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Paranoia:
Andrea Williams tells audience in Spain: 'Christians are persecuted in Britain'

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Green responds:
Christian Voice head says he is a victim of tabloid lies after ex-wife claims he beat her

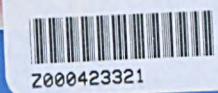
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'Blasphemy' Pope:
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UK Anglicans told to expect 'criticism, even persecution'

At the Church of England's General Synod in London last month the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, said that the Church of England cannot expect to be "universally welcomed or applauded" for performing its "God-given duty" to re-evangelise the country.

Dr John Sentamu warned that the "counter-cultural vision" of the church mission did not promise a "life of ease, but of criticism, even persecution".

According to a report in the *Guardian*, Sentamu told the assembled clergy and laity that people lived in "fractious and uncertain times" in which the national church was "constantly questioned and attacked".

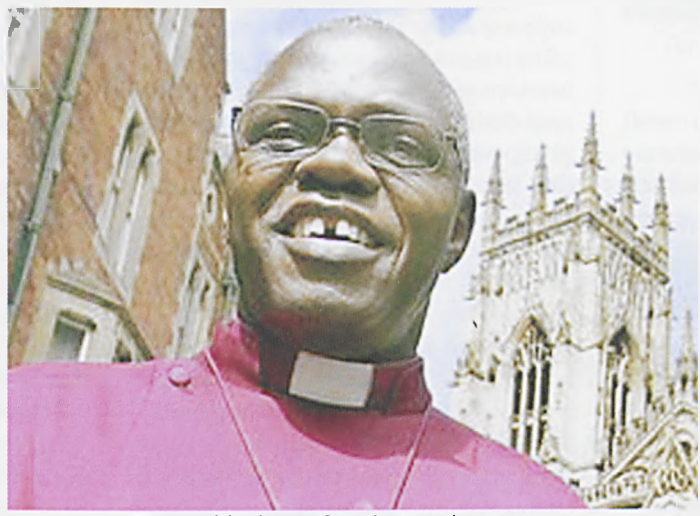
His words echoed those of Pope Benedict XVI who, during his historic visit to the UK last September, told Catholics that fidelity to the gospel involved being "dismissed out of hand, ridiculed and parodied".

The Archbishop added that any attempts to marginalise Christianity should not deter the Church of England from fulfilling its "opportunity and obligation" as the established church.

"We must actively continue to seek to influence the terms of the national debate on key issues affecting our society. I do not accept the arguments of those who say that Christian convictions should have no place in questions of public morality.

"The fact is that all our communities benefit from the contribution of those who adhere to the worship of God, expressed in a life of service to their fellow human beings."

His words came as Synod grappled with the challenges facing the Church of England in the next five years – the ongoing financial crisis, the size and ageing profile of its congregation and the fact that 40% of its clergy are due to retire in the next decade.



The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu

It was in this climate that the Church had to work.

Sentamu said that the extent to which the "social compact" represented by the welfare state was now under threat was a major concern.

He said: "There is an urgent need for the Church once more to rise to the challenge and to lead reflection on how the social compact can be refashioned in ways that make sense of today's serious social and economic realities."

The debate – on the future role of the Church of England – garnered near universal praise.

But Synod member James Townsend rejected the notion of a "national church", lamenting that he regretted that "so much energy" was spent on "internal debates" that the rest of society had settled long ago.

He said: "In my generation, we are not the national church, we are the nutters on the sidelines."

Earlier in February, a C of E report showed that the number of people attending services at Anglican churches each week dropped again in 2009. Figures out last month revealed a one per cent decrease in weekly attendance on the previous year's numbers, from 1,145,000 to 1,131,000 in 2009. In the same period, average Sunday attendance dropped by two per cent, from 960,000 to 944,000, while average monthly attendance fell from 1,667,000 in 2008 to 1,651,000 in 2009.

The statistics showed that the number of children and young people attending on a monthly basis remained virtually unchanged at 436,000. But services on days other than Sunday continue to attract people. For every 50 people attending church or cathedral services on a typical Sunday, another 10 attend during the week and an extra 37 in total over a month.

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Silence isn't necessarily golden

BARRY DUKE FINDS LIFE IN SPAIN CAN SOMETIMES BE A LITTLE TOO QUIET

Nested in my 31st-floor eyrie, overlooking a small pine forest and with a view of a range of large mountains, I get a great deal of silence here on the Costa Blanca. No longer are my thoughts (and phone conversations) drowned out by Brighton's hooligan seagulls, squarking, squealing, chuckling, yapping and doing war dances on the flat roof of the room I once called my office.

Nor am I subjected to the heavy bass thumping of music played by sociopathic, crack-dealing neighbours. I am also spared the shrieks – and occasional puking sounds – of ladettes tottering barefoot along the Viaduct Road, clutching stiletto shoes they are too drunk to walk in.

If I hear anything at all now, it is the distant wails of ambulances or fire-engines, or, on rare occasions, the howling of the wind, so intense that it can be quite terrifying.

Trouble is, I don't do silence very well. When I am not concentrating on work, I tend to fill my head with music, or I listen to the radio – in particular to a station called Talk Radio Europe, which pretty much keeps me up to

date with both Spanish and English news.

But I have a real problem with TRE. It gives voice to the largest number of nutters I have ever heard on any single radio station. I am not referring to those numpties who participate in its phone-ins, but to the station's choice of interviewees, who range from astrologers, conspiracy theorists, alternative medicine devotees, psychics, mediums, astral travellers, aura cleansers and other charlatans.

In the space of a week, I heard one twittering on interminably about a secret cabal of mad US scientists who are poisoning the earth's atmosphere; another saying that he had incontrovertible evidence that Lord Lucan was murdered by Arnold Schwarzenegger; and yet another claiming that the moon is a hollow sphere put in place by an ancient alien civilisation to manipulate life on Earth.

This last piece of drivel fell from the voluptuous lips of David Icke, who seems to get a great deal of exposure on TRE, but now none whatsoever in the UK. Many will remember Icke, 59, as a BBC television sports presenter and spokesman for the Green Party, who became an object of ridicule after he announced on the *Terry Wogan Show* in April 1991 that he was the Son of God.

At the heart of one of his many madcap hypotheses is the notion that a sinister group of reptilian humanoids called the Babylonian Brotherhood controls humanity, and that many prominent figures are reptilian, including George W Bush. Well, *that* I'll buy – but Queen Elizabeth II, and singers Kris Kristofferson and Boxcar Willie? Give me a break!

As crazies go, Icke is in a league of his own; far too outrageous even to be remotely taken seriously. But what got me rushing out of the kitchen in a blind rage was an interview TRE did on the night of January 31 with the reprehensible Andrea Minichiello Williams, head of the Christian Legal Centre.

Right now she is on a mission to prove that British Christians are being persecuted by a growing army of secularists in general, and, in particular, gays, using "Nazi tactics".

In the last part of the interview, "Mini-cello" was loudly drawing a bow along all of her paranoid strings to orchestrate sympathy for the owners of a B&B establishment – the Chymorvah Hotel, near Penzance – who refused to accommodate a gay couple.

She was referring to that miserable pair of Christian fundies, Peter and Hazelmary Bull, who were recently ordered to pay damages to Martyn Hall and his civil partner Steven Preddy, from Bristol. The judge in the case

found that the Bulls' refusal to accommodate them was "direct discrimination", and they were awarded £1,800 each in damages at Bristol County Court.

As I did not have a telephone number for TRE, I found its website, and immediately blasted off an email, expressing my fury over the amount of air-time given over to this monstrous bigot's homophobic clap-trap. Within two minutes my phone rang. It was TRE, asking whether I was prepared to go on air and have a pop at her. "Delighted", I replied, hoping to be allowed to debate with Williams. This was not to be. The woman was off the air. Setting disappointment to one side, I had to content myself with doing a solitary hatchet job on her, and her fellow paranoiacs.

This wasn't enough for presenter Richie Allen. He wanted more. He wanted me to talk about the history of the *Freethinker*, to discuss the subject of blasphemy, and to elaborate on the misery caused in general to humankind by religion through the ages. Nudged along this fertile path, I was more than happy to oblige.

Forty-five minutes later I returned to the kitchen to finish off my tuna-balls in white wine sauce, and to listen to phone-in reactions to the broadcast. There were many – and, to my astonishment, all but one was wholly supportive of me. The dissenting voice was from a woman who, while agreeing that Williams was a raving headcase, accused me of being equally intolerant, and asserted that I had no right to call myself a freethinker.

This prompted me to blast off another email. In it I provided two definitions of the word "freethinker", provided by the on-line *Your Dictionary.com*. The first is "a person who forms opinions about religion, politics, morals, etc, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief" and the second is "One who has rejected authority and dogma, especially in religious thinking, in favour of rational inquiry and speculation". This, I hoped, would be aired to underpin my claim to being a *bona fide* freethinker, but alas, it was not broadcast.

You cannot win 'em all, but I was nonetheless elated that I had been given an opportunity to bring the magazine and its website to the attention of a great many listeners in Spain and to demonstrate what a thoroughly nasty piece of work Williams really is.

What a shame, though, that it was on a station which hosts so many bloody basket-cases.



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EDITOR

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Secularist of the Year to be announced in London this month

CONTENDERS for the title of Secularist of the Year 2011 have been named by the organisers of the £5,000 award scheme, sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin and organised by the National Secular Society.

The winner will be announced at a luncheon on Saturday, March 19, in central London.

The nominees include journalist Polly Toynbee, comedian and singer Tim Minchin, the Dutch MEP Sophie in't Veld, the late Salmaan Taseer, Pakistani provincial governor who was murdered earlier this year, comedian Pat Condell, human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell, author and commentator Christopher Hitchens, and Geoffrey Robinson QC.

Penny Thornton nominated Toynbee, saying "I feel that the philosophies and ideals of secularism are always to the forefront in her many excellent articles in the *Guardian* and other newspapers and that she reaches and influences many people and enables them to see the world and events in this country in a new light."

There were three nominations for Tim Minchin, one from David Cutts who said: "His show is loud, funny and terrifically rational, communicating strong humanity at the same time." Berni Lowe nominated Tim for his sterling work in debunking many of the myths of the Church and of religion. His skilful use of lampoon and *reductio ad absurdum* successfully ridicule the ridiculous.

Jenny Southwell nominated Sophie in't Veld, the Dutch MEP "who runs the committee to promote secularism in the European Parliament. She works very hard to promote secular ideas in an institution that is increasingly influenced by religious bodies, particularly the Catholic Church. She needs every support she can get in this vital work."

Anthony Cox suggested Salmaan Taseer, who was murdered on January 4 after criticising Pakistan's blasphemy laws. Anthony said: "I feel it is important that we support those in countries who fight secular causes in the most dangerous of environments."

Anthony Niall plumped for comedian and commentator Pat Condell for his "witty and brave critique of Islam, which leaves other more anaemic sections of the secularist movement standing".

Will Perry suggested Christopher Hitchens – "not because this may be your last

chance to honour him, but because he has lead the fight against the ghastly and the gullible in the crucible of contrition with his face to the bitter wind, and he has not blinked, not once."

Mandy Henson thought Peter Tatchell would be a worthy winner "for his many secular campaigns during the year, including defending free speech for homophobic street preachers and seeking to extend marriage rights to gay people."

Marco Tranchino put forward Geoffrey Robertson QC for his book *The Case of the Pope* and his support for the Protest the Pope demonstration.

Tickets for the event are £45 each (special rate of £15 for students) and can be purchased securely online at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/secularist-of-the-year-2011.html> or by post at NSS (SoY), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.



Tim Minchin is a popular contender for the Irwin Prize

Please remember to mention the names of everyone in your party and whether any of them have special dietary requirements.

Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain needs your support

MARYAM Namazie, spokesperson for the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, last month issued an emergency appeal for funds, saying: "The CEMB is in the worst financial situation since its inception".

She explained: "It is incredibly hard to get support for our work from funders, even some who might be perceived as allies. The media and government, too, continue to avoid real discussion on the issues at hand. That's why we have to depend on you for your help in getting the word out, supporting ex-Muslims and challenging Islamism and sharia law, which punishes 'apostates' with the death penalty.

Since its establishment in 2007, the CEMB has become a refuge for people who have left Islam. It is a hugely important sanctuary for women and men who face threats, intimidation and/or isolation for taking this step.

Namazie added: "Since our inception, we've always been here to help – whether it is finding a safe house and giving support or defending the right to asylum for 'apostates' fleeing sharia law.

"In the past year, we've helped hundreds of people, held an important conference on Apostasy and Sharia Law, had speaking engagements across the country and developed a number of crucial resources including Guidelines for Ex-Muslims and Frontline Practitioners and an information document on Apostasy and Asylum in the UK.

"But all this work needs money. We hope you can take time out to send us a donation. Any amount, whatever you can give, will truly help. We are looking for people to give just £3 a month (more, if possible), so that we can begin to have an income that we can rely on."

To donate to the crucial work of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, please either send a cheque, made payable to CEMB, to BM Box 1919, London WC1N 3XX, UK or pay via World Pay by visiting: <http://www.onelawforall.org.uk/donate/>



Secularism and bad weather blamed for falling Church of England attendances

Attendance at Easter services remained virtually the same as 2008 with 1,411,200, but the number of people attending Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services fell by nine per cent from 2,647,200 in 2008 to 2,420,600 in 2009.

The Church of England said Christmas services had been badly affected by the widespread snow and ice, which had forced some churches to cancel their services.

Overall, the total number of adults, children and young people attending local churches fell by two per cent between 2002 and 2009. The total number of baptisms also dropped by one per cent on 2008 figures, while the number of thanksgivings for the birth of a child fell by two per cent. The number of marriages taking place in parish churches also fell by one per cent to 52,700.

The Church of England's head of research and statistics, the Rev Lynda Barley, said the figures painted a mixed picture for

Continued from page 1

2009. She admitted that there are "continued challenges" for the Church but added that there were also some "encouraging" signs. "Churches continue to be central to community life and are responding positively to changes in modern-day lifestyles with a growing range of opportunities to participate in church life," she said.

Rev Barley said it was important to see the trends in the context of wider changes in a society where fewer people join and take part in membership organisations.

"Even in a General Election year, almost double the number of members of the three main political parties taken together will attend a Church of England parish church on Sunday," she said.

"Nevertheless, the figures are a further reminder of the importance, highlighted in the report 'Challenges for the Quinquenni-

um', of achieving sustained numerical and spiritual growth over the coming years."

The report, which was debated in General Synod last month, warns that the next five years are "set to be a period of exceptional challenge for the nation and the Church of England".

The size and ageing profile of many congregations "point to the need for new imagination and creativity in the way the Church demonstrates in this generation its faithfulness to the Great Commission", it states. The report also notes the challenges posed by secularisation and attempts to marginalise religion, stating that the "increasingly secular assumptions" within society "make it all the more important that the Church takes seriously the need to celebrate, profile and support the work of active Anglicans making important contributions at all levels in the public and private sector".

Queensland dad challenges chaplaincy programme

A QUEENSLAND father has issued writs in the High Court against the Commonwealth Government and Scripture Union Queensland, alleging the Government has breached the Australian Constitution through its funding of a chaplain at his children's school.

Ron Williams, the father of four children attending a public school in Toowoomba, argues that Commonwealth funding of the school's chaplain breaches sections 54 and 116 of the Constitution.

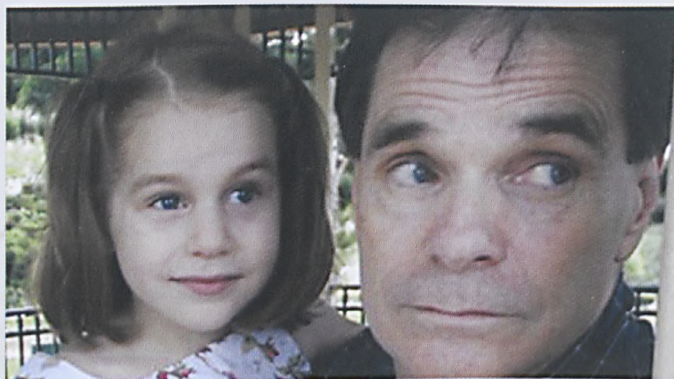
The chaplain is funded under the National Schools Chaplaincy Program (NSCP), which has provided places for 2,700 chaplains in schools throughout Australia at a cost of many millions of tax dollars.

Ironically, in August 2010, the newly appointed *atheist* Prime Minister of Australia, Julia Gillard pledged a further \$222-million toward extending the programme to at least 1,000 more Australian schools. This sum was to represent almost one third of Labor's entire education budget of \$704m.

Williams argues that the Commonwealth Government failed to follow the proper constitutional requirements in funding the NSCP, and in its agreement with Scripture Union to place a chaplain at his children's school.

Mr Williams also argues that the NSCP requires that those appointed to the public office of school chaplain at his children's school are subject to a religious test. That is, they must be practising Christians, regulated and trained by Scripture Union. This, he says, breaches section 116 of the Constitution which states that "no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public test under the Commonwealth".

The case has sparked fierce debate in Australia – and has served to focus attention on the issue of gay bullying in schools which a number



Ron Williams with one of his daughters.

Photo: Lyndon Mechielsen *The Daily Telegraph, Australia*

of commentators claim is the result of anti-gay propaganda unleashed among youngsters by fundamentalist Christian chaplains."

One, Chrys Stevenson, recently pointed out that "research studies reveal that one-third of all teenagers who commit suicide are gay. Considering that gay teens only comprise one-tenth of the school population, this means that they are 300 percent more likely to kill themselves than heterosexual youth.

"So to whom do we entrust these vulnerable young people? Evangelistic, fundamentalist Christians. As Adele Horin wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*: '... Religious institutions remain the last bastion of bigotry. They have resisted the evidence from health and legal professionals that homosexuality is a normal part of human sexuality. They have instead maintained a hardline interpretation of a few scattered references in the Bible ... Church leaders should be spreading a message of love and acceptance of gays. Instead, they are part of the problem'.

Stephen Green plays the victim card following a report of his brutality toward his ex-wife and kids

CHRISTIANVOICE zealot Stephen Green has responded to a recent article in the *Daily Mail*, which exposed him as a violent, dictatorial wife-beater.

Best known for his obsession with homosexuality, Green posted on his recently launched ChristianVoiceUK blog a statement in which he said: "Firstly, I never once had sexual relations with my former wife against her clearly expressed wish. Secondly, in connection with the published allegations that I assaulted her, the truth, sadly, is the complete opposite. I had to obtain a harassment order against her to stop a campaign of intimidation and on one of the occasions when she assaulted me, I reported the matter to the police and she received a police caution."

Green also asserted that he was a victim of defamatory journalism: "The article was a catalogue of smears and distortions stitched together by a tabloid journalist [Frances Hardy] who specialises in TV, celebrities, women's features and gossip. She also has an anti-Christian agenda. Just over a year ago, she wrote a sycophantic piece exalting the pro-paedophilia campaigner Peter Tatchell. In April this year, she gushed over the first two lesbians who have jointly put their names on the birth certificate of the baby born to one of them."

Then he whined: "None of us is perfect, we are all sinners saved by grace, but I sincerely tried to lead my marriage and household in a loving and responsible way, and one which was faithful to the Lord. There are things I dearly wish I could have done differently, but sadly none of us can ever start from somewhere different from where we are."

The *Daily Mail* article claimed that Green often punished his ex-wife Caroline, 59, for failing to be a dutiful and compliant wife. She told the paper that Green wrote a list of her failings, then described the weapon he would make to beat her with. "He told me he'd make a piece of wood into a sort of witch's broom and hit me with it, which he did. He hit me until I bled. I was terrified. I can still remember the pain."

She added: "Stephen listed my misdemeanours: I was disrespectful and disobedient; I wasn't loving or submissive enough and I was undermining him. He also said I wasn't giving him his conjugal rights."

"He even framed our marriage vows – he always put particular emphasis on my promise to obey him – and hung them over our bed. He believed there was no such thing as marital rape and for years I'd been reluctant

to have sex with him, but he said it was my duty and was angry if I refused him. But the beating was the last straw. It convinced me I had to divorce him."

The paper said that "during the time he was terrorising his wife and their four children, he was also revelling in his self-appointed public role as guardian of the nation's morality. He routinely inveighs against the abolition of the death penalty, no-fault divorce, Islam, abortion and, his particular *bête noir*, homosexuality. Violent crime and rape, he laments on his website, have risen dramatically in the past 50 years, while he points out that 'virtue is derided'."

Caroline, 59, said: "Whenever I watch him on TV spouting verses from the Bible, or see him quoted in a newspaper, it turns my stomach. I've decided to tell the truth about him now because the people who support him financially and morally should know what he is really like."

She added: "He had very high expectations of the children; nothing they did was ever good enough. He bullied them mentally and manipulated them. And they always had to be chaperoned. He wouldn't countenance them having boyfriends or girlfriends."

There were occasions when his explosions of wrath became physical. He assaulted not



Stephen Green

only Caroline, but their sons. She said: "He beat our middle son with a belt, in front of his best friend, for answering him back. I tried to intervene but he pushed me away. My eldest son was hit with a broomstick and kicked on the back of his legs. He still has scars on his shins. On one occasion Stephen beat him so hard with a piece of wood that we thought he might have broken his arm. When we took him to hospital, my son pretended he'd fallen because he didn't want to incur his father's anger."

Rabbinical trio slam Internet use



The Internet is an abomination say these bearded horrors: Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (left), Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (centre) and Shmuel Halevi Wosner

THREE Israeli rabbis have added their weight to a new ultra-Orthodox campaign which uses scare tactics to prevent their communities from surfing the Internet.

The campaign claims that the Internet, among other things, causes droughts and cancer. One poster in an Haredi area claims: "Where there is Internet, there are no rains. Let's remove the idolatry from among us. Hundreds of thousands of cancer patients (suffer) because of the Internet."

YNet News reported that, fearing the community's exposure to secular culture, different establishments within the Haredi sector published the intimidating declarations, in addition to quotes from prominent rabbis – among them Rabbi Ovadia Yosef – that describe Internet use as the root of impurity. Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv was quoted as saying: "The connection to the Internet is an abomination, and the one who does it in his home brings abomination into his home." And Rabbi Shmuel Halevi Wosner reportedly said: "The Internet causes disease and all types of adversity. Since the creation of the world, there has never been invented a tool so dangerous and corrupting like it."

Upsurge of religious violence

Indonesians were left reeling last month from one of their country's worst incidents of religious violence in years. Ironically, the violence broke out on February 6 in Pandeglang in Banten Province in western Java, not far from Jakarta, at the start of Interfaith Harmony Week, launched amid considerable pomp and ceremony at the Jakarta Convention Centre.

Out of keeping with the more prevalent pattern of Muslim-versus-Christian attacks, this was mob violence by Muslims against men who claimed to be their own fellows: members of an Islamic sect called the Ahmadiyah.

Three Ahmadis were killed and five seriously injured in a frenzy of violence: footage of the assault was deemed too graphic to be shown on Indonesian TV news, which tends to have a fairly high tolerance for the stuff. Instead the footage is circulating on the Internet.

Now Indonesians are asking what could have motivated religious people to commit such a barbaric act ("sadistic" is a word being bandied around)—and why the police were so feeble in their attempts to stop it.

The Ahmadiyah sect was established in India in 1889; modern Ahmadis believe that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet and messiah. This, of course, contradicts orthodox strains of Islam, which all hold that Mohammed was the final prophet.

Non-Ahmadi Muslims have long regarded Ahmadiyah as an apostasy. Its adherents are a persecuted minority almost everywhere they are to be found: the Pakistani Taliban carried out an especially terrible massacre of Ahmadi worshippers in May 2010. There have been attacks on them before in Indonesia, perhaps three in the past decade, but nothing remotely as gruesome as what happened last month.

A local group of Ahmadis had gathered at the home of their leader and refused to disperse, despite complaints made by their neighbours. A 1,500-strong mob then arrived at the house, dragged the people from inside their mosque and fell on them with machetes, knives and sticks.

An *Ahmadiyya Times* reporter wrote "the sheer savagery of the attack shocked the rest of the country. Many Indonesians also felt let down by the police, not for the first time. The local police had been aware of the threat posed to the Ahmadis, and indeed they asked them to leave, for their



Members of the the Alliance of Muslims in West Java recently held a rally in Bandung demanding the government ban the Ahmadiyah sect which has been deemed heretical by the Indonesian Ulema Council. (Photo: JP/Yuli Tri Suwarni)

own safety. The Ahmadis had replied that it was the police's job to guarantee their safety, according to the Constitution.

"The footage of the attack shows that the police's attempts to stop the mob were half-hearted at best. To critics of Indonesia's police force, their pitiful effort was further proof of a lack of direction and authority at the top. The president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, has dithered in his defence of Ahmadiyah, sometimes suggesting that he might sympathise with its persecutors. As one disappointed adviser to the government told me, yet again the state has proven itself to be weak and ineffective when it comes to upholding laws concerning the freedom of religion."

The human rights NGO Imparsial has also condemned the government for its failure to protect the Ahmadis. "Once again, the police – a state apparatus – have failed to guarantee religious freedom by protecting Ahmadis from violence. In fact, the police seem to have ignored the attack instead of strictly enforcing the law by arresting the violent offenders," Imparsial program director Al Araf said in a statement.

Imparsial urged the Banten police chief to immediately order an investigation and arrest the murderer or murderers. "The police must act quickly because Ahmadiyah followers are no different than any other

civilians whose rights are protected by the 1945 Constitution," Al Araf said.

Meanwhile, the Wahid Institute blamed the repeated anti-Ahmadiyah violence on President Yudhoyono. "Violence against Ahmadiyah followers happens almost every day throughout the country. And yet, the President does not take that into account," the institute's program coordinator, Rumadi, said.

The attack on the Ahmadis was immediately followed by a riot in which a Muslim mob of around 1,500 trashed a courtroom and set fire to churches and schools in a protest over a "too light" sentence demanded by prosecutors for a Christian accused of blasphemy.

Violence broke out after a five-year sentence – the maximum allowed under Indonesian law – was imposed on Antonius Richmond Bawengan, 58, who had been accused of distributing materials that insulted Islam.

Bawengan was tried for distributing books and flyers in October last year which described the Black Stone, or al-Hajaru-l-Aswad, on the Kaaba in the Grand Mosque in Mecca as looking like a woman's genitals.

Muslim pilgrims circle the Kaaba as part of the Tawaf ritual of the Haj. Many of them try, if possible, to stop and kiss the Black Stone, emulating the kiss that Is-

Violence leaves Indonesia reeling

Islamic tradition records it received from the "Prophet" Mohammed.

The material that Bawengan is accused of distributing also described the jamarat – three stone pillars in the city of Mina just east of Mecca which worshippers throw stones at during the Haj – as looking like a man's genitals.

According to this report, police fired warning shots and used tear gas to restore calm in the district of Temanggung, 400km east of Jakarta, after the violence initially broke out at the Temanggung District Court but quickly spilled onto the streets with the crowd demanding the accused be given the death penalty.

Protesters demanded that Bawengan be handed over, and chanted "kill, kill" outside the court as he was led away under heavy security.

There were also sporadic clashes with police before calm was restored.

Bawengan, who has been in custody since October 26, has also been accused of describing Islam as a "cruel religion".

Meanwhile, it was reported last month by *Ecumenical News International* that Indonesia is being urged to repeal its blasphemy laws and provide greater protection to religious minorities – including Christians and the Muslim Ahmadiyya sect – in order to safe-



The Black Stone in Mecca, and the three stone pillars at Mina, were likened to female and male genitalia by Antonius Richmond Bawengan.

guard its reputation as one of the world's most progressive and tolerant Muslim-majority countries.

"If extremists are allowed to continue to terrorise religious minorities with impunity, Indonesia's tradition of pluralism and religious freedom will be under threat," Kiri Kankhwende of Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) told *ENI News*.

According to CSW's Advocacy Director Andrew Johnson, "Over the past two years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of violent attacks against religious minorities in Indonesia, which is a cause

for serious concern."

A Far East specialist at CSW told *ENI News* that there is no clear answer to why anti-Christian violence has escalated in recent months.

He said that some Muslim countries were taking their lead from Pakistan when it came to attacking non-Muslims accused of making blasphemous statements which offends followers of Islam. He said that at the same time, leaders of major religions in Indonesia are increasing their efforts to promote inter-faith dialogue and harmony. "They must be encouraged," he said.

Multiculturalism: Cameron comes under fire

BRITISH Prime Minister David Cameron has been attacked by religious figures, trade unionists and others who have accused him of divisive and simplistic politics, treating Muslims as "the enemy within" and turning the clock back "to the days when it was acceptable, through ignorance and fear, for people with a different religion, culture or skin colour to be scapegoated and treated as inferior or outsiders."

In an open letter to the *Guardian* last month, a number of his critics wrote:

"We believe David Cameron's statement that multiculturalism has failed was a dangerous declaration of intent ... His speech was reminiscent of Margaret Thatcher's infamous 1978 statement that Britain was 'being swamped by alien cultures'. He has branded Britain's Muslims as the new 'enemy within' in the same way as Thatcher attacked the miners and trade unions.

"David Cameron is attempting to drive a wedge between different communities by

linking Britain's multicultural society with terrorism and national security ...

"Mr Cameron's aim is simple as it is crude – to deflect the anger against his government's cuts from the bankers and on to the Muslim community.

"The prime minister is aping attacks by other European leaders like France's Nicolas Sarkozy, who passed legislation banning the veil, and Angela Merkel, who has also made statements denouncing multiculturalism in Germany. We believe our multicultural society and the respect and solidarity it is built on is a cause for pride, and reject any moves by this government to undermine and destroy it.

"We must not allow this coalition government to turn the tide back to the days when it was acceptable, through ignorance and fear, for people with a different religion, culture or skin colour to be scapegoated and treated as inferior or outsiders."

While some in Britain, like Cameron, are

having serious doubts about multiculturalism, some parts of Canada appear to be embracing it with great gusto.

It was reported last month in Ontario's *The Record* that prayer rooms in Ontario "could become commonplace" in public and Catholic schools. A province-wide policy says that school boards must be more inclusive and accommodate different faiths. The newly adopted Faith Accommodation policy states that each student has a right to follow his or her beliefs free from discrimination or harassment. Areas of reasonable accommodation include observance of major religious holy days and celebrations, prayers and rituals, dietary requirements and fasting, religious attire and participation in school curriculum and extracurricular activities.

Said public school trustee Cindy Watson: "Someone's faith is part of who they are. Accommodating them brings understanding and shows we respect them."

SURVIVING DEATH

Before Life – LIFE – After Life

After recently undergoing surgery, **JAMES MERRYWEATHER** got to think long and hard about the implications life beyond the grave

Horace Wells was a sensitive American dentist who thoroughly disliked hurting his patients. In 1844 he made the intellectual connection between nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and analgesia – insensitivity to pain. He was attending a performance by “Itinerant Chemist” Gardner Quincy Colton when he noticed that one of the volunteer gas-sniffers named Cooley, who had breathed the gas and was cavorting drug-crazed about the stage, barked his shin against a settee but exhibited no signs of the pain he ought to have felt.

Following a revealing chat with Colton, Wells arranged to have one of his wisdom teeth extracted after breathing nitrous oxide until totally unconscious. Like Cooley, he felt no pain. Relieved that he need no longer hurt people when helping them he is said to have exclaimed: “A new era in tooth-pulling!”

What an understatement that was, for his observation marked the beginning of the science of pain relief we now take for granted when confidently presenting ourselves for dentistry or surgery. From the time early man first attempted to cure himself of disease until October 18, 1844, dental and surgical treatments always involved excruciating, unmitigated pain. Within two years of Wells’s discovery, nitrous oxide, which when administered undiluted could have disastrous side effects, had been replaced with ether. Then, from 1853, when Queen Victoria was delivered of her eighth child senseless under chloroform, anaesthesia became established practice. It was what humankind wanted and needed, at last after thousands of years putting up with appallingly pain.

What a truly wonderful discovery that was, allowing the pain of medical treatment to be abolished for ever. These days, since 1884, anaesthesia can be local, providing insensitivity to pain whilst the patient remains fully conscious, or general, during which the patient is entirely unaware of proceedings no matter how unpleasant



Horace Wells

they would be without. We can learn a lot about ourselves from the latter.

During a recent stay in hospital, post-operatively lying in my hospital bed with time to think, I cast my mind back to the time I spent as subject of the surgeon’s undivided attention. I recall being shunted into the preparation room where I was rapidly surrounded by anaesthetists and surgical assistants with whom I chatted and joked as they fitted the plumbing necessary to keep me asleep and alive during surgery.

At a certain point I knew I would soon be passing out – they told me so – and as far as I was concerned that was when our jolly interaction ended. They must have known otherwise. When the surgeon came to check on me the following day he referred to the conversation we had had just before I was wheeled into theatre. I was certain that that was the first time I had seen him since I arrived at the hospital and had no recollection of our pre-operative chat. Presumably I was so dozey by the time he came to fetch me the event had not been recorded as a memory.

From shortly before talking to the surgeon until I woke up, trundling along the corridor returning to the hospital ward, I could remember nothing. As far as I was concerned I never even entered the operating theatre. Not only do I have no memory from that period, but no matter

how hard I try to find them in my brain I can’t sense any feelings or sensations of any sort. I can shut my eyes and concentrate on occurrences from decades ago and wallow in the feelings and emotions I felt at the time, but I have not the slightest residue of sensation, let alone memory, from that missing hour of my life.

I have checked this against the three other times I spent under general anaesthesia and those are the only occasions in my entire life when I can sense that my accessible memory is utterly blank. It’s like placing a new CD-ROM in the computer’s disc drive and examining the contents with Windows Explorer in the hope of finding interesting files there. You can left click and double click till you’re blue in the face but no file names appear and no files open. There’s nothing there. The anaesthesia ‘experience’ (n.b. the point is there is none) is a glorious, deeply restful void; time spent doing and feeling nothing; utter oblivion.

Anyone who has experienced general anaesthesia – other than those few for whom its effects turn out to be, usually after the event, imperfect – know that it is deeper or perhaps blanker than the deepest sleep, profound unconsciousness, total blackout, mental vacuum, complete and absolute nothingness. When you wake up afterwards you have witnessed none of the distress recently inflicted upon your body by the surgeon – or anything else.

Correspondence with a minister of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) enabled me to explore this topic with a man of the cloth. In response to a draft of this discussion he told me:

“You raise the interesting question as to what happens under anaesthetic. Actually I would simply see anaesthetic as being the same as a deep sleep. I believe there are different levels of sleep. In some you dream and in others the mind is resting.”

My contradiction came to mind effortlessly: there are indeed different levels of sleep recognised by science and everybody’s experience, but if during any of them a surgeon were to open up your abdomen

and rummage around, whipping out appendix or gall stones, you'd soon wake up! Even a pinprick on the finger would likely make you jump. Sleep and anaesthesia may seem to be alike but they are certainly not analogous.

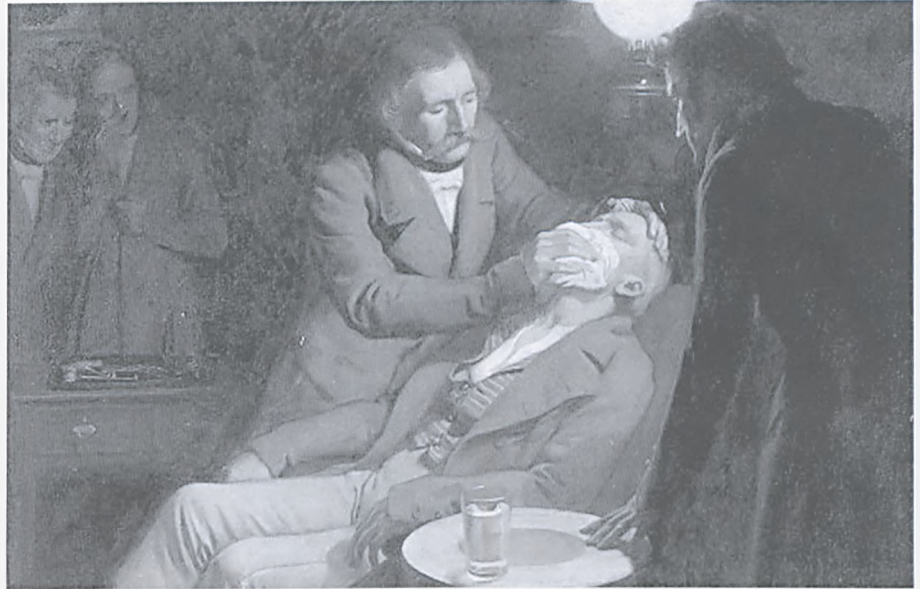
A more valid analogy, as far as I can tell, would be between my four experiences of anaesthesia and the grasp I had of existence from 13.72 billion years ago until the emergence of my first recognisable memories in April 1950, aged two, which was absolute zero. So far as I can see, consciousness before existence is pretty well the same as consciousness when we are totally unconscious and vice versa.

We are told we have an immortal soul that, when we die, will rejoice in Heaven or wail eternally in Hell, depending on our behaviour in this life. Having established that when anaesthetised I was aware of nothing, what was my soul doing then? If the soul is aware of its reward or punishment in death, then when all else is blacked out, surely it must at least continue to observe. If I, as my soul, am to experience the afterlife during death, surely I, as my soul, should have some recall of the oblivion I experience whilst similarly unconscious?

The obvious next question is, what would have happened if instead of waking up after the operation I had remained unconscious for ever or died? In order to move on to and become aware of the alleged afterlife, my immortal soul would have needed to take over, to awaken, to switch on. What would that be like? With a deft swipe of Occam's razor¹, it seems sensible not to complicate the scenario by adding the soul, and accept that a death that follows seamlessly from anaesthesia would feel no different from the anaesthesia itself – nothing.

At the other end of life, what do I expect consciousness to be like when I depart from this world; when my brain ceases to function and my body slowly disintegrates into the elements of which it spent three score years and ten (more, hopefully) organised into the form, mind and functioning of me? I expect – should it be otherwise? – no consciousness, total unawareness, very similar to or more likely exactly the same as that vastly long period of prenatal vacuity and relatively brief anaesthetic coma. The last thing I expect to encounter is anything at all, including awareness of a busy afterlife.

How could I experience an afterlife if, as is amply demonstrated by anaesthesia, I would have no faculties for its perception? Also, if I do have supernatural faculties for



An illustration of the first use of ether as an anaesthetic in 1846 by the dental surgeon W T G Morton

the perception of the afterlife, why do they not offer me at least hints to what it will be like, particularly when I'm unconscious? Is ours not to reason why; just have faith, jolly well die – and then we'll find out? Bah!

In which version of the afterlife would I live? There are many worldwide to choose from, assuming choice is an option in so serious a matter and assuming you believe in any of it. Afterlives are exclusive functions of religions, so because I was born in a so-called Christian country in a Congregational Free Church community, I suppose it would have to be a conventional Catholic Heaven-Hell situation as refined by Protestants Luther, Calvin *et al*, diluted and modified in subsequent centuries by priests, theologians, writers and artists. That hardly narrows it down. There are so many versions and variants, it's difficult to work out what I am expected to believe in.

Hang on a mo'. As an atheist, do I not have the same right of choice as a Hindu or Daoist what to believe? I don't believe. If they can have an afterlife simply by believing in it, can I not choose to have no afterlife, as suits my particular lack of beliefs? That's good enough for me.

As I write, not long out of hospital after the anaesthesia experience that generated this essay, I feel more than ever disposed not to bother with the notion of any afterlife (zero minus some equals zero in all its almost negative totality). If I have the soul that Christians insist I own, what was it up to when I was out for the count on the operating table? Should it not have been somewhere in my awareness, perhaps even looking over or protecting me? I was unconscious and this alleged soul did not

supply me with any information or care whatsoever. What was it doing before I was born and what will it do that I could ever be aware of after I am dead? The most sensible conclusion is that I will have no awareness of it because it was then, is now, and ever shall be, 100 percent absent.

We are told *ad nauseam* that this immortal soul we own will languish for all eternity in Heaven or Hell (a slightly different story from those barny End Times Christians, about whose Rapture we'll find out in 2012 or possibly sooner on 21 May 2011 ... or not), but we are never given any indication when that soul will be alerted of our demise, and, as it were, turned on, so that we may experience our Heavenly delights or Hellish torment. If, as is likely (!), I am to burn for ever in the fires of Hell, then I will need to be aware of being there in order to get full benefit of my punishment. I suspect that priests have no real idea and I must tackle one or two of them on the topic to find out what they really think.

Apologies, reader: I sense this argument is going round and round in circles. Why? Because it is based upon other people's very silly premises, stuff we should not be spending time over. Besides anaesthesia, we might also care to consider "consciousness" during the unconsciousness of persistent vegetative state and following cranial concussion, but why waste any more time and ink? If it were really necessary to consider the afterlife at all, the experience of general anaesthesia indicates that, no matter what imaginary soul and its accompanying afterlife supernatural-believers may

(Continued on p10)

Before Life – LIFE – After life

care to invent, it is most unlikely that we would know anything about it. If it is true, why is it entirely undetectable, available only as a dogmatic prediction supported only by the interpretation of imprecise, out-of-date scriptural authority; just like all the other supernatural tenets of religion? If it is real, why do religions differ about what the afterlife will be like and by what manner we must embark upon it? They all insist theirs is the truest and best but none of them is at all convincing and all but one must be wrong.

We modern atheists are not, by a long chalk, the first to posit an alternative to the religious worldview or to question the concept of afterlife and press for evidence to underpin all those unfounded beliefs. Around AD 165 the Syrian satirist Lucian wrote, in *The Passing of Peregrinus*: “The poor wretches [Christians] have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time ... by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines

Blasphemy in Pakistan: Rehman drops efforts to change law

FOLLOWING the report in last month's *Freethinker* that Sherry Rehman, a member of the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), had proposed changes to her country's notorious blasphemy law, we learned last month that the courageous politician had withdrawn the bill she tabled in the national assembly.

Samaa TV reported that Rehman withdrew the bill on the directions of Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

Gilani had announced that there will be no amendment in the blasphemy law and that he would soon invite religious parties to discuss the issue to dispel fears in this regard.

Speaking to Samaa TV, Rehman said she was bound to follow the party line. “When the Prime Minister publicly announced that the current regime does not intend to bring about any change in the blasphemy law, I had to withdraw the bill”, she said.

Rehman faced death threats over her attempt to modify the law, and had been advised to flee the country.

(Continued from p9)

traditionally without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple folk.”

For writing this and a lot of other strident material, is Lucian currently and in perpetuity roasting in the underworld and does he know that's what's happening to him? I very much doubt it. A prerequisite of physical pain, the main feature of this punishment imagined by Christians as the fate of non-Christians, is a physical body with which to feel it. In death – after a brief spell of decomposition and dispersal, and until the end of time – we have no such body.

The likelihood is that after life we return to the consciousness state we enjoyed during pre-life – profoundly numb nothingness – and that is rather like (I contend exactly like) being under general anaesthesia, which is indistinguishable from being stone dead. Any immortality we may achieve remains in this world, in the tangible achievements we recorded during our lifetime and the conscious memories, ephemeral like ours, of our descendants.

I terminated my e-mail exchange with the aforementioned minister with the following, which I hope conveys the – *ahem* – intensity of my fear of the afterlife: “I commend you for, throughout this correspondence, avoiding the subject of my inevitable fall from grace when this life is over, which might have brought our dialogue screeching to a halt. Unfortunately, whilst you did so, you concurrently failed to address the most powerful and pressing of my arguments. (Maybe I convinced you, rendering further discussion unnecessary.) From your writings and sermons I know you will surely consider that my ultimate fate will be the Hell that Christ so lovingly promised, with extravagant Renaissance elaboration, courtesy of your decidedly unpleasant Reformation predecessors. Of course, I don't believe a jot of it. But in case I'm wrong (I confidently think not) and do wind up eternally roasting down below, I ask that when you ascend to the post-mortal realm of your deserving, you team up with old Tom Aquinas and invite him to share his favourite entertainment with you, a little merry *schadenfreude* at my justly earned expense – and please call down to let me know you're there and I'll join in the fun. :-)”

Postscript: I've just been back to hospital for more general anaesthesia, whilst getting

the other hand's fingers, curling due to Dupuytren's Contracture, surgically straightened. The experience was no different: total unawareness and amnesia.

Remarkably, my anaesthetist was a chap I'd met at a creation “science” lecture, organised by Culloden Gospel Hall, where I was the only biologist/atheist present. (I'm currently writing about that mind-expanding experience.) He was clutching his Bible, he is a Gospel Hall member and they are fundamentalist Christians. In spite of the massive incongruence in our attitudes to religion we got on famously. He visited me in the ward the following morning and I presented him with this article to see what such a Christian might make of it.

His preliminary response showed how different are our views. “Why doesn't the soul ‘override’ the pharmacological effects of general anaesthesia? I don't know”. Well, I agree with that, but he continued, offering a suggestion based on the (I say false) premise that the soul is not of the material world and, therefore, not a matter for scientific appraisal. That, of course, reveals his faith in the soul's existence and that means he is satisfied with his case that depends on the existence of something undetectable that nobody has witnessed. I fear that makes mutually satisfactory continuation of this dialogue difficult if not impossible. It also deflects the discussion into intellectual territory where, Christians confidently claim, the faith card trumps all. We've been through all this over the existence of that super-fiction God, but I'm willing to continue this endless discussion, if only because I'm fascinated by other people's preposterous notions and the puzzle of why they adhere to them.

1. Sadly, Wells became the victim of unforeseen side effects of his own discovery. He became addicted to chloroform, committed an assault, was imprisoned and slashed his wrists whilst under self-administered chloroform anaesthesia. Inventive, but tragic.

2. An extremist offshoot through schism (2000) within the notoriously strict Free Church of Scotland, the “Wee Frees” Schism is second nature to these people, who argue like ferrets in a sack over doctrinal *minutiae*. In Britain you would be hard pressed to find a more fundamentalist sect of “right-thinking Bible interpreters”. <http://www.freekirkcontinuing.co.uk>

3. William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349) wrote: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. Entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity; ie don't make it any more complicated than need be. Christopher Hitchens, 2007: “The razor of Ockham is clean and decisive. When two explanations are offered, one must discard the one that explains the least or explains nothing at all, or raises more questions than it answers.”

Saints, Miracles and the Media

WILLIAM HARWOOD is appalled at the uncritical coverage of John Paul II's newly-declared status as 'Blessed'

Almost every day I watch world news broadcasts on BBC (England), NBC (America), and CBC (Canada). On a January day in 2011 all three networks credulously reported a claim by the Pope that a prayer directed to his immediate predecessor, John Paul II, had effected a cancer cure, and that JP II was henceforth to be titled "Blessed."

No network raised the question of whether the alleged spontaneous remission had really happened, and none pointed out the logical flaw in Ratzinger's "*post hoc ergo propter hoc*" reasoning.

It is no secret that the BBC is a conscienceless puppet of the Vatican crime syndicate. But what excuse do the North American networks have?

Imagine the Head Scientologist claiming (a purely hypothetical scenario) that a prayer to Lafayette Ron Hubbard had cured Tom Cruise of the gays, and Hubbard was henceforth to be venerated as Saint Ronald. Would the media publicize such a claim as if it had as much credibility as a report that Ellen DeGeneres had married her girlfriend?

Under Catholic dogma, a saint is anyone a Pope says is a saint. The general public tends to have its own definition, and see a saint as a totally admirable person whose devotion to justice, decency and altruism goes above and beyond the call of duty. Does John Paul II conform to that standard? Certainly he went to extraordinary lengths to protect the Catholic Church's reputation in the face of ever-increasing reports of priestly pedophilia, ordering the victims of priestly molestation to remain silent under threat of excommunication, and transferring accused priests to different locations where they could continue their child-rapes without interference.

But ordering the cover-up of priestly atrocities was merely the tip of the iceberg. A committee of clergy and laity appointed by John XXIII to examine the Church's intransigent stand on birth control overwhelmingly recommended to John's successor, Paul VI, that the ban on contraception be reversed. Paul VI was on the point of implementing that recommendation, when the future John Paul II pointed out that, "If the church sent all of those souls [who practised birth control] to hell, it must keep maintaining that that is where they are." In other words,



How nice: Pope JP is 'Blessed'

the Church's own doctrine decrees that the "blessed" JP II was in a position to free millions of dead people from hell, and chose not to do so because such an amnesty would cause the Church to lose face. That may be Joseph Ratzinger's concept of a saint. It is not any sane person's.

On the same day as the Vatican Führer's announcement of John Paul's beatification, the networks also reported that a congresswoman had survived a bullet through the brain, and broadcast interviews with as many people as they could find willing to identify the congresswoman's survival as a "miracle". Not one raised the self-evident reality that, if Mother Goose's male equivalent had indeed intervened to save the congresswoman's life, then it must have made the conscious decision to allow six others to be murdered. Why would a divine interventionist do that? Does it lack the omnipotence to have saved the other six? Or does it lack the benevolence to wish to do so? The only possible answer is that either there was no divine intervention, or

the intervener is a capricious, mass-murdering son of a bitch who plays favorites. I have yet to encounter a believer in miracles who is willing to consider that alternative.

At a time when belief in religion's all-powerful sky fairy is being systematically demolished by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Victor Stenger, and Daniel Dennett, and irrefutable proof of the non-existence of gods, devils, angels, saints and miracles is no further away from anyone in the Western world than the nearest university library, the mass media continue to keep the god delusion alive for the same reason they keep the astrology delusion alive: believers are their bread and butter, and truth-telling would cut into their profits. Or does anyone think that newspaper editors who choose to carry an astrology column take such bovine excrement seriously?

Miracles happen every day. All that is necessary in order to produce a miracle is to count the hits and ignore the misses. If enough people prayed to saint Hitler to recover from an illness, a predictable percentage would recover. If the Nazi Pope was unable to find the one cure that he could use to justify the beatification of his ultimate hero, that would be a real miracle.

I once prayed to the Flying Spaghetti Monster to protect me from finishing last in a cycling race, where past experience said I was bound to finish. A cyclist ahead of me was run over by a cement truck. I finished the race while his remains were being shoveled off the highway. The FSM answered my prayer! Miracle!

1. Garry Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, p 94.

Vatican rules against iPhone confessions

CATHOLICS cannot confess via iPhone, and technology is not a substitute for being present when admitting sins to a priest, the Vatican spokesman said last month.

The statement by Federico Lombardi follows the launch of an iPhone application aimed at helping Catholics through confession.

"One cannot speak in any way of confessing via iPhone," Lombardi said, adding that confession required the presence of the penitent and the priest. "This cannot be substituted by any IT application," Lombardi added.

Confession: A Roman Catholic App, thought to be the first to be approved by a church authority, walks Catholics through the sacrament and contains what the company behind the program describes as a "personalized examination of conscience for each user".

The application is not designed to replace going to confession but to help Catholics through the act, which generally involves admitting sins to a priest in a confessional booth. Some reports on its approval by the Catholic Church in the US had suggested confession would now be possible via iPhone.

SHALL we give thanks, oh Lord of Death
 Who seals the lips and shuts the eyes
 And chills the blood and stops the breath
 Of those who've lived with hopes and lies
 Till leprous Death upon them crept?
 Shall we join mocking rituals, wept?

Shall we give thanks, oh Lord of Pain
 For suffering so freely given
 Whose symbol is your tortured son
 And martyrdom your path to Heaven?
 Shall we give thanks, oh Lord of Strife
 Whose creatures live devouring life?

Shall we give thanks, oh Lord of Fear
 In supplication as we fall
 Wretches, imploring you to hear
 Yet your will willing, Lord of All?
 Your opaque judgements we must bless
 But at their justice only guess.

Shall we give thanks, oh Lord of Lies
 In gratitude – whatever for? –
 And, mouthing oiled hypocrisies
 Our prayers unanswered, bless you more?
 Your boundless love none can declare.
 For Christ's sake let us feel it here.

Shall we give thanks, oh Lord of Guilt
 Assured that all our weary works
 Are nothing more than waste and filth
 And to be damned our only worth?
 The service of a life span spurned
 Shall we give thanks not to be burned?

Thanksgiving

By JACK HASTIE

And shall we, Lord, our worship raise –
 The organ music swells and rolls –
 As, Parasite upon our praise
 You throb with strength sucked from our souls.
 By springs of crazed emotion fed
 Our hate and love, our guilt and dread?

Then shall we, flies against a pane
 Beat bluntly till our efforts ebb
 Seduced by what we can't attain
 Until at last the corner web
 Entangles us in death throes tight
 You, Spider, watching in delight?

Shall we give birth, oh Crucified
 To little children who will cheer
 Your name – and die, as we'll have died
 Yet pious generations rear
 So you, enslaved to adoration
 Are slaked through human procreation?

Or – shall we decline, oh Lord of Fate
 To breed and prostitute our race
 To crawl to deaths predestinate
 Gorging your vanity with praise?
 Let motherhood no more procure!
 Find other species for your whore!

So shall we, extinct, stop at last
 The fountains of your power and pride
 Till, Parasite without a host
 Our posthumous tyrannicide
 Gives you too rest, Vampire, and undoes
 The thralldom of the stake and cross.

So, let our ghosts – and yours, forgiven
 Dissolve into that arced abyss
 From which even you must once have risen
 Amid the birth of galaxies.
 Then yours may thank ours for release
 And galaxies recede in peace.

Government proposes church marriages for gay couples

THE British government announced last month it was planning to change the law and allow same-sex couples to have civil partnership ceremonies in places of worship.

The *Sunday Telegraph* newspaper reported that such ceremonies could be permitted to include religious elements for the first time, and *The Sunday Times* said the proposed marriage law reforms could also end the legal definition of marriage pertaining only to a man and a woman, in a highly symbolic move.

“The government is currently considering what the next stage should be for civil partnerships, including how some religious organisations can allow same-sex couples to register their relationship in a religious setting if they wish to do so,” a Home Office spokesman said.

“Ministers have met a range of people and organisations to hear their views on this issue. An announcement will be made in due course.”

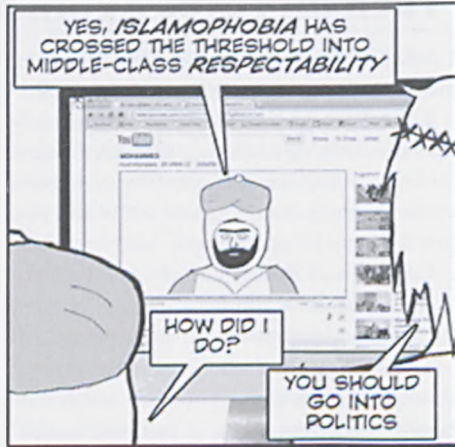
While the changes will be welcomed by gay equality campaigners, they could provoke a strong reaction from some traditionalists and church groups. The Church of England has already said it will not allow any of its buildings to be used for civil partnership ceremonies.

However, other groups including Quakers, Unitarians, and Liberal Jews are likely to be more sympathetic, the *Sunday Telegraph* said.

Under current rules, ceremonies must be secular and cannot contain religious elements, such as hymn singing and Bible readings.

The *Sunday Telegraph* warned that the new move could open a “legal minefield”, with gay couples possibly taking action against faith groups if they were barred from tying the knot in their chosen place of worship.

Jesus & Mo



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A Buddhist atheist confesses

JEAN BRAITHWAITE reviews *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* by Stephen Batchelor

A certain publishing cachet attaches to atheist titles now that Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, *et al* have produced best-sellers. On his book tour to promote *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, Stephen Batchelor explicitly acknowledged his intention to participate in the debate between the New Atheists and the old theists. And Hitchens blurbs Batchelor's book admiringly (although in *God Is Not Great* three years earlier he blasted eastern religions no less than western). Should the average New-Atheist fan acquire Batchelor's *Confession* to set alongside Hitchens on the shelf, though? Maybe, if the reader already knows something about Buddhism, meditation practices, or Batchelor. But if not, a better starting point might be Batchelor's 1997 *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, in which he promotes Buddhist agnosticism; this book became quite controversial in Western Buddhist circles and cemented Batchelor's position as a leading teacher and writer on the subject.

One expects Batchelor's new book to develop a more radical metaphysical position than the earlier one, but that is not the case. Batchelor's "atheism" has the same gentle tone as his agnosticism; the New Atheists, he says, should really be called "antitheists," and he intends to steer a middle course between them and their adversaries. Both *Buddhism Without Beliefs* and *Confession* present readers with lucid accounts of the good news of secular Buddhism: it is not that you have an immortal soul which will live on, somewhere, forever (in fact, you don't even have a self that remains constant over this lifetime); nor should you count on being reincarnated in some newborn organism after your demise, thereby working out the karma of innumerable previous existences and striving to accumulate moral progress through innumerable future existences; what you can do, though, is learn how to suffer less in this lifetime, as your impermanent self, starting now. A lot less.

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist braids Batchelor's personal history together with his painstaking reconstruction of the biography of Siddhattha Gotama (the Buddha) from the earliest scriptures (the Pali Canon). There's a bit of travelogue, a bit of exegesis, and a gripping account of Batchelor's book-learning and intellectual development, an arc describable as: pray, read, love.

Batchelor grew up in a "charmless" sub-

urb of London and recalls feeling existential anxiety beginning as a schoolboy. Why didn't his books and teachers address "the most urgent matter of all: the bewildering stomach-churning insecurity of being alive"?

He followed "the hippie trail to India" and by age 21 he was ordained as a monk in the Geluk school of Tibetan Buddhism. (Tibetan Buddhists tend to practice a polytheistic faith rich in deities, demons, sacred objects, and incantations.) Eight years later he was in Korea studying Zen. There he met his future wife, but not until four years after that did they decide to give up their vows of celibacy and marry. Meanwhile, Batchelor studied and doubted as he tried to reconcile what his monastic teachers said with his own experience, and Buddhist scriptures with Western science and philosophy. (He would later write *Alone with Others: an Existential Approach to Buddhism* as well as other books seeking a middle way between western academicism and eastern mysticism.)

The memoir part of the book is moving and funny: when Batchelor began studying to be a monk, he "reduced [his] consumption of hashish" and struggled not to notice "hippie girls in their diaphanous dresses." In the opening scene a Tibetan monk perched by a smoking fire mutters incantations, blows into a thighbone, makes ritual gestures, and flings mustard seeds in order to prevent rain from falling on the Dalai Lama and his audience. Young Batchelor lies about the success of this weather-control technique in order to shore up his faith and others'. But "it didn't feel like a lie" because "it served to affirm what I believed to be a greater truth". The lie, Batchelor writes, "was prompted by my craving to believe". (Craving is a significant term in Buddhism, where, per the Second Noble Truth, it is held to be the cause of suffering.)

Confession of a Buddhist Atheist affords some pleasures for a reader interested in examining religious superstition and dogma for fun, as in the rain scene and other vignettes from Batchelor's life. In addition, he claims that the historical Buddha was also an "ironic atheist", quietly poking fun at true believers of his time. But this sort of light diversion is mixed together with many other components. Batchelor is a collagist, working out of chronological order, and I found it nearly impossible to follow events and sort out the many individuals called Geshe (Teacher) until I constructed a timeline with dates, places,



Stephen Batchelor

and names. For instance, the Dorje Shugden controversy – protective deity or evil spirit? – is a sizzling conflict in Tibetan Buddhist politics, even the occasion of a murder, but the details are hard slogging for an uninitiated atheist. Here is my recommendation for beginners: read another Batchelor book first, then read this one. And reflect that meditative traditions may well have something to offer when shorn of the usual accompanying claptrap. After all, Sam Harris says the same!

• *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* is published by Spiegel & Grau. Hardback, 320 pages. ISBN-10: 0385527063; ISBN-13: 978-0385527064. Retail at Amazon at £13.24.

The God Instinct

MICHAEL BROOKS reviews *The God Instinct: The psychology of souls, destiny and the meaning of life* by Jesse Bering

THANKS to evolution we naturally expect there to be a god – or gods – watching over us. Our brains interpret the world around us in ways that created God; the notion of the divine is "a scratch on our psychological lenses", says psychologist Jesse Bering.

Bering admits that explaining away God in this way is radical and possibly dangerous, but he handles it deftly. His writing is witty, crammed with pop-culture references, and he employs examples and analogies that make his arguments seem like common sense rather than the hard-earned scientific insights they really are.

This fascinating book presents gentle, nuanced but convincing arguments for atheism. Bering knows he can't change the world, though. Thoroughly and permanently removing God from our heads "would require a neurosurgeon not a science teacher", he says.

• *The God Instinct* is published by Nicholas Brealey Publishing. Hardback, 288 pages. ISBN-10: 1857885600; ISBN-13: 978-1857885606. Retail at Amazon at £9.37.

points of view...

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WHAT WE NEED IS ANOTHER CHARLES BRADLAUGH

I WAS pleased to see Bryan Niblett's book about Charles Bradlaugh, ably reviewed by Jim Herrick, given such prominence in February's *Freethinker*. As a result, I have ordered a copy of *Dare to Stand Alone*. Bradlaugh, as we now increasingly recognise, was ahead of his time, courageous and resolute, inspired by rational vigour. A true 19th-century colossus standing fearlessly astride social progress, he is almost as important as Darwin and certainly more visionary than Marx.

There are parallels between Bradlaugh's sense of mission and the current NSS leadership's seven agreed "constitutional principles", broadly covering religion in its relationship with the state and social equality. These ought not to appear radical at the start of the 21st century, but in the light of the last 15 years in Britain, they do. Terry Sanderson's feature in the same issue: *Secularism: a fresh approach*, is, therefore, for the most part, spot-on. Secularism is not about granting privileges to atheism over religious belief, or about promoting Humanism. It's about creating a neutral public sphere in which all are equal and free, as well as obliged to uphold the equality and freedoms of others.

Where Sanderson's address falls down, one feels, is in its failure to put some clear blue water between the NSS and the received multicultural wisdoms of the day. Nor does it really engage with most ordinary people's fears and concerns which arise from multiculturalist policies foisted upon a largely unwilling, sometimes hostile population. Multiculturalism has usurped the place of the shared, secular public sphere, replacing it with the special pleading and victim-politics of various competing ethno-cultural factions. It has also sought to stifle proper debate about

managing immigration, as well as the place of (non-Christian) religions in our society.

It is no secret that the NSS is a left-leaning organisation, and for the last 30 or 40 years, perhaps longer, there has been a broad consensus that the secular agenda and its spin-offs like "gay rights" and "anti-racism" has been best served by aligning the NSS with a broad liberal-left swathe of opinion. This is not without foundation. Nearly all of us, I suspect, were enthusiastic supporters of New Labour back in 1997 and no one can deny that great strides were made in terms of social justice, not least with the rapid advances in gay equality, a cause close to Terry Sanderson's heart. If there is a reluctance to condemn multiculturalism, this is no doubt due, in part, to a sense that such advances benefited from riding on the coat tails of the liberal-left's multicultural consensus.

Of course, an honest appraisal would also accept that the flip side of these advances was the liberal-left's uncritical backing of divisive faith schools, the enthusiastic solicitation of religious involvement in politics and the "community", the active depletion of British identity and values, the erosion of free speech, increased snooping and intrusion by the state, the accommodation of unwelcome, culturally dissonant elements on an equal footing with the indigenous culture, and the government losing a grip on the scale and character of immigration. With a new Conservative-led government, some of these negatives seem likely to be reversed, or at least reined in. Naturally, we won't get everything we want – we never do – but we can advance the secularist cause in ways unimaginable under New Labour, by working intelligently with the Conservatives.

In his recent Munich speech, rejecting

multiculturalism, David Cameron signalled a welcome return to the ideals of One Nation conservatism, saying: "A genuinely liberal country ... believes in certain values and actively promotes them – freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality." He described this as "muscular liberalism", but as the *Independent's* Tom Sutcliffe noted, what he was actually describing was "muscular secularism". Therefore, what Terry Sanderson needs to be saying, is: "Mr Cameron, we can do business!" Yet, incredibly, while a whole seven paragraphs of Terry's feature are given over to the lost cause of Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* (5 minutes of harmless, platitudinous drivel), the menace of Islam is only alluded to in fleeting references to the labelling of "meat products" and "parallel legal systems". We need another Charles Bradlaugh to shake things up.

Diesel Balaam
London

ANTI-SEMITISM

HAVING just received my December and January copies of *Freethinker* (reasons explained and acknowledged), I might be a little late with this comment. In both editions I find that I have been taken to task (beaten up) over my comments about Israel.

I am big enough and old enough to take criticism and if I'm wrong, admit it. What I found unacceptable, though, was that both Mr Levin (Dec) and Mr Wilkes (Jan) found it necessary to play the anti-Semitism card. One of them even likened me to a Nazi.

Well let's see. The OED defines anti-Semitism as "hostility to or prejudice against Jews". I admit that I find some of the spokespersons of the Jewish faith obnoxious, but no more and no less than spokespersons of other faiths. I admit I have no respect for the Jewish faith, but no more

and no less than any other faith. As for hostility or prejudice against Jews, I have neither as I don't know them all.

Why should it be that one can criticise the policies of, say, the American or British governments without being labelled anti-American or anti-British and yet one word against Israel and you are anti-Semitic?

Mr Wilkes tells me that I have no shame because six million Jews died, yet in the next breath tells us that the Palestinians should talk peace or keep *shut* and take the consequences. Is that anti-Palestinian, I wonder?

David Anderson
Spain

SNEAKY CREATIONISTS

A FRIEND of mine was appalled to discover his small son had been given some stickers (pictured below) at the play group he attends.

Aside from the reprehensible indoctrination of small children I think it a bit rich that a church group should lay claim to dinosaurs of which there is no mention in the Bible.

At least the artist didn't draw a person in the cartoon as some fools in Arkansas would have it.

Robert Smith
Surrey



MUSLIMS & ISLAMOPHOBIA

THERE is no Islamic fundamentalism, no reading of texts as if they were items being read by a post-Newman vicar looking for absolution despite orientation, which is why Islam is the world's biggest problem.

If the *Freethinker* is nervous of "Muslim", other words could clue readers in: "Islamic front-runners, zealots, jihadists, supremacists, atavists, subversives." Balm to the mealy-mouthed media, there is a label which ought not to upset even the BBC: "dedicated Muslims" – which, of course, implies another sort.

So? There *are* many, as even the media-quislings will admit, of the non-dedicated sort, some of whom I've met in various parts of the *dar* and who are no more

Muslim than some pretended Christians are even *flexible* Christians. But the fact that most religious people throughout the ages have been liars – and I mean *premier grand cru* – is not the issue. We don't have to be. "Muslims" always means "Islam" and always the belief that the Koran is God-spiel. That is not being "fundamentalist".

As Graham Newbery (*Points of View*, February) spells out, by messing with the referents, our rulers are up that stinking creek without a paddle. They are as much liars as our leaders were 1933–37.

Keith Bell
Wales

MUSLIMS, moderate or extreme, fail as a subject in my dinner-table test. However, there is one subject which succeeds beyond all others: the contempt felt for *Thought for the Day*. This programme has made ridicule of the BBC, which persists with it, inevitably in dinner-table discussions.

Denis Watkins
Wales

GRAHAM Newbery (*Points of View*, February) cannot be right when he says his Islamophobia is a sane response. A phobia is an irrational fear. Perhaps there are sufferers from Islamophobia who lose their reason at the sight of a mosque, the way a sufferer from arachnophobia loses it at the sight of a spider, but I doubt it. Graham Newbery's fear of Islam appears to be a rational response to a real danger. The word Islamophobia is used as an insult, and we should not apply it to ourselves.

Donald Rorum
London

ONTOLOGY

ROBERT Stovold (*Points of View*, January) ought to know that "ontology" is a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being and that ontological arguments are arguments from premises which are supposed to derive from some source other than observation of the world – eg, from reason alone. In other words, ontological arguments are arguments from nothing but analytic, *a priori* and necessary premises.

Consequently, in respect of Jesus' historicity, the claim that he did not exist is an ontological argument; ie its source is not "observation of the world" (the latter indicates that he did exist).

It is fair enough to strip the miracles out of the Gospels, which I do while explaining their origin, but have a care with alleged "absurdities and events with Old Testament precedents": they explain much of Jesus' life.

If Mr Stovold really wants to "pene-

trate the fog" and recover the real Jesus, he should read my book.

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

CATHOLIC CHURCH

FOLLOWING the success of last year's demonstrations against the Pope's visit to the UK, which we were reminded of in last month's issue of the *Freethinker*, I would urge organisations like the National Secular Society not to rest on their laurels, and, wherever possible, to keep up the pressure on the Catholic Church.

This vile organisation still has the money and the power to continue inflicting harm on people, and we are reminded daily of its past crimes as more and more cases of abuse are uncovered.

Many say the Church is now on the ropes, and a report last month said it was at the point of collapse in Ireland. While this is good news, the fact is that the Church is gaining ground outside of Europe, and every effort needs to be made to curb its influence in developing countries.

Dale Hendry
London

The Census: A reminder

CENSUS Day in England and Wales takes place on March 27, and it is imperative that people who have no religious beliefs are counted this time around.

The British Humanist Association, which is running an "If You're Not Religious, for God's Sake Say So!" campaign points out that Census data on religion produced by the 2001 census gave a wholly misleading picture of the religiosity of the UK, cutting the number of non-religious people in half.

The campaign organisers point out that "if you say you're religious on the census and don't really mean it, then you are treated by some sections of the media, churches, and even government policymakers, as if you are a fully-fledged believer.

"The short answer is simple. If you're not religious, then answer 'No Religion' on the Census." The BHA says it needs to raise awareness – "and we need to do it quickly. We are asking like-minded people to support advertising for the Census Campaign on public transport and in public places." You can make a donation to the campaign by visiting <http://census-campaign.org.uk/>

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. Wed, Mar 2, 8pm. Romy Hassan: *Multiculturalism v Universal Human Rights*. Wed, April 6, 8pm. Ken Humphreys: *The Easter Hoax*.

w <http://homepage.nflworld.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 OHP. 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. March 9. *The Qur'an*.

Antony Thomas' 2008 documentary.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagember@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

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

4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** brianmccolinton@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 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.

w www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk **i** Ian Abbott,

Wavecrest, 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. Wed, March 17, Denis Cobell: *Why I am Not a Christian*.

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 Thistle-down 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. Wed, March 2, 8pm. Mike Freedman: *The Optimum Population Trust*.

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 Gwinell on 01935 473263 or

e edward.gwinell@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

The Thomas Paine Society: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Sq, Holborn, London WC1. Sat, March 5, 2 pm. The Eric Paine Memorial Lecture by Dr Ted Vallance: *Thomas Paine and the English Radical Tradition*.

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@fiscal.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.

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.