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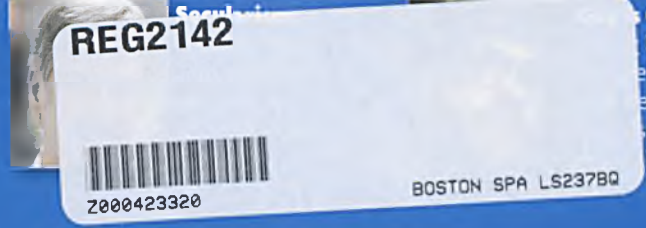
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Islamic fundamentalism threatens Pakistan's stability

British-educated Sherry Rehman, a journalist and senior leader of the Pakistan People's Party, is reportedly refusing to leave Pakistan, despite renewed calls by fanatical Muslim clerics to have her killed.

Rehman, who attended Smith College and the University of Sussex where she read art history and political science, incurred the wrath of Muslim fundamentalists when she called for changes to Pakistan's infamous blasphemy law. Last November, she submitted a private bill in Parliament that sought to drop the mandatory death sentence for blasphemy.

But last month Interior Minister Rehman Malik advised the former information minister to leave the country if she wanted to keep safe from religious extremists.

A source told *Pakistan Today* that Malik had telephoned Rehman, telling her to leave the country at the earliest opportunity because "fanatics are hell-bent to take her life due to her views on blasphemy laws".

Renewed threats against Rehman came days after a police guard gunned down Punjab Governor Salman Taseer for criticising the blasphemy law.

Several clerics issued fatwas against Rehman, declaring her an infidel. Media reports said the imam of Sultan Masjid, one of Karachi's biggest mosques, declared Rehman a "kaffur" (infidel) and "wajib-ul-qatl" (fit to be killed) while delivering a sermon. The mosque has close ties to the Saudi Arabian government.

Security had been increased at Rehman's residence in Karachi, but she told the media she would not leave Pakistan.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of people rallied last month in the Pakistani city of Karachi against any changes to the blasphemy law.

Qari Ahsaan, from the banned group Jamaat ud Dawa, addressed the crowd from a stage, saying: "We can't compromise on the blasphemy law. It's a divine law and nobody can change it. Our belief in the sanctity of our prophet is firm and uncompromising and we cannot tolerate anyone who blasphemes. Whoever blasphemes will face the same fate as Salman Taseer."

Speaking to *Al Jazeera* from Islamabad, Omar Waraich, Pakistan correspondent for the UK's *Independent* newspaper, said: "The reality is that there are no moves afoot right now to amend



Sherry Rehman

this law in any way. The government and the ruling party [Pakistan People's Party, or PPP] have backed off that. It [the rally] certainly means that a more radical, more intolerant mood has become mainstream in Pakistan. For the moment, the liberal voices have been silenced.

Commenting on the rapidly-deteriorating situation in Pakistan, Ishtiaq Ahmed, Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Stockholm University, said that Tuesday, January 4, 2011 – the day the governor was assassinated by one of his bodyguards, Malik Mumtaz Hussein Qadri – "will always be remembered as the day when Islamist terrorism took one more step towards wholesale talibanisation of Pakistan."

Qadri – now regarded by many as a national hero and "a warrior for Islam" – proudly confessed that he carried out the killing because Taseer had had the audacity to describe the blasphemy law as draconian.

Taseer had decided to take up cudgels on behalf of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman recently sentenced to death for blasphemy. The governor was accused of doing so to please the West. Said Ahmed: "I have tried very hard to understand how the West benefits from a poor Christian woman being pardoned for a

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What's the point of having a priest?

BARRY DUKE FINDS GREAT ENTHUSIASM FOR SECULAR CEREMONIES IN SPAIN

Of all the questions I have been asked about life in Spain ever since I upped sticks and moved to the Costa Blanca last September, the most stupid came from a young numpty from Bradford, who – in a complete state of panic – asked me whether Spain had any dentists.

I was quietly enjoying a beer and a cigarette when the holidaymaker – on his first trip to Spain – decided to join me for a chat. Being a gregarious cove – and thirsty with it – I allowed him to buy me a drink, but within minutes realised that my new-found companion was possibly the most boring human this side of Saturn.

Now don't get me wrong. I have nothing against supermarket shelf packers. They do a great job, and I have no doubt that many among them possess high levels of intelligence and a sparkling wit to boot. This one had neither. Boredom set in like semolina as he droned on about the details of his career in a monotone that had me glancing about for something sharp to open an artery.

Then suddenly he went silent, and clapped

one hand over his mouth. A look of total panic leapt into his eyes, and I quickly realised why. He had talked his teeth right out of his mouth. It was a bridge actually, comprising four front upper gnashers, which now lay glistening in the palm of his hand.

"Well, me old darlin', looks like you're gonna have to get those glued back pronto by a dentist," I declared, gazing with distaste at the object now being waved under my nose.

To which he replied: "Do they have dentists in Spain?"

I rolled my eyes, and asked the barman for a "bolie" (short for bolígrafo, or biro) and drew a map, showing precisely where the nearest dentist was in relation to the Benidorm bar. I then made my excuses and quickly left in search of more stimulating company.

Since then, I have frequently been called upon to draw a map showing nearby pharmacies for people afflicted with conditions they never expected to suffer on holiday.

During the first two weeks of January, holidaymakers, in croaking tones, have asked Dr Duke what they can do for a flu bug that had been causing much misery here. My stock reply is "Frenadol". Frenadol is possibly the best ever over-the-counter cure for colds and flu I have ever used, and I always include several sachets of the stuff whenever I send gifts of tobacco to friends in the UK.

What I *hadn't* so far been asked is who does one turn to if one wants someone to conduct a non-religious funeral. This is hardly surprising as people generally don't plan on dying, or have friends or relatives snuff it, when they are on holiday or have just moved abroad.

Had the question arisen last year, I would have been lost for an answer. I am, of course, fully aware of the steps one has to take to organise a secular funeral in the UK where such services are provided in the main by the British Humanist Association, but here on the Costa Blanca ...?

Fortunately, I now know that non-religious funerals *do* take place here, and are growing rapidly in popularity.

Unfortunately, it took the sudden death of a friend on January 2 for me to embark on some research into the subject.

Kenny, 48, and his partner of 15 years Scott came to settle in Benidorm in the same month as I did, and I got to know them well as we had banded together to form a small group of fitness enthusiasts who travelled each week to a gym in the neighbouring town of Albir.

Scott conducted some of the training sessions, and Kenny – along with a few friends –

would always join in. A non-smoker employed in the private health-care sector, Kenny was great company, and a deeply caring individual. So you can imagine what a shock it was to us all when he suffered a devastating stroke on New Year's Eve and died a day later.

The funeral was conducted at a stunningly beautiful crematorium set on a hillside on the outskirts of Benidorm by a Church of England clergyman.

With all due respect to Scott, and the families of both men, I have to say that the lengthy religious service was tedious in the extreme – except for the two uplifting tributes paid to Kenny by his brother and a close friend.

Immediately after the funeral, I made it my mission to discover what facilities were available to anyone wanting to arrange a non-religious send-off for a relative or friend in this part of the world, and within hours was in contact with Susan Coley, an ex-pat Brit now living in Javea.

Susan, a humanist who has enjoyed a lengthy career as a public speaker, runs a website called Celebrant Costa Blanca (www.celebrantcostablanca.com/) and I was delighted to learn from her



Susan Coley

how great a demand there is in this area for secular funerals (for humans and pets), as well as for marriages and baby-naming ceremonies.

And ever since gay marriages were legalised in Spain (much to the annoyance of the Catholic Church), her services have been in great demand among same-sex couples.

Of course, it came as no surprise to me that people like Susan are providing secular services in Spain, given the enormous social changes that have taken place in the country since its hasty retreat from the horrible Franco era it had to endure for so many decades.

It's just a pity that it took the untimely death of a friend to make me realise that, as in life, Spain has joyfully embraced the idea that it can conduct its affairs free from the influence of religion in matters of death, and that Susan, and others like her, are out there demonstrating how wonderfully well funerals can celebrate the personalities and accomplishments of people no longer with us – without recourse to silly, superstitious whittering.



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Nigerian humanist Leo Igwe arrested and beaten up by police

AN on-going campaign of intimidation against Nigerian humanist Leo Igwe took a sinister new twist when Igwe, a representative of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) in West Africa, was beaten up while in police custody.

Igwe, Director of the Centre for Inquiry in Nigeria, who has been bravely campaigning against religious leaders and their supporters who stigmatise children as “witches”, was arrested earlier this month by the police in Akwa Ibom State. His arrest is thought to be part of a campaign by state Governor Goodwill Akpabio to clamp down on activists involved in the rescue of children accused of witchcraft.

Akpabio, according to this report, had vowed to jail the activists for bringing his administration into disrepute over the campaign against the harmful traditional practice, which violate the rights of children in the state.

Later it was reported that Igwe, following numerous calls to the Nigerian authorities by concerned human rights campaigners around the world, had been released, with the police claiming that his arrest had been the result of “mistaken identity”.

Igwe said after his release:

“It was a terrible encounter ... my hands were tied behind me and they beat me mercilessly. My head was swollen ... I was kept incommunicado and had no contact with either my family or my lawyers.”

He added:

“During my interrogation I discovered that my case was worsened by the fact that I was an anti-witchcraft advocate; they kept saying that I was a fraudster making money from the child witch phenomenon, so it was funny for them to say that it was a case of mistaken identity.”

Governor Akpabio had promised to make life uncomfortable for NGOs working on children’s rights in the state when he ordered the arrest of Sam Ikpe-Itauma in a radio broadcast last year. Reacting to a report aired by CNN on the child witch situation, the Governor reportedly promised that “heads will roll”.

Igwe, along with Sam Ituama, who runs a homeless shelter for rescued child “witches”, has been working tirelessly against child abuse in Akwa Ibom State. Their successful campaigns have exposed the depth of the harmful practice in the state. But it has also

pitched the activists against the state Governor, who recently accused them of “corruption”.

In 2009 Igwe was assaulted by supporters of a lunatic Pentacostal “witch-hunter” Helen Ukpabio. She and her church, the Liberty Foundation Gospel Ministries, have run a campaign of terror against children and those committed to fighting for their rights. The conference had been organised by the Nigerian Humanist Movement and the UK charity Stepping Stones Nigeria in response to the widespread abandonment, torture and killing of children branded as “witches” in Akwa Ibom and Cross River State.



Leo Igwe

Catholic education officials spooked by NSS

THE National Secular Society’s continued criticism of “faith” schools seems to have spooked the Catholic education establishment, which last month hit back saying that the Society was “quite small but very noisy” and “have friends in Parliament.”

The comments came from the Bishop of Nottingham, the Rt Rev Malcolm McMahon, who chairs the Catholic Education Service, as he launched “new research” showing that Catholic schools are the best thing since sliced bread – “as though any research from the Catholic Education Service would come to any other conclusion” said the NSS.

Of the NSS, he said: “You always feel a little bit got at, because that is the nature of these groups. They get more publicity than their numbers deserve. When you ask parents, they want their children to go to faith schools. That is why we are well supported.”

“But,” said the NSS, “the Bishop omitted to mention that we are not alone in opposing the growing and disproportionate influence of religion in state schools. Teaching unions, education specialists and academic researchers as well as campaigners have all called for either the abolition of faith schools or a root-and-branch reform of them, and the removal of collective worship from assemblies.

“They recognise the dangers of sectarian education, the injustice of discriminatory admissions procedures (although this is less of a problem in Catholic schools than it is in some others), the probable illegality of religious discrimination in the employment of teachers – and all carried on with public money.”

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: “Distracting attention from awkward issues by attacking critics is a familiar tactic of the Catholic hierarchy. But they can’t escape the serious questions that need to be asked about faith schools and the disproportionate influence of religion in our education system. The unease about this extends well beyond the NSS and is shared by teaching unions and education specialists as well as many parents. Simply trying to dismiss those who ask awkward questions doesn’t make the questions go away.

“We won’t be deflected from our concerns about faith schools. We all have to pay for these schools, but only some of us can access them. Most religious schools are discriminatory in employment and admissions against those who don’t share their faith. And in some cases they are a severe threat to community cohesion. That is unjust, and no amount of sniping at the NSS will change that.”



a crime she did not commit.”

Ahmed added: “Another line of justification of [Taseer’s] murder by right-wing journalists is that the governor interfered with the judicial process by declaring the blasphemy law as bad. Such reasoning is of course pure chicanery. Justice Arif Iqbal Bhatti of the Lahore High Court had in 1995 found two Christians, Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih, not guilty of blasphemy and set them free. On October 10, 1997 he was gunned down. Recently one of the clerics referred to Justice Bhatti’s fate as the punishment awaiting anyone who acquits non-Muslims on blasphemy charges: irrespective of whether there is evidence to corroborate it or not.”

Ahmed points out that in 1982, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq amended Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code to declare blasphemy a major offence. Initially the maximum punishment was life imprisonment. In 1986, it was made even harsher and read, “whoever by words either spoken or written or by visible representations or in any manner whatsoever, or by any imputation, innuendo or institution, directly or indirectly defiles the sacred name of the holy Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) shall be punished with death or imprisonment for life and shall also be liable to fine.” A further amendment in 1991 resulted in the death penalty becoming the automatic punishment for blasphemers and life imprisonment was deleted.

Since 1986, said Ahmed, hundreds of non-Muslims, mainly Christians, as well as some freethinking Muslims have been charged with blasphemy. Mostly it has been petty disputes over property or jobs that have been the basis of attacks on the Christians. At the lower levels the courts have found them guilty and passed the death sentence, but because of the agitation by human rights organisations and pressure of



Muslim fanatic Qadri, regarded by many as a national hero for killing Taseer

Blasphemy in Pakistan

Continued from page 1



Governor Salman Taseer, slain for his opposition to Pakistan’s blasphemy law

international public opinion, no individual has been executed up till now. Rather, at the higher levels the courts have found some technical basis to reduce the sentence or set such individuals free.

That has of course not been the end of the matter. Such persons have either been killed by fanatics, or granted humanitarian asylum in the West. In some cases fanatics have taken the law into their own hands and brutally killed alleged blasphemers. To this day, no such killer has been punished. Justice Arif Iqbal Bhatti of the Lahore High Court had in 1995 found two Christians, Salamat Masih and Rehmat Masih, not guilty of blasphemy, and set them free.

On October 10, 1997, Justice Bhatti was gunned down. In 1998, Bishop John Joseph burnt himself to death to protest against the injustices meted out to Christians under the blasphemy law.

Said Ahmed: “It is time for Pakistani liberals and leftists to study the rise of fascism and Nazism from the late 1920s and follow how these movements ended up capturing the state and plunging Europe into a bloodbath that claimed millions of lives. Initially the fascists and Nazis were considered fools and upstarts, but already before World War II broke out Italian and German liberals, social democrats and communists – all had been cornered; not to mention that the Nazis had begun to target Jews and Roma (Gypsies), though the gas chambers had not yet been put into service.

“The whiskey-drenched upper classes of Lahore think that the Lahore Canal is some insurmountable physical barrier that pro-

TECTS them from the tentacles of the growing fascist monster. Just look around and see how well-prepared, co-ordinated and skilfully orchestrated is the foul propaganda barrage that has been let loose to project the assassin, Malik Muntaz Hussain Qadri, as a great champion of Islam.

“Pakistan is in a state of near anarchy ... it is a fast failing state, but has not failed yet. Contrary to the fatwa of some ulema that Salman Taseer should have been refused an Islamic burial, other clerics were willing to lead his funeral prayers. Thousands of people took part in the ceremony. He was buried with full official protocol, his bier being carried by men in uniform. He was given a state funeral with full honours. It means that not all people have gone mad.

“Salman Taseer was a brave man and one with strong convictions. Such individuals are becoming rare commodity in Pakistan. Something drastic needs to be done. Our very active judiciary must do its duty. Malik Muntaz Hussain Qadri and his accomplices should be tried and meted out the punishment they deserve for the crime they have committed. This is the opportunity. It is now or never. Unless the PPP-led Federal Government repeals the blasphemy law, it might as well pass on the unenviable task of proving Pakistan to be a failed state to someone else.”

Irish judge orders blood transfusion for infant of a Jehovah’s Witness couple

AN Irish court has ordered a life-saving blood transfusion for the infant of a Jehovah’s Witness couple.

The couple’s baby boy went down with bronchitis last December 25 and was placed in hospital the following day. The boy was suffering from low haemoglobin levels which restricts oxygen flow to the organs.

The usual procedure in this situation is a blood transfusion, but Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that, according to the Bible, they should not ingest blood, including transfusions.

Doctors decided the only way to save the boy was by transfusion and when the parents refused they sought and received a court order.

The judge in the case, Mr Justice Hogan, decided the court had the right to order the transfusion, despite the parents’ religious beliefs, because the child’s life was in danger. His judgment was published early in January.

Former Catholic priest Martin Bormann Jr faces allegations of child abuse

THE eldest son of Adolf Hitler's secretary, Martin Bormann, was accused last month of subjecting a former pupil at an Austrian Catholic boarding school to violent and protracted sexual abuse during his time there working as a priest and schoolmaster, more than 50 years ago.

Martin Bormann Jr, the 80-year-old son of one of the Nazi leader's most important deputies, is renowned in Germany and Austria for his attempts to atone for his father's crimes. He has been a Catholic missionary, priest and a speaker against the Holocaust in schools.

According to the *Independent* last month, Bormann faced serious allegations that he had assaulted pupils both violently and sexually while employed as a schoolmaster at an elite boarding school at the Heart of Jesus monastery in Salzburg during the 1960s. Bormann is reported to have denied knowledge of the events.

The accusations, which were the latest in a flood of sex-abuse allegations against the Catholic Church which began surfacing in Germany and Austria early last year, were made by a 63-year-old former pupil at the monastery school, named only as Victor M.

He told Austria's *Profil* magazine that when he was a 12-year-old pupil, Bormann, who was a 30-year-old priest at the time, had repeatedly raped him and had warned him that informing others of his experiences, even his own mother, would be useless because "nobody will believe you". Three other pupils at the school told the magazine that Bormann had also beaten boys so badly that they ended up covered in blood.

In one case, it was claimed, a boy was beaten unconscious. Victor M's lawyer told *Profil* that her client's life had been "ruined" by his school experiences and that he had had to undergo protracted psychiatric treatment as a result.

Bormann spent his childhood and adolescence largely in the company of the Nazi bigwigs who were contemporaries of his father, who was once thought of as a future Nazi leader himself.

His first confrontation with the brutality of the Third Reich came as a child when he saw a chair – belonging to the Gestapo chief Heinrich Himmler – which was made out of human bones. Bormann's father, who was killed by shellfire outside Hitler's Berlin bunker, was tried *in absentia* at Nurem-



Martin Bormann Jr pictured when he was a Catholic priest in the 1960s

berg after the war and sentenced to death, due to a lack of physical evidence about his demise.

Bormann's son was said to be shocked by the scale of the Nazis' crimes after the war and decided to become a Catholic priest. He served as a missionary in the Congo and wrote an autobiography in an attempt to come to terms with his Nazi past.

Later he left the priesthood in order to marry a nun who nursed him after he suffered a near-fatal injury in 1969. However, he continued to visit schools and speak out against the crimes of the Holocaust. He also met with survivors in Israel. He currently lives in Germany with his wife.

Profil magazine visited him at an undisclosed address and asked him to respond to the accusations of sexual abuse. According to the magazine, Bormann said that he did not remember the alleged incidents. Shown a photograph of his alleged victim, Victor M, aged 12, Mr Bormann insisted that it was a picture of a girl. Victor M told the magazine that all he expected was an apology

Nobel Prize nominee admits abusing a boy

A BELGIAN priest confessed to a child sex-abuse accusation that came to light during a campaign to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Francois Houtart's confession was published in a Belgian newspaper last month and confirmed by the organisation he founded – Cetri, which publishes reports critical of developed nations' actions in the Third World

Last October – after supporters of Houtart, 85, began working to nominate him for the Nobel Prize for his work fighting globalisation's impact on developing countries – a woman contacted Cetri and said the priest abused her brother 40 years ago.

Houtart resigned the next month from the board of Cetri, and told the newspaper *Le Soir* that he twice touched "the intimate parts" of his cousin, an incident he called "inconsiderate and irresponsible." Now in Ecuador, Houtart said that he entered the boy's room when he was staying with the boy's parents close to Liege, in eastern Belgium.

"Walking through the room of one of the family's boys, I effectively touched his intimate parts twice, which woke him up and frightened him," Houtart is quoted as saying.

The Cetri committee then ended its campaign to nominate him for the 2011 Nobel Prize, saying the priest had requested its termination because "his age and his personal projects would not allow him to fully assume the role requested in such circumstances".

It has been a traumatic year for the Catholic Church in Belgium, beginning last April with the resignation of the Bishop of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe. Vangheluwe admitted to sexually abusing a nephew for years when he was a priest and a bishop.

Last June, authorities seized hundreds of case files from a church and used power tools to open a prelate's crypt in Mechlin's St Rumbold Cathedral, seeking evidence. The raid was condemned by the Vatican and later ruled excessive by a Belgian court.

However, the investigation into the abuse continued, and last September the Catholic Church published an almost 200-page report detailing the testimonies of 124 victims of abuse by Catholic clergy over decades.

Faith Wars: How holiness drives

PETER BRIETBART, recently returned from a trip to Israel, sees little hope for peace so long as

JERUSALEM is an overwhelming city. In the tradition of absurdist thought, nothing is truly meaningful, and any meaning has to be somewhat arbitrarily imposed onto the world. Jerusalem poses a significant empirical challenge to this notion: every stone of every street bursts with historical significance. It is overwhelming for the psyche to become aware of just how much history occurred in such a small place. It feels claustrophobic.

In my recent journey travelling through Israel and the Palestinian Territories, I visited this sacred city to discover more about the origins and causes of the Israeli-Arab conflict. My findings? Religion is a cause of it, sustains it, and makes everything worse.

The origin of the problem comes not from Zionism (the motivating ideology for a national Jewish home), but from the need for Zionism in the first place. One of the catchy, pseudo-left commentaries on the subject is that "Zionism is racism". But this is only a half-truth, for Zionism is a response to racism. Writing in the early 20th Century, Theodore Herzl saw a majority Jewish state as the only answer to the existential threat created by anti-Jewish bigotry – and he wrote this pre-holocaust.

So what, we might ask, fuels this existential aggression against the Jews?

Well, it was Catholic theology until the 1960s that the Jews were collectively responsible for the death of Christ. And of course, if they killed God, then they must be the enemies of goodness, and accordingly, the agents of evil. This simple line of reasoning fed into anti-Jewish sentiments from the Crusades to the Third Reich. Without this divine hatred, the Jews would have been able to live peacefully in the diaspora without needing a nation-state of their own.

But they did need one, and now they do have one. Israel's existence is now a fact, regardless of how dubious the ethics of its foundation may appear to be. The Palestinian people have legitimate grievances, from the illegal annexation of east Jerusalem to the grotesque separation barrier, but it is doubtful that these injustices are a complete explanation of the politics of Hamas. A passage from the Hadith has made its way into the charter of Hamas that may illuminate my point: "The prophet, prayer and peace be upon him, said: The Day of Judgement



Peter Brietbart, pictured close to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem

will not come until Muslims will fight the Jews (and kill them); until the Jews hide behind rocks and trees, which will cry: O Muslim! there is a Jew hiding behind me, come on and kill him!" 41:6985. This is not anti-Israel rhetoric, but anti-Jewish rhetoric. Their opposition to Israel is not merely political, but holy. They are not fighting merely for an Islamic Palestinian state, but against a secular Jewish one. The origins of and justifications for anti-Semitism can be found proudly displayed in both Christian and Islamic texts. These two monotheisms made it necessary for the existence of a Jewish state in the first place.

Speaking to Haaretz Editor-in-Chief Aluf Benn, he described the Israeli center-left as being made up of those who now place blame for the continuation of the conflict squarely with Israel and its policies. Those on the Israeli right, he says, are now those standing in the way of peace. Permanent residents of the political right – we natu-

rally discover Orthodox and Messianic Jews – who consider both Israeli and Palestinian territories to be the divinely gifted property of the Jewish people, courtesy of Yahweh. As such, what need is there for a Palestinian state? Why pursue peace? The creator of the universe is on their side – why listen to the UN? The destruction of Palestinian homes to make way for Israeli settlements would be utterly unjustifiable, were it not for the pious self-righteousness induced by religious orthodoxy. Those who truly believe that the messiah will return when and only when the Jews have 'reclaimed' their sacred homeland provide a solid powerbase to Netanyahu's right-wing coalition. Any Israeli-Arab resolution will come in spite of, and not because of, the strong religious convictions involved.

But in assessing the situation, we must not view things too provincially – there is more being played for than Palestinian lands. Author and Israeli foreign policy

Drives the Israeli-Arab conflict

As long as both sides involved in the Israeli-Arab conflict are dominated by religious orthodoxy

expert Jonathan Spyer perceives the conflict to be driven externally by Iranian Islamism, which has much political credibility to gain from opposing Israel. Both Hamas and Hezbollah are funded, armed and trained by Iranian Islamic revolutionaries whose agenda is to see Israel destroyed and an Islamic empire re-established. Needless to say, if Iran's nuclear capabilities are realized, Hezbollah will have few qualms in utilizing them. As Hitchens neatly puts it, "What, when messianic groups acquire apocalyptic weaponry? What, when those who think

the end of the world is coming get weaponry that could bring it about?"

The parties of God have made the Israeli-Arab conflict impossible to solve with their input. On the Jewish side are those who believe the land and its capital, Jerusalem is their Holy Land, granted to them by an omnipotent being who occasionally grants territorial rights. Their callous indifference to the suffering of Palestinian families is all too typical of the faithful. On the Arab side are Jihadi thugs hell-bent on murder, even if it kills them. So long as the land is *Dar al-Harab* and

not *Dar al-Islam*, the poisonous forces of the Iranian Revolution will continue to threaten human rights, liberty and peace.

What the region needs more than anything else is secularism, rooted deeply in respect for human, and not divine rights. The conflict cannot be solved between those who are arguing over whose side their shared imaginary friend is on. All those pious men of God are now the greatest enemies of peace: Yahweh vs. Allah is an absurd match-up, and one in which the Palestinian people can only lose.

Studies reveal that eating disorders are a serious problem among Orthodox Jews

HEALTH experts say eating disorders are a serious, underreported disease among Orthodox Jewish women and to a lesser extent others in the Jewish community, as many families are reluctant to acknowledge the illness at all and often seek help only when a victim is on the verge of hospitalisation.

According to a recent Associated Press report, several studies indicate a rise in the problem, and those who treat eating disorders say they are seeing more Jewish patients. A new documentary, books and facilities have cropped up to help.

As eating disorders have become less taboo in mainstream US and British culture, they are still widely ignored in Orthodox Jewish communities, as families worry the stigma of mental illness could ruin arranged marriages for the patient and even her siblings. Strict food rituals of fasting and remaining kosher can also exacerbate the problem.

Israel has one of the highest rates of anorexia, bulimia and binge eating in the world, said Dr Yael Latzer of the University of Haifa. No organisation tracks the numbers of eating disorders among Jewish women, which experts say is partly because of a cultural reluctance to divulge the illness, but studies in different countries and Latzer's research indicate a high rate in Israel.

When Dr. Catherine Steiner-Adair arrived in Israel more than a decade ago amid pleas from Jewish activists alarmed by a spike in eating disorders, she recalls patients were so afraid to get help that they sent

a proxy. "A nurse would come up to me on the street and say, 'Please help me. I'm here on behalf of a 19-year-old girl who's lost 30 pounds but she can't ask for help because she comes from a very religious family and they think it's good (for her to be underweight) because it's better for marriage making,'" said Steiner-Adair, a clinical instructor in Harvard Medical School's psychiatry department. "I was overwhelmed by the needs and the requests."

Experts say the Orthodox community is sending mixed messages to young women. Parents, matchmakers and potential mates want a svelte bride, but may shun a woman who divulged she has an eating disorder because of the stigma of mental illness. For arranged marriages among the ultra-Orthodox, the first question matchmakers ask is about physical appearance, including weight and the mother's weight, which feeds the message that thinner brides are more desirable, said Dr Ira Sacker, who practices in New York and has written several books including *Regaining Your Self*.

In 1996, Sacker studied ultra-Orthodox and Syrian Jewish communities in Brooklyn and found that 1 out of 19 girls was diagnosed with an eating disorder – a rate about 50 percent higher than the general US population.

"It is of prime importance within the Jewish Orthodox community the bride appear to be as flawless as possible," said Rabbi Saul Zucker of the Orthodox Un-

ion, which represents Orthodox synagogues in North America.

A mental illness, such as an eating disorder "would be a terrible, terrible blemish and people will go to unbelievable lengths to hide it," he said.

Experts say preoccupations with food are more pronounced in the Jewish community, whether it's planning an elaborate Sabbath dinner and following strict kosher laws. Kosher laws forbid eating meat and dairy at the same meal, and forbid eating pork and shellfish. Separate dishes, silverware, sinks and microwaves may also be used for meat and milk products.

"This rigidity can really be a perfect breeding ground for an eating disorder. If you're already struggling with an eating disorder and now you have all these foods that you can't eat, it can be very difficult," said Jodi Krumholz, a dietitian at The Renfrew Center, a Philadelphia-based eating disorder treatment center which treated nearly 200 Jewish patients last year, up markedly from 2009.

Steiner-Adair says effective prevention highlights part of the religion that can inoculate girls against dangerous body messages in Western culture.

"When you have a religion that says your body is the temple of your soul and you find ways to make that meaningful at 13, that can be a very powerful way to look quite critically at Calvin Klein anorexic-chic models," she said.

CHALLENGING RELIGIOUS PRIVILEGE

Secularism: a fresh approach

It has been a momentous year for the National Secular Society, and, in its latest Annual Report, it unveils a new strategy to meet future challenges and defend the rights of an increasing number of Britons who want less religious interference in their lives

In his introduction to the NSS's 2010 Annual Report, the Society's President, Terry Sanderson, writes: "The Pope's fears about 'aggressive secularism' are, of course, entirely ill-founded. Secularism is not about destroying religion. It is not about oppressing believers. It is not the instrument by which atheism will be imposed on an unwilling population.

"Secularism is the structure that would permit all of us, from whatever creed or none, to have the same rights in the society we must share.

"In a truly democratic, secular society, religion has its place – not in parliament or the corridors of political power – but in places of worship and in the homes of the faithful.

"Religious believers are citizens with the same rights as anyone else in a democratic society. If they want to bring their religious values with them into political life, that is fine. But if the electorate don't share their values or don't like their philosophy, they must accept that they can be rejected at the ballot box.

"Secularism is not about controlling religious organisations or telling them what to do or say; it is about ensuring that they cannot bring disadvantage to those who do not agree with them.

"No one can be permitted to use the law or the state to impose their view of life onto others unless it has been democratically agreed. The law must remain impartial, democratically formulated and applicable equally to all. There can be no parallel legal systems that are not answerable to democratic control.

"Similarly, there can be no established church. The right to freedom of religion should always be tempered by the right to be free from religion.

"Human rights should be the ultimate test; religious exemptions should be limited to the absolute and justifiable minimum. Religious bodies must understand that human rights are to protect individuals, not religious groups or ideas.

"In a secular society, religions would only have access to public money for the common good, not to promote their particular view of life. There would be no taxpayer funding for 'faith schools'; there would be no hijacking of public events – such as Remembrance Day – so that they become the property of any particular religion.

"Publicly-funded welfare and medical services would be resolutely secular and open to all without question and without religious demands, even if they are being run by religious organisations. Nor could there be any religious employment discrimination in services funded by the taxpayer but run by religious bodies.

"On the other hand, the state would have no power to interfere with the internal decision-making of religious bodies. As long as they obey the law, religious bodies would be free to pursue their own interpretation of their holy scriptures and arrange their own internal structures without question.

"Your NSS Council has worked together to produce a Secular Charter which we think can provide a new focus for the NSS's work in the twenty-first century. It seeks to be fair to everyone, to be achievable and to be benign.

"I want the NSS to adopt this Charter as the basis of its ambition to create a properly secular society. I would like us to position ourselves as a purely secularist organisation with a focused objective, that will not only champion human rights above religious demands, but will also accept that religion has a place in society for those who want it, but on terms of equality, not privilege.

"We will leave humanism for the humanist groups, atheism to the atheist groups and fix our sights uniquely on secularism.

"The NSS must be at the forefront of the big debate about the place of religion in society. We must be ready to fight the myriad battles that will lead to the kind of society that we want. A society that is fair for all – religious people included.

"Secularism protects the rights of every-

one, religious and non-religious alike. Let the debate begin."

As part of the preparatory discussions for a revision of the Society's Objects, the Council agreed the following wording at a recent strategy meeting:

"The Society promotes the separation of religion and state where law and the administration of justice are based on equality, respect for Human Rights and objective evidence without regard to religious doctrine or belief.

"We campaign for the following constitutional principles:

1. There shall be no established state religion.
2. The state shall not engage in, or fund, religious activities or practice.
3. All public and publicly-funded services must be non-discriminatory and non-religious [no proselytising or preaching or religious requirement to access services].
4. Publicly-funded schools shall be non-discriminatory in admissions and employment and there shall be no religious instruction or organised worship.
5. The state shall not have the right to amend religious doctrine nor interfere in religious hierarchies.
6. The state or any emanation of the state shall not express any religious beliefs or preferences.
7. Religious beliefs, ideas, organisations and people shall not enjoy privileged protection from the right to freedom of expression."

Last year saw the NSS's profile elevated to possibly its highest level ever – and, ironically, the key factor in raising public awareness of its vital role in safeguarding the rights of non-believers in Britain was Pope Ratzinger's state visit to the UK in September, 2010.

The Pope's visit, the Annual Report points out, galvanised many into demonstrating their secularist concerns for the first time and generated a significant influx of new members.



Part of the huge crowd of protesters who turned out to express their opposition to the Pope's UK visit

But media coverage of Ratzinger's visit was – as the NSS predicted – “unrelentingly fawning”.

The important distinctions between news, comment and worship all but disappeared, particularly on the BBC. “Several of their staff privately expressed to us their discomfort about this. Both the visit and its coverage were profligate, and our attempts to establish just how costly are being resisted at the very highest levels. We will persist,” the NSS vowed.

The report added that “diminished crowd sizes, despite massed bussing in of children at the last minute, reflected the decline of Catholic adherence as well as the unpopularity of this present Pope, reactionary even by Vatican standards and mired in unending revelations over clerical child abuse”.

There were nearly 300,000 in Bellahouston Park in Glasgow for the papal visit in 1982; this time round it was barely 60,000. Empty seats and large swathes of unoccupied grass were evident at the Cofton Park Birmingham venue as the Pope and entourage were flown in by two huge helicopters. Miles of barricades were erected

in the streets through which he drove, but even in central London “crowds” were often only around two deep.

Said the NSS: “We would have had no objection to the visit had the trip been a purely religious one, like its predecessor, without recourse to the public purse. The objection to the cost is given hugely more weight given the period of austerity which we are now facing and which for some will reach levels unseen since World War II.

“The Government is claiming that the visit's cost to the taxpayer will be in the order of £10–12 million – deftly stonewalling enquiries about the cost of policing, which we are convinced will be much greater, but Lord Patten dismisses this as “poppycock”. Let's hope he is right.

“It is still not clear why a state visit was justified at all. A 2009 press report suggested that a “trip by Benedict XVI in the next year could provide a major boost for the Prime Minister ahead of the next General Election.

“As we now know, the timing did not work out so conveniently for Mr Brown,

but his successors were only too happy to play host.

“The Vatican is so small that even our embassy to the Holy See is situated in another country – across the road in Italy. Nor is it clear why the UK should be honouring a ‘state’ with such contempt for Human Rights.

“The Church also seeks to undermine democracy itself through pressure on Catholics in public life to use their positions to seek to impose its dogma – so widely disregarded by its followers – much more widely. That dogma, particularly on contraception and abortion, is enforced in the developing world with such disastrous effects because of this ‘state’s’ influence in the United Nations.”

The NSS added that “despite having paid through the nose for this state visit, we had to endure the Pope using the visit ‘as an international platform from which to seize the initiative in the fight against secularisation’ and to criticise our equality laws. There was of course no opportunity for the Pope to be challenged.”

(Continued on p10)

A momentous year for the NSS

The NSS was the only organisation named in the infamous leaked Foreign Office memorandum as being “negative” to the Pope’s visit, perhaps on account of the petition that it organised opposing the visit, which garnered 28,000 signatures in just three weeks.

This was delivered to Downing Street by the President and the staff of the NSS.

Well ahead of the visit, the NSS created the Protest the Pope website and brought together a coalition of activists to arrange the opposition to the Pope’s presence in the UK.

The NSS helped arrange well-attended press conferences, one in which survivors of sex abuse from England, Scotland, Ireland and Australia told their stories. Thirty film crews and battalions of journalists from all over the world turned up.

NSS member Sue Cox, an abuse survivor, spearheaded this aspect of the campaign, rapidly becoming a widely quoted spokesperson in this field and proving herself an accomplished media personality. Her moving articulation of her own plight and that of so many who have been abused by priests – and the Church letting them get away with it – captured the media’s imagination and was widely reported.

Protest the Pope’s crowning glory was between 10,000 and 20,000 people (according to estimates) amassing in the very heart of London, “protesting the Pope” in a good humoured and witty march with a serious message. The march was expertly co-ordinated by Marco Tranchino. It stretched for about three quarters of a mile and was far too big to fit in to Whitehall, where the final rally took place. Even a Vatican-connected news agency reported the protest and admitted it was unprecedented.

Speakers at the rally included Richard Dawkins, Johann Hari, Geoffrey Robertson QC, Peter Tatchell, Maryam Namazie, Pragna Patel and others.

The NSS President’s contribution went out live on the BBC1 news. The NSS apologised to the thousands who were unable to hear these speeches because the rally attracted so many more supporters than anticipated. The Society also had a presence at Cofon Park in Birmingham.

Said the NSS: “We hope that this campaign and especially the march will have energised many for the fight for secularism



NSS President Terry Sanderson

that is under increasing attack from religious interests.”

Apart from its “Protest the Pope” campaign, the NSS has had an increasingly high profile in the media with regard to a number of other issues. This exposure, says the Annual Report, “helps our work spreading the secular message and at the same time attracts new supporters. We also work with journalists behind the scenes researching stories and giving advice.”

President Terry Sanderson said: “The media is our most potent weapon in the fight for secularism and we try not to miss any opportunity to use it”.

As well as its public presence in the UK, the NSS is increasingly appearing in the international media.

Among many issues covered by the media last year were the NSS’s High Court challenge to council prayers and its complaint about sentencing remarks by Cherie Booth QC, which ended up turning the spotlight on the Office of Judicial Complaints itself.

Website hits generated from the Pope’s visit and the Cherie Booth stories reduced it to near collapse, .

Other topics included the Society’s criticism of Catholic adoption agencies seeking to evade the law under which they must also be open to including gay prospective adop-

You can download a copy of the NSS’s Annual Report by visiting the website (www.secularism.org.uk) or by following this link: <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/5477257/nss-annual-report-2010.pdf>

tive parents; the discriminatory policies of Christian B&Bs; numerous cases of evangelical Christians claiming they are “victims” of equality legislation and seeking privileged exemption from it; religious conscience opt-outs for pharmacists; the alleged healing power of prayer being claimed in advertisements; Archbishop Vincent Nichols’ attack on the Labour Government and the absence of labelling of meat (and meat products) from slaughter without stunning; and the Church’s evangelising.

But with regard to BBC Radio 4’s contentious *Thought for the Day*, the Society’s efforts to have it opened to secular voices

hit a brick wall.

“Our optimism about a positive outcome to our complaint to the BBC Trust about the discriminatory *Thought for the Day* slot turned out to be misplaced,” reports the NSS.

“The summary judgment from the Trust read: ‘The Trust found that the editorial policy of only allowing religious contributors to participate on *Thought for the Day* does not breach either the BBC Editorial Guideline on impartiality or the BBC’s duty to reflect religious and other beliefs in its programming.’

“However, the Trust confirmed that *Thought for the Day* must comply with requirements of due impartiality and that any future complaints on particular broadcasts of *Thought for the Day* would be judged against these standards on a case-by-case basis.’

“One of the negative replies we received at an earlier stage of the complaints process was from Mark Damazer, until recently Controller of Radio 4. We later learned it had also been posted on the BBC website. Less than one in six of the hundreds of comments on the article supported Mr Damazer’s attempted justification for the ban to remain.

“Recognising the intransigence we were facing, we suggested some alternatives, such as a separate regular slot for those excluded, but none of these suggestions was taken up.”

The NSS said it “considers that this adjudication adds to the long list of betrayals by the BBC over our complaint that spans half a century. The BBC would not dare to restrict the participation of any other minority in the way that it does the non-religious over this programme.”

Dishonest to God: on keeping religion out of politics

JOHN RADFORD reviews Mary Warnock's latest book

Baroness Mary Warnock, DBE, is of course pre-eminently one of the Great and Good of our time, the establishment's favourite consultant on ethical issues. I was once briefly on a committee with her, but recall only that she had strong views about whatever it was. I will start this review, perhaps unusually, with her final conclusions (p166).

"Religion is significant to large numbers of people, and for some their belief in God is of supreme importance, but there is not and could not be any obligation to believe. Morally speaking, believers and unbelievers are equal, and their right to make their voice heard democratically is equal. Our parliamentary democracy is doubtless flawed, and may seem in especially poor shape in the twenty-first century. But we must do all we can to mend it; and this entails doing all we can to fend off the forces of theocracy."

With nearly all of this I strongly agree. Let us see how Mary Warnock reaches it. In her introduction she makes the point that religion, and the churches, whatever their support, are clearly no longer dominant in our society. Yet they are vociferous in battles over ethical and moral issues. Mary Warnock has herself been closely involved in many of these, as a peer, and as a member or chair of influential committees. Further, she argues, the law cannot avoid such issues, as for example in cruelty to animals, or capital punishment. Nor of course can politics. In the first two chapters she reviews the debates over abortion, work on human embryos, cloning, and euthanasia, or rather assisted suicide.

She shows with great clarity how the arguments have often confused ethical, moral, legal and religious questions, as well as explicit or implicit assumptions about human nature. She also shows how the religious lobbies have sometimes cheated by, for example, presenting "opinion polls" based on deliberately biased samples. Very often arguments have revolved round questions of

"human rights", often with the assumption that these are somehow a given, whether by God or human nature. Mary Warnock takes the view that rights can only exist as agreements, enshrined in law. If slavery (not her example) is legal, then slaves have no right to freedom; if it is illegal as currently with us, then we all do. It is meaningless to say slaves have the right to be free, all we can say is that they ought to have it.

Which rights are established changes over time, and the decision rests upon morality, that is, the views of what is right and wrong. Conceptually that must come first (of course, historically it is often an interaction between two continuous processes; slavery was abolished by a campaign based on morality, but the law then became accepted and slavery is considered fundamentally wrong, at least in our society). The question then is, where does morality come from? It cannot come from religion. Religions notoriously vary in what they consider right and wrong. Further, there is and can be no legitimate compulsion to be religious.

Of course some societies have sought to compel it, and Warnock perhaps does not fully acknowledge how far this can succeed, at least for a time. And in many societies it is or has been universally taken for granted. But she is concerned with our society, and here religion is clearly optional: one of many faiths, or none at all. Thus if the attempt is made to justify morality on religious grounds, this too appears to be optional, and is therefore weakened.

The religious argument that without God, or holy texts, there would be no morality, is not only false, but dangerous, since the gods disagree (not her words). This argument, she thinks, comes partly from the desire to have one unquestioned source for morality, so that moral laws are absolute. But in her view they cannot be. Here she goes back to Aristotle, who argued in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that we have to deal with propositions that are for the most part



true, rather than absolutely. Moral convictions cannot be proved or disproved, any more than those of faith. Rather, they must be based on a general consensus, which in turn is based on how people actually live together in society.

Without such a consensus, explicit or implicit, life in society would not be possible. And humans are intrinsically social; we cannot exist in any other way. The consensus rests on two conditions. One is that humans are fundamentally alike. However much we may differ in many respects, we share ways of thinking and feeling, desires to live and be happy and so on.

The other condition she calls imagination, in which she includes the uniquely human capacity to perceive how others think and feel. (Psychologists would use such terms as empathy and theory of mind, and perhaps point out that their rudiments, at least, are found in other species. They could also add that there is extensive evidence for such a consensus.) Religion is not essential to any of this.

She then turns to what value religion does have. Here I find her arguments less clear. She stresses that "religion" is not homogeneous, and that in any case humans can often hold views that are contradictory. Nevertheless religion can be a force for cohesion in society, and for "imagination". At least some of what religions teach is not literally true. Much can best be regarded as "stories", which can embody truth, "not the whole truth but a truth".

What "true" means has bedevilled philosophers for centuries, and Mary Warnock, herself trained in philosophy, does not offer an answer. Rather, she discusses what may be called spirituality, though she dislikes the word as being too often equated with religion; she means "that aspect of the human imagination which has immortal longings". These often find expression in the arts, and often (at least for her) when these are of a religious kind, especially architecture and music. Through these we can glimpse "something that all human beings aspire to, something that is secure, beyond time and change". Such sweeping statements give me pause:

(Continued on p12)

Dishonest to God

how does she know we do? Religion cannot “be wholly replaced by science or any other imaginative exercise. The only thing is, it is no longer compulsory”.

Religion is not necessary to society as are morality and law, without which there would be no society. But it may still be good. She suggests three ways. One is that it can teach useful lessons, especially through stories. One is that individuals are often helped by religion at times of crisis and suffering. One is that our own society owes much to religion aesthetically. The counter argument is that religion has caused much harm. But it is not religion as such that leads to the Crusades or terrorism, rather the belief that religion “can provide unassailable moral truth, and, above all, that it has the authority to enforce what its morality dictates”.

So to her final conclusion. The bit of this conclusion with which I disagree is that believers and unbelievers are morally equal. I would argue that “morality” that rests only on belief is inherently unsatisfactory. Indeed this seems to be the message of the book as a whole. When it comes to the remaining value of religion, a problem with religious “stories” is that they are only effective if they are taken to be true. The



In a BBC Radio 4 interview last October 18, Mary Warnock said: “Religion, any religion, is a construction of the human imagination, but has immense appeal and immense power, and for many people, it is that which gives their life a point and a meaning ... I do not deny that at all. What I deny is that religious people have any particular right to dictate ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ ... I am not against religion at all, and I am not against religious people taking part in politics, but what I am against is supposing that their faith gives them an entitlement, which the rest of people without their faith don’t have ... They shouldn’t be permitted to treat themselves as moral experts.”

Bible can certainly be read as literature, and in the King James version at least it is acknowledged to be fine literature. But in that case it becomes equivalent to *King Lear*, or *La Boheme* in music. Such works can touch deep emotions, but they are not true, or taken to be true, in the sense in which believers consider their religion to be true.

Further, “truth” is what believers value in their faith. And they do not consider their religion to be optional, even if it is not

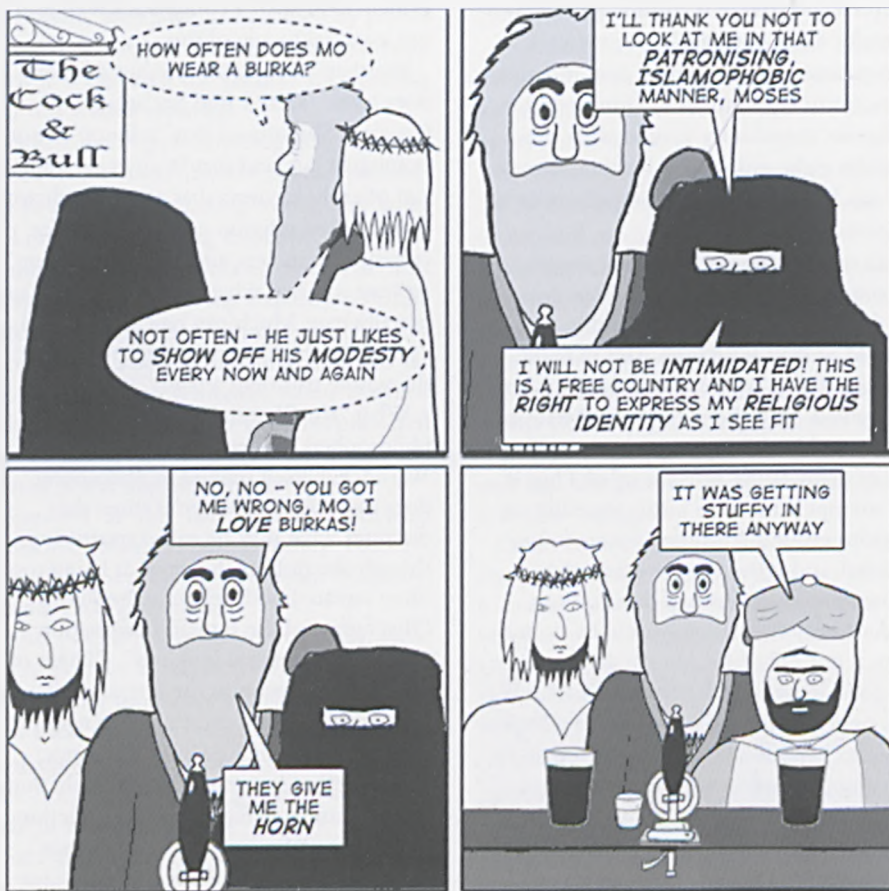
compulsory (as, in some societies, it is).

Mary Warnock acknowledges that for many people, religion is simply not part of their life. She could have added that for many others in our society, it is merely an occasional convenience, mostly for weddings and funerals. But that does not resolve the issue.

Nevertheless, the main thrust of the book, clearly and forcibly set out, is that religion cannot be the basis for morality or for law, and while individuals are entitled to their beliefs, religion should have no privileged position in politics.

• *Dishonest to God: On keeping religion out of politics* by Mary Warnock. Continuum Publishing Group, 2010. ISBN 978-1441-12712-9

Jesus & Mo



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Rushdie to write memoir

SALMAN Rushdie is writing a memoir that will recount his years in hiding after Iran’s Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ordered Muslims to kill him because of what he called blasphemy in Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses*.

“I’m beginning to write this memoir,” Rushdie told Reuters. “So far I feel that I’m right: I’m not getting churned up and upset, I’m just writing it and I’m feeling quite pleased to be writing it.”

Rushdie, 63, has frequently spoken of the death sentence, issued in 1989 as a fatwa, but has devoted most of his time since then to writing fiction: in recent years, *The Enchantress of Florence* and *Shalimar the Clown*. His children’s book *Luka and the Fire of Life* has just been published.

The memoir could be completed by the end of 2011.

The story of Charles Bradlaugh

JIM HERRICK reviews *Dare to Stand Alone: the story of Charles Bradlaugh, Atheist and Republican* by Bryan Niblett

There are three biographies of Bradlaugh which stand out. The earliest was by his daughter Hypatia Bradlaugh-Bonner and his colleague J M Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work, with an Account of His Parliamentary Struggle, Politics and Teachings* (1895).

A scholar and Liberal politician, Robertson also wrote a detailed and lucid biography, *Charles Bradlaugh* (1920), and later the President of the National Secular Society, David Tribe, wrote a biography fully based on the sources, *President Charles Bradlaugh, MP* (1971). Now comes Bryan Niblett with specialised legal knowledge and considerable admiration, with an impressive new biography.

Niblett indicates in his preface that Bradlaugh joins the ranks of his childhood heroes. He came across Bradlaugh at the age of fourteen and realised that he was a real life hero. What attracted him to Bradlaugh was that he displayed “a moral quality, an uncompromising rationality, a commitment to justice...” He was also impressed by his battling spirit: “battles of the mind, played out on public platforms, in courts of law, and in political debating chambers...”. Bradlaugh showed the virtue of thinking for oneself, of engaging in action founded on reason – indeed a man who stood alone.

Niblett was well prepared to write the very successful biography that he has now produced in maturity. He mentions his legal interests which have enabled him to deal with the great range of litigation in which Bradlaugh was involved. Niblett’s account of the many legal and Parliamentary issues involved in Bradlaugh’s struggle to enter Westminster benefits greatly from his legal mind. And he creates a detailed biography which is extremely readable.

He writes in his preface that his aim was to tell a story – and this is one of the most gripping freethought volumes which I have ever read.

This leads to a significant drawback. He declines to offer footnotes, which some readers will find disappointing considering the depth of legal and parliamentary documents he must have trawled. So be it if we have such clear uncluttered prose. There is however, a very good bibliography.

Bradlaugh’s tough childhood was accompanied by a determination to be true to his own ideas – especially demonstrated in his quarrel with a clergyman over the church’s 39 Articles.

When in the army he stood up for himself as a teetotaler and a man of books – known as “leaves” because of his preference for tea rather than beer. Not surprisingly he worked in junior roles in legal firms, becoming at the same time more and more involved in the freethought arguments and meeting well-known freethinkers.

He remained tough and determined and began his many struggles. A key to his life was his autodidactic nature and he came to write many pamphlets and booklets and much journalism. He edited the *National Reformer* for more than thirty years, almost uninterrupted; it was virtually his autobiography. Niblett has clearly dug deep into the tomes of the bound volumes. But I feel that, in his enthusiasm for the legal and parliamentary aspects of Bradlaugh’s career Niblett slightly neglects to give enough details of his writing. That said, Bradlaugh was more a man of action and speech than the pen.

He could have a grim aspect. He was loyal to his friends, but cold if they betrayed him. This partly comes from his upbringing – the harshness of which must have permanently affected him. James Thomson, the free-thinker and poet who contributed much to the *National Reformer*, was a friend whom he met in the army and who was on very friendly terms with his wife and children. But his alcoholism led to a sharp rift between them – he died in total degradation. Bradlaugh’s wife’s alcohol dependency led to no denunciation but no sympathy either. However, a break with the journalist G W Foote was patched up by the time he was proposed for President of the NSS.

Bradlaugh added Malthusianism (birth control) and Republicanism to his causes. The birth control book, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, was prosecuted as lewd and obscene especially because there were biological illustrations. Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, his co-campaigner by that time, were the publishers and faced prosecution. Niblett gives a gripping account of the two trials from which they only just escaped imprisonment.

In 1880 after several attempts Bradlaugh was elected as an MP for Northampton. It is well known that he struggled to enter Parliament. It is worth recounting here, because even a seasoned freethinker today will often give a garbled account of this momentous battle. When entering Parliament Bradlaugh thought that the Evidence Acts, which had allowed him to affirm rather than swear on the Bible in a court case, would apply to Parliament. But this was not allowed because the Parliamentary Oath Acts were considered to take precedence – whereupon he attempted to swear the oath and kiss the Bible. This was disallowed because as an atheist he would not be bound by the oath.

It was a *Catch 22* situation in which he was neither allowed to affirm nor to swear. It took five years of re-elections, court cases (his opponents tried to bankrupt him), physical ejection from Parliament, imprisonment in the Clock Tower and years of struggle and acrimony, especially from Conservatives such as Randolph Churchill. In the new Parliament of 1885, he stepped forward at the appropriate moment, swore the oath and was allowed by the Speaker (a Conservative) to enter Parliament. It was a mighty struggle and Niblett depicts it with a greater clarity and excitement than anyone else.

He was an effective MP, though his energy was sapped by long-term exhaustion. He dealt with the injustice of hereditary pensions, and hereditary monarchy, and other issues dealing with the poor. He was a vigorous supporter of Home Rule for Ireland and independence for India. During a voyage to India he was feted by Indians. To this day I have met Indians who revere Bradlaugh.

Niblett writes with skill and accuracy and has a dry wit. Bradlaugh’s atheism, writes Niblett, “was no mere disbelief”. He is quoted: “It is in no wise a cold barren negative; it is on the contrary a hearty affirmation of all truth and involves the positive assertion of action for all humanity.” We must be grateful that Niblett, long-inspired by Bradlaugh, has now put pen to paper.

• *Dare to Stand Alone: the Story of Charles Bradlaugh* is published by Kramedart Press. Hardback, 400 pages. ISBN-10: 0956474306; ISBN-13: 978-0956474308. Retails at Amazon at £18.99.

American evangelist Jay Bakker insists that being homosexual 'is not a sin'

JAY Bakker, the son of disgraced US televangelist Jim Bakker, has sent shockwaves through hordes of American conservative Christians by declaring that "it's OK to be gay".

In his new book *Fall to Grace: A Revolution of God, Self and Society*, Bakker, 35, whose father was jailed on fraud and conspiracy charges, says that "the simple fact is that Old Testament references in Leviticus do treat homosexuality as a sin ... a capital offense even. But before you say, 'I told you so,' consider this: eating shellfish, cutting your sideburns and getting tattoos were equally prohibited by ancient religious law.

"The truth is that the Bible endorses all sorts of attitudes and behaviours that we find unacceptable (and illegal) today and decries others that we recognise as no big deal."

Bakker, pastor of Revolution NYC, a Brooklyn evangelical congregation that meets in a bar, points out that Leviticus prohibits interracial marriage, endorses slavery and forbids women to wear trousers. Deuteronomy calls for brides who are found not to be virgins to be stoned to death, and for adulterers to be summarily executed.

In an interview with American columnist Cathleen Falsani, Bakker declared: "The church has always been late. We were late on slavery. We were late on civil rights. And now we're late on this."

Examining the original Greek words translated as "homosexual" and "homosexuality" in three New Testament passages, Bakker (and others) conclude that the original words have been translated inaccurately in modern English.

What we read as "homosexuals" and "homosexuality" actually refers to male prostitutes and the men who hire them. The passages address prostitution – sex as a commodity – and not same-sex, consensual relationships, he says.

(The word "homosexual" first appeared in an English-language Bible in 1958. Bakker is part of a group petitioning Bible publishers to remove the words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" from new translations and replace it with terms that more precisely reflect the original Greek.)

"We must weigh all the evidence," Bakker writes. What he calls the "clobber" scriptures "don't hold a candle to the raging inferno



Tattooed and pierced, Jay Bakker is no ordinary evangelist

of grace and love that burns through Paul's writing and Christ's teaching. And it's a love that should be our guiding light."

Writing in the *Huffington Post*, Falsani claims Bakker's "clear voice on homosexuality" is not alone in the evangelical community. Tony Jones, a "theologian-in-residence" at Minnesota's Solomon's Porch, one of the pre-eminent "Emergent" churches in the nation, echoes many of Bakker's arguments. Peggy Campolo, wife of evangelist Tony Campolo, has been saying this kind of thing for years, despite her husband's disagreement.

And while he stops short of explicitly say-

ing "it's not a sin" in his 2010 book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian McLaren, godfather of the Emergent church movement, condemns a Christian preoccupation with homosexual issues as "fundasexuality".

Following a 16-month Federal grand jury probe, Bakker – creator of the hugely successful Praise the Lord Ministry – was indicted in 1988 on eight counts of mail fraud, 15 counts of wire fraud and one count of conspiracy. In 1989, after a five-week trial which began on August 28 in Charlotte, the jury found him guilty on all 24 counts, and Judge Robert Potter sentenced him to 45 years in federal prison and a \$500,000 fine.

In early 1991, a federal appeals court upheld Bakker's conviction on the fraud and conspiracy charges, but voided Bakker's 45-year sentence, as well as the \$500,000 fine, and ordered that a new sentencing hearing be held. On November 16, 1992, Bakker's sentence was reduced to eight years.

During his time as a televangelist, Bakker was closely associated with the late US evangelist, Jerry Falwell. The two had a falling out and Falwell called Bakker a liar, an embezzler, a sexual deviant, and "the greatest scab and cancer on the face of Christianity in 2,000 years of church history".

Treat gays humanely and God will kill blackbirds

THE deaths of thousands of blackbirds in Arkansas at the start of the New Year may have been caused by the recent repeal in America of the notorious "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" military rule.

That's the view of dotty US evangelist Cindy Jacobs, a "prophet" who once claimed the ability to banish "gay demons". Jacobs said in a video last month that the strange phenomenon, that has now occurred in various places across the world, was an "answer" from God for violating his principles concerning homosexuality: "According to biblical principles, marriage is between a man and a woman, so we have to say 'what happens when a nation makes a decision that's against God's principles?'. Well, often what happens is that nature itself will begin to talk to us – for instance, violent storms, flooding."

Jacobs founded Generals International (GI), an international evangelical Christian group, along with her husband in 1985. She is also a member of the Apostolic Council of Prophetic Elders. During an evangelical conference in 2008, Jacobs conducted a mass exorcism of the audience to cast out the spirits of pornography, addiction, lust, bisexuality, homosexuality, and perversion.

President Barack Obama signed a landmark law last December repealing the ban on gay men and women serving openly in the military, fulfilling one of his major campaign pledges and casting the issue as a matter of civil rights long denied.

Of course there's a more rational explanation for the blackbirds' deaths. According to various media reports, fireworks may have caused them.



points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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EXETER UNIVERSITY'S ISLAMOPHOBIA STUDY

EXETER University's misguided underwriting of a study into Islamophobia by paid Islamophiles, which – surprise! – was found to be dishonest (an embarrassment reported in January's *Freethinker*), is trumped by a report in the *Sunday Telegraph* (January 2, 2011) that it's the worst university in the UK for degree grade inflation.

Contrary to the biased views of religious appeasers and apologists, Islamophobia is a sane response to insane fanaticism: every suicide bombing, discovered terrorist cell, assassination, and Muslim riot, being reminders of Islam's unhappy influence in the world.

In the UK, intimidation has already led to Islamic law being partially recognised. This capitulation could be the start of a collapse in moral resolve if the political commentator Mark Steyn's predictions, set out in his *America Alone* (2006), come true. Christopher Hitchens describes the book as "a welcome wake-up call".

Although Mark Steyn is a neo-con Catholic, his analysis of Islamic ambitions, and the Western liberalism that accommodates it, is startling. He warns that if the European political establishments don't halt the growing power of Islamists, then in only a few decades, as a consequence of conversions and Muslim birth rates – he's generous with demographic facts – future generations in "Eurabia" will live under sharia or cower in fear of it. On page 196 he summarises the layers of culpability, which I've paraphrased by a list:

1. Spineless politicians, who pretend Muslim demands are a managerial problem and can be finessed away by new laws and inclusivity. (Latest UK concession: Muslim, Bahá'í and Zoroastrian chaplains are to be recruited to the House of Commons to make it multi-faith friendly.)

2. Opinion makers in the media, too

squeamish about ethno-cultural matters to confront reality.

3. Religious and community leaders, columnists and academics who serve as apologists for Muslim grievances.

4. Muslim grievance-mongers, adamant that they're the victims of Islamophobia and racism.

5. The "moderate" Muslim majority, whose silence lends tacit agreement to violent jihad.

6. Imams who openly incite treason against the state.

7. Muslims who celebrate mass murder.

8. Jihadi terrorists.

9. Religious psychosis.

America Alone is indeed a wake-up call, which I think everyone who values democratic freedoms should try and read. Christopher Hitchens' 2007 review is at www.city-journal.org/urbanities.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

PRAYER

HURRAH for Peter Brietbart's piece about prayer being the art of doing nothing worthwhile (*Freethinker*, January).

Of all religion's absurdities this has always struck me as being one of the most bizarre. Why would an all-powerful and merciful God heal a sick man who could pray to him but not an equally sick one with learning difficulties who could not? Come to think of it, why would he allow either of them to become ill at all?

When I was a teenager I had a few difficulties, which I eventually got over – probably by the simple process of turning 20.

One of my grandmothers, however, who probably would have still been an evil woman even if she had not also been a

Protestant bigot, however informed me in all seriousness that my problems had been solved as she personally had prayed to the Almighty on my behalf.

May God (or preferably someone else) help us!

Graham Livingstone
London

GOD BOTHERING REVIEW

I WAS interested in Peter Brietbart's review of *God Bothering* by Stuart Abercrombie and Malcolm Hobbs (FT, November 2010), in which he claimed that the authors "significantly undermine the existence of Jesus". That gives the impression that they came to the conclusion that Jesus did not exist. So I obtained a copy to check.

It is true that they doubt the secular testimony of both Tacitus and Suetonius, but not for very good reasons (in my opinion). However, they grudgingly accept that the testimony of Josephus, although altered, is basically genuine, viz: "a religious troublemaker named Jesus or Christ was crucified by Pilate..."

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

THEODICY

ISLAM, like other religions, is of such diversity and complexity that statements about it or its scriptures or practices are all too easily over-simplified.

However, Keith Bell's contribution (*Points of View*, December 2010) is worse than that: he uses words he doesn't understand. Theodicy means "vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil" (*Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1976); that is, it deals with how God can be all-good, all-wise and all-powerful in a world in which evil and suffering are all too prevalent.

Colin Mills
Amersham

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information **w** website **e** email

Birmingham Humanists:

w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. 0845 2015135.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: **i** 01273 227549/461404. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. *Census Question*. Wed, Feb 2, 8pm. Robert Stovold:

"Spirituality" and Palliative Care. Wed, Mar 2, 8pm. Romy Hassan: *Multiculturalism v Universal Human Rights*.

w <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>.

Central London Humanist Group: **i** Chair: Alan Palmer. Sec: Josh Kutichinsky. **e** info@centrallondonhumanists.org.

w www.meetup.com/central-london-humanists

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 01296 623730.

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

Cotswold Humanists: **i** Phil Cork Tel: 01242 233746. **e** phil.cork@blueyonder.co.uk.

w <http://www.cotswold.humanist.org.uk>.

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

Cumbria Humanist Group: **i** Tel: 01228 810592. Christine Allen

w www.secularderby.org **e** info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk.

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

w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists:

e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities. Enquiries 01202-428506.

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:

i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available **i** 01268 785295.

Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, Woodstreet Village, Guildford GU3 3DD.

w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):

1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067.

Email: secretary@galha.org. **w** www.galha.org

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: **i** John Coss: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday, 7.30pm) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Phone John Coss for details.

Hampstead Humanist Society: **i** N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Tel: 0207 328 4431.

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday of the month at 8pm (except Jan, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. February 9. E Bostle: *Life in a Religious Cult*.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike.Savage@mfsavagemba@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

Ireland: **i** Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27

4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** brianmcclinton@btinternet.com.

w <http://www.humanistni.org/>

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. **uk** Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Dundee:** 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Glasgow:** 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Highland:** 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Isle of Man Freethinkers: **i** Jeff Garland, 01624 664796. Email: jeffgarland@wm.im. **w** www.iomfreethinkers.org

Humanists4Science: A group of humanists interested in science who discuss, and promote, both.

w <http://humanists4science.blogspot.com/>

Discussion group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/humanists4science/>

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group. **i** David Broughton on 01983 755526 or **e** davidb67@clara.co.uk

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780 **e** Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com. **w** <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 **i** Ian Abbott, Wavcrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 **e** ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 07598 971420.

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Lewisham Humanist Group: **i** Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6. Meetings on third Thurs. 7.30pm. Feb 17, Colin Swinburn & Trevor Moore:

Don't Sleep, There are Snakes Converting the Missionary.

w www.lewisham.humanist.org.uk

Liverpool Humanist Group: **i** 07814 910 286

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e hghumanist@googlemail.com. Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens: **i** Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Marches Secularists: **w** www.MarchesSecularists.org

e Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

Mid-Wales Humanists: **i** Maureen Lofmark, 01570 422648 **e** mlofmark@btinternet.com

Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group: **i** Chris Copsey, 1 Thistledown Road, Horsford NR10 3ST. Tel: 0160 3710262.

Northants Secular & Humanist Society: For information contact Ollie Killingback on 01933 389070.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group):

i C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):

i 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 **e** enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk **w** www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

e enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

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

Oxford Humanists: Chair: John White, 01865 891876. **e** jdwhite@talk21.com

Peterborough Humanists: **i** Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Sheffield Humanist Society: **i** 0114 2309754. University Arms, 197 Brook Hill, Sheffield. Feb 2, 8pm. Michael Granville: *Review of the Year*.

South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689 **e** info@southhantshumanists.org.uk **w** www.southhantshumanists.org.uk

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or **e** edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings, Sundays 11am at Conway Hall Reockway Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8031/4 **e** programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists: 25 Haughgate Close, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1LQ. Tel: 01394 387462. Secretary: Denis Johnston.

w www.suffolkhands.org.uk **e** mail@suffolkhands.org.uk

Sutton Humanists: **i** Alan Grandy: 0208 337 9214. **w** www.suttonhumanists.co.uk

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. **i** 01923-252013 **e** john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk **w** www.watford.humanists.org.uk

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: **i** 01568 770282

w www.wmhumanists.co.uk **e** rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk

Meetings on the 2nd Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

Listing & Event Deadlines

Please send your listings and events notices to:

Listings, the *Freethinker*,
PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD or preferably by email to barry@freethinker.co.uk

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