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# the freethinker

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## Catholic schools urged to slither out of reach of 'meddling' secularists

Britain's Education Secretary Michael Gove has openly urged Catholic schools to convert to academies as a way of avoiding "unsympathetic meddling" by secularists. Critics of faith schools, argued Gove in a recent article in the *Catholic Herald*, often misrepresent the Catholic school ethos as a mechanism of religious indoctrination and wrongly portray the admissions criteria used by Catholic schools as selection on the sly. By becoming an academy, a Catholic school can place itself permanently out of range of any such unsympathetic meddling.

Gove also pointed out: "Of course, what really makes Catholic schools stand out is their Catholicity ... A key element of [Cardinal Manning's] vision was that Catholic schools must be allowed sufficient autonomy to integrate the Catholic faith into every aspect of school life. A Catholic ethos is not something confined to RE lessons, but a pervasive set of values that find expression throughout the school day."

The Education Secretary said that people who opposed academies and free schools on ideological grounds were also likely to be hostile to faith schools.

He said: "Active in the teachers' unions and in other parts of the education establishment, they often misrepresent the Catholic school ethos as a mechanism of religious indoctrination and wrongly portray the admissions criteria used by Catholic schools as selection on the sly. The academy model, said Gove, gives Catholic schools a chance to extend "hard-won freedoms" over admissions, staff appointments, the teaching of religion and the way they are governed.

Catholic schools that convert to an academy will also no longer have to contribute 10 percent of the capital costs of the school - meaning that the schools will be 100 percent funded by the

taxpayer, if they were not already.

BHA Education Campaigns Officer Jenny Pennington commented that Catholic schools already have the ability to exclude children from families that are of the "wrong" or no religion, dismiss teachers for their private lifestyle choices and for refusing to teach subjects in line with religious doctrine, such as subjective sex and relationships education.

Converting to academies will give even more power to "faith" schools to discriminate, segregating children and communities along religious and socio-economic lines. To dismiss concerns about the damaging effects of such practices as "meddling" ignores the evidence of to support them.

Meanwhile, the National Secular Society has complained to the Government and the European Commission following legal advice it has received that the transfer of both community and faith schools to academy status is likely to be in breach of the EU Employment Directive.

At present, the many non-religious staff in community schools have important statutory protections against discrimination on the grounds of their religion or lack of it. This includes not being required to take religious education lessons or conduct collective worship, something that is likely

to be important if they are not believers in the faith promoted by the school. All this protection is lost when these schools are converted to academies, which is what the Government wishes to be the norm.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: "The statutory protections on which the jobs of hundreds of thousands of non-religious teaching and support staff depend will disappear when they transfer to academies, the



Michael Gove

Continued on page 3

# Bell's Hell

**BARRY DUKE UNCOVERS A NEW ROW AMONG AMERICAN EVANGELICALS**

Oh, how my heart goes out to Rome-based René Breuel, founder of a religious blog called *Wondering Fair*. Last month Breuel sat down to write a piece about Hell, but was thwarted by the designers of the software used to power the blog.

Each time he typed "Hell" it appeared as @#!\*%.

So at the start of his article – *Rob Bell's Hell, and God's Goodness* – Breuel said: "Till I figure how to fix this spelling issue, I've added \_ to the end of the word, so it stays readable."

Breuel has more than just a problem with typing "Hell". A much larger concern of his was that the Rob Bell in his title is allegedly trying to abolish Hell as well.

Let me explain: Rob Bell, 40, pastor of the 10,000-strong Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan, has released a new book called *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*.

In it, Bell re-examines Christianity's traditional understanding of life, salvation and what happens after we die – and in doing

so has outraged a considerable number of evangelicals, who have labelled him a "heretic", "a wolf in sheep's clothing" and "a false prophet".

Rob Bell's "crime" was to suggest that no loving god would ever condemn a human to Hell, and, when pressed several times last month on whether he believes there is a Hell, Bell would only speak of "a Hell on earth". He provided no indication that he believed in an eternal place of punishment.

Earlier, he described Hell this way: "Greed, injustice, rape, abuse, we see Hell on earth all around us all the time ... And we actually see lots of people choosing Hell. We see oppression, we see tyranny, we see dictators using their power to eliminate the opposition, literally."

Well, that simply wasn't good enough for those who relish the idea of eternal torment, including Breuel, who rushed to his computer to declare:

"The underlying tension behind the latest theological controversy – about Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins* – is our uncomfortable belief in Hell\_. On the one hand, the New Testament, and Jesus especially, talk often about Hell\_, and suggest it is a nasty reality. On the other hand, Hell\_ sounds a Medieval, cruel belief, the dirtiest pleasure of a sadist God, a place where eternal suffering lasts far longer than the earthly sins committed. Many of us, then, wish to explain Hell\_ away, understandably, and Rob Bell's book is the latest example of this sentiment.

"In my view, however, whatever content we ascribe to Hell\_ – definitive death, eternal suffering, some meaningless state away from God – the existence of some form of Hell\_ is necessary if we are to have an all-good God. To get rid of Hell\_ does not give us a more loving God; rather, it gives us a more cruel, more mediocre God. A perfect Heaven can exist only if there is also a Hell\_; if there is no Hell\_, there won't be a Heaven either, and neither (*sic*) earth: everything is consumed by Hell\_."

This latest controversy reminded me of a piece penned for *The Rationalist* in 2007 by veteran British atheist Bill McLlroy, of the Brighton and Hove Humanist Society. Unconstrained by any software censorship issues (McIlroy is all for computers and the Internet, but clings like a barnacle to a typewriter), his piece – *Christian Visions of Hell* – had no silly \_'s at the end of Hell, and was far more entertaining and illuminating than Breuel's.

In his article, McLlroy wrote:

"Generations of young people have been damaged psychologically by the Church's teachings, particularly the doctrine of eternal punishment. For centuries it has been the subject of countless sermons, books and pamphlets."

And he cited as a "hideous" example *The Sight of Hell*.

Published in 1855, it was on sale well into the 20th century and can now be accessed electronically at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/35957826/Fr-John-Furniss-The-Sight-of-Hell>

"It was," wrote McLlroy, "conceived in the mind of a religious fanatic and written specifically for 'children and young persons'."

Said McLlroy: "*The Sight of Hell* is a vile screed by the almost perfectly named Father John Furniss. Approved by the Church hierarchy and distributed to children at Catholic churches in England and Ireland, it received the Vicar General of Dublin's commendation: 'I have carefully read over this little Volume for Children and have found nothing whatever in it that is contrary to Holy Faith; but on the contrary, a great deal to charm, instruct and edify our youthful classes, for whose benefit it was written'.

"Father Furniss commences his work of edification and instruction by pinpointing the location of Hell. 'It seems likely that Hell is in the middle of the earth ... It is just four thousand miles. So if Hell is in the middle of the earth, it is four thousand miles to the horrible prison of Hell'.

"The good Father takes his young readers on a conducted tour of Hell to see '... the tremendous tortures prepared for the wicked ... look at the floor of Hell. It is red hot, like a red hot iron. Streams of burning pitch and sulphur run through it. Oh the screams of fear, the groaning of horror, the shouts of agony. They cry because the sharp fire burns them. Little child, it is better to cry one tear of repentance now than to cry a million tears in Hell'."

McIlroy concluded: "Most Christians are ashamed and embarrassed by the doctrine of eternal punishment" – but the controversy that has erupted around pastor Bell indicates that, in the US, there are still millions of deluded religiots who take sadistic delight in the ghastly belief that fire and brimstone await all who are "unsaved", and that those who dare suggest otherwise will be consigned to, well, Hell.



**BARRY DUKE**  
FREETHINKER  
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# It's time to reconsider prayers in Parliament, says Lib Dem MP

LIB DEM MP Jo Swinson, who represents East Dunbartonshire, said it was "time to reconsider" the daily Church of England prayers that date back to the 16th century. She complains that she has to attend them in order to secure a decent seat. The *Free-thinker* has heard similar complaints before from members in both Houses.

Last week, during a session of the House of Commons, Ms Swinson asked: "Is it time to reconsider the House practice whereby the only way to reserve a seat in the chamber makes it mandatory to attend Church of England prayers?"

Sir George Young, the Conservative Leader of the House, responded that such reforms were a matter for the Speaker. But Keith Porteous Wood, of the National Secular Society, told the *Sunday Express*: "I don't think it is appropriate for prayers to form part of the proceedings, although we would have no objection to prayers outside the chamber."

Ms Swinson's question follows Jo Johnson,



Jo Swinson MP

MP for Orpington in Kent, recently questioning the continuation of prayers. There has been an angry reaction from the Church of England, with a spokesman saying that prayers set the "important decisions" made by MPs "within a wider moral, Christian

context".

Sittings in both the Commons and the Lords begin with prayers, and non-members are barred from the public galleries until they are finished. All MPs must turn and face the wall during prayers, a tradition that developed in the days when most members wore a sword and could not kneel.

## Dutch MEP is named Secularist of the Year

SOPHIE in 'tVeld has been named the 2011 winner of prestigious Irwin Prize of Secularist of the Year.

The National Secular Society (NSS), which organises the annual presentation, awarded her the prize at a ceremony in London last month for her work as chair of the European Parliamentary Platform for Secularism in Politics (EPPSP).

She is an ardent advocate of the separation of religion from politics and campaigns on a number of issues where this is relevant.

She has supported campaigns aimed at improving the rights of women and gay people and recently protested to the President of the European Parliament, Jercy Buzek, about his invitation for the Pope to address a plenary session of the parliament.

## Catholic schools

(Continued from page 1)

new norm. Staff should be treated with equal respect whatever their faith or lack of it, and not forced into pretending to hold beliefs that they do not have, in order to retain their jobs. This has the potential to be a most serious erosion of religion and belief employment rights. It is even more disgraceful given that these academies are funded by the taxpayer, not religious bodies.

Referring to Gove's *Catholic Herald* article, Keith Porteous Wood said:

"Mr Gove's outburst is truly astonishing. He seems to be saying that Catholic academy schools will be able to become virtual theocracies, with the rights of staff and pupils waived away. And all because he is desperate to privatise the education system. If that is not driven by ideological considerations, then I don't know what is."

## Christians barred from being foster carers decide not to launch appeal

A CHRISTIAN couple have decided not to appeal against a High Court decision that ruled their views on homosexuality were a bar to their being foster carers. But Eunice and Owen Johns plan to take their case to Parliament, with the launch of an equalities and conscience petition.

It will call on the Government to review the equality laws and re-visit "the absurd human rights agenda, including the Human Rights Act".

The launch of the petition came just days after Prime Minister David Cameron backed the High Court ruling and said the judges' decision should stand. The Johns' case went to court after Derby City Council said it could not decide whether the couple could remain foster carers because they did not meet minimum guidelines.

This conclusion was reached after Mr and Mrs Johns told a city social worker they would not tell a child that homosexuality was acceptable because of their Christian beliefs. The Oakwood couple have been taking advice from the Christian Legal Centre, which backed the judicial review in the High Court.

Barrister Paul Diamond, who represented the Johns, advised them not to appeal the decision. He said: "In my opinion, it would be futile – a waste of resources. Recent equalities legislation and its interpretation in the courts has led to several Christians being barred from different areas of public life and employment. This creates a serious obstacle to the Christian community's full and active involvement in the Government's Big Society initiative.

He added: "There is no reason in law why sexual orientation rights should prevail over religious rights. There is something deeply and ethically wrong with the ethical and legal compass of Britain."

The Johns are seeking wide support across the Christian community. They will be lobbying MPs and members of the House of Lords to seek a review of the Equality Act. Mrs Johns, 62, said: "We are not doing this just for ourselves but for thousands of Christians in a similar position."



# A major new survey reveals that most Britons want religion kept out of politics

A MAJOR new piece of research has shown that only 54 percent of people in Britain define themselves as Christian. More importantly, over two-thirds of respondents said they did not approve of religion and politics being mixed, or religion dictating policy-making.

The survey has been published by the Searchlight Educational Trust and was carried out by Populus. There were 5,054 respondents (much larger than the usual opinion poll, which usually questions around 1,000 people).

The poll also shows that as well as the 54 percent of people defining themselves as Christian, 35 percent say they had no religion and seven percent were from other religions.

The survey runs to some 395 pages and the following details were extracted from a summary compiled by the British Religion in Numbers website.

Twenty-three percent said that religion was important to them, with 55 percent disagreeing and 22 percent neutral.

Just seven percent said religion was the most important element in their personal identity. This compared with 35 percent for nationality, 24 percent for country of birth, 16 percent for the city, town or village in which they lived, seven percent for ethnicity, six percent for their immediate neighbourhood, and five percent for the country of residence where different from that of birth. Religion was the second most important influence on identity for eight percent and the third most important for ten percent.

Fifty-five percent never attended a place of worship in their local community. Eight percent claimed to go at least once a week, five percent at least once a fortnight, six percent at least once a month, and 26 percent less than once a month. The official figures for church attendance, however, which are based on counting the number of people actually in the pews, indicates that respondents to opinion polls overstate their religious observance quite substantially. (A rough calculation by the National Secular Society's Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood suggests the numbers claiming to be in church on an average Sunday equates to around 14 percent – which is double the actual number as

counted by the churches themselves.)

Only 23 percent thought that, by and large, religion is a force for good in the UK. Forty-two percent disagreed and 35 percent expressed no opinion.

A large majority of people in Britain are secularists, with 68 percent agreeing that religion should not influence laws and policies in Britain. Sixteen percent disagreed and 16 percent were neutral.

Sixty percent believed that people should be able to say what they wanted about religion, however critical or offensive it might



*Almost half of those surveyed regarded Islam as a major cause of conflict in the world*

be. Forty percent thought there should be restrictions on what individuals could say about religion, and that they should be prosecuted if necessary. Significantly more, 58 percent, were in favour of limitations on freedom of speech when it came to race.

Forty-four percent regarded Muslims as completely different from themselves in terms of habits, customs and values. Just five percent said the same about Christians, 19 percent about Jews, 28 percent about Hindus, and 29 percent about Sikhs.

Forty-two percent said that they interacted with Sikhs less than monthly or never, 39 percent with Jews, 36 percent with Hindus, 28 percent with Muslims, and five percent with Christians. There were a lot of don't knows for this question.

Fifty-nine percent did not know any Sikhs well as friends and family members, work colleagues, children's friends or neighbours. Fifty-five percent said the same about Jews, 53 percent about Hindus, 41 percent about Muslims, and eight percent about Christians.

Thirty-two percent argued that Muslims created a lot of problems in the UK. Far fewer said this about other faith groups:

seven percent about Hindus, six percent about Sikhs, five percent about Christians, and three percent about Jews.

Forty-nine percent contended that Muslims created a lot of problems in the world. Again, this was much less often said about other faith communities: 15 percent about Jews, 12 percent about Christians, ten percent about Hindus, and nine percent about Sikhs.

Twenty-five percent viewed Islam as a dangerous religion which incites violence. Twenty-one percent considered that vio-

lence or terrorism on the part of some Muslims is unsurprising given the actions of the West in the Muslim world and the hostility towards Muslims in Britain.

Forty-nine percent thought that such violence or terrorism was unsurprising on account of the activities and statements of a few Muslim extremists. Six percent dismissed accusations of violence or terrorism by Muslims as something got up by the media.

On hearing reports of violent clashes between English nationalist extremists and Muslim extremists, 26 percent would sympathise with the former who were standing up for their country and six percent for the Muslims who were standing up for their faith. Sixty-eight percent would view both groups as equally bad.

Forty-three percent indicated that they would support a campaign to stop the building of a new mosque in their locality, against 19 percent who would oppose such a campaign, with 38 percent neutral.

In the event of such a campaign turning violent or threatening to do so, by the action of either of the disputing parties, 81 percent would condemn such violence but 19 percent would continue to support one side or the other.

Interviewees were asked to react to the possibility of a new political party which would defend the English, create an English Parliament, control immigration, challenge Islamic extremism, restrict the construction of mosques, and make it compulsory for all public buildings to fly the St George's flag or Union Jack. Twenty-one percent said that they would definitely support such a party and a further 27 percent that they would consider backing it.

# Another opponent of Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws slain

SHAHBAZ Bhatti, the only Christian in the Pakistan Cabinet, has been assassinated. Despite numerous death threats, Bhatti, who became Pakistan's Minister for Minorities in 2008, worked courageously for years to overturn his country's draconian blasphemy laws.

Gunmen ambushed him on March 2, riddling his car with bullets. The gunmen appeared to know Bhatti's movements and that he was without security that morning.

Bhatti was honoured at a Roman Catholic service attended by thousands, but Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani was the only senior Pakistani government official present. However, a large number of foreign diplomats, including the US ambassador, Cameron P Munter, were in attendance.

Bhatti had dedicated his life to religious tolerance in this increasingly radicalised Muslim country. His killing underlined the anxieties among Western governments that extremists are using targeted killings as a way to move Pakistan toward an Islamic state and are doing so with impunity.

Bhatti's assassination followed the killing in January of an even more prominent politician, Salman Taseer, the governor of Punjab. Both men campaigned for the reform of the blasphemous laws that are often used to persecute minorities, particularly Christians. Taseer was killed by his government bodyguard, who was widely hailed in Pakistani society after he confessed.

After multiple death threats in recent months, Bhatti rarely travelled with his security guards because he did not trust them, a Western diplomat said. The minister tried to take his own security measures – for example, sleeping at his mother's house instead of his own – but the killers knew where to find him, the diplomat said, citing the likelihood of leaks from the security services.

Another diplomat said that the government, which so far has proved unwilling or unable to take a strong stand against the killings, would try to offer compensation to Bhatti's family and then close the case.

The ruling Pakistan Peoples' Party, which was founded on secular principles but is now under pressure from religious conservatives, announced recently that it opposed efforts to amend the blasphemy law.

But the dismay of Bhatti's family and the angry atmosphere at the funeral, in Khushpur, indicated that Pakistan's Christians –



Shabaz Bhatti

about 5 million out of a total population of 180 million – were unlikely to let the matter rest.

"We feel that Pakistan is our country, but it seems there is no government in the country, ever, which gave us shade and protected us and fully respected our rights," said the Rev. Andrew Nisari, one of the Catholic clergymen at the burial. "Will we be living in this hostile, harassed and fearful environment forever?"

Later in March the US House of Representatives tabled a draft resolution condemning Pakistan's blasphemy laws and expressing sorrow at the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti and Salman Taseer.

The resolution was slammed in an editorial published on March 13 in the Pakistani newspaper, *The Nation*, which said: "The resolution not only represents an unwarranted interference in the affairs of Pakistan, but also intends keeping alive the blasphemy issue. The West does not want Pakistan to punish the blasphemous. It also takes an unhealthy interest in the death of Pakistanis which it would not otherwise take. It should be kept in mind that no US Congressman would have shown any interest in the state of religious freedom in Pakistan had the blasphemy law not been involved ... The resolution should not be viewed as an isolated action. It reflects the unhealthy interest shown by American official institutions in the internal affairs of Pakistan, something in which they have been encouraged by the complaisant attitude of successive Pakistani governments, including the present. It also represents a route along which Pakistan is to be taken again, which will lead to the stopping of US aid. Despite Pakistan's cooperation in the USA's war on terror, it still sticks

in India's craw that Pakistan not only exists, but is also the world's only Muslim nuclear power. As the USA is bent on helping India in achieving its regional ambitions so that it will act as a regional counterweight against China, it will use any weapon it can to damage Pakistan, even though it cannot fight its war on terror without Pakistan."

## Police investigation launched after nuns report missing cash

POLICE and tax inspectors in Spain want to know why the nuns at Zaragoza's Santa Lucia convent claimed in February that a robber had stolen €1.5 million (£1.3 million) in cash from them.

The nuns' banking system – stuffing 500 euro notes into bin liners – made investigators suspect that the cash did not come solely from the Sunday collection plate. And the fact that they later changed their story to claim the money that disappeared amounted to only €450,000 has done nothing to allay those suspicions.

According to evidence given to police, the nuns kept their stash of cash in a locked cupboard, much of it in the high denomination notes favoured by those paying for, or receiving, services in Spain's widespread black economy.

The nuns said they had been preparing to distribute some of the money to other convents in financial difficulties.

Unlike most of the nuns who live in the hundreds of crumbling, half-empty convents dotted around Spain, the 16 Cistercians at Santa Lucia have no financial problems.

As expert restorers of old books, their services are constantly required. One of their number, Sister Isabel Guerra, is a renowned portrait painter whose pictures fetch up to €40,000 each and are key to maintaining other Cistercian convents around Spain.

The nuns' lawyer, Jesus Garcia Huici, denied they worked for black economy money and said they always issued receipts and bills with their tax number on.

"The money comes from a lifetime of saving," he told Spain's ABC newspaper.

# The Crucifixion: The sado-maso

With Easter looming, **BARBARA SMOKER** reminds readers of its pagan origins, and demonstrates t

**L**ike Christmas, Easter is pagan in origin; and its movable date is even based on the older lunar calendar. Children enjoy the surviving ancient pagan customs, such as Easter eggs – which, of course, originally symbolised fertility.

Though Christmas has become the most popular (and expensive) festival in the Christian calendar, it is Easter that is both theologically and traditionally by far the more important, for it commemorates the victorious resurrection of the divine Jesus, following his willing propitiative sacrifice on the cross – said to have been required for the reconciliation of God and sinful humanity, so as to open up Heaven to believers. The week preceding Easter, culminating in the oppressive observance of Good Friday, is therefore known as Holy Week.

The name Good Friday seems rather ambivalent. Though it may be regarded as good for those allegedly “saved” by means of the crucifixion, it can hardly have felt very good for the person crucified – and even if Jesus never existed, there certainly were people executed in that cruel manner. You probably think it is called crucifixion because the gallows was a constructed cross made of two thick wooden planks. Not so; the cross was formed by the body of the victim having outstretched arms. There was no constructed cross: why bother to make one, when any sturdy tree with opposing branches would serve the purpose? In fact, the word used in the gospels is not cross, but tree. The later substitution of a cross was intended to provide a symbol with strong astrological associations, for Christianity, in common with most religions, is largely based on astrology — and the cross has proved a powerful, indestructible symbol.

Human redemption through the god-man’s suffering is called “vicarious atonement” — the word “vicarious” deriving from vicar: that is, one who stands in for another, as Christ is supposed to stand in for us. It is meant to assuage God’s anger against us, though punishing one person — especially an innocent person — in place



*A devout Christian is nailed to a cross during an Easter event in the Phillipines. How will he unwrap his chocolate eggs?*

of others is hardly what we would count as justice. In fact, it undermines the whole civilised notion of justice. (In the religious Middle Ages, however, it was acceptable for high-born boys who were too important to be punished for their own misdemeanours to employ whipping-boys!)

Even if, as we are told, there is to be compensating justice in the world to come, God remains unjust in this, the only world we know. And not only *vis-a-vis* the sacrificial victim; the whole human race is subject to the chances of disease, disability, and disaster. (Not to mention other animals.)

Nonetheless, the whole theological *raison d’être* of Christianity is the vicarious atonement of Jesus, to offset the guilt of the first man’s disobeying his creator — that is, of Original Sin. Though it is difficult to imag-

ine anything more unjust than inherited guilt, let alone eternal punishment for it, orthodox theologians maintain that Original Sin persists to stain the soul of every newborn baby until the stain is removed by Christian baptism and “accepting Christ as Saviour”.

Simply being born human is clearly what makes us all miserable sinners bound for Hell, at least until baptism has washed away our Original Sin. But apparently any subsequent personal wrong-doing, being a sin (however venial) against the majesty of the godhead, somehow adds to the suffering of the incarnate god-self (or son?) in his earthly death throes. Contemplating this martyrdom often arouses in susceptible believers a flood of sado-masochistic emotion (even in the so-called “happy-clappy” churches), together with mental instability.

The Atonement theory derives from the ancient annual custom of animal sacrifice, which was a modification of prehistoric human sacrifice. If, in Old Testament times, the head of a Jewish family neglected to slit the throat of a Passover lamb “without blemish” and to smear its blood on the portal of his house, Jehovah was sure to punish him by the death of his eldest son.

As sanctioned by the Bible story of Abraham, the sacrificial animal was a substitute for the favourite son — though God “the Father” apparently stuck to the previous tradition. Fortunately, the majority of Christians do not honour him by following his bloodthirsty example.

Modern more attenuated forms of Christianity are down to belonging, rather than believing, though they may retain the comforting hope of a blissful after-life, with family and friends reunited — but not usually fear of damnation. Even baptism is no longer a *sine qua non* for salvation except among the more rigorous sects.

To orthodox Christians, however, Jesus is the infinite sacrificial lamb: Agnus Dei, “who taketh away the sins of the world”. Because, say Christian theologians, “without the shedding of blood there is no Redemption”. Don’t ask me why! An omnipotent god, by definition, must be able to

# sado-masochistic heart of Christianity

demonstrates that Jesus' crucifixion has the power to arouse strong sexual emotions among the faithful

do without blood sacrifice. What good does it do? The only possible need for it is to appease a sadistic and unreasonable tyrant — who, perversely, is said to be “perfect”.

In the first few centuries of the Christian era, depictions of the crucifixion were less sadistic — more triumphant — than they became in the later Middle Ages, when the emblematic royal crown worn by the crucified Christ was transformed into the literal biblical crown of thorns.

This burgeoning emphasis on the agony suffered by the Saviour is a form of pornography, which stimulates heightened religious emotion — an extension of sexual emotion, especially in highly-sexed young people. It is the main reason why some of them, wallowing in sado-masochistic fantasy, choose Jesus as their soul-mate and pledge themselves to lifelong celibacy as priests or nuns. Indeed, a nun will often refer to herself as a Bride of Christ.

Those who have seen the video of the “Ecstasy” of St Teresa will recall the odious blood dripping from the crucifix. A similar exemplar from our own time is her namesake Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who unknowingly revealed her sexuality in youthful descriptions of her religious visions. As her hormones aged, these naturally diminished in intensity — and I think this decline is what is really meant by the phrase “the dark night of the soul”, said to be suffered by many Christian saints.

It was in the year 1224 that Francis of Assisi was said to exhibit, while in an ecstasy of prayer, the wounds of the crucified Christ in his own body, so starting a craze for manifesting the stigmata, as it is called. It is now recognised medically as a symptom of hysteria.

Certain reiterated phrases in Christian brain-washing — such as “He died for me” and “By His stripes are we healed” — carry this strong emotive charge. Which is deliberately triggered by hymn-writers, in both their lyrics and musical cadences, so that any relevant analytic questions are swept away in a flow of feeling.

Having carried out a little research into popular hymns of the 19th and 20th centuries, I am able to quote the words of a sado-masochistic verse from the Methodist Hymnbook, as follows.

*There is a fountain filled with blood*

*Drawn from Emanuel's veins —  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.*

(Presumably emerging horribly blood-stained instead!)

Even more reprehensible, from the same collection, is a hymn that is actually designated a hymn for children. Here is one of its verses.

*He died that we might be forgiven —  
He died to make us good —*

*That we might go at last to Heaven,  
Saved by His Precious Blood.*

Apart from its emotional seductiveness, its string of *non-sequiturs* is intrinsically anti-educational.

As for the hymns that I remember from my own Catholic childhood, some of those in English from the Westminster Hymnal were remarkably similar in their sado-masochistic sentiment to the Methodist ones quoted. Here is a verse from one of them — which, I am now rather embarrassed to say, was my favourite hymn as a convent school-girl.

*Blood of my Saviour*

*Bathe me in thy tide.*

*Wash me ye waters*

*Gushing from His side.*

(At least with this one the blood got washed off in the end.)

Needless to say, I was unaware in those

days of its Freudian sexual implications.

Only in maturity did I recognise that the religious feeling was identical to sexual arousal. But how many believers who do recognise it are likely to admit it?

The crucifixes, statues, and holy pictures that littered Catholic schools and churches also loomed large in homes where the Catholic parents were as devout as mine. In fact, I was so used to them that when, years after I had renounced the faith, I took an ex-Protestant atheist friend on a visit to my parental home, I was taken by surprise when she recoiled in horror from the Sacred Heart picture in the sitting-room. And, of course, upstairs there was a crucifix over every bed.

Relics of the saints, especially of martyrs — body parts as well as clothing and other artefacts — are another kind of sacred object venerated by Catholics. In my youth, every church had to have a piece of bone of a canonised saint embedded in the altar. I don't know whether this macabre practice is still *de rigueur*, but only two years ago body fragments of St Therese of Lisieux, who died in 1897, toured Britain, and hundreds of thousands of Catholics, including a certain Tony Blair, queued up to pay homage to her remains.

Let us expunge the toxic religiosity of the holiday, simply enjoying the (far less unhealthy!) hot-cross-buns and Easter eggs.

## Catholic priest financed abortions

A CATHOLIC priest in Spain has become the subject of a new book in Catalan. *Fr Manel: Closer to Earth than to Heaven*, describes the ever-growing popularity of Manel Pousa's charitable work alongside Spanish celebrities. In addition to repeating his claim of having paid for abortions, the priest says he has performed blessings of homosexual unions, and endorses the creation of female priests.

He also states that he regards clerical celibacy as optional, and says he has a girlfriend — but claims that their relationship is celibate.

Although Pousa has never retracted any of his statements, his prelate, Cardinal Lluís Martínez Sistach, has only given Manel a verbal “warning”, leaving him in his place to continue his leadership of his parish and his other activities.

The controversy about Pousa began in 2008, when the Spanish website *Religion en Libertad* (Religion in Liberty) first published in Spanish a quote from an interview given by the priest, in which he said: “What interests me is the person. It is true that there are ethical principles, but there are reasons that, for example, lead certain women to have an abortion. I have paid for abortions. And the Spanish Episcopal Conference doesn't realise that the Gospel doesn't condemn, but rather offers liberating measures.”

In the new book on Pousa, the priest admits to paying for at least one abortion, and appears to defy the Church authorities, claiming that “I am as much the Church as the Pope or the bishop.”

# A view from the terracing

Football fan **JACK HASTIE** looks at Process Theology and, in particular, *An Introductory Exposition* by John B Cobb and David Ray Griffin, Philadelphia, 1976.

I enjoy football and try hard to explain the niceties of the game to my wife, who follows rugby. I explain that “offside” and “penalty” mean different things in the different codes. I also console my grandson that when Saint Mirren lose it’s not the end of the world. Life will go on, even if it’s in a lower division. It is, after all, only a game.

So is Process Theology. It has its offsidés, penalties and red cards, but it has nothing whatever to do with what happens outside the ball park, or in this case the lecture theatre. But successful careers are to be made in both arenas, as those of Sir Alex Ferguson, John B Cobb Jnr, David Beckham and David Ray Griffin testify.

Football has been described as the beautiful game. So what is beautiful about Process Theology?

First, it solves the theological problem of infinity, more usually described as the problem of evil. Traditional Western theology faces the paradox that a God, defined as omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent, co-exists with a world in which evil and unjustifiable suffering are prevalent. The logic is that as he either cannot or will not prevent such suffering he cannot be both omnipotent and omnibenevolent.

Process Theology avoids this dilemma. God is constrained by the freewill with which he has invested his created universe. He cannot – or rather chooses not – to override that freedom by his omnipotence and must, therefore, influence events on earth, and presumably elsewhere in the universe, persuasively, not coercively. In other words he could only have prevented Auschwitz if the Nazis had been open to persuasion not to gas Jews. So far so good, but by proclaiming a God who cannot achieve anything outside the working of natural causes and the frailties of human freewill, the Process Theologians are in danger of avoiding Scylla only to fall into the clutches of Charybdis, the alternative demon being, in this case, the Invisible Tiger. This is a beast of whom no one need be afraid, since, in addition to its qualities of invisibility, intangibility etc, it doesn’t bite, scratch or eat people. As with the God of

Process Theology, the sceptic may join William of Occam in asking, “Wouldn’t it be simpler to assume that it just isn’t there?”

The second beautiful thing about Process Theology, and the only genuine insight I can discover in it, is its description of reality as a series of actualities, a perpetual becoming and a perpetual perishing. This clarifies the distinction between the acorn and the oak tree, the foetus and the human being, and thereby destroys the Catholic argument against abortion.

Now to the rules of the game. Long ago the authorities who governed soccer and the two rugby codes defined their rules. The Royal and Ancient did the same for golf and the Marquis of Queensberry for boxing. Process Theologians have their authorities too. Cobb and Griffin cite the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead the way biblical fundamentalists cite Holy Writ, even down to chapter and verse. And behind their arguments lie the assertions of the Jesuit palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Like good empiricists they also defer to experience, but in surprising ways. They state, “To be actual is to be an occasion of experience” (p17). This seems to imply that where there is no experience there is no actuality. In other words, the internal structure of the red giant star Betelgeuse, which astrophysicists expect to explode as a supernova “soon”, is unreal since no sentient thing can experience it. There are two ways out of this dilemma. One may believe that even atoms and sub-atomic particles have some kind of mental life, as only Chardin has had the audacity to suggest. Or one may follow the anonymous reply to the famous limerick by Ronald Knox:

*There was a young man who said, “God  
Must find it exceedingly odd  
If that sycamore tree  
Continues to be  
When there’s no-one about in the  
quad.”*  
*“Dear Sir, Your astonishment’s odd.  
I am always about in the quad.  
So that sycamore tree  
Will continue to be  
As observed by  
Yours faithfully, God”*

In either case the arguments that follow are circular. The nature of reality has first been decided. Then comes the statement, “To be actual is ...”

More damaging to the philosophical edifice they create are the following statements: “We all know that at pre-reflective level there is a sacred reality” (p32); “The primacy of pre-reflective experience” (p32); “Our prehension of God is an essential part of all experience” (p29); “Our immediate experience is the final court of appeal” (p40). All this is mere assertion. Contemporary primitives, children, perhaps even some animals, instinctively fear thunder (because it is noisy) and mountains (because they are big). The instinct has been evolved because some dangerous things are noisy (lions) and some are big (buffaloes). That there is a generalised sense of the sacred at “pre-reflective level”, ie before social conditioning, is dubious. But if it does exist why should it be accorded any validity let alone primacy? At pre-reflective level we are all geoplanarian geographers and geocentric astronomers, and although we know that the earth is neither flat nor at the centre of the universe we continue to behave as though these “essential parts of all experience” were true. This is the corner stone of the entire Processual project: a primitive cosmology is assumed to be true; now a metaphysic has to be invented to articulate it.

An entire lexicon of concepts is called into being: *Enjoyment; Triviality; Discord; Complexity; Harmony; Intensity; Concrescence; Structures of Existence; Creative/Responsive Love.*

None of them means what it means in every-day language and none of them, unlike Newton’s Gravity or Dalton’s Atom, has any explanatory value at all except in the fantasy world of its own process-speak. Some of the terms, it is claimed, are derived from aesthetics where they may indeed have objective validity, but to generalise from aesthetics to metaphysics and ontology is, in fact, to assign to the terms purely arbitrary meanings.

Let me tinker with the rule book. Let me assert, in contradiction to Cobb and Griffin, that a lump of lead is more *intense* than





Linking sport with religion has become fairly popular in recent years, with manufacturers cashing in on figurines such as this one. Jack Hastie makes the connection in a far more cerebral manner

a living sponge; that the sexual enjoyment of a rutting stag at his climax is more intense than that of Archimedes working out geometrical problems in the sand. Who are Cobb and Griffin to put a different spin on these terms? Let me wonder why God, before he created the universe, before he became dipolar, ie immanent as well as transcendent, while he was still absolute, could have wanted to create a complex universe to increase his enjoyment which, at that stage, must have been absolute. Let me rather contend that God must hate complexity, intensity and enjoyment because he has created a universe in which entropy always increases. It is important to realise that I have no interest in refuting Cobb and Griffin point by point; I have simply decided to change the rules and play with a ball of a different shape.

But we must have a ball, not a balloon. Words must mean something, even if, like Alice's Red Queen, we make them mean whatever we want them to mean. Consider the following: "God stimulated the emergence of life" (p68). This may be a revival of Richard Owen's 19th-century theory of divinely guided evolution. Owen believed in a series of miraculous saltations and this is surely contradictory to the concepts of Process Theology. Yet if this

is not the meaning of stimulated the word is meaningless. What about such phrases as "We contribute everlastingly to the joy of God. That meaning is simultaneously that we are always safe with God". (p124) "Self as spirit objectifies and transcends itself" (p94). "Original thinking in science and philosophy, original art...all witness to the peculiarly effective presence of Christ" (p102). With this Red Queen logic it is not surprising to be told that God's creative and responsive love can be identified with the second and third persons of the Trinity. In general, despite a facade of philosophical thinking, the authors tend to default to the language of personification and mythopoeia.

With the chapter entitled *Jesus Christ* we depart, thankfully, from philosophy and enter the field of history. The authors argue that his career is the supreme example of the divine power as persuasive, as opposed to coercive. They claim that "history divides at this point", presumably somewhere between 4 BCE and 33 CE. This is a question for historians to decide, as they have to decide similar questions about the significance of 1492, 1789 and 1848.

History, like philosophy, has to define its terms. The chapter appears to refer to what may be called "The Christ Narrative." This

is an account of a series of events beginning with the Annunciation (Luke I) and ending, let us say, at Pentecost (Acts II). The narrative is held to be paradigmatic of the divine as persuasively, as opposed to coercively, immanent. Why it should be more representative of this aspect of divinity than narratives relating to Mahatma Gandhi, Father Damien, Mother Teresa or Mary Slessor is not discussed. Clearly it is not because of the miracles – for that would surely be coercive. The narrative is also held to be factual.

Also not discussed is the relationship between the Christ Narrative and the life of Jeshua bar Joseph. The authors seem to assume a close, if not exact correspondence, and, unless I am mistaken, they think that that correspondence is important. I disagree. The narrative, as it emerged between the composition of the fourth gospel and the finalisation of the canon in the 4th century has been massively influential in history. The Christ of the narrative is paradigmatic in the same way that Thor or Goebbels' *Horst Wessell* were paradigmatic, even if unhistorical.

However, the authors do stress another relationship which takes us back into the realms of philosophy: the Christ of the narrative is identified with the *Logos*, God's *Creative Love*, which has an objective reality independent of the protagonist of the narrative. Under the Caliph Omar, Muslim warriors, assembled in jihad, fought regardless of personal safety in the belief that the souls of those who died would go straight to Paradise. This belief enabled the Arabs to conquer most of the civilised world. History demands no further explanation of the success of either Christianity or Islam than the existence of the beliefs which motivated the faithful. The actual existence of the *Logos* or of the Muslim Paradise is, from the point of view of historical explanation, redundant.

Now back to History. Cobb and Griffin would have us believe that the Church – the Bride of Christ – through its sacraments and rituals, perpetuates the immanence of God as exemplified in the Christ Narrative, the divine power as persuasive. The record of the Church is exhaustive and eloquent. From the Byzantine persecutions of the 6th-century Monophysites, later persecutions of Bogomils, Cathars and Albigenses, sundry medieval excommunications and interdicts, England's Henry II at Canterbury, the Emperor Henry IV at Canossa, the witch and heretic burnings of the 16th and 17th centuries, Calvinist theocracies in

(Continued on p10)

# Jesus: God, man or myth?

**WILLIAM HARWOOD** reviews Earl Doherty's *Jesus – Neither God Nor Man: The Case for a Mythical Jesus*

It has long been hypothesized, usually by non-historians who have never had to write a properly supervised graduate thesis and defend it before an examining committee of qualified historians, that there was never a Jesus of history onto whose biography the Christian fairy tales were posthumously grafted. It is an observable reality that supporters of the “no such person” hypothesis adhere to the same Prime Directive as apologists for the claim that a bible containing fourteen assertions that the earth is flat is nonfiction: “If you cannot rebut it, ignore it in the hope that it will go away.” Earl Doherty adheres firmly to that Directive. That explains the absence of *God, Jesus and the Bible: The Origin and Evolution of Religion* from his bibliography, even though it was drawn to his attention (under its original title) long before the publication of this 2009 update of *The Jesus Puzzle*. The absence of *The Protestant Bible Correctly Translated* (under a pre-2009 edition title) from the list of bibles from which he quotes is also questionable.

The strongest case for a historical Jesus is the negative anecdotes that no person who regarded Jesus as his ultimate hero would ever have invented. For example, Jesus entered Jerusalem on a Sunday, started a Ten Minute War of independence—and lost. He was arrested and executed by a method used only by the Romans, and only against rebels and slaves. Historical rebels, such as Bar Kokhba, Jefferson Davis, and Robert Emmett, make unilateral declarations of independence and lose. Invented heroes do not.

Confronted by the accusation that he could not be Mashyah because he was not a descendant of King David, Jesus conceded that he was not Davidic. He argued that, even though Mashyah was by definition the descendant of David who would restore Jewish independence, his interpretation of a psalm proved that Mashyah could not be Davidic. Would any mythmaker in his right mind have depicted his hero as resorting to such incredible doublethink? And if it was not a historical Jesus who was accused of being born in Galilee rather than Bethlehem, as Mashyah should have been, the fourth gospel author would either have invented a response or not mentioned the incident at all.

Why would gospel authors include such

embarrassing facts if they were not stuck with the reality that they had actually happened? And if Josephus's portrayal of Jesus as a bald, hunchbacked dwarf was not taken from an eyewitness description of a real person, why did six centuries of Christian apologists repeat it unchanged until Josephus, whom they dared not dispute, was expurgated? Doherty, in his twelve-page Appendix 14, contends that Robert Eisler's quoting of Josephus's Halosis was a product of Eisler's own imagination. In doing so he ignores the reality that, if the description of Jesus as a cross between Rumpelstiltskin and Quasimodo did not originate with someone at least as prestigious as Josephus, apologists as early as Origen would not have repeated it without questioning its accuracy.

While a majority of biblical historians

support a historical Jesus, more than one originally published a conclusion that there was no real person behind the Jesus myth, only to reverse himself after considering the “preponderance of the evidence”. Robert Price and G A Wells fit into that category. Doherty in contrast ignores all evidence conflicting with his thesis, and instead stresses arguments that his disputants have more than adequately rebutted.

Consider (p. xiii): “Once upon a time, someone wrote a story about a man who was God.... Later generations gave this storyteller the name of ‘Mark’, but if that was his real name, it was only by coincidence.” What that passage says about Earl Doherty's competence is not flattering. Certainly he is right that the real name of the author of “Mark” is unknown. But his assertion that Mark depicted Jesus as a god reveals

## A view from the terracing

(Continued from p9)

Geneva (remember Servetus) and Scotland (Thomas Aikenhead), to contemporary close and manipulative cults, such as the Unification Church, history celebrates the Church Coercive (with the honourable exceptions of the Quakers and Unitarians).

Anyone clever enough – you do have to be quite clever – can construct a set of concepts and ways of reasoning about them which are not self-contradictory. Great minds from Aquinas to Leibniz did it in the West; the Hindu Sankara, the Buddhist Nagarjuna and others did it in the East; L Ron Hubbard did it for commercial gain and called it Scientology; Riemann and Lobachevsky created alternative geometries; Tolkien and J K Rowling fantasy societies. Yes, space may be elliptic or hyperbolic; karma, samsara, thetans, hobbits and horcruxes may exist. The only way to find out is to look and see. And if there is no conceivable observation which could falsify a belief in such a system, if it adds no explanatory power to anything external to itself and it has no predictive capability, parsimony requires that we defer to the man from Occam. Cobb and Griffin attribute to Buddhists the belief that, “whatever is there, is there, signifying nothing and explaining nothing” (p140). Why not?

But now you must excuse me; I'm off to get a ticket to see Saint Mirren in the cup

final. Rangers' three semi-final goals against them were all offside – by the rules of rugby, which I now embrace!

### Appendix:

#### Process Theology and Creation Science.

In its most sophisticated form in the hands of mathematician W Demski and biochemist M Behe, Creation Science argues that there must be an intelligent designer at work behind the universe as it exists. All that can really be derived from their arguments is a kind of template for the physical universe and the biology of life on earth. Yet Demski is a Southern Baptist and Behe a Catholic.

Similarly, the philosophical arguments of Cobb and Griffin can only yield an impersonal force or perhaps a tendency at work in the universe. Yet they go on to identify Jeshua bar Joseph with the divine logos, and end up with the doctrine of the Trinity and the continuing role of the Church.

In both cases there has been a leap from arguments which may be valid and are certainly sophisticated to articles of faith which, as fundamentalists rightly claim, can only be known through revelation. The suspicion must be that the faith, *quia absurdum*, has come first, and the rest is not really an open-ended quest for truth but a justification of the initial belief.

a determination to see what he wants to be there even though it clearly is not. The synoptic gospels did not merely reject Jesus' god-status; they had never heard of it. Prior to the deification of Jesus in the fourth gospel, 130–138 CE, no gospel author portrayed Jesus as anything but a purely human king, adopted by the god Yahweh at the time of his dunking in the Jordan river by John the Immerser. (The virgin-birth myths were interpolations.) If Doherty can so misread Mark as to imagine that it calls Jesus a god, that explains why he is able to so misread the letters of Paul and others as to delude himself that they did not portray Jesus as an ordinary flesh-and-blood human. Such rationalization should not be attributed to Doherty's status as a self-confessed amateur who was unable to complete an MA program for health reasons. I have read books by PhDs that likewise imagined that the Jesus of the synoptics was depicted as a god, even though, if they had ever searched for such an implication, they would have been forced to acknowledge that it is not there.

## Catholic Church opposes civil unions in Peru

DEBATE over civil unions for gays has divided Peru's socially conservative electorate ahead of next month's presidential vote, drawing particularly fierce opposition from the Catholic Church.

The issue took centre stage after presidential front-runner Alejandro Toledo declared that if elected he would move to change current law to allow spousal rights for homosexuals.

"We're not promoting gay marriage, but we fully support civil unions," said Toledo, 64, who led the country between 2001 and 2006. "We're working to create a more inclusive society."

But outspoken opposition has come from Cardinal Juan Luis Cipriani, the archbishop of Lima and an active figure in Latin America's arch-conservative Opus Dei movement.

Cipriani said that candidates' efforts to change Peru's legal code are overridden by what he says are the laws of God and Nature.

"The only valid union is between a man and a woman, because they complement each other physically, psychologically and spiritually," he said, adding that heterosexual marriage under God was the ideal situation for procreating and raising children.

I was impressed by Doherty's refusal to parrot the most popular *non-sequitur* of other mythicists. He does not argue that the fictitious content of the gospels, such as plagiarized miracles and sermons, incompatible genealogies, and parallels with older virgin-born resurrected savior gods such as Osiris and Adonis, could not have been posthumously added to the biography of a real person as easily as to that of a purely mythical creation. He does cite the absence of any mention of Jesus from contemporary writers (p. 503): "[F]or historians of the time, Jesus and the religion he began should have constituted a noteworthy event in the period of the early emperors. It is difficult to believe that he would have escaped the attention of at least some commentators." And that argument would be completely valid—if Jesus had ever done anything worth reporting. The explanation is that Jesus was an insignificant preacher and warmonger whose name would not have survived if the inventor of Christianity, Paul, had not arbitrarily chosen him from the dozen recently crucified messiahs to be the posthumous figurehead of a new, gentile religion that Jesus the Jew would certainly have repudiated. In other words, Jesus was a nobody who did nothing.

Even though Doherty argues against any kind of historical Jesus, let alone a miracle-working god-incarnate, much of his 814 pages reads like theology. And H L Menck-

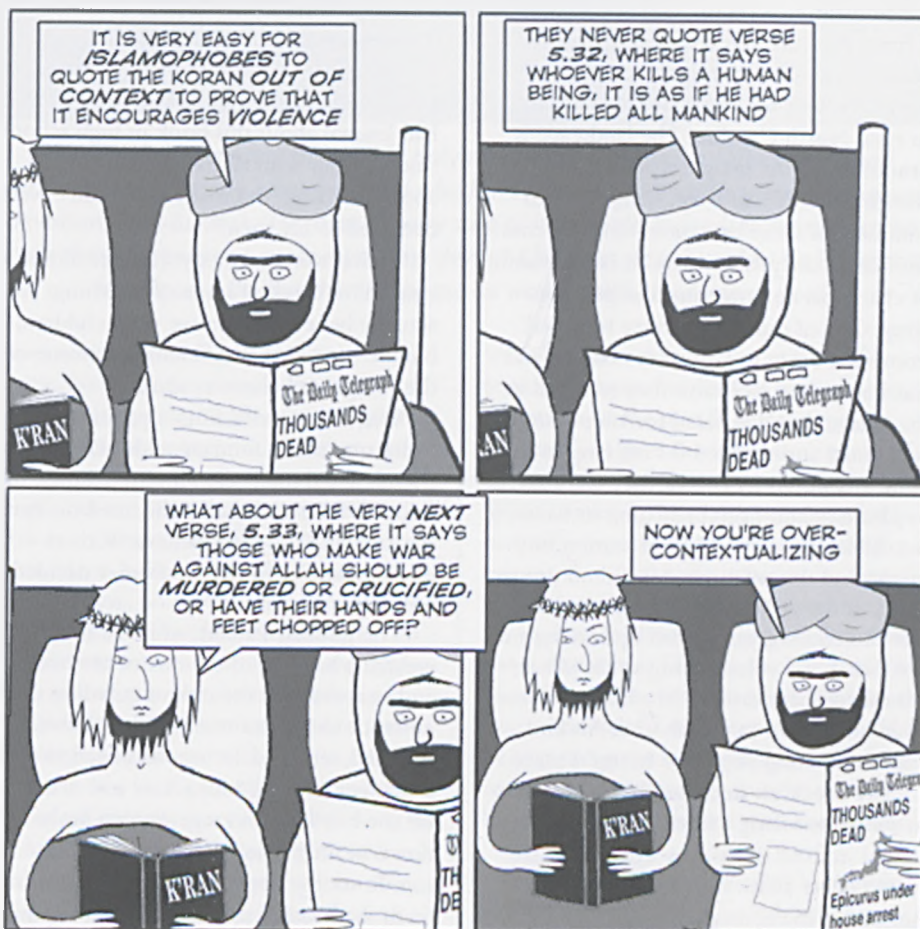
en defined a theologian as a blind man in a dark room searching for a black cat that is not there—and finding it. Doherty searches for evidence of absence, and finds only what he interprets as absence of evidence.

Nonetheless, a case can be made for a purely mythical Jesus, and Doherty catalogues the evidence supporting that conclusion (while ignoring the falsifying evidence) well enough for it to be convincing to a reader who is unaware of what he has left out. And unlike some inflexible dogmatists I have had the misfortune to encounter, he does not denigrate the majority of scholars who have reached the opposite conclusion as incompetent bunglers who embarrass themselves by daring to disagree with him. While *Jesus—Neither God Nor Man* presents only one side of an open question, it should not be ignored, and everyone who wants to be well informed should read it.

The only down side is that, on the one conclusion Doherty's whole book was designed to prove, he is wrong.

*Jesus—Neither God Nor Man: The Case for a Mythical Jesus*, Earl Doherty, 2009, Age of Reason Publications, P O Box 36009, 1106 Wellington St, Ottawa ON, K1Y 4V3, Canada, ISBN 978-0-9689259-2-8, 814 pp, ppb, \$39.95.

## Jesus & Mo



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# The atheism of an artist

**ANNE HOLLOWAY** discovers that an American figurative painter she admires greatly also writes passionately about his absence of religious belief

**D**uring a recent visit to the US, I picked up a copy of *American Artist*, featuring the work of American artist Scott Burdick, a name that meant nothing to me at the time, but whose work – examples of which were featured in the magazine – instantly captivated me with their sheer brilliance.

On my return to the UK, I did some research into the career of Burdick, 44, and discovered that his paintings are highly sought-after in the States, and command some pretty hefty prices. Then, to my astonishment, I discovered that Burdick is an outspoken atheist, who lives in North Carolina, which isn't exactly noted for its tolerance of non-believers. In fact, North Carolina's constitution expressly forbids anyone "who shall deny the being of Almighty God" from holding public office. The provision was included when the document was drafted in 1868 and was not revised when North Carolina amended its constitution in 1971.

In an on-line essay entitled *Why I Don't Believe ... or Remembering the Lessons of Santa*, Burdick wrote: "I love living here in rural North Carolina. The landscape is beautiful and the people around us quite wonderful. It is also a very religious area and most of those that travel to other countries do so on 'mission trips', a combination of charitable volunteering and proselytizing. One of our friends once returned from such a trip to a Muslim country and was irate at the reception they received in the village they'd traveled to. After being welcomed and thanked for offering to help build a community center, they were asked to please refrain from preaching or handing out Bibles, since the Muslim community might find this offensive. My friend was so angry at the inflexibility of this condition that the entire group ended up leaving and not doing any volunteering at all. 'What would you have done if Muslims came to your small town in North Carolina and tried converting people to Islam?' I asked.

"The shock on my friend's face was akin to someone seeing a horrible murder committed in front of his very eyes. 'Why, we would never allow such a thing! They'd be run out of town, maybe worse!'"

Burdick retorted: "But what's the differ-

ence between what the Muslim village did to you and what you'd do to them?"

The reply Burdick got was: "It's obvious! The difference is that our God is real and theirs is false. If we succeed in converting someone, we are saving them from an eternity in Hell, whereas if they succeed in converting someone, they are damning them to hell."

Burdick, who says he knows what it's like to be deeply religious, as he grew up in a working-class Catholic neighbourhood on the outskirts of Chicago, said: "Like all children across the globe, I believed without question what my parents, priests, and the community told me to. I believed in the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and God. Catholics don't emphasize reading the Bible, but I love to read and so I read most of it on my own ... I guess this was probably my first mistake, for anyone who has read the Bible from cover to cover will be left with quite a few questions the nuns and brothers will never be able to resolve in God's favor. Later in life I came across Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, written shortly after the Revolutionary War and the founding of the United States. I wish I had known about this book in high school since it deals with all the questions I had about the Bible and many that hadn't even occurred to me then."

Burdick went on to say: "It does seem comical to think of some of the things we actually believed when we were children, but are they all that different than some of the things we believe as adults?"

"When I returned from a painting trip to India, one of my fundamentalist Christian friends asked me if the Hindus believed in miracles their gods had performed on Earth the same as Christians believe. With so many examples to choose from, I decided to tell her this one..."

"The goddess Parvati, while bathing, created a boy out of the dirt of her body and assigned him the task of guarding the entrance to her bathroom. When Shiva, her husband, returned, he was surprised to find a stranger denying him access and struck off the boy's head in rage. Parvati broke down in utter grief at the death of her son. To soothe her, Shiva sent his guards to fetch the head of the first living being they came across. The company found a sleeping

elephant and brought back its severed head, which was then attached to the body of the boy. Shiva restored its life and thus was born the Elephant-god Ganesh. Ganesh is one of the most popular gods of the Hindu pantheon, people pray to him regularly, leave offerings at his temples and keep small statues of him with them for protection everywhere they go, just as many of my neighbors and relatives in Chicago worship statues of Mary.

"Well, my friend found the idea of attaching an elephant's head to a man ridiculous. I agree completely. It is ridiculous to take such a story literally, though millions of people certainly do. But is the talking snake from the Garden of Eden any less unbelievable? Where also does one find enough water to actually cover all the land across the globe from the Noah story, and where does it go afterwards? How about people living 800 years? Or being swallowed by a whale and surviving. Or rising from the dead?"

"The point is that Hindus believe their religious myths as fervently as my friend believes hers; and as literally as I used to as well. The only distinction she could make was that the Jesus myths weren't as 'bizarre' as the Ganesh myth, which implies implicit agreement that they, too, are bizarre. But why is the Ganesh story more unbelievable than the Jesus story?"

Burdick went on to say that he is often asked to explain what he thinks will happen to him after death.

"My creed might read something like this. Question everything. Evaluate everything based on evidence. The greater the claim, the more evidence you should require. Don't be afraid of not knowing all the answers! We are human and not capable of knowing everything; those who claim such knowledge are almost certainly lying or deluded.

"Socrates claimed no special knowledge of the universe above and beyond his fellow Greeks. He fully admitted that he knew nothing about the answers to the great mysteries of life. Socrates concluded, however, that he was smarter than his fellow citizens only because he knew he didn't know these answers, while they mistakenly thought they did. It was a victory by default, as if he never scored a goal, but won the game because his opponents

kept accidentally kicking the ball into their own net. Thus one of the most intelligent answers one can give is often the admission 'I don't know.'

"For this, Socrates was sentenced to death by his fellow citizens. Actually, he was given a choice, stop questioning the existence of the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, or drink poison. Socrates chose the poison. I suppose all people alive now, whether atheist or religious, would agree that Socrates was right that the Greek gods weren't real. What do you think those living another two-and-a-half millennia from now will think of our gods?"

"If someone tells me they've seen an alien land in their backyard, I don't believe such a monumental claim until I've seen it. Do I know aliens don't exist? No, but I don't 'believe' in them either. This is such a large claim I will require a proportional amount of evidence (far more than fuzzy photographs of lights that might be many things or scattered second-hand accounts). Such is my feelings on the multitude of gods there are to choose from. There are things that can't be known, at least with our current evidence, and the claims of all religions falls into this category in my opinion. Many things that used to fall into the unknowable category and were explained by religion have now been explained by science. Such was the case with the idea of the sun moving around us rather than the other way round. Religion's record is very bad on such things, so one should treat its current claims with even more skepticism. There always will be darkness for religion to retreat to. There will always be things we don't know that will prompt the challenge, 'Well, what's your answer then?' What I'm saying is that it is OK not to have an answer.

"Just because certain things can't be explained, this doesn't excuse simply making something up so you don't have to worry about it any more. This is the easy way out, the path to complacency. What if Galileo and Copernicus had simply accepted the Church's explanation of the motion of the planets like everyone else unquestioningly did for thousands of years? Thomas Aquinas implied that the need for scientific inquiry no longer existed because all the answers were already written down in the Bible, so this was the only realm any scholar need attend to. Is it any wonder that the rise of the Catholic Church throughout the Dark Ages saw an actual reversal in scientific progress? All the brilliant minds of Greek science were forgotten, their books actually scraped clean so the parchment could be written over with something useful such as prayers – a very logical thing to do if you know for certain your particular god exists. How to explain the fact that belief in gods



*Scott Burdick's painting of a Hindu holy man, or sadu, wearing saffron coloured garments traditionally worn by those who have taken up the solitary life of religious devotion. Says Burdick: 'He must be very sure of his beliefs, indeed, to have given up everything for prayer. I guess if you're a devout Christian, you must feel he is wasting his life on a lie, but then I suppose he would think the same of you.'*

are so universal, then? My answer is very simple. Never underestimate the power of our minds to protect us from some truth or fact that might be harmful, either psychologically or physically. Stated another way; people believe what they want to believe, what is convenient to believe, what is profitable to believe, and what is comforting to believe, no matter how at odds with reality this belief might be. Politicians, con men, investment scam artists, fad diet peddlers, and, of course, religious leaders use this basic fact of the human mind to great advantage. You are most likely to convince someone of a lie if you tell it to someone whose self-interest is served by believing it.

"As technology moves us farther and farther into an age where we will be able to unleash destructive forces and diseases undreamt of by our ancestors, I don't think

we can continue indulging in the self-serving fantasies our leaders have used to control us in the past. When two groups say that God gave them the same patch of ground, how can there be any compromise? What happens when both sides acquire nuclear weapons? How ironic that we are gaining these scientific wonders by men and woman who don't believe in God, but are in danger of destroying ourselves when those discoveries fall into the hands of the most fanatical believers in God. We hear the slogan 'guns don't kill, people do'. Could it be that the greatest danger humanity faces isn't actually technology, but the primitive beliefs that have outlived their usefulness?"

• You can read Scott Burdick's essay in full by visiting <http://scottburdick.com/speakingout21.htm>

# points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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## FLAWS IN THE REVIEW OF CHARLES BRADLAUGH BOOK

IN HIS rave review (*Freethinker*, February) of Bryan Niblett's *Dare to Stand Alone: the story of Charles Bradlaugh, Atheist and Republican* (which I haven't read), Jim Herrick rightly criticises the frequently "garbled account" by "even a seasoned freethinker" of Bradlaugh's parliamentary struggle. Unfortunately, Mr Herrick's synopsis, though less garbled than most, is also flawed. The "worth recounting" facts are:

When Bradlaugh was elected to Parliament in 1880, a parliamentary select committee refused him leave to affirm, because historically parliamentary Oaths Acts took precedence over other legislation permitting affirmation.

He then announced willingness to take the oath. Since he had already declared a lack of religious belief, a second select committee decided he was not entitled to take the oath but should be allowed to affirm. The full House of Commons rejected this recommendation, and, when Bradlaugh refused to leave the chamber, he was arrested and imprisoned in the Clock Tower,

On his release, Gladstone successfully moved he be allowed to affirm and take his seat "subject to any liability by statute" – a fine of £500 for every time he voted without having taken the oath. A private court case to claim the first fine ensued. Alleging the plaintiff had no legal standing, Bradlaugh cross-sued unsuccessfully, then appealed. Ultimately his debt reached a potentially bankrupting (and disqualifying) £108,500, but the original case was dismissed by the House of Lords in 1883.

In parallel was a saga of other unsuccessful attempts to bankrupt him, three by-elections futilely won by him, a forced parliamentary entry and physical expulsion, self-administration of the oath during a

permitted entry, further complex civil and criminal litigation, political manoeuvring and a general election. He was allowed to take the oath and his seat in the new Parliament of 1881 (*sic*). In 1888 he secured passage of the Oaths Act permitting alternative universal affirmation.

Furthermore, "obscene" books aren't prosecuted; Charles Watts, not Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, was prosecuted for unwittingly publishing an illustrated edition of the contraceptive *Fruits of Philosophy*; they were prosecuted for publishing a revised, unillustrated edition; and Bradlaugh broke with James Thomson not simply because of his alcoholism but repeated dereliction of duty and disloyalty, notably by joining the pious secularist faction hostile to the defence of the *Fruits*.

Also in the February *Freethinker* is John Radford's review of Mary Warnock's *Dishonest to God: on keeping religion out of politics* (which I haven't read). My one issue with this review is its main criticism of the book: that "believers and unbelievers are morally equal". I would argue that "morality" that rests only on belief is inherently unsatisfactory." And so would, and did, I in *Nucleoethics: Ethics in Modern Society* (1972), and so presumably did Baroness Warnock in reviewing for *New Society* this "adventurous, original and iconoclastic book which is wonderfully readable".

*Nucleoethics* asserted that personal morality really doesn't depend on one's stated beliefs, but on the impacts of parenting, peer pressures, education, pragmatism, technology, admiss, bureaucracy and law in one's family and society at large. Surely this is what Mary Warnock means by "believers and unbelievers are morally equal".

David Tribe  
Australia



## ONTOLOGY CONFUSION

IN asserting "the claim that he [Jesus] did not exist is an ontological argument", Steuart Campbell (*Points of View*, March) is guilty of confusing a claim with an argument. *Ontological arguments*, according to Campbell, "are supposed to derive from some source other than observation of the world – eg, from reason alone". Is the same true of ontological claims? Clearly not, because when seeking to justify ontological claims (claims concerning what does exist and what doesn't) we tend to rely rather heavily on real-world observations. For example, I accept the ontologically positive claim "Frogs exist" largely because I *have actually seen frogs*. I reject the ontologically negative claim "Frogs do not exist", again because I've *actually seen frogs*. Not all ontological claims rest on direct observation. Ontological claims for the existence of such things as Jesus or dinosaurs rest on indirect evidence. Neither claim, though, can be settled "from reason alone". But the fact that real world evidence is useful here in no way negates my use of the practical principle known as the burden of proof. Campbell claims that Jesus exists, and I don't. The burden of proof lies with Campbell, not me. Non-belief need only be justified after compelling evidence for belief has been brought to the table, otherwise we'd be spending our time debating the (non)existence of all kinds of things. The Burden of Proof is the Achilles' Heel of all unsubstantiated thought, religious or otherwise.

Campbell repeatedly counters the idea that "Jesus never existed" in our discussion, giving the false impression that I keep advancing it. I do not. In my discussions with Campbell, I neither made the positive ontological claim "Jesus exists" nor the negative ontological claim "Jesus didn't

exist". I made no ontological claim at all. I merely point out a simple principle that Campbell refuses to accept: that the burden of proof lies with the one who alleges. This isn't a claim from pure reason, it's a practical rule that helps us avoid wasting time.

To summarise, in his last letter Campbell plagiarises the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy's* article about ontological arguments for the existence of God (see <http://tinyurl.com/5u2gube>), misapplies it to an ontological claim about the non-existence of Jesus (a "straw man", since I made no such claim), and of course has another go at plugging his book. Which is presumably about as reliable as his letters.

**Robert Stovold**  
Brighton

## ISLAMOPHOBIA

THE response by correspondents in last month's *Points of View* to my legitimising use of "Islamophobia" calls for clarification.

First, my thanks to Keith Bell, whose impassioned views seem supportive when he says that Islam is "the world's biggest problem" about which the media is "mealy-mouthed" and politicians are "up the creek without a paddle." Many writers on political Islam and Jihadist terrorism would probably agree, none more readable than Michael Burleigh in his *Blood & Rage*.

Donald Rooum, on the other hand, is critical. He says that Islamophobia is used as an insult – which was not my intent – and argues that it isn't a sane response [to Islam] because "a phobia is an irrational fear."

In my understanding, fear is an instinctive visceral reaction to a threat, or perceived danger, and becomes irrational – a phobia – when the threat is absent but nevertheless is projected, imagined, is "all in the mind" – often the result of past trauma.

Such phobias, however craven to non-sufferers, could be considered rational because they at least guarantee survival: never (again) will sufferers be in a situation where they could be blown-up, shot at, tormented, earthquaked, fall off a cliff, snake-bit, Redback-bit, whatever.

I intellectualise a fear of Islam because it's an oppressive barbaric theocracy predicated on sky-god irrationality, whose resurgent extreme versions, dedicated to destroying my democratic freedoms, proselytise by terror. My "phobia" about Islam, then, is not a response to trauma, or to immediate danger – I live miles away from any mosque or angry radicalised Muslims. It is a result of knowledge and is, in my opinion, very rational because it precludes me visiting places where outspoken atheism would inflame hatred and, according to Koranic instruction, lead to death.

This is another reason why I promote secularism – the only solution to the world's religious problems.

**Graham Newbery**  
Southampton

## 'SOUL SLEEP'

I TOTALLY agree with the conclusions James Merryweather reaches (*Before Life – Life – After Life*) in the March *Freethinker*. However, there are two circumstances he might find it interesting to consider.

Some Christian sects believe in a doctrine known as "soul sleep", according to which the soul is completely inert and uncomprehending between the time of bodily death and the resurrection of the body at Judgement Day.

While there can be no empirical evidence to support such a view, it would reconcile Merryweather's experience under general anaesthesia with the prospect of eternal life.

Then there are reports of out-of-the-body experiences with the subject under general anaesthesia. In one of these the patient appeared to witness his own open heart surgery. While it is difficult to know how to interpret such accounts, they do suggest that, in rare cases, some form of awareness may persist even under general anaesthesia.

**Jack Hastie**  
Scotland

## ANTI-SEMITISM

I AM one of the people accused by David Anderson (*Points of View*, March) of finding it "necessary to play the anti-Semitism card".

"One word against Israel and you are anti-semitic", he says. Actually I have many words that I could use against Israel, but I try to base them on actual knowledge. His letter in your November issue, in contrast, was the most bigoted one I have ever read in the *Freethinker*. It probably infringes the 1986 Public Order Act.

His latest letter (March 2011) doesn't take issue at all with the precise points that I made and fails to confirm his statement that he is "big enough and old enough to take criticism".

**Michael Levin**  
London

## CHRIS PATTEN AND THE BBC

IF Chris Patten is appointed Chairman of the BBC Trust, may we expect his connivance with the same pushing of the interests of people of faith?

Conversely, will the dismissive contempt

for secularists continue?

Mr Patten, as a prominent Roman Catholic and cheerleader for the visit of the Pope, has an agenda. I assume that part of that agenda will be to continue to deluge large parts of the BBC with the Christian message, thus suggesting that the coverage reflects a wider picture.

I am reminded of a passage in *Villa Air-Bel* by Rosemary Sullivan. In the summer of 1938 Mussolini was on a speaking tour of Northern Italy. He was then a standing joke in the Montmartre cabarets and the butt of satire in satirical papers such as *Le Canard Enchaîné*.

When he spoke at Verona, the square was only half filled. The picture in the local paper the following day showed a piazza packed with people cheering madly.

The observer of this felt a queasiness in her stomach. She realised: "Reality now belonged to whoever had the power to manipulate it."

Is this analogy too fanciful, offensive perhaps, to the reality that is purveyed every Sunday and beyond by the BBC? Is the persistent impression of an overwhelmingly Christian nation, despite the emptying churches, an analogy too far divorced from that fake crowd in the piazza in Verona?

Are we unnecessarily concerned about the arbitrary dismissal – censorship? – by the Director General of the BBC, another high-profile Roman Catholic, of the National Secular Society document demanding non-religious voices on *Thought for the Day*?

Where was agreement given that the BBC, complete with its license fee-funded Religious Correspondent, was the propaganda arm of "people of faith" regardless of how nonsensical, and biased, their opinions?

The religious clique at the BBC have shown a determination, even ruthlessness, to have their way regardless of the views of licence payers. Where is the opposition to their *dietat*, and is its appearance in political form not long overdue?

**Denis Watkins**  
Wales

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