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Council of Ex-Muslims warns against sharia law in the UK

SWEEPING legal challenges must be made against the creeping introduction of Islamic law (sharia) in the United Kingdom, the head of a new body of former Muslims said in London last month.

The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, a group bringing together former adherents of the Islamic faith as well as humanists, held its first international conference at the Conway Hall on October 10.

Several speakers decried the rise of what they called “political Islam” across Europe.



In Britain, Muslims are increasingly and controversially turning to religious courts to decide civil matters under religious law.

Since 2006, the largest such body, the Islamic Sharia Council in east London, says it has handled around 1,000 cases, mostly dealing with divorce.

While most sharia courts have no binding legal authority, a growing network of arbitration panels applying Islamic law have been set up around Britain since 2007, and their decisions can be enforced by regular British courts.

Proponents of sharia courts argue that they help pre-

serve the Muslim identity of a minority community and create a protective environment for young and old alike.

Members of the Islamic Sharia Council said earlier this year that the vast majority of their cases deal with getting women out of marriages that have gone bad, thus enabling them to remarry under Islamic law.

“We try to reconcile, but in cases where a marriage was enforced on a girl against her wishes, against her own opinion, we don’t want to negotiate,” Council president Maulana Abu Sayeed said at the time.

Archbishop Rowan Williams, head of the Church of England, was sharply criticised in February for suggesting that the establishment of sharia in Britain was “unavoidable.” However, Sadiq Khan, the recently-appointed government minister for community cohesion, told *The Times* last month that the Muslim community in Britain was not “advanced enough” to have its own system of courts.

Such courts could also enforce a system of discrimination against women, said Khan, who is himself a Muslim.

Maryam Namazie, head of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, told the conference’s audience of several hundred that sharia courts were part of the growing influence felt by politically motivated Islamists.

Namazie, a feminist and communist activist who left her native Iran several years ago, charged that the courts victimise poor, immigrant women, forcing them to remain

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Woman with pig painting outrages Muslims

THE Religion of Perpetual Outrage has found something new to offend it: a picture of a Muslim woman cradling a pig.

Mokhtar Badri, the vice-president of the Muslim Association of Britain, told the *Telegraph’s* Mandrake last month that his organisation plans to visit the SaLon Gallery, in Notting Hill, west London, to demand that it remove Sarah Maple’s painting when it goes on show.

Said Badri: “Although we condemn violence, Muslims have a right to express their disgust at this work. An artist has the right to free speech and to express him or herself, but people also have the right to protest. She clearly wants to provoke a strong reaction from Muslims, and that is what she will get.

Maple, 23, brought up as a Muslim, has already evoked Islamic wrath. Her exhibition at Rolling Stone Wood’s gallery earlier this year depicted

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Mad Muslim cleric wants women to wear one-eyed veils – p5
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Freethinker editor Barry Duke uncovers another Christian attempt to distort history

THE name Buzz Aldrin will be familiar to anyone who remembers Apollo 11 touching down on the moon almost 40 years ago. Aldrin, now in his late 70s, followed commander Neil Armstrong onto the surface of the earth's only natural satellite after America's first manned lunar landing in 1969.

But how many, I wonder, know of his abortive attempt to broadcast a biblical verse from the landing craft after touch-down?

Aldrin, armed with a communion kit furnished by his church, Webster (Texas) Presbyterian, planned to broadcast the following passage from Psalms 8:3-4 from the moon to earth: "*When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man that thou art mindful of him? And the Son of Man, that thou visitest Him?*"

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) took fright and said "sod that!". Earlier, they had had a run-in with America's pit-bull of an atheist, the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair.

O'Hair mounted a legal challenge against NASA after astronauts from a previous mission, Apollo 8, read the biblical creation story from Genesis. Though the lawsuit was eventually rejected, NASA had no stomach for further confrontations over religious shenanigans in space, and blocked Aldrin's attempt to broadcast Christian propaganda.

So, instead, Aldrin performed the communion in private. Armstrong did not participate in the service, but merely looked on.

Why mention Aldrin now? Because of the following bit of baldersdash written about the astronaut by an English vicar. It appeared as an article in the *Halifax Evening Courier* on September 19, and later – on September 30 – as a letter in the *Isle of Man Examiner*. At the outset, Rev Jonathan Willans misleads readers by suggesting that Aldrin's message was actually broadcast.

"... This symbolic act [of communion] was deliberate. The astronaut was sending the world the message that Christian belief and science are in harmony together. Here he was at the cutting edge of science and yet at the same time a believer in God and a churchgoer. Science merely tells us how God makes things work. The Bible, on the other hand, tell us why we are here.

"Many people in Britain imagine that science and religious belief are incompatible, but in reality, across the world, millions of scientists believe in God. Even NASA has its own chaplain, with so many of those involved in space research being regular churchgoers.

Indeed, no fewer than 20 percent of the congregation of one local church works in some way for NASA.

"These people see scientific discoveries as proof the universe has been designed by a supreme intelligence. Science shows that the nucleus of every cell in the human body contains as much data as that found in a thirty-volume set of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. Such complexity cannot have happened by chance and is clear evidence of the existence of a Creator God.

"Sadly, whenever reference is made to science and religious belief in the British media it is done so assuming that there is conflict between the two.

"Many scientists believe in God precisely because of their scientific studies and see true science as the friend of religious belief. With this fact rarely mentioned, it is no wonder the UK is one of the few places in the world where churchgoing is declining while churches in many other countries are filled to capacity!"

Well, this was all too much for Isle of Man resident Jim Hawkins, who blasted off the following letter, published a week later:

"I am afraid your correspondent, Rev Willans is labouring under a serious delusion quite apart from that of a purely religious nature. Scientists are overwhelmingly atheist, as would be expected.

"In a recent poll, only 3.3 per cent of Fellows of the Royal Society agreed strongly with the statement that a personal god exists, while 78.8 per cent strongly disagreed.

"There were a massive 213 unbelievers and a mere 12 believers.

"American figures are somewhat less impressive, as may be expected in that hotbed of religious fervour. But nevertheless, some 62 percent of a recent poll of 1,646 scientists employed at 21 top-rate universities professed to be either atheist or agnostic. Only 9.7 per cent had 'no doubt that God exists'.

"Buzz Aldrin's attempt to introduce religion to the moon is new to me. I prefer Yuri Gagarin's observation when he achieved orbit: 'I see no gods up here...'"

Earlier this year, on July 13, serial letter-writer Willans had a pop at non-believers in a lengthy letter published in the *Hastings and St Leonard's Observer*, in which he attributed all the ills of society to "liberalism" and "secularism":

"... If liberalism and secularism is so good, then why is everything so bad?"

"Having rejected the teaching of the church and the reality of God, most people in this country today are brought up to believe that they are just an accident of nature, without any

meaning or purpose to their existence.

"Deny the existence of God and reject the ten commandments and this is what happens: lack of self discipline, moral meltdown, confusion and despair. Society really does reap what it sows."

Fat lot of good Christianity did for Aldrin. For all his religious fervour and his determination to claim the fifth largest natural satellite in the solar system for Christianity, the second human to set foot on the moon sank into deep depression after leaving the space programme, and battled against alcoholism for many years.

Willans continued:

"Many people are profoundly worried about the kind of society we are passing on to future generations. Indeed, this concern is now so great that a free booklet has actually been issued to thousands of congregations nationwide outlining techniques on how to help restore faith and avert total moral collapse." He says that individuals can download it free from the website, www.churchsurvey.co.uk.

Curiosity led me to the site, and it took me all of three seconds to realise that the Church Survey Report is linked directly to the Christian Party, a hatchery for neo-conservative evangelical nuts led by the clownish Rev George Hargreaves, whose homophobia is second only that of Stephen Green.

The site also revealed that the Church Survey Report was compiled by "the inter-denominational Ecumenical Research Committee established under the chairmanship of the Rev Willans.

"[The ERC] examined exactly what people needed from their church and revealed that Christians urgently want the church to take the lead in promoting beliefs and morals and to make a stand against the tide of secularism destroying our nation."

Oh really? If people wanted it so much, why did they not come out in their droves to vote for the Christian Party when they had the opportunity to do so in the 2007 Scottish Parliamentary elections? In total, the Scottish Christian Party polled a meagre 31,000 votes and won no seats. (See *Freethinker*, July 2007). Hargreaves, who was most recently exposed to public ridicule when he featured in the TV series, *Make Me a Christian*, attracted a piddling 588 votes in Glasgow East.

Well, I ask you – who in their right minds would vote for a party whose policies include legislation to ban abortion, the return of the death sentence, greater observation of the Sabbath, the reintroduction of corporate Bible reading in all Scottish state schools, mandatory Christian religious education ("with no obligation to promote other faiths"), and a science curriculum which reflects "evidence" of creation/intelligent design?

Footnote: The handwritten card on which Aldrin wrote the Bible verse he planned to broadcast fetched over \$179,000 (about £90,000) at an auction of space memorabilia in the US last September.

'Goodbye, good riddance and don't come back!'

TERRY Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, has welcomed the ousting of two UK politicians who have tried hard to impose religion onto legislation. The Government, he said, "has become just a little more secular as a result of the departure of Transport Secretary Ruth Kelly and Education Minister Andrew Adonis."

Sanderson added: "Goodbye, good riddance and don't come back! ... Kelly controversially resigned/got sacked (take your pick) from her job as Transport Secretary and from the Government. She has now announced that she will step down as an MP at the next election. She also – at long last – confirmed what we all knew anyway: that she is a member of Opus Dei, the sinister ultra-right-wing Catholic organisation that reserves its membership only for those in positions of influence. Presumably Opus Dei, too, will dump her now that she no longer has the power to further their nasty aims behind the

scenes in Government."

He added: "Ms Kelly gave an interview to *The Times* earlier this week and made clear that she thinks Christian politicians should bring not only their "faith" but also their religions' dogmas to Parliament. The former maybe, but not the latter.

"When it became clear from her voting record that Ms Kelly was hitching her wagon to the Vatican rather than New Labour, she had to go. After all, she signed up to the Labour Party manifesto that promised the Fertility and Embryology Bill, and then she demanded to be let off voting for it. Her cabinet decided that homosexuals would have rights enshrined in law. Mysteriously, Ms Kelly was nowhere to be seen when the votes were taken. We say good riddance to her.

"And we also bid a not-very-fond farewell to Lord Adonis, the Education Minister, who has been moved to transport in Gordon Brown's cabinet reshuffle.

"Despite being unelected, Andrew Adonis has almost single-handedly steered the academy and 'faith school' expansion programme through Parliament. It seemed nothing could stop him as he encouraged 'faith groups' of all kinds – wild and wacky included – to apply to run academies, entirely at the taxpayers' expense and with running expenses guaranteed in perpetuity.

"But now his rampage has been brought to an abrupt end. It seems Ed Balls, the Education Secretary, was not at all in sympathy with Lord Adonis and his farming out of education to almost anybody who wanted it. It will be interesting to see where the Government will take the education system from here. Let's hope that when it has its rethink, it will give serious thought to bringing an end to the 'faith school' madness."



Ruth Kelly

Christians wake up to the dangers of UN anti-blasphemy resolution

FOR months now secularists and proponents of free speech have been warning of the dire implications of an Islamic-inspired United Nations anti-blasphemy resolution. Now Christian leaders too have cottoned onto the dangers posed by the resolution.

According to the *Christian Post*, the resolution "could hinder Christian evangelism and spread sharia law."

Said Carol Moeller, President and CEO of an organisation called Open Doors:

"This anti-blasphemy resolution is mostly seen to be putting a 'chilling effect' on Christian work and outreach around the world, and that is a very troubling development for us."

The non-binding UN resolution was first introduced by Pakistan and the Organization of the Islamic Conference at the UN Human Rights Council in 1999. It was amended to include religions other than Islam, and has since passed every year.

In 2005, Yemen proposed a similar resolution before the General Assembly and now the 192-nation Assembly is set to vote on it again.

Resolution 62/145, which was adopted in 2007, says it "notes with deep concern the intensification of the campaign of defamation of religions and the ethnic and religious profiling of Muslim minorities in the aftermath of September 11, 2001." It stresses the need to effectively combat defamation of all religions and incitement to religious hatred, in particular against Islam and Muslims.

Despite its good intentions, Moeller said: "The reality is that wherever Christianity and



Muslims in London protesting against the Mohammed cartoons first published in Denmark

Islam come into relationship with each other in the culture, the net effect has been for Christian evangelism to be silenced or to be intimidated through this act."

Although the resolution is non-binding, it has been passed several times, giving it a kind of authority and, in effect, protecting militant Islamists who retaliate against perceived offences, Moeller said.

Moeller added: "The slope is so slippery because everything that purports to criticise Islam is considered 'blasphemy'. Anything that promotes another religious viewpoint, like Christianity, is considered blasphemy. It really becomes the ultimate weapon against free religious speech around the world."

Earlier this year, the US government mission in Geneva said in a statement to the UN Human Rights Council that "defamation-relat-

ed laws have been abused by governments and used to restrict human rights".

Former UN Ambassador John Bolton commented: "It's obviously intended to have an intimidating effect on people expressing criticism of radical Islam, and the idea that you can have a defamation of a religion [ruling] like this, I think, is a concept fundamentally foreign to our system of free expression in the United States."

It is bizarre, to say the very least, that the Human Rights Council should be used as a platform for this ridiculous resolution, as the very worst violators of human rights are the Islamic regimes themselves.

Former Iranian Ali Sina, creator of the FaithFreedom blog, points out in an internet article that "human rights abuses happen in many countries, but never to the proportion and the magnitude of what is happening in Iran and other Islamic countries. In the last few years, and with no little thanks to the Islamic Revolution of Iran, I noticed that the major human rights abuses are perpetrated in the name of religion.

"I became concerned for the plight of my people in Iran and her neighboring countries and decided to investigate the cause. I asked myself whether all this is because the gentle and peaceful message of Islam is misunderstood and whether there is a way to revive the pure Islam and save my country.

"It was in this quest that I realised, to my chagrin, that the human rights abuses are not deviations from the true Islam but they ARE teachings of Islam."



Ghoulish reburial plan for Cardinal Newman turns to dust

TIME and damp conditions have thwarted the Catholic Church's ghoulish plan to relocate the remains of the Cardinal Henry Newman.

When church officials exhumed Newman's body last month as part of the process of making him a saint, they were devastated to discover that his grave was almost empty. All that remained were a brass plate and handles from Newman's coffin, along with a few red tassels from his cardinal's hat.

Officials have now had to abandon plans to transfer his bones from a rural cemetery in Rednal, Worcestershire, to a marble sarcophagus at Birmingham Oratory, which Newman founded after converting to Catholicism from the Church of England.

According to a report in *The Times*, thousands of worshippers were expected to descend on the Oratory from the end of October to pay their respects to Newman and seek his intercession. Now the Oratory is left with only a few locks of his hair.

Newman is expected to be beatified in December following claims that he was responsible for a miracle in which an American clergyman was "cured" of a crippling spinal disorder. This would gain him the title "Blessed", one step short of sainthood, which will require the Vatican to verify a second miracle.

"I have been visiting that grave since I was a very young boy," said Peter Jennings, a spokesman for the Oratory. "I will never forget how I felt, standing there, looking at this deep hole which had been dug out. This was the greatest churchman of the 19th century and there was nothing there, only dust."

Experts believe that damp conditions led to their complete decomposition.

The decision to exhume Newman's body had been fiercely resisted by gay rights campaigners because the priest had asked to be buried close to the body of Father Ambrose St John, a lifelong friend. With Newman's grave now lying empty, the controversy is expected to fade away, sparing the Vatican any possible embarrassment over claims that the priest was a closet homosexual.

Writing in the *Guardian* (October 8), human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell said:

"The only personal artefact found in the graveyard earth was a tiny piece of tassel from the cardinal's cap. Its survival from the ravages of decomposition will no doubt, in due course, be hailed by the Vatican as The Miracle of the Red Tassel, and be cited as a divine intervention that proves Newman's holiness and his worthiness of veneration. *Sigh*.

"... Pope Benedict XVI wanted Newman's remains reburied in a grand marble tomb in Birmingham Oratory Church, where he could



be venerated and the church could raise vast sums of money from pilgrims by selling 'Holy Newman' souvenirs.

"The Vatican's reburial scheme would have violated the Cardinal's repeated, explicit instructions to his executors, which were that he should be buried with the man he loved, and with whom he lived for more than 30 years, Father Ambrose St John.

"As well as making money out of Newman's sainthood, the Pope wanted to rebury Newman separate from St John to scotch allegations

Paintings offends Muslims

(Continued from page 1)

Muslim women in provocative poses, including one suggestively eating a banana (pictured below).

Badri explained the upset that would be caused by the image. "Muslims believe that all of God's creatures should be treated with respect, but we are taught to keep our distance from pigs because they are unclean. That is why this picture is so offensive to us."

A spokesman for the gallery explained: "She doesn't intend to offend anyone but simply wants to pose questions about Muslim culture and identity."



concerning his homosexuality. The Catholic Church has always been deeply embarrassed that the two men were buried together in the same grave and that they wrote about each other in passionate romantic language. Such evidence has prompted credible suggestions that the Cardinal might have been gay, at least by orientation if not by sexual practice.

"Foiling the Vatican's knavish plans, Newman's and St John's bodies have decomposed together, uniting them forever in the same soil. They cannot now be separated, as the Pope wanted. Cardinal Newman's wishes have triumphed over the homophobia of the Catholic hierarchy.

"The revelation of the empty grave came after I had written to the Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, arguing that it was morally wrong and possibly unlawful for the Ministry of Justice to grant the Catholic church an exhumation and reburial licence that violates Newman's instructions to his executors.

"This licence was granted, in utmost secrecy, in July, after much moral arm-twisting by Vatican emissaries, including lobbying recent Catholic convert Tony Blair.

"The government's willingness to give a non-relative third party the right to veto the Cardinal's will and to control his remains strikes me as high-handed and disrespectful. In effect, the Ministry of Justice caved in to Vatican demands and gave the Catholic church disposal rights over Newman's body, including authority to remove his bones and parade them in public as holy relics. The government's collusion with these macabre plans is shameful."

"I received a reply last week. It was penned on Mr Straw's behalf by his junior justice minister, Catholic MP Bridget Prentice. As the person in charge of the Ministry of Justice burials department, she wrote to me justifying her decision to grant a special exhumation and reburial licence to the Catholic Church: 'I was aware of Cardinal Newman's own recorded views regarding his place of burial. I took these views into consideration when deciding to grant the licence but did not consider them to be the overriding consideration in this case.'

"I wonder whether it is entirely right and proper that this exceptional and controversial decision should have been made by a Catholic minister? Won't it inevitably lead to allegations that the minister has, as a loyal Catholic, shown favouritism towards the Vatican's pleadings?

"Well, all those issues are academic now. The cardinal's body has turned to dust in the place where he wanted to be buried, beside the man he loved. There will be no reburial. Pope Benedict has lost his battle to overturn Newman's wishes. Sweet justice."

Australian euthanasia campaigner, 75, takes her own life

AN AUSTRALIAN euthanasia campaigner convicted for her role in the manslaughter of an Alzheimer's sufferer has taken her life with the same drug she illegally obtained for him.

Caren Jennings, 75, died alone in September, according to euthanasia advocate Philip Nitschke. He called her death "inevitable".

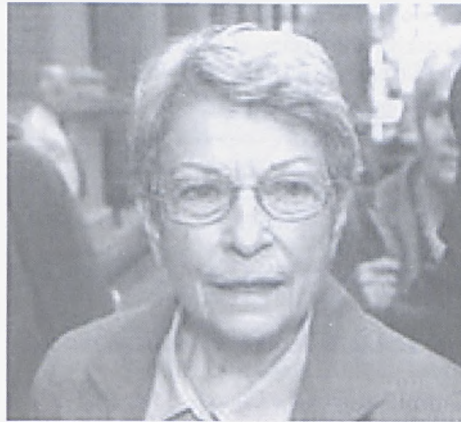
"It is not unexpected given the treatment and persecution she received at the hands of the legal system in the past few months," Dr Nitschke said.

Ms Jennings had been suffering from terminal cancer, which had spread from her breasts.

She is survived by her daughter Kate, who had been unaware of her plan, Dr Nitschke said.

Her lawyer, Sam Macedone, said he believed she did not want to take the risk that she might have to go to jail and probably decided to "go while I can".

Graham Wylie, 71, a former Qantas pilot, died in March 2006 from an overdose of the veterinary drug Nembutal, bought in Mexico and illegally imported by Jennings, a long-term friend and a former NSW representative of the euthanasia group Exit International, founded by



Caren Jennings

Dr Nitschke. Justins, his partner of 18 years, provided the drug to him, which she said he poured and drank, knowing it would kill him.

But the court found that Wylie no longer had the capacity to decide to kill himself because of his advanced dementia.

Jennings and Justins were found guilty of killing Wylie, and were due to appear in the Supreme Court last month for a sentencing.

The verdict, a blow to the euthanasia move-

ment, came after a six-week trial which did not cover the concept of a possible "mercy killing".

During the trial, Jennings admitted travelling to Mexico to obtain Nembutal for her long-time friend days before his death. The court heard she had made a second trip intending to obtain the drug for herself and another member of the voluntary euthanasia movement.

Nembutal, the organisation's drug of choice, was used in Australia by vets but is now illegal.

Jennings had been found guilty of being an accessory before the fact to Wylie's manslaughter and of importing the drug. Justins was found guilty of manslaughter.

During the court case, Kate Jennings said her mother, a former English teacher, was a selfless person who had been involved in many causes.

The former head of the NSW Voluntary Euthanasia society, Kep Enderby, said he was shocked by her death. "She was one of the finest people I've ever known," he said.

Justins was awaiting sentence at the time of the *Freethinker* going to press.

One-eyed veils would make Muslim women less provocative

IF SAUDI Arabia could make as much money out of the production of mad mullahs as it does out of oil, it would surely double its wealth overnight.

The latest crackpot cleric to step into the limelight with a fatuous fatwa is Sheikh Muhammad al-Hababan, who has called on women to stop being so brazen as to reveal both their eyes from under a full veil or niqab.

One eye, he said, was more than sufficient, according to a recent BBC report. The two-eyed look, he proclaimed, was far too seductive, as it encourages women to use eye make-up.

Sheikh Hababan, an ultra-conservative cleric with a distinctly cock-eyed view of women, is said to have wide influence among religious Saudis. He was answering questions on the Muslim satellite channel al-Majd.

His fatwa prompted Amit Varma of the India Uncut blog to pen the loopy cleric the following open letter.

Dear Sheikh Muhammad al-Hababan, the BBC reports that you have recently called on women in Saudi Arabia to "wear a full veil, or niqab, that reveals only one eye." You say that "showing both eyes encourage[s] women to use eye make-up to look seductive."

I believe, sir, that showing only one eye will make matters worse. You see, whenever a

woman and a man are together and the woman blinks, the man might think that she is winking.

Is the hidden eye open or closed? If it is assumed to be normally open, then a momentary closing of the visible eye could be assumed to be a wink. If it is assumed to be normally closed, then the woman may be considered to be perpetually winking, which is equally problematic.

I have an alternative solution to your problem. I suggest that you introduce veils for men that cover both their eyes. That way it



This is the sort of provocative look the mad mullah wants stamped out in Saudi Arabia. The brazen women showing ID cards in this picture are, in fact, Pakistanis.

will make no difference if the women are winking, blinking or, heaven forbid, naked.

Good idea, no? You're welcome.

Unsurprisingly, hundreds of other people left derisory comments on the internet in regard to the sheikh's reported fatwa.

Here's one that appeared on the *Freethinker* website, penned by "Valdemar":

"The obvious solution (duh!) is to poke one eye out, preferably when the girl is nice and small and unable to fight back or run away. It can be done at the same time as that other pious mutilation Muslim men find so attractive.

"And why not lop off a limb or two, or at least a few digits, just to be on the safe side? We wouldn't want the weaker sex to lure good Muslim men into the ways of Satan by suddenly revealing a delicate, five-fingered hand or – Allah forbid – a full set of five cute little toes!

"Aaarggh! I must take a cold shower, then say my prayers to the Lecherous Misogynistic Bastard in the Sky – Blessed Be He."

The sheikh's comments follow the pronouncement last month by fellow Saudi cleric Muhammad Al-Munajjid, who condemned Micky Mouse as "one of Satan's soldiers". Earlier, he denounced scantily-clad women participating in the Olympics as "satanic".

Lambeth Conference was a financial disaster too

IT appears that the Anglican Church's festival of feuding bishops, better known as the 2008 Lambeth Conference, was a financial as well as an ecclesiastical disaster.

Organisers of the conference managed to overspend by up to a possible £2 million – and the Archbishops' Council and the Church Commissioners want to know how the hell it happened.

So they have launched an investigation into the finances of the 2008 event, marked by a titanic clash between the liberal and conservative wings of the Anglican Church – mainly over the issue of the ordination of women and gay priests. It was a most unedifying spectacle – but a source of great fun to the more rational among us who regard such churchly goings-on as a load of old codswallop.

John Ormerod, a former senior partner of Deloitte, will chair the inquiry into the estimated £1 to £2 million deficit run up by the July 16 to Aug 3 gathering of 617 Anglican bishops in Canterbury.

The committee's brief will be to investigate how the Conference came to be so dramatically over budget, and to examine

ways of eliminating the debt.

Two representatives of the Archbishops' Council – the Bishop of Leicester, the Rt Rev Tim Stevens, and Christina Baxter – will be on the inquiry board, along with Third Church Estates Commissioner Timothy Walker. A report is expected within nine months. On Aug 7, the officers of the Lambeth Conference Company met with the Archbishops' Council to brief them of the Conference's inability to pay its debts as they came due.

Following an Aug 11 meeting with the Board of Governors of the Church Commissioners, the Church of England agreed to extend a temporary interest-free £600,000 loan to the Lambeth Conference Corporation while it attempted to cover the shortfall through a fund-raising campaign.

According to a January 2008 internal conference document, the budget for the

Lambeth Conference was £4.4 million and the Lambeth Spouses' Conference was £1.2 million, excluding the costs of travel to the conference.

Asked on Aug 3 how the costs would be covered, the Archbishop of Cant, Dr Rowan ("Dumbledore") Williams said: "We are looking at various routes to meet what looks like a shortfall at this stage. We knew this would be difficult. I don't think I can go into details because I don't have the direct management of that question."

Dr Williams added: "It's just that it's not my particular responsibility at the moment, although I'm rather concerned about it."

Editor's Note: *In response to the global financial crisis, the C of E's website launched a "Prayer for the Current Financial Situation" as well as a prayer to help people balance their budgets more effectively. Maybe the commissioners will find the solution there.*

Ex-Muslims warn of encroaching Islamisation

(Continued from page 1)

in situations where domestic abuse was common. By bowing to political correctness, she said, the British government had abetted a terrible situation.

"Opposing sharia is not racism," she said. "It's racist to demand backward, medieval laws for people living in the 21st century."

The Council wanted humanists and secularists to band together to legally challenge Islamic tribunals, taking their argument to the European Court of Human Rights.

Namazie and other speakers said countries such as Germany and Sweden were becoming more accepting of Islamic law.

Roy Brown, who represents the International Humanist and Ethical Union at the United Nations' Human Rights Council, said influential Islamic countries have been successful at shaping debate in the Geneva-based council.

"We've been told not to mention Islam," he said. "We've been told not to mention sharia."

Members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a grouping of Islamic countries, hold one-third of the seats in the 47-member Human Rights Council.

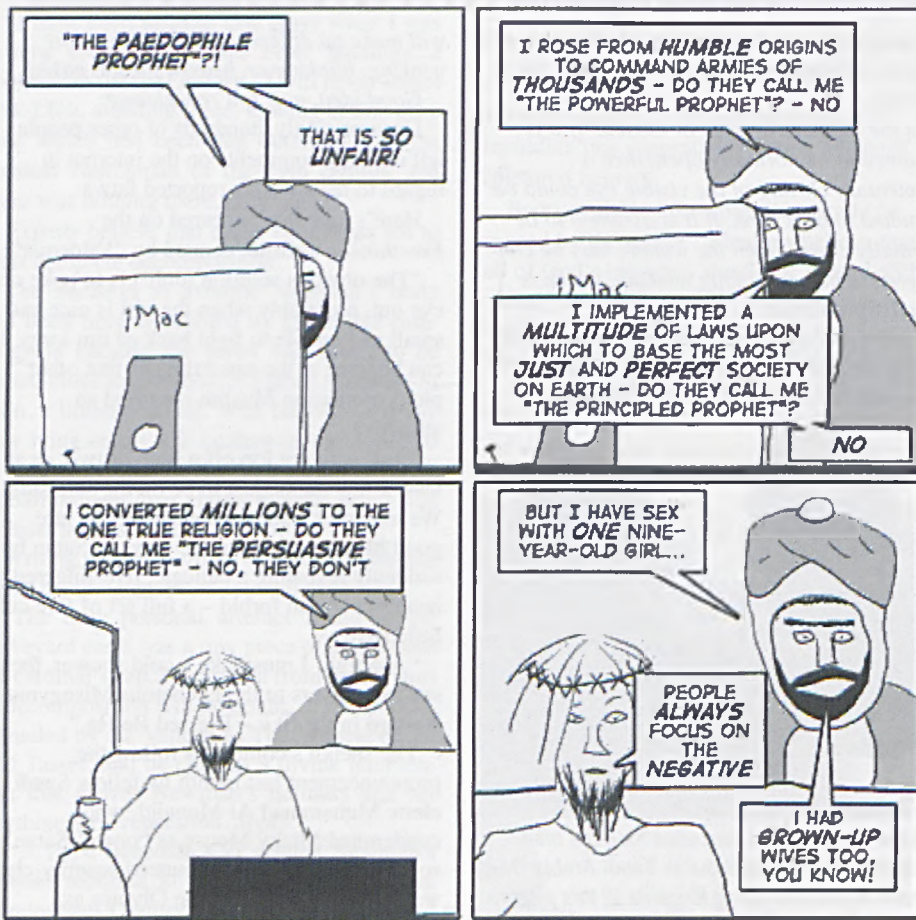
The OIC has come under fire for promoting resolutions at the council and other UN bodies seeking to outlaw what it calls the "defamation" of Islam.

Brown said the spread of fundamentalism in Britain had been sparked by massive donations coming from Saudi Arabia to fund religious schools and mosques.

"One of the reasons that political Islam has been so successful in this country is because it's awash with Saudi money," he said. "They have been spent literally billions."

Throughout the day, speaker after speaker railed against the British government's decision to increase the number of state-funded faith schools of all religions.

Jesus and Mo



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Methodist vicar fabricating a hate campaign against herself

A VICAR sent faeces and a dead hedgehog to herself in a fabricated hate campaign after falling out with church officials, Grimsby Crown Court heard last month.

Methodist minister Rev Janet Magee, 62, was convicted of perverting the course of justice, and given a six-month suspended sentence.

On the strength of the minister's complaints police arrested church steward Roger Chessell who had wanted to force her out of her job. But he was released without charge and detectives focused their inquiries on the clergywoman, believing she may have been lying about the hate campaign.

Police secretly installed a CCTV camera at her home which proved she could not have received the hedgehog in the post on the date she stated, the court was told.

Forensic evidence also proved that she had written some of the hate mail herself by using words and letters cut out from a national newspaper.

Rev Magee, of Brigg, Lincolnshire denied perverting the course of justice by falsely representing herself as a crime victim.

Prosecutor Simon Waley said the defendant, who has been suspended as minister in charge of seven churches on the Brigg and Barton-upon-Humber Methodist Circuit, wanted to stay on as minister at the end of an initial five-year term.

But certain members of the church leadership including Mr Chessell viewed her as "hard to work with" and "not a team player". The vicar was not offered a further term, but she called for a vote from the whole congregation, who backed her, and in September 2004 she was offered a further three-year term. Circuit stewards Mr Chessell and Mary Knaggs resigned over the issue two months later.

About this time the vicar first reported to police that she had been receiving anonymous letters typed on a computer, claiming the author was unhappy at her re-election and they were "going to get her out and nobody liked her".

Mr Waley said a notice was read out at all the Methodist churches in the area appealing for information to uncover the mystery writer. Magee claimed the problem continued on and off for more than two years. One letter referred to her as a "whore".

In August 2007, when she returned from an exchange visit to the United States, the minister claimed to have received a hand-delivered letter containing pieces of dog dirt.

The CCTV footage was checked by officers but nobody was found making a suspicious delivery. The following month she claimed she received a hand-delivered note accompanied by a dead hedgehog. The note read: "Dead like you will be soon. I told you the police could never catch me".



Rev Janet Magee.

The vicar was arrested and her home searched. An envelope was found containing newspaper cuttings and letters removed from them had been sent with the hedgehog, it was alleged. She said she could give no explanation when confronted with the evidence herself and told officers: "If I was you I would be thinking she has done it herself".

Later she added: "It stinks. Whoever set me up has done it brilliantly. I take my hat off to them".

Cornwall police, meanwhile, are investigat-

ing a hate campaign against another woman vicar, the Rev Yvonne Hobson, 63, of the village of Paul in Cornwall. In September she found a death threat on a postcard inside her Bible moments before she took part in a Holy Communion service.

A campaign against Mrs Hobson started in June last year when she received the first of a string of letters expressing hatred for women priests. She had returned to the rural parish only a few months ago after taking leave to recover from two arson attacks within weeks last year.

In December, someone forced open the window of her car and threw in a burning candle after choir practice at the parish church. It is thought only the wet weather prevented the silver Mercedes from catching fire. In an incident the month before – also after choir practice – a burning candle was left in a basket of logs on the porch of her £350,000 home in Newlyn.

Police have advised her to stay away from the church for her own safety, and she is said to be so distressed she is considering leaving the ministry. Mrs Hobson took up her post as curate at the 15th-century Church of England church in July 2006.

Islamic law firm used porn stars to attract clients

TWO porn stars posing as secretaries on a Muslim law firm's website have been "disappeared" after they were unmasked by the media in Holland.

Photos of the women were removed from the sharia site after the press turned their attention on Jairam Advocaten, following a hissy fit thrown by one of its staff who accused the Rotterdam city council of discrimination.

Faizel Ali Enait took the council to court after it had turned him down for a job in the Social Services department because he refused to shake hands with women. He lost his case after judges ruled that the council had every right to reject him.

Enait, who regularly appears on talk shows, also wants women to wear burquas.

But, on the home page of Jairam Advocaten, two porn stars posed as its secretaries. Although wearing clothes, they were identified by news website Geenstijl.nl as well-known "adult entertainment" models Anetta Keys and Rahilla.

Geenstijl.nl established that the pictures had been on the website since 2005. They therefore seem to have been deliberately picked by the "sharia lawyers".

After the embarrassing revelation, Jairam Advocaten removed the porn actresses' portraits from its website, replacing them with a



The porn stars who posed as secretaries

picture of what appears to be its office.

Geenstijl.nl then discovered that the picture chosen was a prestigious office building in Rotterdam.

In reality, Jairam Advocaten is located in a shabby building in Amsterdam.

It was revealed that, prior to the court case – in an interview with *Algemeen Dagblad* (NL) – Enait said

he would get the job of Customer Relations Officer, no matter what.

"I think I will be made Customer Relations Officer and that it'll piss off the aboriginals, which is what I call the autochthonous population."



Enait, who refers to Dutch people as 'aboriginals'.

John Radford: 'Oh what a noble mind is here o'erthrown'

This line from Hamlet Act 3 Scene 1, completely out of context, came into my head after meeting two Elders of the Church of Jesus Christ (Mormons) in the street, as one does. They were, as always, smartly dressed, polite young men who spoke coherently and earnestly. Our conversation was short. It soon turned to whether I believed in God. I said I did not. "Why?" one asked (as usual one took the lead). I said I knew of no reason to do so. "Why?" again.

I said something to the effect that I did not need reasons for not doing something for which I saw no reason. There was nothing in my knowledge or experience that gave me any inkling of the existence of God. "Ah", he said, "that is where faith comes in. I know that God exists. He has spoken to me."

This was said as one who has access to a special source of knowledge. One of my favourite lines came next: "You must have faith in God. Then you will know he exists." And he gave me a little booklet, marking the page that told me how to achieve this, by prayer. This was the point at which I made my excuses and left. Unfortunately I've lost the booklet so I cannot quote it. (Freudian slip or what?) I guess that they begin with belief in God because many people will give at least some assent to it, whereas if they started with say No. 10 of their Articles of Faith, the literal gathering of Israel, restoration of the Ten Tribes, and building of Zion, the New Jerusalem, on the American continent, the reaction might be more skeptical.

This encounter left me, as they always do, quite unhappy. I can discern three reasons, though there may be more. First and most trivially, I usually forget the neat responses I could have made. For example, to the question whether I believe in God, a possible response is, "Which one?" Of course, the answer is always there is only one true God, but at least one can make some attempt to see how this one differs from all the others. Or again, one might say, "Do you believe in pink unicorns?" If the answer is no, one could follow it up by saying, "I know that pink unicorns exist. They live on the Moon, and I have seen them." If this elicits disbelief, one might ask why the Elder's faith should carry more weight than yours. I could have told the missionary (for such they are) that his recommendation about praying is circular. But I doubt if he would have understood. I could have told him that this experiment was tried in the 19th century by Francis Galton. Intrigued by the reverence given to idols by the peoples he had met on his travels, Galton set up a figure of Mr Punch, and deliberately "worshipped" it each day. He quickly developed feelings of veneration and found it took some time to shake them off.



A comedy duo from an old silent slapstick movie? Nope, these are Mormon Elders A T Rose and G M Fryer in Mississippi in 1897. Their Prince Albert coats, derbies, umbrellas, and satchels were standard for missionaries at the time. Missionary efforts to convert people to Mormonism began as soon as the church was founded, and by 1850 Mormonism had spread throughout the US, Canada, and Europe. Over 400 missionaries left Salt Lake between 1855 and 1864, and in large part because of their success, the city's population doubled every ten years. In 1850 approximately 6,000 people lived in the city, while by 1890 the population was officially 44,843. (Photo Courtesy Utah State Historical Society.)

Second, more seriously, there is bafflement. I experience a total lack of empathy. If someone tells me that they hate Jews, or some other group. I strongly disagree. But I do at least understand what they are saying. There are things I greatly dislike and even types of people, such as cheats and bullies, and I have some idea of the feeling. But I have really no idea at all of the God-certainty. I don't know what it means, or feels like, to believe with absolute certainty in something for which there is no support except the belief itself.

A deeper bafflement is that it is impossible to make any headway with someone who sim-

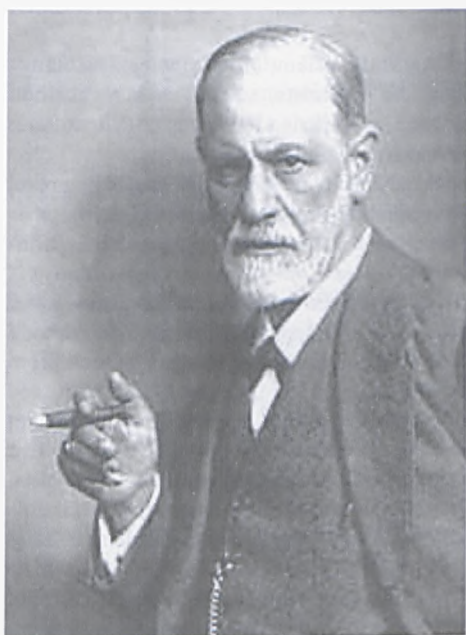
ply "knows". The sensation is of running into a steel door. Nothing one says makes the slightest impression. This is disturbing, partly because it violates the assumptions we make about conversing. Social life depends on verbal give and take, and without it, humans cannot survive. Third, there is sadness. Here are young adults, healthy, apparently sane, whose minds appear (to me) to be in a certain way warped. On this matter they cannot think straight, or in a sense at all, since no contrary thought is allowed to exist. And here indeed is the potentially noble human mind o'erthrown.

Human capacity for thought, like other abilities, varies enormously. Great philosophers, scientists, artists, have wrestled with the hardest problems and the most profound issues. But people of very ordinary abilities, and little education, can nevertheless work out their views on issues such as what is good and bad, is there any purpose in life, was our universe created by something external to itself, and so on, in a coherent and more or less rational way. An analogy might be with top professional sports players and lowly amateurs. The young Mormons and others like them seem to me to be not poor players, rather as it were paralysed, at least partially.

False beliefs exist at many degrees of fixedness. No doubt it is a continuous distribution. But take three points on it by way of illustration. There are false beliefs that are easily corrected. For example one might incorrectly think that the capital of Turkey is Istanbul, or of the United States, New York. A simple check will replace these with Ankara and Washington. Then there are beliefs that are resistant to change, but which can nevertheless often be modified. Such are many prejudices. They are resistant, partly because they fit in with an individual's desires and needs, or they may seem to offer explanations. This was what was exploited by the Nazis in relation to the Jews and other groups, and is still at work today. Reasoning, which would show the prejudice to be false, is subverted by the tendency to avoid disproof and selectively find confirmation. Nevertheless prejudices can often be modified. Education is of help, but experience is better, especially of working together in small groups.

Schools are ideal for this, which is one more reason why "faith" schools are such a bad idea. Then there are false beliefs which seem intractable. Sometimes they are harmless eccentricities, but more seriously are pathological and harmful. Such are major delusions, obsessions, compulsions, paranoia, though these have other features besides simply belief. But the belief itself is resistant to argument or evidence.

Somewhere close, it seems to me, we must



Sigmund Freud

put unquestioning faith. This may be relatively harmless if it is simply the certainty that Jesus lives and loves you, or even that he is to be seen in a burnt potato crisp. It is less so if it comes to refusing blood transfusions or blocking medical research, because they are contrary to God's will, which one has the remarkable ability to know with complete certainty. And the dark side of faith is fanaticism. If one has the certainty of revealed truth, it follows that all else is false. It is, all too often, a short step to seeking to destroy it, peacefully or violently. And it goes on to burning books, wars,

torture, oppression of all kinds. Of course the great majority of those who "know" God are not so extreme, and of course horrors are committed by the non-religious too, motivated by power or greed or, sometimes, certainty of their own rectitude. But it is mainly some of the religious who make a virtue of unsupported faith.

Sigmund Freud has been a controversial figure for over a century now. Much of his detailed theorising has not been supported by evidence, and his specific method of treatment is of dubious merit. However, he remains historically important because, like Copernicus and Darwin, he changed our view of the world, in particular of human nature. Freud did not, as is loosely said, "discover" the unconscious mind. The concept had been around for a hundred years and more. But, like Darwin with evolution, he made it central.

As he put it, reviewing his work in 1925, "Psychoanalysis regarded everything mental as in the first instance unconscious; the further quality of consciousness might also be present, or again it might be absent." Man was no longer a rational animal, though an animal capable of being rational. Current researchers, while paying little attention to Freud himself, are in many ways working out this assumption. Studies of brain and behaviour, using techniques far beyond Freud's reach, the unravelling of the genetic code, explorations of evolved mental modules or modes of thought which we all inherit, all show in increasing detail how much of our lives is based on our animal, largely unconscious, nature. Many examples, vital or trivial, have become popular

knowledge.

In Presidential elections in the USA, the taller candidate nearly always wins. He seems stronger. We like decisive leaders and hate ditherers, regardless of the merits of the decision. Easy to see how this fits a small tribe struggling for survival, and even further back a migrating herd or swarm. Unthinking certainty must be a very ancient trait. It characterises what used to be called "instinct". It can serve well for survival, and so persists. But in rapid change it is a handicap. Just one example is the giant pandas, at risk of extinction partly because they cannot change their vanishing diet of bamboo shoots. So are we humans, if we don't adapt our life-styles. Our Neanderthal cousins were bigger and stronger than us, with larger brains. But it seems they were less adaptable, and they perished.

Kind hearts may be more than coronets, and simple faith than Norman blood, but untested beliefs are no longer useful for survival. When disasters threaten, prayer dramatically increases, as it has no doubt since *H sapiens* became capable of it, possibly around 50,000 years ago, judging from the earliest discovered remains that may have been "religious". It has comforted many, but has never yet averted any danger. God is not going to stop wars or global warming, or find new sources of energy and food, or halt fatal epidemics. Indeed, many gods have notoriously visited disasters upon suffering humanity, or so believers tell us. Our best hope lies, not in more faith, but in more of our noble rationality.

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

Dan J Bye: How to be prolific: the cut-and-paste theology of Alister McGrath

BEST known to the general public for his anti-atheist trilogy, *The Twilight of Atheism* (2004); *Dawkins' God: genes, memes, and the meaning of life* (2005); and *The Dawkins Delusion: atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (2007), the prominent Christian academic Alister "book a month" McGrath is a theology-generating machine, cranking out new texts at an extraordinary pace. McGrath's own website lists about 40 books written or edited by him; the British Library catalogue contains in the region of 70 titles.

Tackling the ever-rising Christian-apologetic flood waters is a daunting task for even the most intrepid critic, and that's without taking into account his numerous talks, lectures and debates, television and radio appearances, and newspaper, magazine and academic journal articles.

On top of all that, he has recently taken up the Chair of Theology, education and ministry at King's College, London, having previously been Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. Does the man never sleep?

But I've discovered something that helps to explain how McGrath maintains his intimidating rate of publication, and makes him seem just a little less impressive.

For Alister McGrath is an accomplished recycler of his own words. He habitually regurgitates sentences, repeats paragraphs, and reproduces pages of largely unaltered text. In other words, he is guilty of the often neglected academic sin of self-plagiarism.

Set against the obvious crime of theft from the work of others, self-plagiarism is often seen as a minor problem. But while I agree that there are worse failings than re-using your own

words, doing so without disclosing that you are doing so is nevertheless a clearly unethical scholarly practice. Allowing derivative work to be presented as original material (or, worse, actively disguising old writing as new text) is a form of deception.

It may not be intentionally deceptive; it may occur innocently, as when a writer repackages something originally written for an academic audience for a wider market. Nonetheless, the effect is to create a misleading impression of the author's creativity, exaggerating how much original work they have actually done. In any event, to avoid the appearance of pretending to be more prolific that is really the case, portions of text which have been seen prior publication should be duly acknowledged and attributed. McGrath fails to do this. Whether he is aware

(Continued on Page 10)

The cut-and-paste theology of Alister McGrath

(Continued from page 9)

of the issue or not, McGrath's burgeoning bibliography makes him look like a man of ceaseless creativity, an image somewhat undermined by the knowledge that he repeats himself a lot.

I was alerted to McGrath's practice of shovelling material from old books into newer ones while subjecting some of his publications to detailed and – it has turned out – interminable scrutiny. Reading *Twilight of Atheism* alongside *Dawkins' God*, I soon became aware of certain similarities, in particular between the sections of each book which dealt with the supposed warfare of science and religion. Reading pp 84-87 of *Twilight* alongside pp 140-143 of *Dawkins' God*, I found that although there were some minor differences between the two texts (for example, in *Dawkins' God*, David Livingstone is described as an "Irish geographer and intellectual historian", whereas in *Twilight* he is an "Irish scientist and historian"), and while *Twilight* was more verbose, the text was basically the same.

Wider research revealed that the passage in question is one of McGrath's favourites: he's recycled it more than once. In fact, the earliest incarnation I have tracked down can be found in McGrath's 1998 book, *The Foundations of Dialogue in Science & Religion* (I cannot claim to know whether this was its first appearance in McGrath's oeuvre). It was also used in *The Re-enchantment of Nature: science, religion and the human sense of wonder* (2002).

Here are the opening few lines of the section in question, taken from each of those books:

"As Freeman Dyson points out in his superb recent essay 'The Scientist as Rebel'... a common element of most visions of science is that of 'rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture'. Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition – a point famously stated by the biologist J B S Haldane in February 1923. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture..." (*Foundations of Dialogue*, 1998, p21)

"As Freeman Dyson points out in his essay 'The Scientist as Rebel', science has often been seen as a liberator – a Prometheus-like figure, bringing freedom from outmoded ways of thought and institutions. Science is a 'rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture'. It is a subversive activity, a point famously stated in a lecture delivered to the Society of Heretics at



Alister McGrath

Cambridge by the biologist J B S Haldane in February 1923. History offers us many confirmations of this insight. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for English physicists of the eighteenth century it offered a platform for criticising the pervasive influence of the Church of England; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture..." (*The Re-enchantment of Nature*, 2002, p 69)

"There has always been a sense in which the natural sciences are opposed to authoritarianism of any kind. As Freeman Dyson points out in his important essay 'The Scientist as Rebel', a common element of most visions of science is that of 'rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture'. Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition – a point famously stated in a lecture delivered to the Society of Heretics at Cambridge by the biologist J B S Haldane in February 1923. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual constraints of Islam; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture..." (*Twilight of Atheism*, 2004, p 84)

"The history of science makes it clear here that the natural sciences have often found themselves pitted against authoritarianism of any kind. As Freeman Dyson points out in his important essay 'The Scientist as Rebel', science often finds itself in 'rebellion against the restrictions imposed by the local prevailing culture'. Science is thus a subversive activity, almost by definition. For the Arab mathematician and astronomer Omar Khayyam, science was a rebellion against the intellectual con-

straints of Islam; for nineteenth-century Japanese scientists, science was a rebellion against the lingering feudalism of their culture. (*Dawkins' God*, 2005, p140)

But this is by no means an isolated example. Investigating further, I uncovered many other instances of McGrath's labour-saving technique. *Twilight of Atheism* emerges from this as a patchwork-quilt of a book. Based on a speech, it was apparently padded out to book length by incorporating chunks of text from other sources.

I discovered that a passage summarising Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* on p 74 of *Twilight of Atheism* had been previously aired (with only slight differences) in McGrath's *Christian Theology: an introduction* (2001, p 541) and *A Brief History of Heaven* (2003, p 149). *Twilight of Atheism* also shares material about Freud with the much earlier *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (1993, compare pp 68-69, 70 of *Twilight* with pp 97, 99 of *Intellectuals*). The account of Marx's approach to religion in *Twilight of Atheism* (especially pp 63-65) closely resembles similar discussions in *Christian Theology: an introduction* (2001), *Introduction to Christianity* (1997 – and the second edition, published as *Christianity: an introduction* in 2006), *Historical Theology: an introduction to the history of Christian thought* (1998), and *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (1993). McGrath's discussion of 'death of God theology' in *Twilight* (pp 158-161) seems to owe a great deal to his *The Future of Christianity* (2002), with echoes in the later *Dawkins' God*.

This is just the tip of the iceberg; I found many other examples which it would be tedious to rehearse here. Anyone with the patience to systematically compare McGrath's books with each other will undoubtedly discover many other examples of recycling.

How much does any of this matter, if self-plagiarism is often seen as one of the less serious infringements of academic integrity? Well, it's another dent in McGrath's scholarly reputation. As one of the most prominent and eminent of the critics of modern atheism, with a string of qualifications to his name, McGrath simply should not be making basic mistakes like this.

As I pointed out in my article "McGrath vs Russell on Calvin vs Copernicus: a case of the pot calling the kettle black?" (*Freethinker*, June 2007), McGrath often attacks atheists like Bertrand Russell and Richard Dawkins for their perceived scholarly failings (indeed, it's a key part of his apologetic strategy), and that's every reason for us to search out and expose McGrath's own weaknesses.

Peter Brietbart: Why core Christian beliefs are morally reprehensible

A pleasant and friendly Christian sadly informs me that, yes, I am going to Hell. He cites me the scripture: "He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name." (*Revelation 14:10-11*)

I'd been told this before and I'd never really been sure how to respond. But now I am going to.

If this is not the most offensive belief it is possible to hold, then I truly do not know what is; I certainly cannot imagine worse. To think that one will go to some vague, nice place for all time after physical death is riddled with logical problems, but harmless.

But to honestly believe that every non-believer will suffer torment for all time is hateful in the absolute. I don't believe what the book says and for this I am condemned to some unimaginable torture. There is no threat that has been uttered that comes anywhere near to that of the threat of Hell. Any human injustice, vile deed or depraved act could be infinitely repeated for all time – and this is what is threatened. For not believing the same thing!

I can understand why some people find the idea of Hell satisfying. When one thinks about a person like Hitler, who took his own life before justice could be done, someone who got away with it, one could easily wish that he were in a sense alive once more. That way justice could be done and he could face up to his crimes. The concept of Hell meets this need very nicely.

But if Hell were to exist – really exist – then surely only humans who have caused the most suffering should be condemned to it? Well surely not, says the Good Book. If you commit the crime of failing to wholeheartedly embrace Christ as saviour, then it's fire and brimstone for you. There are, at best estimates, 4.5 billion non-Christians. Some of these believe in their own versions of Hell, where all Christians are presumably bound, but most do not. I find it mind-boggling that anyone can imagine that all of these people are somehow damned.

Ironically, it is the very act of not believing in Hell that will land you a one-way trip there. It is also important to note that "accepting Christ as saviour" is literally the qualifying factor for entry to Heaven. It is not your deeds or your intentions, your wishes or your hopes, it is your devotion to a first-century theologian. That is, a secular person who devotes their life to good causes and brings joy to many throughout their life has no hope at all of entering the Kingdom of Heaven. God doesn't want that

sort of person there. He wants believers.

I realise, of course, that the idea of Heaven is a very comforting one. After a life of hardship, the idea that your difficulties will one day go away and everything will be lovely must be very appealing. I also have suspicions as to why belief in a version of the afterlife is found in so many unrelated cultures.

When the forces of natural selection have shaped every part of your being to try and prolong your life and to avoid death as much as possible, it is almost natural to sort of pretend that it won't really happen. I wonder, however, if it is totally incompatible with the idea of Hell. For example, my grandmother, a Sunday school teacher, is supposedly in Heaven but I am doomed to Hell. Will she be happy in Heaven knowing this?

But the problems are not only ones of incompatibility. What happens if I go to Heaven, but someone I despise is also there? Do I just avoid them? And what of food? Do I get hungry? If not, will I never be able to eat again? Does my digestive system work normally in heaven? Can I get drunk? I certainly want to be able to drink wine. Will I be able to do enjoyable things in Heaven that on earth are considered to be sinful by the Bible? Can I read my favourite books there? Will books written by homosexuals be banned? An eternity without Stephen Fry's brilliance, for example, would be dull indeed.

Of course the different ideas of Hell are equally baffling to the non-believer. Some Christians have explained to me that the whole idea of demons and hellfire is utterly ridiculous. No-one really believes in all that, they say. They believe that Hell is an eternity without God. That, to me, is as much a worry as is an eternity without unicorns. And yet others have spoken to me at length of Satan and demons and a real, fiery place that you go to when you die. The differences of opinion are



Dante And Virgil In Hell by William-Adolphe Bouguereau (1825-1905)

enormous. It's been said that if all the Christians who have called other Christians "not really a Christian" were to vanish, there wouldn't be any Christians left.

I want Christian moderates to sit up and take notice. Your beliefs are not as nice as you might think. On the contrary, they should be wholly unacceptable to any moral person. If you believe in Heaven and Hell, I ask you to think about the implications of such a belief. If you believe in Heaven, but not Hell, then you are ignoring the words of Jesus. He speaks of it at length.

Scripture describes Heaven as an eternity of praising God, which sheds some light on the sort of God the Bible describes. If Heaven is full of zealous sycophants slaving over God in praise for all time, then it really isn't the sort of place I'd like to go to.

After all, the company would be so much better down below.

Quotes of the Month

"People set up this big conflict between reason and faith. I don't believe that it exists. I think that faith is completely rational. The debate in Britain has become incredibly secularised. Religion is seen as something a bit strange, in the margins. Politics is much the poorer for that because you want people who believe in things to go into politics."

– Ruth Kelly, who confirmed this week that she is a member of *Opus Dei*, *The Times*.

"The best definition of science I have ever heard (embarrassingly, it's my own) is 'humility in the face of facts', and yet science in America is always being accused of arrogance! Arrogance? Compared to those Sunday evangelists and others who claim that truth is 'revealed' in a book, one book, whose journey into existence is traceable in history, whose fragments and parts and apocrypha were arbitrarily decided by compromise and pragmatic need? Yet America's insistence on equal validity between 'revealed' truth and evidence-based truth has meant that evolution is now pitted against so-called 'intelligent design', a barbarously irrational mixture of pseudoscience and fallacious argument that poses itself 'innocently' as a credible alternative."

– Stephen Fry, *Radio Times*.

Eric S Stockton (Dec 5, 1924 – Oct 3, 2008)

MY friendship with Eric began in the 1960s when he joined the Department of Science and Engineering at Isleworth Polytechnic which was still in its infancy. Eric was a chemist and he and I were soon brought together to develop a laboratory technicians' training course on which we worked together with others for many years.

It was a privilege to be close to a man who, when he spoke, compelled one's attention. For as he said, "when talking about serious matters one should only speak when one has something to say". Oh, if only more modern media people, especially politicians, would understand that excellent precept. As I worked with Eric I slowly came to know more about him, and soon learned that after graduating in chemistry at the age of 17 from the same college that once held H G Wells, he worked for a time as an industrial chemist at British Non-ferrous Research Association and, as he put it, "played a tiny part in the Manhattan Project". Then in the 1950s he decided to quit science and for a time became a "Commons Ranger", a job involving patrolling several square miles of London's hilly heathland on horseback.

His marriage to his first wife in 1952 was dissolved some years later. In 1962 he married his second wife Catherine, who was a medical doctor and several years his junior. They were happily married and Catherine bore two children, Fred and Rachel.

I still have vivid memories of one summer day when Eric invited my wife Jean and myself to spend a day with him, Catherine and baby Fred, her first-born, on his river boat which was moored at Goring on the Thames. We were steering towards a lock when the gear handle came off in Eric's hand. Showing no sign of alarm he simply said "Oh dear", turned off the engine and steered the boat into the bank. Fortunately we had gone up river, using his rowing dinghy, and I had the pleasurable and not too difficult exercise of towing the boat back to its moorings.

I left Isleworth in 1966 but remained in touch with Eric and Catherine. We met frequently until 1977, when Catherine was appointed doctor to the inhabitants of the Island of Sanday in the Orkneys. Shortly before this, in the early 1970s, Eric and Catherine had agreed that it made more sense for Catherine to continue her professional career while he became the "housewife". This change in lifestyle was brought about when Catherine diagnosed a heart condition in Eric that required the fitting of a pacemaker, which Eric had to live with for the rest of his life. Neither were to know that this agreed change in life-style may have been a useful apprenticeship for Eric for what was to follow.

ERIC Stockton's *Atheist Thought* website features two quotations. The first is "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use" – Galileo; and the second, by Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), states: "My only wish is ... to transform friends of gods into friends of man, believers into thinkers, devotees of prayer into devotees of work, candidates for the hereafter into students of the world, Christians, who, by their own admission, are 'half animal, half angel', into persons, into whole persons."



His site also declares that his latest post (undated) "is almost certainly the last because my declining health and stamina make it so. My thanks to all readers for their interest and comments; I wish you all well. The website will remain accessible for some time yet."

Eric was a prolific writer, and an enthusiastic contributor to the *Freethinker*. I learned of his death from RALPH ISON, who penned Eric's obituary.

– Barry Duke

Before they had been on Sanday very long Eric was in regular telephone contact with me and others and was making himself computer literate, first with an Amstrad word-processor and later with a desk-top computer. He began writing and distributing a magazine on Sanday called the *Lady Godiva*. "Lady", no doubt in recognition of the tiny hamlet in which he lived called by the same name, and "Godiva" perhaps for some reason which, I cannot remember his revealing to me, may have had the connotation of "revealing all".

He was founder editor of the *Scottish Humanist*. He also wrote a regular column for its successor *Humanism Scotland* and many articles for and letters to the *Freethinker* during the time of the editorship of the late Peter Brearey, who is buried at Lady on the Island of Sanday. Eric also ran a website called *An Atheist's Thoughts* for many years, as an antidote to the BBC's *Thought for the Day*. His

efforts have received high praise in reviews, particularly in *The Times*. These *Thoughts* have recently been edited into book form (a copy of which is available in the Library of South Place Ethical Society) by Eric's American friend and e-mail correspondent Mark Moore of Massachusetts.

Catherine tragically died of cancer in 1981, leaving Eric a widower with two children to care for. Later in 1983, as he writes in his own brief autobiography*, "he had the good fortune to marry Myra, a teacher who has proved to be a fine wife and a marvellous stepmother". It is she who has patiently cared for him during his terminal illness of many months, and as Eric has written "presides over us with discretion, sensitivity and affection".

Myra and Eric's marriage is an example of how, no matter what views one holds about the larger and generally unanswerable questions, one can create a loving and mutually caring relationship of tolerance and love.

I shall end this brief account of Eric's life with a quotation from his Epilogue in *An Atheist's Thoughts*, for as a biologist I have no wish for my honoured friend to be misunderstood or debated about as was Darwin by all those who clearly had never read him in any depth or with any great understanding.

Here is what Eric wrote:

"Let it be understood clearly that I respect the main doctrines of the Christian religion in four main ways.

1. I see no sufficient reason to believe in the existence of any god outside of the human imagination.
2. I believe that Jesus was a human person – no more and no less than any other historically important person.
3. I do not attribute to the Bible any special authority – I think it is just one package of human writing, among many, and is open to the same critical assessment as any other.
4. I regard the churches simply as associations of various like-minded people who are, in my opinion, entitled to hold any beliefs they please so long as those beliefs do not take a hostile form towards people who are entitled equally to believe differently."

He goes on to say: "I attach no value whatever to survival for its own sake." and "I have never assented to the doctrines of the church – I find the Christian creeds to be unconvincing."

Eric is survived by his wife Myra and his two children Fred and Rachel.

Goodbye my friend, you will be remembered.

– Ralph Ison

* Stockton, E. (2002) *An Atheist's Thoughts*. Sanday. Orkney. Eric S Stockton.

Homoeopathy and self-absorption

DID the October *Freethinker* feature too much irrelevant self-absorption? Firstly, in his editorial, Barry Duke railed against those who condemn his tobacco addiction, pledging to smoke himself to death as a final act of defiance against the iniquities of a cruel world; then in the letters' "Alternative therapy" correspondence, personal ailments were paraded to support homeopathy – bizarrely in a journal dedicated to debunking superstition.

There was Don Marchant's idiopathic, possibly psychosomatic, "excruciating carpal tunnel syndrome at the base of [his] left thumb" (cured – I'm pleased for him – by acupuncture); and C A M Aitchison agonising over the correct treatment should he hit his thumb with a hammer – after telling us that in 1941 as an Ordinary Seaman on a tramp steamer he, armed with a first-aid certificate, had to argue against the objections of a carpenter – who had accidentally burnt his wrist with a blowlamp – when trying to apply treatment; in retrospect incorrectly, he explained at length.

Never having been in a war, and in awe of the courage of those who have fought and died in them, I would be the last person to belittle Mr Aitchison's wartime service, but I would like to remind him that there were graver disasters at sea, and more desperate decisions to be made, than minor self-inflicted wounds and methods to treat them.

In that same year – 1941 – for instance, in the north Atlantic, HMS Hood blew up and sank with the loss of all 1,418 crew, save three survivors, after being shelled by Bismarck, itself hunted down and sunk by the Royal Navy with the loss of all 2,200 crew, save five survivors. On a more modest scale, SS Arthur F Corwin, loaded with 14,500 tons of aviation spirit, was blown up and sunk by U96 with the loss of all 49 crew – including my 25-year-old uncle, its Second Officer. After my father lost another brother, a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm, later in the war, his atheism must have hardened because when, as a lad in the late 1950s, I asked him what he thought about religion he answered with a dismissive, "It's rubbish!"

While this "rubbish" still moulds minds and dictates world events, and brave young men and women – misguidedly or not – are still suffering and dying for a cause along with innocent civilians of all ages, would contributors to the *Freethinker* please write about issues more important than singed wrists and sore thumbs – or even suicide by fags.

GRAHAM NEWBERY
Southampton

IF C A M Aitchison had any sense he'd have allowed the homoeopathy debate to die after the sound thrashing he has received in the letters pages. His latest ramblings only serve to indicate what a glutton for punishment he is.

Still he carps on about the qualifications of homoeopaths, in spite of me exposing the stu-

pidity of this argument from authority in my letter in August 2007. Some people never learn, it seems.

Now he regales us with a series of irrelevant anecdotes, attacking modern medicine, all of them wildly out of date. Does he think that he can vindicate one treatment by attacking another? Homoeopathy stands or falls on its own merits or shortcomings, not those of other treatments.

His examples are also flawed. At least thalidomide really did what it was supposed to – act as a sedative and anti-emetic – with evidence to prove it.

There is not a jot of evidence for homoeopathy. And the fact that medics have changed their minds over the years with respect to various treatments, just shows that they are prepared to follow the evidence, unlike the homoeopaths, for whom mere anecdote trumps double-blind clinical trials.

The only thing that can be said in homoeopathy's favour is that it will not have harmful side-effects except, perhaps, death, if Mr Aitchison ever develops malignant melanoma and follows his expressed preference for homoeopathy for skin conditions.

DR STEPHEN MORETON
Warrington

Un-Islamic ceremonies

SO the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia thinks that birthday and anniversary celebrations are un-Islamic, putting Muslims on the same level as the lower orders, such as Jews and Christians. Is this the same Grand Mufti who recently confirmed – for once and for all – that the Earth is definitely flat?

DAVID CARR-ALLINSON
Oxford.

Crucified frog

THE *Freethinker* (October) quotes Italian Franz Pahl, head of the Trentino-Alto Adige region, over the controversy about the crucified frog who said that "many people (who?) consider the Cross as a symbol of God's love ..."

I presume "many people" have kids, and possibly love them too, but I'm damned sure few of them nail them to crosses as a symbol of their love.

I used to take my kids on picnics or read them fairy stories. Nailing them to a cross never crossed my mind as a way of expressing my love.

No wonder so many priests abuse children with that outstanding example of God's love for his children.

FABIAN ACKER
London

Debatable assertion

WILLIAM Harwood's assertion (*Freethinker*, October) that "Religion has been the cause of 90 percent of all man-made evil for at least 3,000 years" is, to say the least, debatable. Holocausts are fuelled by fanatic, but not necessarily religious, belief. The fact

that gods or God are frequently invoked as a justification is beside the point, which is that a struggle for survival (national, political, ideological) often entails mass-extirmination of a perceived enemy.

But in any case the term "evil" is so vague (and religious by connotation) that all of us, believers or not, are "guilty" in tacitly or deliberately consenting to the passage of arms against others of our species.

Moreover, the conflation of Hitler and the Sky Fuhrer is simply absurd. Humans need a leader, true, but Hitler is biographical, God mythological.

DAVID JAMES
London

Secular schools

IN No.10's explanation of their policy on Faith Schools it says this: "The Government also believes that every pupil should be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge, understanding and awareness of the major religions represented in this country. As such, maintained schools must provide religious education for all registered pupils, although parents have the right to withdraw their child from all or any part of this education."

If the pupils are indeed developing their knowledge of other faiths, why are parents allowed to withdraw their child from the lesson? Are they allowed to withdraw them from other lessons, Maths or English for instance? The Government believes that Collective Worship stimulates thinking and encourages pupils to learn about Christianity as well other religions and belief systems, nurturing respect and tolerance. It also offers schools a unique opportunity to develop their particular ethos and set of shared values.

So collective worship in a Muslim school encourages children to learn about, respect and tolerate Christians, Buddhists and atheists? That is encouraging, indeed I am amazed. Mind you, my Anglican brain-washing has left me with great respect for much of their sixteenth and seventeenth century choral music, and in the huge and magnificent mediaeval buildings which they inherited the words are usually inaudible. Looking up at the miracles of craftsmanship above it is easy to ignore the puppet-show below and simply listen to music. Of course the music in school collective worship is seldom even as good as in a parish church but it may be louder.

PETER ARNOLD
Alderney

Dawkins misrepresented

IN his review of Richard Dawkins's TV series "The Genius of Charles Darwin" (*Freethinker*, September), Carl Packman calls the programmes Dawkins' "latest attempt at weaning believers away from religion", which it wasn't. In fact it was Dawkins' latest attempt to wean dupes away from denial of biological evolution. So the review's opening sentence ("Is Richard Dawkins right to target *all* religion?")

was irrelevant silliness.

Later we read "his attack on religion still seems to be half-baked". What is meant by "half-baked"? I guess it expresses Packman's emotional discomfort at any criticism of faith-based falsehoods that isn't promptly "balanced" by a reference to "some contribution religion has made to civilisation".

Packman states the bleeding obvious: "These elements [denial of evolution] are not an absolutely inherent part of religion". Of course they're not: the only link between evolution-denial (and male supremacism, refusal to have a bath, burning of "witches" and heretics, geocentric astronomy, condemnation of homosexuality, birth control and abortion, etc etc) and Christianity is that once you believe in God, anything goes: no act is too vile, no myth too absurd, that one cannot declare it God's will that we do it or believe it.

"Surely we should have to look further than just religion for producing anti-rationalism." Of course we should, and Dawkins routinely does: he attacks quack pseudo-medicine such as homoeopathy, Freudian psychobabble, the pretentious muck of "post-modernism", irrationalism of all kinds. As a marker of many a student essay, I suspect Packman's knowledge of Dawkins may come from TV shows and secondary sources rather than from reading Dawkins' works.

The review mentions "the 18th-century Age of Enlightenment, in which Darwin himself was a prominent figure". Very confusing, I know, but 18th-century dates begin with 17 ... and Darwin lived 1809-1882.

Young Carl has some homework to do.

CONNAIRE KENSIT
London

Sarah Palin

AS I watched the hysterical acclamation given to the book-censoring, hypocritical and massively incompetent Sarah Palin by the Republicans at their convention. I marvelled at what I was witnessing. Why would any political party want a woman like this as their next Vice President? To what depths of cynicism and crude calculation must they descend to accept her in an attempt to retain power?

They had to square the circle, abandon every supposed principle, entertain a woman whom, were she in any other party, they would castigate and, given the chance, cast into the gutter. Contradictions were ignored, deceits overlooked and acclaimed as "real experience of small town life", and certainty claimed in the face of overwhelming evidence that all are wrong. And all backed up by the smartest and most vicious public relations system on the planet. Where do we look for a parallel? Where else but the Christian literalists and their acceptance of the Bible, and a tyrannical Stone Age god, that provide support for their acceptance of Palin and the flaky would-be President McCain.

Only another H L Mencken could do justice to this. He declared: "Religion is fundamental-

ly opposed to everything I hold in veneration – courage, clear thinking, honesty, fairness, and, above all, love of truth."

DENIS WATKINS
Wales

O'Neill piece 'ridiculous'

THE piece you printed in the September edition by Dan O'Neill is ridiculous. He says "This Jesus fella swans around all day with a dozen other blokes. No women. Mark that, no women". He is talking nonsense.

Several extracts from the so-called New Testament show that Jesus travelled with women. Nearest writer to his supposed lifetime was Paul, who in Corinthians 9:5 talks of apostles and the Lord's brother and Peter taking wives on their travels. The Gospel of Mark, 15:40-41 says "Also looking on were some women. They had followed Jesus when he was in Galilee, and had helped him. Many other women who had come to Jerusalem with him were there too." In Luke 8,1-4 it says "... the 12 disciples went with him and so did some women ..." It names Mary Magdalen, Joanna, Susanna, "and many other women who used their own resources to help Jesus and his disciples."

In Mark 10:13-16 "Some people brought children to Jesus for him to put his hands on them, but the disciples scolded the people." Whereupon Jesus scolds the disciples. Of course, in that context the laying on of hands by Jesus was a sort of magico/spiritual blessing. But Mr O'Neill, with his own touch of sheer nastiness, insinuates paedophilia.

I hold no brief for, or belief in, those "New Testament" tales. But Dan O'Neill seems to think they are so important that he must radically change them.

JOHN LAWRENSON
Leicester.

Editor's note: *O'Neill in no way suggested that Jesus was gay, or that he had paedophile tendencies. He was merely speculating on what Stephen Green – Britain's principal purveyor of sheer nastiness – would have made of Jesus. The words John Lawrenson objects to are introduced with the sentence "How would this fanatical Hammerer of Homosexuals, leader of a bunch of annoying bigots, have interpreted events in Palestine a couple of thousand years ago?"*

Last words on the historicity of Jesus

I REGRET the need to respond again to the incorrigible Charles Douglas (*Points of View*, July). He now accuses me of being a follower of Roland de Vaux, a French Dominican priest who led the Catholic team that initially worked on the Dead Sea Scrolls and excavated the site at Qumran between 1951 and 1956. De Vaux was director of the Ecole Biblique and the originator of the Qumran-Essene Hypothesis, the idea that the community living at the site were Essenes.

In my book, I did claim (somewhat rashly) that the Essenes had a community at Qumran, but I also claimed (correctly) that they were

also to be found throughout Judaea (Josephus claimed that "many of them dwell in every city"). But I am not a follower of de Vaux and now have no view on the above hypothesis. I regard both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Essenes as irrelevant to the life of Jesus (their philosophy was not his). Nor is it a question of preferring the view of a priest to that of a historian. Robert Eisenman is an archaeologist and biblical scholar. One should instead defer to the views of the Jewish historian Norman Golb, who claims that the Dead Sea Scrolls were not the product of the Essenes, but rather of many different Jewish sects and communities of ancient Israel. They can therefore only give a muddled view of Jewish beliefs and certainly not "a far better picture of life in Jerusalem in 40-60 AD", as Mr Douglas claims.

He describes the New Testament as "garbled fiction". If he refers to the gospels (only part of the NT), then historians would not agree; they describe them as Church propaganda based on historical events. Nor would they agree that Christianity was unknown in Judaea or Galilee at this time. Luke placed the first use of "Christian" in Antioch (c 40 CE), but that does not mean that the sect that came to be known by that name did not originate in Judaea.

Paul, when arrested and brought before the Palestinian governor (Felix (52-59), was charged with being "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), undoubtedly the sect led by Jesus, who was crucified as a "Nazarene".

Mr Douglas gratuitously accuses me of having given the Gnostic gospels "only a brief examination". I did not claim to have done that; I claimed that "a brief examination" is sufficient to show them to be unhistorical. Such a distortion is regrettably typical of Mr Douglas's method of dispute (use a twisted version of one's opponent's views to criticise them). He then claimed that I dismissed them because "they do not support his [my] false hypothesis of a historical Jesus". I ignored them because they neither supported nor detracted from my hypothesis; they are totally irrelevant to it.

Regarding Mr Douglas's claim that the idea of a mythical Jesus goes back to Trypho (he miscalls him "Typho") in Justin Martyr's Dialogue, I have to point out that not knowing Christ is not the same as believing that Jesus did not exist. Also, I would agree with Trypho that Justin's Christ is "imaginary", but based on a real historical Jesus. It remains a fact, that the notion that Jesus did not exist emerged only about 200 years ago.

If Mr Douglas believes that my book is merely a reworking of the canonical gospels, then he is greatly mistaken and has not read it properly. I take the gospels apart and put together a more likely sequence of events and explanations. Is that a "reworking"?

In your October 2008 issue, Robert Morrell responds to my letter in your August issue. He



should not take my silence on any issue as agreement with his views, but if he was claiming that Christianity was developed by Paul, then I agree. We may not agree about the existence of a historical (not "historic") Jesus, but he knows my views on that matter. He went on to describe my account of Professor Thomas L Thompson as a "disgraceful attack". However, what I wrote about Thompson appears to be common knowledge, or it would not have appeared in that form in the Wikipedia entry about him.

Regarding the *Testimonia Flaviana* (there are in fact two), which Mr Morrell claims are forgeries, he surely knows (because I mentioned it in my book) that this is controversial and that historians are confident that they have a historical basis.

Both Mr Morrell and Mr Douglas describe me as "plugging" my book, as if I should not refer to it. That's odd when this whole debate is founded on the views I express in the book. Martin O'Brien (*Points of View*, September) admits that he has not even read the book and cannot recall even seeing reviews of it. Evidently he missed Jack Hastie's review in your journal (May 2000). He must also have missed two reviews online, one by William Harwood (www.midwestbookreview.com/rbw/jan_03.htm) and one by Eric Stockton (www.users.zetnet.co.uk/BOW3741/g981109.html). It has not been "hailed as a landmark in the field of modern biblical scholarship" for the simple reason that amateurs like me are not recognised by the Christians who mainly constitute the fellowship of biblical scholars (others are Jewish academics).

Nor do I have the academic status that gives others the platform to air whatever views they hold. In any case, the book is not a biblical study; it is a study of the life of Jesus and the origins of Christianity. Mr O'Brien demanded that I tell him where Jesus was between the ages of 12 and 33. He also wanted to know where Jesus lived after he was executed (he even wanted to know where I thought Jesus was buried)! I ignored these provocative questions for obvious reasons; Mr O'Brien would do better to read my book and learn some reasoned methodology.

In his letter (September 2008) Mr Douglas complains that I had taken six months to respond to an article in your February (2008) issue. You know that it was because I had overlooked Robert Morrell's article. However, such a gratuitous complaint only induced me to take even longer to reply to my critics, Mr Douglas in particular, most of whose accusations deserve no response at all.

I would not blame you if you determined that "this correspondence is closed".

STEUART CAMPBELL
Edinburgh

MAY I request further space to assure the perceptive Charles Douglas (*Points of View*, September) that his doubts about Josephus being a witness to the historical Jesus were

shared very decisively 300 years ago by no less a personage than the great Voltaire.

In his *Philosophical Dictionary* (Trans 1765) he wrote in the section devoted to Christianity that ... "Several learned men have been surprised not to find the least trace of Jesus Christ in the historian, Josephus, for everybody now agrees that the brief passage concerning him in the History is an interpolation."

In a lengthy footnote to his text (which I shall slightly abridge), he went on to say: "The Christians, by one of those frauds called pious, grossly falsified a passage in Josephus. They attribute to this Jew, so obstinate in his religion, four ridiculously interpolated lines, and at the end of this passage they added: He was the Christ! What an absurdity to make Josephus speak as a Christian! How can there still be theologians stupid or insolent enough to try to justify this fraud by the first Christians, who are known to have fabricated impostures a hundred times worse!"

It will be interesting to see how Steuart Campbell will set about denigrating Voltaire, for it seems to be par for the course with Mr Campbell that anyone who doesn't agree with his belief in a definite historical Jesus will be fair game for a hatchet job!

I believe that in Mr Douglas, Steuart Campbell has encountered a formidable intellectual foe!

MARTIN O'BRIEN
Gwent

STEUART Campbell and Robert Eisenman both present reconstructions of Christian origins sufficiently different from my own that I cannot recommend either as a guide to what really happened, although I do urge readers to consult opposing views for comparison purposes.

Whether they are entitled to such a designation may be debatable, but there is no shortage of scholars calling themselves historians who believe that no element of the biblical Jesus was based on a real person from history. While I disagree with Campbell on some details, I agree that the evidence for a historical Jesus far outweighs arguments to the contrary. His statement that Jesus was "a Jew who mistakenly thought that he was the expected Messiah" is right on the money.

I should point out that Jesus the Nazirite, as he was known throughout his public life – possibly as a joke, analogous to calling a bald man "Curly" – instructed converts to his sect to liquidate their assets and give the proceeds to "the poor". The Hebrew word he used, *ebionim*, was translated as *ptokos* in the Greek gospels. The most charitable interpretation of Campbell's letter is that he thinks Jesus spoke Greek. (I would rather not spell out the alternative.) Anyone who doubts that Jesus' sect, which he called "Ebionim" and which outlived him by about three centuries, was communistic, need only read Acts 4:32-35.

There are many points on which Campbell's reconstruction of early Christianity (*The Rise and Fall of Jesus*), differs from my own

(*Mythology's Last Gods*). Obviously I think he is wrong. But in order to believe that anyone who disagrees with me must be an ignoramus, I would have to believe that my conclusions constitute Revealed Truth, as Campbell seems to think his do.

WILLIAM HARWOOD
Canada.

Editor's note: This correspondence is now at an end.

'Religigerent'

ESTIMATES vary considerably about the true number of words coined each year in the English language. But that doesn't matter because I'm only seeking the lexicographer's approval for one neologism: in an age of increasingly disturbing bellicosity from many followers of religion, is it not time to add the word "religigerent" to our vocabulary?

JAY KENDAL
Essex

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Events & Contacts

- Birmingham Humanists:** Information: Tova Jones on 021454 4692 or see www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Summer programme available.
- Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** Information on 01273 227549/461404. Website: <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Nov 5, 8pm. Denis Cobell: *The Churches and War*. Wed, Dec 3, 8pm. Ken Humphreys: *Ripping Yarns from the New Testament*.
- Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. Information: 01959 574691. Website: www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com
- Central London Humanist Group:** Contact Jemma Hooper, 75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX. E-mail: rupert@clarity4words.co.uk Tel: 02075804564.
- Chiltern Humanists:** Wendover Library, High St, Wendover. Tues. Nov 11, 8pm, Ralph Ison: *The Bible as Folklore*.
- 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: NI 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. November 12: A biographical film on video on the life of *Thomas Paine*, entitled *Thomas Paine – the Most Valuable Englishman Ever*. Further details as usual from the Secretary on 0208 907-6124.
- Hasving & District Humanist Society:** Information: Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Tues Nov 6, 8pm. Maryla Hart: *The Rain Forests and Bio Fuels*. Tues, Dec 4, 8pm. Mike Howgate: *Tackling Creationism*.
- 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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- 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
- 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:** Meets third Thursday of month (ex.August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact Sec: 01707 653667. email enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk website: www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk 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.
- Thomas Paine Society,** Conway Hall, Red Lion Sq, London. Sat, Nov 8, 3pm. Chad Goodwin: *Paine and Women*.
- Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** Information: 01568 770282. Website: www.wmhumanists.co.uk. E-mail: rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.
- West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** Information: 01792 206108 or 01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands, Swansea SA2 0JY.
- Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland.** Information: Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264. E-mail: brianmccinton@btinternet.com website: www.nirelandhumanists.net

Please send your listings and events notices to:

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

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