillors observe the fasting rules for Ramadan. This sends out the wrong message to our community. Our community consists of a huge number of different religions, all of which should be valued."

To accommodate its Muslim councillors, Tower Hamlets decreed that tea, coffee, sandwiches and special Muslim snacks called Iftar packs will be on offer in a separate room to the meeting chamber.

But councillors were told not to start eating until after sunset, both out of courtesy to Muslims and to ensure some of the food is left for them. In the letter to members, John Williams, the council's head of democratic services, said: "It is requested that members do not partake of any refreshments until after the Iftar refreshments are served."

A spokesman for the council said: "All that's being asked for is courtesy to be shown to the sensitivities around some councillors eating during council meetings whilst others in the room are fasting.

"Non-Muslim councillors have simply been asked to ensure that there is Iftar food available for Muslim councillors, because in previous years, Muslim councillors wanting to break their fast following prayers had found that the Iftar packs had been eaten."

heads around the Holy Trinity

welcome with a simple explanation of the Trinity for his rug-butting chums, here – to save him time and a monumental headache – is the finest (and funniest) definition of the Holy Trinity ever written. Well, we think so, anyway.

Robert G Ingersoll (1833-1899) explained it thus:

"Christ, according to the faith, is the second person in the Trinity, the Father being the first and the Holy Ghost the third. Each of these persons is God. Christ is his own father and his own son. The Holy Ghost is neither father nor son, but both. The son was begotten by the father, but existed before he was begotten – just the same before as after.

"So, it is declared that the Father is God, and the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God, and that these three Gods make one God.

"According to the celestial multiplication table, once one is three, and three times one is

one, and according to heavenly subtraction, if we take two from three, three are left. The addition is equally peculiar, if we add two to one, we have but one ...

"How is it possible to prove the existence of the Trinity? Is it possible for a human being, who has been born but once, to comprehend, or to imagine the existence of three beings, each of whom is equal to the three?

"Think of one of these beings as the father of one, and think of that one as half human and all God, and think of the third as having proceeded from the other two, and then think of the three as one.

"Think that after the father begot the son, the father was still alone, and after the Holy Ghost proceeded from the father and the son, the father was still alone – because there never was and never will be but one God. At this point, absurdity having reached its limit, nothing more can be said except: 'Let us pray'."

Stuart Abercrombie & Malcolm Hobbs: The Mainstream Fringe: 'Rational Christianity'

A common Christian criticism of the so-called "New Atheists" such as Richard Dawkins is that they caricature religious people – that they argue against a lunatic fringe and then load that criticism onto ordinary, reasonable believers in their bid to discredit all religion. Last year Rowan Williams declared that "a great many of religious believers" would feel, when confronted by Dawkins's book, "that whatever the religion is being attacked here it's not actually what I believe in".

In their attacks on Dawkins, Alister McGrath and John Cornwell and John Humphrys have all emphasised the difference between the majority of Christians and the literalist fundamentalists supposedly targeted by Dawkins. His arguments, they say, do not apply to the great mass of Christians in this country. In the *Sunday Times* John Humphrys insisted that most Christians follow the gentle faith of some early acquaintances of his, Mr and Mrs Buchanan: "an unremarkable couple – quiet, honest, decent, God-fearing." The vision is of a benign, undogmatic belief that does not ultimately claim to be based on empirical evidence or rational analysis.

But the image these writers present is deeply inaccurate when considering the fastest growing and loudest churches in Britain, let alone anywhere else. Old-fashioned church fete Christianity is dying off with its elderly parishioners. It is being replaced by a Christianity of a very different type, broadly known as evangelical Christianity. The churches that are expanding in Britain are not, we suspect, the type attended by Mr and Mrs Buchanan; and the difference is not confined to the amount of guitar strumming. These churches commonly promote a literalist, intolerant and frighteningly irrational version of the Christian faith that nevertheless insistently claims to be based on solid historical evidence and reason. This is in direct opposition to the hazy spirituality defended by Humphrys.

One need not even look beyond the Anglican flock to find a key exemplar of this ideology. It is the Alpha Course, run out of the genteel Holy Trinity Brompton church by Blair-like Vicar Nicky Gumbel. It is the most popular Christian course in the UK today, and is expanding around the world. In 2005 there were 7,215 British churches registered as running the course, as well as hundreds of other institutions. Abroad, there were a further 16,000 churches running it. Dozens of Alpha conferences run each year to train advisers, and there is now a theological college, St Paul's Theological Centre, dedicated to Alpha ideology. By any measure it represents a key strand of Anglicanism, and it is only one example among many evangelical movements

in British Christianity as a whole. Most of the others are even more radical.

Because it fills churches, Alpha has been embraced, often by the same people who apparently reject its extreme message. Rowan Williams himself described Alpha as "a very special tool", and has launched and spoken at several courses (his more avowedly evangelical predecessor, George Carey, "whole-heartedly" commended it, describing it as "superb"). The course also has cross-denominational appeal, being implemented by Catholic churches among others. Supporters include Alister McGrath (he praised it as a "reliable and important means of drawing people into the church"), born-again perjurer Jonathan Aitken, and a string of TV celebrities.

On the surface, Alpha is a course about "basic Christianity" with a friendly atmosphere and free food. Its introductory session talks in standard fashion of faith as the missing ingredient of a soulless 21st century life. But if you stick around, as we did, you soon hear a harder-edged message. On the strength of the Bible as a "manual for life", heavily implied to be inerrant, Alpha prohibits homosexuality and pre-marital sex. It urges followers to marry only those of the faith – and that category is so narrowly drawn that many of the "converts" come to believe they weren't previously Christian at all. Three talks are devoted to the provision by the Holy Spirit of the ability to gabble in "tongues". Another is spent on the healing power of prayer. Yet another equips followers to battle demonic forces, a manifestation of which is "doubt". Ouija boards and horoscopes are evil, and should be destroyed.

Unsurprisingly, its followers often attend other, even more extreme churches, to which it acts as a conveyer belt. To the extent that Rowan Williams's "special tool" has succeeded – and it has on a large scale – the average British churchgoer does not remotely fit the Humphrys description.

This isn't just about the swaying crowds being "slain in the spirit", or their various instances of divinely-sanctioned intolerance (although these are certainly worth examining). It is about the most fundamental claims evangelical Christians make in countless proselytising efforts worldwide. On the one hand we have Cornwell saying that God does not "interfere in the universe", that religion "does not stand or fall by external information or external inferences". On the other we have evangelicals insisting that faith is, to quote Gumbel, "based on firm historical evidence".

No serious Christian commentator can be unaware of the huge and growing relative importance of evangelical Christianity, and yet their principle objection to Dawkins hinges on

pretending it is a fringe phenomenon.

It is not hard to see why mainstream apologists ignore evangelical Christianity, because under any serious examination its foundational claims crumble. In Alpha the basis for faith is the description of Jesus's life within the Bible. How do we know the Biblical account is accurate? The Alpha answer is a superficial patchwork of factually-challenged special pleading. Textual corruption is supposedly ruled out because there are lots of copies of the gospels dating from a few centuries after Jesus. In fact there are numerous textual interpolations known to scholars. The original gospel accounts, we learn, are verified by oblique and questionable mentions of Jesus's name, decades after his death, in Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius. There are many well-known problems with these historical claims, and one can certainly object to Gumbel's inclusion of the almost certainly forged *Testimonium Flavium* (among other things), but even at face value these writings tell us nothing about Jesus's message or alleged miraculous activities. Citation of Jesus's reported prophecy fulfilment is even less persuasive, hinging on tortured readings of Old Testament ambiguity or, failing that, plain mistranslation (see Isaiah 7:14). In all cases we have definite factual claims at variance with the scholarly consensus recruited in a bid to push a predetermined conclusion.

Nor is this even the most absurd element of the Alpha message. Having supposedly established Biblical reliability, Alpha exhumes C S Lewis's old "trilemma" argument. His outlandish reasoning has somehow escaped much recent scrutiny, in spite of widespread use by evangelicals.

It goes like this: There were three explanations for Jesus's hints that he was God – he was either mad, evil or telling the truth. "The teaching of Jesus is widely acknowledged to be the greatest teaching that has ever fallen from human lips," declares Gumbel.

"[I]n 2,000 years no one has improved on the moral teaching of Jesus Christ. Could that teaching really have come from someone evil or insane?" And that's it – case closed, apparently.

The rebuttals are not hard to produce, even accepting the far from proven contention of Biblical infallibility. The "greatest teaching" claim presupposes a pro-Christian bias: no Muslim would accept that Jesus's moral teachings were unsurpassed. Even granting this lavish assertion, why laudable morality could never stem from a deluded or mad man is not clear, even though many other religions' prophets and teachers are presumably in this category. "[W]e find good in many religions", says Gumbel elsewhere, yet the god-claiming

ity' and the Alpha Course

prophets of such religions must at least be deluded, if not evil, according to the trilemma.

In any case, what in the Bible justifies the great claim of moral uniqueness? Jesus's primary moral message, a version of the so-called "Golden Rule", was by his own admission just a distillation of the Jewish Ten Commandments (Matthew 7:12). In fact, Gumbel is aware that this central principle of Jesus's teaching had been around centuries before him, saying "it is not surprising that the essence of the 'golden rule'... is contained in almost every religion from Confucius (551-479 BC) onwards". His explanation is that human beings are "in the image of God and God has given us a conscience with which to distinguish right and wrong." But if Jesus's moral teaching was embedded in everyone, even those before Jesus's time, what claim does he have to moral innovation? How is his rehash of a common moral principle extraordinary enough to confer divine status? And where does this leave the implicit idea that a moral standard outside the Bible can be used to judge Jesus's morality?

If we follow the argument beyond Alpha we are left with a case based not on Jesus's unique morality but on the extremity of his reported claims – that unlike Buddha et al. he supposedly said he was God, rather than just a teacher. This is all C S Lewis ultimately presents, and it is absurd. The grandness of a claim is not positively correlated with its truth; if anything the reverse is true. But even if this notion were accepted, its consistent application would hardly bring one to rest at Christianity given the catalogue of bizarre beliefs that have existed. The approach distinguishes Jesus from thousands of other god claimants only by implicitly ignoring them.

The Alpha case for faith boils down to essentially this: Jesus was a uniquely good person, according to some vague and unstated standard, which means he must have been telling the truth when he said he was God. At least, he was said to have said he was God, and was said to have been good, according to a book that must be true because it was enthusiastically copied and it contains a name that matches some other books.

It is in this context that one must consider the rhetoric in McGrath's second Dawkins cash-in book, *The Dawkins Delusion*. He complains of Dawkins's failure to display "rigorous and comprehensive engagement with primary sources" as he "throws the conventions of academic scholarship to the winds". Does he view Gumbel's "engagement with primary sources" as "rigorous and comprehensive"? He says Dawkins "treats the accurate rendition of religion as an inconvenient impediment to his chief agenda", that "[o]ne of the most char-

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A recent Alpha flyer

acteristic features of Dawkins' anti-religious polemic is his presentation of the pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the centre, crackpots as if they were mainstream." But a faith founded on bizarre pseudo-historical argument and Biblical literalism, that promotes glossolalia and prayer healing and personally battling satanic "doubt", that treats homosexuality as an illness – that is apparently mainstream. Why else would McGrath have endorsed a course peddling these beliefs as "reliable"?

It is flimsy arguments like the "trilemma" that underpin a key part of Church of England evangelism, and this approach to truth, along with flagrant bigotry, characterises much evangelical Christianity. That Rowan Williams and the others who lay charges of caricaturing don't want to defend such beliefs is unsurprising: they are irrational and offensive. These are things that liberal Christians like to forget

when fending off Dawkins, but they are there all the same, and church attendance statistics show they will only become more important. Perhaps Cornwell and Humphrys are just ignorant of this, but McGrath and Williams, at least, might decide which version of Christianity they are defending.

Note: Gumbel's quotes are taken from his books *Questions of Life and Searching Issues*. John Humphrys quotes are from "In God We doubt", *Sunday Times*, September 2nd 2007. Rowan Williams's quote comes from a lecture given at Swansea University 13th October 2007. George Carey's quote praising the Alpha Course come from a BBC website news article dated 27th July 2001. Alister McGrath's quotes are taken from *The Dawkins Delusion* and his praise of the Alpha Course from the Alpha website (uk.alpha.org/academia).

British company to publish *The Jewel of Medina*

A controversial novel about the "Prophet" Mohammed and his child bride, scrapped in the US, will be released in the UK. Recently, publisher Random House cancelled the US publication of *The Jewel of Medina*, by Sherry Jones, fearing it could offend Muslims.

Random House said it had been advised the book "could incite acts of violence by a small, radical segment". But independent UK firm Gibson Square will publish the book this month, saying its release is "imperative".

The novel follows the life of A'isha, often referred to as Mohammed's favourite wife, from her engagement at the age of six until Mohammed's death.

Martin Rynja, of Gibson Square, said there must be "open access to literary works, regardless of fear".

He added: "If a novel of quality and skill that casts light on a beautiful subject we know too little of in the West, but have a genuine interest in, cannot be published here, it would truly mean that the clock has been turned back to the dark ages."

Philip Hodgetts: Science Unites, Religion Divides

THE purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the uniting nature of science as opposed to the divisive tendency of organised religion. In it I want to show that the general trend of science and its various branches is to unite humankind and promote co-operation, whereas the tendency of religion is to divide, obstruct, create differing sects, belief systems, social practices etc, leading in the end to hatred and dissension.

This tendency was realised and still is being realised in the crusades, Catholic versus Protestant in Northern Ireland, Islam and Salman Rushdie's fatwah, and the current spate of terrorism and extreme reactions by fundamentalist Muslims to innocuous banter aimed at Mohammed.

Then there are the religious wars occasioned by Martin Luther's "95 theses" in 1517, the bitter dispute between the protestant John Knox and Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in Scotland, the strangling and burning of William Tyndale in 15th-century England because he had the temerity to translate the Bible from Greek to English, the Spanish Inquisition, anti-semitism, the forcing of Galileo under threat of torture to renounce the heliocentric cosmology he had formerly professed, and the continued prohibition of artificial birth control by Pope Paul VI Pope John and his successors, though the use of condoms would help massively in the fight against Aids in Africa, as well as helping to limit dangerous population growth. The fruits of science, conversely, when employed wisely, are of great benefit to humankind.

The most fundamental science is physics, which encompasses chemistry, biology and electricity and magnetism, and ultimately most of the other sciences. Chemistry in its turn develops drugs and synthetic materials, fuels, pesticides, food technology and so on. Biology includes medical science, genetics, the Darwinian evolution of life forms, eco-systems, the study of nature and the biosphere. Electricity and magnetism are the basis of radio and TV, the telephone, radar, the recording and reproduction of speech and music and electronic information and a host of other developments.

There are also innumerable other, peripheral sciences and technologies which use knowledge and techniques derived from these three basic ones, such as astronomy, geology, palaeontology, archeology, meteorology, anthropology, psychology and the social sciences etc. Other benefits of scientific progress include the internal combustion engine, the aircraft turbo-jet, rocket power, which are the basis of road, rail, sea, air-transport and space exploration; the technology of energy generation, electricity, gas and oil, civil engineering, photography, cinema, printing and image

reproduction technology etc.

Science began as a disinterested search for knowledge and understanding of the mysteries of Nature and the universe, but it has led to an immeasurable increase in the comfort and happiness of the civilised societies of the world, and these technologies, which are only a fraction of the total, are parts of an almost perfectly unified whole. This unification has been made possible by the co-operation, over the centuries, of scientists from nations all around the globe, disseminating the results of their dreams, conjectures and experiments in books and papers and the multifarious scientific literature of the world.

With regard to the negative consequences of scientific progress – sophisticated armament systems, nuclear weapons, environmental depredation, pollution and global warming – one must remember that the development of armaments is due to the failure of politicians to manage international affairs in such a way as to reduce warfare and the need for arms to a minimum. The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty of 1968, particularly article IV where member states pledged to eradicate nuclear weapons, their own included, has been and still is being, flagrantly violated by its signatories, Britain included.

As for the rape of our environment, pollution and global warming, these were all made-possible, admittedly, by scientific advance but were caused by what came to be known as "the population explosion" during the last century, and the lust for material wealth and comfort aided and abetted in the last few decades by the immoral actions of corrupt, self-interested politicians who in their turn are manipulated by avaricious and corrupt giants of big business.

Growing environmental depredation, pollution and the danger of global warming first came to public attention in the 1960s, but all the talking was simply hot air and nobody did anything about it except for two or three politically and financially independent organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth.

With a little foresight and application of realistic population control by the industrial nations of the world, plus a thorough-going and constant check on the activities of big

business, today's appalling situation could have been avoided.

It could be argued by opponents of my argument that many religious organisations, charities such as World Vision, Christian Aid and others, the traditional church-organised soup-kitchen and so on, do a great deal of good, and I would agree, but I would also point out that a belief in God and a priesthood, headed by cardinals and bishops in many-coloured cloaks and gold-lamé vestments, wearing strange hats, carrying crooks to rescue lambs and making a peculiar variation on the V-sign are not necessary to achieve these aims.

The necessary actions could be, and indeed ought to be, in the several thousand existing charities, organised in the accepted way, administered and executed by a secular organisation in exactly the same way as is a commercial concern, the only difference being that they would not be required to make a profit.

It is worth noting, to be quite fair, that recent advances in scientific investigation and speculations on the nature of the universe suggest that there may, indeed, be some "divine" principle or principles at work in the universe (see *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* by the physicists Barrow and F Tipler) which co-exists with and infuses living forms but does not presuppose the existence of a creator god. It does not suggest, however, that humankind should fall on its knees and worship it or indulge in acts of self-flagellation.

And what is more important, it certainly does not suggest that self-evidently necessary practical measures to combat suffering on earth, such as birth-control to limit population growth and reduce HIV-Aids infection should be prohibited.

A secondary, though equally important, purpose of this essay is to argue that, if sensibly and responsibly employed, science in conjunction with responsible and holistic national and international political programmes, could eliminate global warming, environmental depredation, and world poverty, and reduce disease to a minimum.

I would go further and say that an active, long-term, world-wide programme, unrealistic though it may at first appear, should be instigated whose purpose would be to educate and persuade religious believers to re-examine their beliefs in the light of what is known to be true, as incontrovertibly established by science, rather than what is only believed to be true.

This is the only way forward if we are to achieve a truly humane world-wide civilisation during the course of the coming two or three centuries.

Perfect twaddle

EVOLUTION presents man as an improving animal. The Bible presents modern man as the degenerating descendant of a perfect man.

– from a recent copy of *The Watchtower*

Verna Metcalfe: Core Doctrines of Christianity

CHRISTIANITY is often thought of as a power for good, even though some of its core doctrines, when critically examined, are obviously outrageous. The most atrocious of these is the doctrine of eternal Hell (played down somewhat in recent times, probably due to humanistic influences). It is such a wicked idea, it makes a normally humane person recoil in horror.

To my personal knowledge, some children's lives have been blighted with terror because of it, and some adults (including many Catholic priests and nuns as well as Bible-toting evangelical Protestants) have felt justified in imposing severe punishments on children in their care, to keep them on the "straight and narrow" – deemed to be more important than their happiness and well-being. Morality underpinned by this doctrine is totally distorted.

Another utterly unreasonable idea is the doctrine of Original Sin, which lays upon humanity the inherited guilt of Adam and Eve's disobedience, even though, by biblical account, it was God himself who set up the whole situation, then allowed the Devil to tempt Eve and, through her, Adam. Furthermore, there is no good reason to rate disobedience as necessarily against morality; according to circumstances, it could be a heroic protest on behalf of humanity, or, on the other hand, a foolhardy refusal to co-operate in a reasonable enterprise.

In any case, it is obviously unjust to blame people for something that happened centuries before they were born; yet it is a central feature of traditional Christianity. Indeed, until recently, the Jews were collectively held responsible for the part played by their ancestors in bringing about the crucifixion – even though the crucifixion was, according to scripture, the key event in God's "Plan of Salvation".

Incidentally, although the apple story seems to cast a shadow over human curiosity about sex, in another part of Genesis the newly created man and woman are told to "be fruitful and multiply". How were they supposed to do that?!

It is maintained that the Bible is the Word of God, despite the God-approved cruelties reported in its pages – a doctrine that has caused endless grief, by such texts as "Spare the rod and spoil the child" and "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live". There is also the Roman Catholic doctrine that under certain conditions the pronouncements of the Pope are infallible – hence the opposition of that Church to sensible fertility control, causing much suffering and death, especially in the

Third World.

Certain phrases associated with the Christian creed (for instance, "He died for me") carry such an emotional charge (deliberately triggered by hymn-writers) that any critical examination of their content is evaded, relevant questions being swept away in a flood of feeling.

The so-called "Atonement Theory" is full of absurd ideas and meaningless phrases. It derives from the ancient custom of sacrificing a lamb "without blemish" as an act of propitiation for sin, with Jesus considered the universal sacrificial lamb: "the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world". For "without the shedding of blood," we are told, "there is no Redemption".

Why not? Who made such a repulsive rule? If almighty, God would, by definition, have the power to do without blood sacrifice. And what good does it do? What difference can the shedding of sacrificial blood possibly make, except to appease a cruel and unreasonable God, who is strangely described as "perfect"?

Anyway, how can something called "sin" be abstracted from people's thoughts and behaviour and then be scrubbed out by an irrelevant sacrifice? And the "sin" may not even be personal: simply being human is apparently to be a "sinner". There is, besides, the outrageous doctrine of Predestination, by

which a person is said to be predestined either to eternal damnation or eternal bliss. It is, of course, a grotesquely unjust doctrine, by which the ultimate fate of the soul is unavoidable, no shred of choice being involved. The God who is revealed in this set of ideas is a downright demon – cruel and sadistic toward some, endlessly indulgent toward others, according to his capricious pre-ordained plan. Though Predestination is not a doctrine accepted by every Christian denomination, it is supported by the commonly held notion of God's absolute foreknowledge – which is logically incompatible with the concurrent doctrine of human freewill.

The idea that the Creator is perfect while his human creation is deeply flawed is intrinsically contradictory. As the universal creator, he would necessarily be responsible for genetic deformities, river blindness, malaria, venomous snakes, tapeworms, earthquakes, floods, tornadoes – in fact, everything that torments highly sentient beings (human and animal). One can hardly call such creative inventiveness "perfect"! And even where human beings are responsible, God is supposed to have made them too – so must have made them the way they are.

The scientific evolutionary explanation, painstakingly investigated and debated, requires no supernatural creator, and is so much more convincing.

Museum defies Pope over crucified frog

THE board of the foundation of the Museion in the city of Bolzano has voted to keep the crucified frog exhibit by the late German artist Martin Kippenberger – despite the Pope's demand that it should be withdrawn.

Last month we reported that the work – entitled "Zuerst die Fuesse" ("First the Feet") – had enraged local Catholics. Pope Benedict then entered the fray by writing to Franz Pahl, the president of the Trentino-Alto Adige region that includes Bolzano.

His letter denounced the sculpture, saying that it "offended the religious feelings of many people who consider the cross a symbol of God's love and of our redemption."

Pahl himself has long opposed the display of the sculpture, even staging a hunger strike this summer and saying he would not seek re-election unless it was removed.

In a telephone interview with The Associated Press, Pahl said he was outraged by the museum's decision to keep the work, which he claims "pokes fun at the Catholic population and offends religion and the Pope."

But the museum said the 3-foot-high sculpture has nothing to do with religion. It is an ironic self-portrait of the artist and an expression of his angst.

"With humour and a tragicomic sense, which belongs to art since the times of Greek tragedy, Kippenberger ... faces his condition of suffering, which he expresses in many works; also, for example, in a video in which he crucifies himself," the museum said in a statement.

Born in Dortmund, Kippenberger moved from painting and sculpture to work in all mediums, often combining elements of Neo-expressionism, Pop and Dadaism. His art has been displayed across the world, including Zurich, Paris, Jerusalem, London and New York.

William Harwood reviews *Did Man Create God? – Is Your Spiritual Brain*

DID man create Ernst Blofeld? Did man create Lex Luther? Did man create Count Fosco? Did man create Iago? Anyone who thinks the answer to any of those questions is No, probably also thinks that man did not create the psychopath "God" of the fantasy work of fiction known as the Bible.

David Comings states in his preface, "This book is intended for all inquisitive readers who are interested in ... whether our rational thinking brain can live in peace with our spiritual brain". The obvious rebuttal to that opening argument is, "It assumes facts not in evidence". While "spiritual brain" might be Comings' original concept, it is essentially an extrapolation from a pseudoscience that he appears to buy lock, stock and barrel.

According to Michael Shermer, "*Did Man Create God?* will be the definitive scientific reference on religion for some time to come." Really? Why?

I have the highest regard for Dr Shermer's findings when he does not step outside of his area of expertise. But every time he does that, his conclusions run from unreliable to hyper-credulous. His repetition of the Big Lie that religion can only be disbelieved, not disproven, can be attributed to a misplaced devotion to political correctness. He is generally able to recognize that, when proponents of an extraordinary claim are unable to produce the single replicable positive result that would be all that is necessary to prove their delusion's reality, it is because the point has been reached where absence of evidence is indeed evidence of absence. But he makes an exception in the case of hypnotism, to which he attributes a fifty percent probability that it actually exists, in defiance of two centuries of seeking and not

finding that single replicable positive result.

He also has no ability to recognize evolutionary psychology, called "sociobiology" until the name was changed out of embarrassment at its demonstrated absurdity, as pseudo-scientific hogwash that could be a useful contribution to human knowledge only if history, biology, paleontology, anthropology, genetics, and several other sciences are not. Sociobiology, like other pseudosciences such as parapsychology, has failed to produce a single instance of a fulfilled prediction. But sociobiology goes beyond failure to find fulfilment. It is so far outside the field of legitimate science that, like theology, it cannot even make any testable predictions.

It was necessary to show, not only that sociobiology, aka evolutionary psychology, is pseudoscience, but also that a usually discerning scientific investigator such as Michael Shermer can be deluded into taking it seriously, before proceeding to David Comings' attempt to harmonize neurology with virtual phrenology.

Did Man Create God? stands or falls on the sociobiology hypothesis that thinking can trigger genetic changes in the brain, the same way (according to sociobiologists) the genesis of face-to-face copulation caused women to think breasts into existence to replace the out-of-sight stimulus of rounded buttocks.

Comings' book is a monumental annihilation of Intelligent Design theology, so detailed and unanswerable that it can be compared to using a sledgehammer to crush an ant. He writes, "Studies of the finches of the Galapagos ring the knell to the complaints of the creationists. These studies show that evolution is an ongoing process and that it occurs in

our lifetime ... They especially falsify the claim that there is not enough time for evolution to occur." The four pages of details that justify citing finches as proof of evolution are typical of what is to be found throughout the book. While Richard Dawkins' *The Ancestor's Tale* is the definitive paleontological proof of the intellectual bankruptcy of evolution deniers, *Did Man Create God?* would belong beside it on every truth seeker's bookshelf if it had not been corrupted by pseudoscience.

I do not dispute that Dr Comings gets his facts right, convincingly right, indisputably right. It is when he interprets those facts in accordance with sociobiology theory that he strays from science into pseudoscience. He is aware that all attempts to locate a "god gene" have come up as empty as attempts to locate a "gay gene." He states correctly that electrical stimulation of designated brain centers has induced spiritual illusions, such as a feeling of being close to and communicating with such imaginary creatures as ghosts, a goddess named Mary, aliens, angels, saints, and a god named Jesus or Allah or Siva or the Flying Spaghetti Monster, depending on whether the stimulated brain belongs to a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, or an imaginative non-theist. And he is aware that, "The vast majority of individuals using LSD experience some type of religious imagery." But from there he jumps to the non-sequitur that the ability of humans to experience such hallucinations became a survival factor, causing the evolution of what he calls the "spiritual brain". While such a development is not theoretically impossible, it could only have happened if persons who lacked the ability to hallucinate were significantly less likely to live long enough to breed. Anyone who thinks that might have happened might have a "spiritual brain", but assuredly does not have a "thinking brain".

Comings carries political correctness to absurd lengths, telling god-worshippers that their beliefs are falsifiable while leaning over backward to avoid telling them that their religion is intrinsically evil. I have not encountered a single writer in the past 60 years who, in arguing that Nazism is an indefensible mindset based on fully falsifiable theories of genetics, anthropology, economics and history, has carefully avoiding saying that Nazism is a force for evil out of fear of offending Nazis. Yet thousands of writers like Comings, while acknowledging that religion is a product of primitive human imaginations, are terrified of offending the persons whose mind-AIDS they are trying to cure.

Comings recognizes that, "A rational first step toward toning down the violence done in the name of religion would be to promote the

Big summer boost for the *Freethinker* fund

SUBSCRIBERS have dug deep into their pockets over the summer months, contributing £2,511 towards the *Freethinker* fund between March 16 and September 8. We would like to thank the following for their generous contributions: H Adams, A Adler, G Allan, J Allison, J Ainsworth, C Aitchison, M Aitchison, I M Anderson, P C Arnold, P V Atkins, B Barrett, R A Batchelor, P Bayliss, P T Beeton, D Begg, D M Bennett, D Blackwell, G Bogie, F Bond, J Bosley, T R Boyce, A Boyd, A W Briglin, R R Brown, D Broughton, K Budden, B Burfoot, A Burnett, C Byrne, B Cattermole, S Campbell, R Chadwick, J Chambers, A M Chapman, M Chauhan, D Clamp, A Clay, J Claydon, R Cobb, R W Coleman, G Colling, D J Cooke, S Corry, R Culhane, D Cunningham, S Dick, R Driscoll, J D L Drower, O Dumbleton, D Fanc, I Finn, D C Flint, D A Franklin, T E Franks, D C Fraser, D J Fruin, A Fowler, D Fox, N Gibbard, R J Giles, P Gillard, E Goodman, C P Goodwin, D K Gorringer, I Griffiths, N Green, W Harman, L Harrington, A Hayes, V Hennessy, J Hill, H D Hichenes, J A Hood, D C Hooley, P Howell, J G Hunt, J R Hunt, D C S Hutchison, J R Hutton, H J Jakeman, C Kensit, H Khan, J Koumi, D A Kroll, P L Lancaster, L M Lawrenson, R Le Seuer, S Littlemore, J S Manley, J Lavety, B Layfield, V Le Mauviel, J Lance, M Levin, J B Lewis, T Liddle, W H Lightbown, T Lock, M F Lofmark, E Loughran, P E McDonald, H McDougall, P McKay, J McKinnon, J R Mackay, A J McQuillin, A Manser, D H N Mason, G Meaden, G T Meaden, N Meek, G S Mellor, A Moliver, V Monger, R Newman, A Newton, J Nugent, F Pamphilion, J A Parr, J J Penn, N J Pickering, D Pincham, S Penoyre, R H Peirce, J Pocock, A Powell, J Rathbone, R T Richardson, B Rima, D Roberts, M Rose, J M Ross, B Sanders, R T Seaton, S Selwyn, W Shevlin, W H Simcock, M Simms, M W Smith, L Smith, J Spargo, O Stanier, A Stuart A G Sumner, W Summersgill, W Suschitzky, G Taylor, P Taylor J, H Taylor, R G Tee, D A Thompson, R K E Torode, A Watmore, G A Weerasinghe, I A Williams, R W Vickers, S Ware, A L Watson, R Watson, J Wellings, B C Whiting, I Whittaker, J G Wilson, A J Wood, F Wright, E Whyte D N Whyte, W Wynne-Willson.

Brain at Peace with Your Thinking Brain? by David E Comings

understanding that the sacred texts were not written by Yahweh, God or Allah, but by man ... Without such understanding it is more likely that [hu]mankind will self-destruct over religion than over any other issue."

He certainly got that right. Religion has been the cause of 90 percent of all man-made evil for at least 3,000 years, and destroys the ability to tell right from wrong to such an extent that persons who condemn mass murder as evil when Hitler did it with gas chambers, are able to rationalize that it is not evil when their Sky Führer does it with a tsunami,

cyclone or earthquake. It is high time writers who recognize that religion is the root of all evil were willing to stand up and say so. Osama bin Laden is not an aberration who contravenes the true spirit of religion. He *is* the true spirit of religion.

Stimulation of a center of emotion in the brain can trigger a delusion of a god's presence. What it cannot trigger is the delusion that the god wants the individual to murder randomly chosen followers of an opposition god. Religion is caused by emotional and cultural conditioning, not neurological hardwiring as

Comings hypothesizes. If he had recognized E O Wilson's mushroom fantasy (*Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*) as incompetent drivel, and not tried to prove the existence of a "spiritual brain" by starting from the assumption that humans have a spiritual brain and then arguing in circles, this book's serious weaknesses could have been eliminated.

Did Man Create God? Is your Spiritual Brain at Peace with your Thinking Brain? David E Comings, MD, 2008, Hope Press, PO Box 188, Duarte, CA 91016, ISBN 978-1-878267-73-3, 694 pp, HC, \$29.95

David E Comings responds to Harwood's review

AS noted in the introduction, I have been an atheist since the 4th grade. However, I prefer the term non-theist because I feel that many atheists are too stridently anti-religion. I am a physician, human geneticist, neuroscientist and molecular biologist. One of the reasons I researched and wrote the book was to try to understand why the majority of the U.S. population believes in God.

I think that part of the answer is that humans are a spiritual species and any psychological trait, whether obsessive-compulsive behavior, depression, manic-depression, or spirituality, is a legitimate subject of scientific investigation. I have always been intrigued by the fact that many traits that most people attribute to their upbringing are in fact not. Twin studies can dissect out genetic factors from shared environment (early childhood) and unshared environment (later childhood and adulthood). Many dozens of these studies all agree that for most personality traits and overt psychiatric disorders the shared environment plays virtually no role.

I agree with Harwood that religion is largely cultural. But many people are spiritual and not religious. They are two different things. As I reviewed in the book, twin studies of church going and related religious activities have a high level of shared environment and parental influence. In Kirk's twin study, church attendance, especially in males, had virtually a zero genetic component, while self-transcendence, a measure of feeling spiritual, had a high genetic and virtually no common environment component. It would obviously be ludicrous to talk about church attendance in a social biology evolution content, but for personality traits with a high genetic content there was likely to be some evolutionary selective value for some of the genes involved.

I totally agree about the ridiculousness of

talking about a god-gene or a god-spot. But I think it is valid to talk about the neurology, genetics and evolution of a personality trait such as spirituality that has been shown to have a strong genetic component. I reviewed a very large body of scientific literature indicating that the temporal lobes probably play a major role in spirituality just as the frontal and parietal lobes have been shown to play a role in attention. I viewed spirituality as simply a feeling of being connected with something larger than oneself, totally independent of religion. I suggest that such a trait both contributed to man surviving as a group-oriented social animal and incidentally probably contributed to why humans often believe in supernatural things.

I know some people like Richard Lewontin are strongly opposed to the role of evolution in behavioral traits. Harwood clearly adopts this view. I think it is extreme to label it "pseudoscience". It would seem better to simply say there is scientific disagreement on the subject rather than resort to name-calling. I think E O Wilson was an impressive scientist and I found Dugatkin's book, *The Altruism Equation* (Princeton Univ. Press. 2006) a great read on the genetics and evolution of altruism in ani-

mals. A lot of people, myself included, believe that if something is significantly genetic, it is likely that some of the genes involved were selected for during evolution.

Harwood felt that Michael Shermer was out of his area. However, he has written extensively and well about religion and evolution. I would suggest that Dr Harwood's degree in literature places him somewhat outside the area of having expertise in genetics and molecular biology. It works both ways. Certainly to characterize sociobiology as "the hypothesis that thinking can trigger genetic changes in the brain" is as silly as saying that "swimming can trigger genetic changes in the fins". That totally misses the point of evolution, a process where pre-existing genetic mutations are present in the nuclei of all cells, not just the brain cells, and there was then selection for those mutations that were advantageous to the survival of the organism.

I should also point out that I would certainly not characterize my book as being "a misplaced devotion to political correctness". As I pointed out in my summary, I classified "religion" into four categories depending upon the degree to which they clashed with rational thought. Instead of blasting all religions, I saved my ire for the fourth category, fundamentalist religions – whether Christian, Jewish or Islam. I state that, "these are the faiths that have been responsible for most of the religions wars, intolerance, hatred, and terrorism. The elimination of the belief in the literal truth of the sacred texts and the concept that one religion is superior to another would be of enormous benefit to mankind".

I think people would pay more attention to atheists if they were less strident and more discriminatory about which religions can be dangerous versus those that may comfort without resorting to excessive dogma.

Quotable quote

"NEARLY all peoples have developed their own creation myth, and the Genesis story is just the one that happened to have been adopted by one particular tribe of Middle Eastern herders. It has no more special status than the belief of a particular West African tribe that the world was created from the excrement of ants."

– Richard Dawkins, in
The Blind Watchmaker

Of matters astronomical

I WOULD like, if I may, to deal with a point that occurred to me when reading John Radford's contention that "no one has to be forced to agree that the sun rises" in the July issue of the *Freethinker*.

Now I know of course that this is usually expected to be taken simply as a statement of what "the man in the street" perceives (in so far indeed as he perceives anything with regard to matters astrological). However, as a matter of scientific fact, what actually happens is that our earth revolves and in doing so carries us and our visual aerial horizon to the east giving us the illusion that the sun itself is travelling westward in an arc across the sky.

Equally "the man in the street" has the illusion that night occurs because the sun has "gone down", whereas in actual fact what has happened is that the rotation of the earth has brought us into the shadow cast by the earth as it interrupts the sun's light.

It might be thought that these observations are so obvious as to be unnecessary. However, my point is that it is *precisely* the failure of most people – regardless of the level of their education – to *accept* this as an intellectually received fact (as against one to which mental "lip-service" is paid) which sustains their, as it were, instinctive retention of the notion of an earth-centred universe, and this in turn makes it easier, indeed natural, for them to continue to believe – however vaguely – that the universe was indeed created around the proposition that man holds a special place therein!

Was it not this consideration which really accounted for the Church's obstinate opposition to Galileo and his adherence to the heretical opposing viewpoint? Man, and his home planet, *had* to have been accorded a special place in the universe, or what else was a god for? (Indeed this, of course, was God's crucial role!) Let us embrace rather the less flattering truth that man's present apparent pre-eminence in the scheme of things (though naturally enough of the most intense interest to him) is as of little consequence to existence as any other temporary state of cosmic affairs!

How well Shakespeare realised this is shown by Prospero's great speech in *The Tempest*, and it is to be found also in *The Rubai'yat of Omar Khayyam*.

Here then is just one example, but a particularly striking example, of the way in which a belief may in practice maintain itself despite being shown and even known to be quite contrary to reason, provided only that it be felt to be emotionally satisfying or, as in this case, to accord with the gross (ie uncritically received) facts of sensation.

While dealing with matters astronomical, may I also be allowed to voice my heartfelt protest at the way in which townspeople have been robbed of the erstwhile common sight of the starry heavens on cloudless nights? As against a time when a Wordsworth could exult, "The moon doth with delight look round her

when the heavens are bare; / Waters on a starry night/Are beautiful and fair"! Much beauty, much that is fair, that is to be seen in *our* light-polluted skies!

Now to a quite separate issue. Jack Hastie in his enthusiastic championing of various alleged esoteric powers proposes David Beckham's ability to score goals from free kicks as a model for how we should evaluate practitioners of ESP: we must avoid what might tend to distract them from turning in a maximum performance. However, I think his analogy misses the point. Beckham after all does not require conditions that are special to his exercise of skills but are only what any sportsman would expect. Moreover, Beckham's feats are performed out in the open. Everyone can see what has been achieved and how it has been done. I do not think that the same can be claimed for the feats of parapsychologists. Beckham's skills, moreover, yield very tangible benefits, by way of audience gratification. I doubt that the same can be claimed on behalf of ESP.

ALBERT ADLER

London

Alternative therapy

AFTER the puny protests by Stephen Moreton I had intended to let the homoeopath debate die a natural death. However, when William Harwood (who has a PhD in nit-picking) decided to enter the lists, I thought I should have one *last* try to substitute sanity for hysterical emotion.

This requires a small recap. Before WW2 homoeopathic medicine was vilified mainly because its medics had only homoeopathic qualifications, and were often referred to as "quacks". Being alive to this, homoeopathic authorities then insisted that anyone wishing to study homoeopathy must first have at least an MB.ChB degree.

One would have thought that this would have delighted the carpers, who could then say, "We have succeeded in forcing homoeopaths to have the same qualifications as orthodox practitioners". This did not happen. As P G Wodehouse would have said, "They may not have been disgruntled, but they were very far from grunted".

Why was this? Their main avenue of attack had been closed and they now had to resort to coarse ranting. Am I expected to infer that orthodox medicine has all the answers? I think not.

At the beginning of the 20th century, carron oil was used to treat burns. It was found to be unsatisfactory and was replaced by tannic acid jelly. When this was found to be equally useless, the next advice was just to keep air away from the wound. I cannot recall the many different remedies that were then offered, but they all had one overriding *caveat* and that was that on absolutely no account was water to be applied to the burn.

In 1941 I was an Ordinary Seaman on a tramp steamer where the carpenter suffered a

severe burn on his wrist when using a blow lamp. At once he rushed to the pump, with me (the ink scarcely dry on my first-aid certificate) shouting after him that he must not put water on the wrist.

"Who says so?" he demanded. "The British Medical Association," I replied, airing my new-found knowledge. He told me – in a manner distinctly his own – what he thought of the BMA, and pumped water all over his wrist. More than 60 years later it appears that the ship's carpenter was right and the BMA has since done a 180° turn.

Then there was also the question of what to do if one hit one's thumb with a hammer. The BMA remedy was to use hot and cold fomentation: ie to dip the thumb into hot water and cold water time about, as this would "restore the circulation". This did not appear to make much of a difference but, as in all such circumstances, it was felt that if the BMA advice had not been heeded, the pain might have been worse. Actually the treatment was rubbish and the present very effective cure is to put a piece of ice on the thumb.

Now is the time to pull my rabbit out of the hat. My family doctor is orthodox and I consult him 95 percent of the time, but for certain problems (particularly those relating to the skin) I prefer the homoeopaths.

As for all the testing to debunk homoeopathic medicine, let us hope that they were not the same testers that pronounced thalidomide (nibrol, quietopex, distaval, or whatever) to be safe!

In closing I should point out to my critics that, as any writer should know, analogies may be used to illustrate, but never to prove. In William Harwood's recent submission, about 60 percent of his letter is devoted to describing an automobile accident. The connection between this and medicine of any kind escapes me. I cannot understand his logic – but then perhaps Mr Harwood burns down his house when he wants roast pig!

C A M AITCHISON

Glasgow

AS an actuary I realise that there are two kinds of truth: statistical truth which reflects all that we have in common and anecdotal truth which recognises that we are all different. William Harwood (*Points of View*, June), commenting on homoeopathy, does not recognise individuality which he calls "a statistical anomaly". Mr Harwood's attitude is really quite a religious one for a freethinker.

Homoeopathic and other complementary /alternative treatment is tailored to the individual. If the patient gets better, the treatment has worked. If it doesn't, at least no harm has been done.

Suppose Mr Harwood is aged 60. Statistics prove that 60-year-old drivers are much safer than 20-year-old drivers. However, noting that, on his own admission, Mr Harwood "wrapped a Volkswagen around a one-metre-diameter guide post at 100km/hr", I don't think that I would accept a lift from him if I visited



Canada.

Incidentally, I think the *Freethinker* is a bit one-sided and appears to have a down on Christianity and Islam. Hinduism and Judaism escape criticism. Yet I am sure that few of us freethinkers would actually demolish a mosque.

The Torah, too, promises the Jews "a land flowing with milk and honey", simply requiring them to kill off the Hittites, Amalekites, Jebusites and all the other "ites" apparently living in the place. This is too close for my liking to what has actually happened and is happening in Palestine.

IVOR KENNA
London

IN HIS book, *Snake Oil Science*, reviewed in the September *Freethinker* by William Harwood, R Barker Bausell says of acupuncture "[It] appeared to be safe but without clear evidence of benefit." Well, all I can say is that it certainly benefited me.

Almost 20 years ago I was diagnosed with excruciating carpal tunnel syndrome at the base of my left thumb. It resisted all medical treatment, so I was advised to have surgery at Newham General Hospital. Then a friend suggested that I try acupuncture.

Two sessions with an acupuncturist completely cured the condition, which has never resurfaced. Coincidence, perhaps, but ever since then I have turned to acupuncture for a variety of other persistent aches and pains – all of which have been seen off by the needles. Several other friends, to whom I have recommended acupuncture, have also experienced startling results.

I know that I would far rather have an acupuncturist treat me than have surgery – if only because I love the wonderful feeling of euphoria and well-being the needles induce.

DON MARCHANT
London

Historicity of Jesus

IN the August issue of *The Freethinker*, Stuart Campbell writes of me having queried his claim that no historian questions the historicity of Jesus, in an article I wrote on the origins of Christianity published in the February issue of *The Freethinker*. However, in his letter Mr Campbell has nothing critical to say about the theme of my article, which suggested that what had evolved into Christianity originated in Syria, developing from a group with which Saul aka Paul became involved after defecting from the service of the Jerusalem high priest.

As for a historic Jesus, I held that the Jesus Christ of the Christian cult was a composite (thus mythical) figure, and that if there had been a historic Jesus he may well have been a political dissident, an idea suggested by the fact that he was executed in the manner the Romans reserved for such people (and also robbers). As Mr Campbell did not object to this scenario I can only conclude that he agrees with it, at least in part.

As for the rest of his letter, leaving aside his

disgraceful attack on the academic standing of Professor Thomas Thompson, whose "controversial" ideas he implies should be taken as those of a senile old man (if not, why did he go out of the way to refer to his age, unlike in the case of others he mentions?), most is taken up with quibbles as to who should be, and who should not be, described as being historians. Also extensive plugs for his own book on Jesus, which I read not long after it had appeared and found to be a good if unimaginative work that was, at times, somewhat naive. One example is its treatment of the 4th-century forgery that has become known as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, a passage found in a late 1st-century work known as the *Antiquities*, written by a priest named Flavius Josephus, which was totally unknown to any Christian writer familiar with it, the forger excluded, until mentioned by Jerome in the 5th century.

ROBERT MORRELL
Nottingham

Ethnic Minorities

THE ethnic "minorities" believe in multi-cultural societies, faiths, races and beliefs in the West but not in their countries of origin. Do they also believe in a multi-racial heaven/paradise, hell, Happy Land, ruled by multi-male deities, or are there separate multiracial heavens, hells and samsara?

Scriptures say that heaven, paradise, or "seven heavens" from which deities look down, can be reached by ladders or high towers – one above Jerusalem. Hells are underground – combined populations billions. Where are they?

In a universe constantly surveyed by satellites, telescopes, space vehicles, military surveillance systems, geological sciences and deep-mining operations, no supernatural worlds are to be found – only Nature and human nature. So, where are they?

W K HARPER
Stoke-on-Trent

Geert Wilders and Islam

ON BBC Radio 4 recently, Michael Buerk in the *Choices* interview hinted that Geert Wilders might be paranoid (the hint was quickly withdrawn). He also suggested several times that Wilders was incapable of grasping that most Muslims were nice people. Wilders himself had stressed this – as he might have stressed that most Germans even after 1939 were nice people – and several times pointed out that his quarrel was with an ideology not its innocent adherents. Buerk also said "people could accuse you of being racist". And Hitler had similarly hated Jews, hadn't he?

Buerk even had the nerve to hint that Wilders didn't know the Koran – the implication being that if you did know it the fascist ideology it espouses would go above your head. In this programme the BBC was advocating appeasement of an ideology which is a bigger threat to our civilisation than ever Hitler was. Buerk also asked: "Wouldn't you have achieved more if

you had reached out to Muslims?"

This programme was the BBC at its worst. It was disgusting. But in the end Wilders came over as a fine man, someone to die for.

KEITH BELL
Wrexham

Secularism

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

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

DAVID TRIBE
Australia

The Freethinker

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

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

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

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

E-mail: fteditor@aol.com

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

Annual postal subscription rates

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

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

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son
Sheffield

Events & Contacts

Birmingham Humanists: Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. 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, Oct 1, 8pm. Anna Behan, Vice-President, National Secular Society: *The Equalities Debate and Secularism*. Wed, Nov 5, 8pm. Denis Cobell: *The Churches and War*.

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: The Court House, off High St, Berkhamsted. Wed Oct 15, 8pm. Eric Rimmer: The Optimum Population Trust.

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): 1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067. Email: secretary@galha.org. Website: www.galha.org.

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. October 8, speaker David Arditti (the subject has yet to be announced. Please contact the Secretary on 0208 907-6124 for further information.

Hasving & District Humanist Society: Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597.

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

Humanist Society of Scotland: 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. 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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Highland Group: 07017 404779. highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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: brianmcclinton@btinternet.com

website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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