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£1.25 JULY 2011 VOLUME 131 NO 7

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US teen who opposed school prayer gets worldwide support

Damon Fowler, an atheist student at Bastrop High School in Louisiana, was about to graduate. His public school was planning to have a prayer as part of the graduation ceremony. But Fowler – knowing that government-sponsored prayer in US public schools is unconstitutional and legally forbidden – contacted the school superintendent to let him know that he opposed the prayer, and would be contacting the American Civil Liberties Union if it went ahead. The school – at first, anyway – agreed, and cancelled the prayer.

Then Fowler's name, and his role in this incident, was leaked. As a direct result, Fowler was hounded, pilloried, and ostracised by his community; one of his teachers publicly demeaned him, and Fowler was physically threatened.

Then Fowler's parents cut off his financial support, kicked him out of the house, and threw his belongings onto the front porch.

Oh, and the school went ahead with the graduation prayer anyway.

Fowler became the centre of what he termed a "shitstorm". He was harassed, vilified, targeted with insults and name-calling and hateful remarks.

He was told he's the Devil. He was told, "Go cry to your mommy ... oh, wait. You can't." (A reference to his being disowned by his parents.)

In short, Fowler's objection to the prayer was turned into an opportunity for the school and community to gang up on him and publicly close ranks against him – teachers as well as students. And people seen defending him were targeted as well.

As just a taste, here are a few comments on the *Bastrop Enterprise* news story about the controversy: "I personally see him as a coward"; "I hope they [Christians] put enough pressure on this kid to convert him and save his soul from the fire of hell"; "If he don't want prayer at graduation he can stay at home and not come to gradu-

ation"; "What he is really doing is trying to shove his views down people's throats" – and "Satan continues to prowl and is deceiving many in this world."

One of Fowler's teachers publicly demeaned him. From the story in the *Bastrop Enterprise*: Mitzi Quinn has been on the staff at BHS for almost 25 years, much of that time as a senior advisor. In the past, Quinn said there have been students who were atheist, agnostic and other non-Christian religions who "had no problems" with the prayer. "They respected the majority of their classmates and

didn't say anything," Quinn said. "We've never had this come up before. Never."

At a time when their son was being bullied, threatened, publicly pilloried, and ostracised, his parents joined the party.

Their initial response was to hold him in their house against his will, take his mobile phone away and sever his contact with the outside world.

They even cut him off from contact with his older brother, Jerrett. Then they cut off financial support, kicked him out of the house, and threw out his belongings.



Laci Mattice leads an illicit prayer at Bastrop High School

Photo: Mark Rainwater

The Fowler case served to focus attention on the ugly reality of anti-atheist bigotry and discrimination across the America – especially in high schools. J T Eberhard, high school specialist for the Secular Student Alliance said: "In Alabama, Auburn High School is refusing to allow an SSA affiliate. In Cranston, Rhode Island, a public school is facing an ACLU suit for refusing to take down a sectarian prayer [a banner posted in the school gym]. In Texas we had a student who was told he could have a secular club if he called it a philosophy club and didn't affiliate with the SSA. The list of similar situations is a mile long and these are only the ones I've become aware of in my first four and a half months on the job. The Fowler

Continued on page 4

Another nail in George Rekers' coffin

BARRY DUKE LEARNS MORE ABOUT THE DISGRACED 'GAY-CURE' QUACK

In May of last year, I devoted my column to the downfall of US "psychologist" and Baptist minister George Alan Rekers, 62, a Christian fundamentalist who devoted his life to "curing" homosexuality. That was until, in 2010, his own homosexuality was exposed after he was spotted at Miami International Airport on his return from a trip to Europe with a male prostitute known as "Lucien".

After his exposure, this egregious monster resigned his membership of a filthy little outfit called The National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH). He said he was doing so to devote all his free time to suing the media for suggesting that he was, and probably always had been, a self-loathing closet queen.

Since then nothing has been heard of this ghastly individual – until last month when he found himself the subject of a three-part TV series broadcast by CNN in the US.

Called *The Sissy Boy Experiment: Uncovers the Truth*, the series centred on the tragic life of Kirk Andrew Murphy. At the age of four, Kirk was a seemingly happy little

boy, the middle of three children. Then his foolish mother, Kaytee, took it into her thick skull to enrol him in a government-funded study aimed at "butching up" effeminate boys, and they set about ridding Kirk of what participating researchers later called "Sissy Boy Syndrome". The happy demeanor of four-year-old Kirk quickly evaporated, never again to resurface.

Kaytee Murphy says she enrolled Kirk in the study because she was concerned about him playing with "girls' toys". A psychologist on a local TV programme suggested boys like Kirk, lacking machismo, would become gay subjected to "treatment".

"I was seeing effeminate mannerisms," Kaytee told TV presenter Anderson Cooper. "It bothered me, because I wanted Kirk to grow up and have a normal life."

For nearly a year, Kirk was treated mainly by Rekers. The treatment would become the subject of Rekers' doctoral thesis, and the success Rekers claimed in "curing" Kirk laid the foundation for his very prominent career. Rekers wrote about his work with Kirk (whom he referred to as "Kraig") in at least 20 publications during a nearly three-decade career. Rekers also became a founding member of the Family Research Council (FRC), a vehemently anti-gay organisation named as an official hate group by the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center.

Kirk's "treatment" consisted of repeatedly being placed in a room with two tables and observed through a one-way window. On one of those tables were toys stereotypically associated with boys, like plastic knives and guns; on the other, toys stereotypically associated with girls, like dolls and a play crib. He could also choose what clothing to wear: an Army hat and military fatigues or a dress, jewellery and a wig. Kirk's mother was brought into the room and told to ignore Kirk when he played with "feminine" toys or clothes, and to compliment him when he played with "masculine" ones. Rekers wrote that when Kirk's mother ignored him, he would beg for attention from her, cry and sometimes throw tantrums. Still, she was advised to continue ignoring him.

The system of reward and punishment continued at home, too. Researchers advised Kirk's parents to use poker chips: blue chips were awarded for "masculine" behaviour; red chips were given for "feminine" behaviour. Kirk's older brother, Mark, also participated in the system as a means of reinforcing Kirk's treatment. On Friday nights, both boys stood

before their father with the chips they'd accumulated throughout the week. Spankings were handed out, the severity of which depended upon the number of red chips. Speaking with CNN presenter Anderson Cooper, Mark tearfully recalled having taken some of Kirk's red chips and adding them to his stack so that Kirk wouldn't be beaten so badly.

Though Kirk's "treatment" lasted just under a year, its effects haunted him for the rest of his life. Kirk's mother, Kaytee, now lives with serious regret. And so she bloody well should.

Despite coming out as a gay man in 1985, Kirk never had a loving and committed relationship and chose a career where being openly gay wasn't even possible. He spent eight years in the US Air Force and then held a high-profile position with an American finance company in India. It was there, in his New Delhi apartment, that Kirk Murphy committed suicide in 2003 aged 38.

Maris Murphy, Kirk's younger sister, told Anderson Cooper: "Before only recently learning the details of Kirk's 'treatment' by Rekers I used to spend so much time thinking, 'Why would he kill himself at the age of 38?'"

His family now have no doubt that Rekers' treatment was to blame. "The very core of who he was, was broken," Maris Murphy told Cooper.

Though Kirk Murphy's life was tragically cut short, the research about his "therapy" unfortunately lives on – cited in a book Rekers co-authored as recently as 2009, six years after Kirk's suicide death. Despite Kirk's tragic death, there are still those who cite Rekers' research about Kirk as evidence that you can prevent a child from becoming gay. Another sad reality is the fact that children are still sent to "therapies" much like the one Kirk attended – and this despite the fact that it's been nearly 40 years since the American Psychological Association (APA) concluded that being gay is not a "disorder" and is not in need of a "cure".

Anderson Cooper and his team exposed the painful truth that so-called "ex-gay therapy" is capable of causing, and often does cause, serious and long-lasting psychological damage.

We now know that Rekers, in addition to being a hypocrite, was instrumental in causing the death of Kirk – and one cannot help wondering how many other lives were destroyed by this god-added abomination.



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the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

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

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

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PO Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD

Email: barry@freethinker.co.uk
Tel: 01273 782 111

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

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged Overseas rate £25 sterling. Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to Freethinker, The Freethinker, PO Box 464, Berkhamsted, Hertfordshire, HP4 2UR, UK.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.

Catholic Church is 'an evil institution' says Professor Richard Dawkins

ATHEIST Alliance International (motto: *Making a World of Difference With a Positive Voice for Atheism*) was launched last month at the first World Atheist Convention in Dublin. In his opening speech, Michael Nugent, Atheist Ireland's chairman, defined atheism as "the arrogant belief that the entire universe was not created for our benefit".

After the event, AAI President Tanya Smith – who is also a member of the Atheist Foundation of Australia – said she was gratified that members of the new umbrella organisation now include atheist groups from Indonesia, Pakistan, Gambia, and Uganda.

The conference included high-profile figures such as outspoken US atheist and biology professor P Z Myers, evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, Iranian human rights activist Maryam Namazie, of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, Danish neurobiologist Lone Frank and Indian author Aroup Chatterjee.

In his address, Myers said that Europeans' sense of their politics as wholly secular was inaccurate. "You guys aren't secular, or at least you aren't secular enough – there's all kinds of tensions between religion and society."

He noted that despite constitutional separation of church and state, the US remains more religious than Europe, but says this itself holds lessons for Europeans hoping to protect and expand secularism in society.

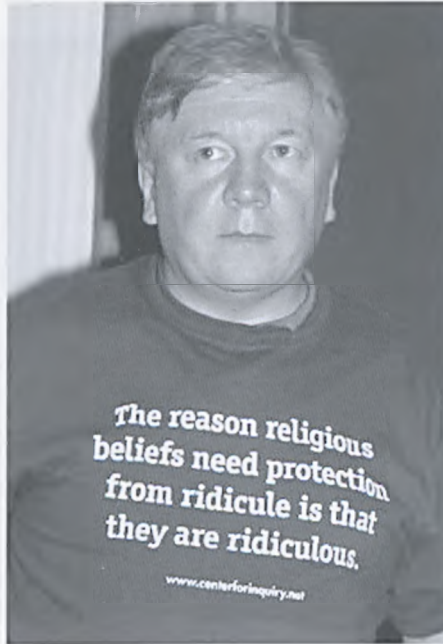
"America is much less secular than any country in Europe. The one thing that can be learned from the US is that you have to be watchful for the encroachment of religion into politics."

Speaking to *The Irish Times*, Prof Richard Dawkins said the Irish Constitution should be reformed to "remove all influence of the Roman Catholic Church and all other churches ... incorporating tolerance for all religions".

Referring to the oath that must be taken by Irish presidents and judges, he said they might as well take an oath "to Zeus or Thor" as to God.

He "rejoiced" at the growth of secularism in Ireland and when he read the papers "about the pathetically diminished number of priests". He hoped the churches would "wither away", describing the Catholic Church as "an evil institution ... by far the worst where the churches are concerned".

The gathering saw the launch of the Dublin Declaration on Secularism and the Place of



Michael Nugent pictured at the World Atheist Convention in Ireland

Religion in Public Life, which says that freedom of expression and of religion "should be limited only by the need to respect the rights and freedoms of others".

The Declaration also states that "the sovereignty of the State is derived from the people and not from any God or gods".

On education, the Declaration says state education should be secular and "children should be taught about the diversity of religious and no-religious beliefs in an objective manner, with no faith formation in school

hours".

Children should also "be educated in critical thinking and the distinction between faith and reason as a guide to knowledge. Science should be taught free from religious interference."

It says that "freedom of conscience, religion and belief are private and unlimited" and that all blasphemy laws should be repealed. "There should be no right 'not to be offended' in law."

Under the heading "Secular Democracy" it says: "The only reference in the Constitution to religion should be an affirmation that the State is secular."

Public policy "should be formed by applying reason, not religious faith, to evidence" and "the State should be strictly neutral in matters of religion, and its absence, favouring none and discriminating against none".

Religions, it says "should have no special financial consideration in public life, such as tax-free status for religious activities, or grants to promote religion or run faith schools" and "membership of a religion should not be a basis for appointing a person to any State position".

Where law is concerned, it says "there should be one secular law for all, democratically decided and evenly enforced, with no jurisdiction for religious courts to settle civil matters or family disputes".

Organised by Atheist Ireland, the convention was attended by 350 delegates, many of them Irish, with a preponderance of young people in their 20s.

Non-belief is on the rise in Ireland

THE non-religious are the largest group in Ireland after Catholics, according to the last census. A report last month in the *Irish Times* said that they "range from active atheists lobbying for a secular Ireland to guilty non-believers who still observe religious rituals.

The paper added that "there is more chance of a non-believer being elected President now than at any other time in the history of the State."

In the 2006 census, more than 186,000 people ticked the No Religion box, an increase of 34.6 per cent on 2002. That makes it the second-largest census grouping after Roman Catholic. There are more agnostics, humanists, atheists and non-religious in Ireland than there are Church of Ireland members, Presbyterians, Orthodox Christians and Methodists combined.

A further 70,000 opted not to answer the religion question. Coming in the wake of the Murphy and Ryan reports on the Catholic Church's abuse scandals, the 2011 census results are expected to record a further increase in this disparate but essentially non-religious group.



Fear and loathing in a Jewish ghetto

THE poorest place in the United States – according to a *New York Times* report – is not a dusty Texas border town, a hollow in Appalachia, a remote Indian reservation or a blighted urban neighborhood. It has no slums or homeless people. No one who lives there is shabbily dressed or has to go hungry.

Yet, officially, at least, none of the nation's 3,700 villages, towns or cities with more than 10,000 people has a higher proportion of its population living in poverty than Kiryas Joel, a community of mostly garden apartments and town houses 50 miles northwest of New York City in suburban Orange County.

About 70 percent of the village's 21,000

residents live in households whose income falls below the federal poverty threshold, according to the Census Bureau. Median family income (\$17,929) and per capita income (\$4,494) rank lower than any other comparable place in the country.

About half of the residents receive benefits and rely on federal vouchers to help pay their housing costs.

Kiryas Joel's unlikely ranking results largely from religious and cultural factors. Ultra-Orthodox Satmar Hasidic Jews predominate in the village; many of them moved there from Williamsburg, Brooklyn, beginning in the 1970s to accommodate a dramatically

growing population. Women marry young, remain in the village to raise their families and, according to religious strictures, do not use birth control. Mothers rarely work outside the home while their children are young.

Most residents, raised as Yiddish speakers, do not speak much English. And most men devote themselves to Torah and Talmud studies rather than academic training.

Earlier this year, the ghetto gained national notoriety when a major falling out among Jewish factions culminated in an arson attack on May 22 on Aron Rottenberg. The attack – which intended killing him and his entire family – left Rottenberg, 43, with burns over half his body.

Rottenberg later announced that he had filed a \$36-million lawsuit against the village's grand rabbi, David Twersky, and the 18-year-old aide suspected of starting the fire.

Meanwhile, dissident leaders from Kiryas Joel have filed a separate federal lawsuit accusing the Satmar Hasidic community's ruling faction of abusing its control over municipal affairs and demanding the 34-year-old village be dissolved.

The 59-page complaint catalogues grievances dating back a decade and depicts a religious faction exercising uncontested power in the secular realm. The case, brought by Goshen attorney Michael Sussman, calls Kiryas Joel a "theocracy" that violates the First Amendment's prohibition against the establishment of religion.

The plaintiffs want a federal judge to dissolve the village, which would effectively remove its leaders, lift its laws and place it under the governance of the surrounding Town of Monroe.

"Religion is wonderful," Sussman said at a press conference, seated beside Joseph Waldman, a plaintiff and longtime dissident leader. "But it cannot dominate the state. And that is what is happening in Kiryas Joel."

The case alleges discrimination against dissidents – estimated in court papers to comprise 40 percent of the village's roughly 20,000 residents – in various facets of public life, from tax exemptions for synagogues to election improprieties to selective enforcement of village noise ordinances.

Among the most serious allegations is that Kiryas Joel's Public Safety Department, a quasi-police agency, has acted as enforcers for the main congregation and tolerated acts of violence and intimidation against dissidents by unruly crowds of young supporters of Satmar Grand Rebbe Aron Teitelbaum, the leader of Kiryas Joel's majority faction.

Magnificent Support for Damon Fowler

Continued from page 1

closer to being the norm than the exception." He added: "Despite the vile threats, bullying, and hatred his community has given him, we recognise Damon for what he is: a brave student speaking up for religious liberty and inclusion."

And American Atheists said of Fowler: "Good job, Damon, you speak for the freedoms of people who are trapped in the bible-belt!"

The "Support Damon" group on Facebook had over 10,000 members within days of the story breaking. And many atheists have written letters to the Bastrop High School administration expressing their support for Fowler's position and their opposition to the prayer.

Many atheists have also offered Fowler transportation, legal advice, places to stay, physical protection, connections with others who could provide additional practical help, and more. The Freedom From Religion Foundation added \$1,000 to his college scholarship.

The *Alternet* website argued: "One of the chunks of mud that's most commonly slung at atheists is that we're selfish. Amoral. That without a belief in God and the afterlife, people would have no moral compass, and would just act to please themselves, without any consideration for others. That without a belief in eternal punishment in the afterlife for bad behavior, eternal reward in the afterlife for good behavior, and a supernatu-

ral authority figure refereeing it all, people would have no reason to be good people, and no reason to avoid doing terrible things. That without religion, people would have no compassion, no sense of justice, no empathy,

no desire to see society running smoothly ... and would just do whatever they wanted to do.

"But when Damon Fowler was suffering and in need, the atheist community stepped up. It provided compassion. It demanded justice. It offered emotional support. It offered practical support. It opened its wallets. It made it unsailably clear to Damon Fowler that he was not

alone: that although his school, his community,

even his parents, had all turned their backs on him, atheists would take care of him, as best they could, until he could take care of himself.

"It made it clear that, even though he no longer had a home in Bastrop, he had a home in this movement. When Damon Fowler was suffering and in need, the atheist community proved itself to be a real community.

"If atheism means we just do whatever we want to do... then apparently, what we want to do is take care of each other. Apparently, what we want to do is help people who have been injured. Apparently, what we want to do is speak out against wrongdoing. Apparently, what we want to do is put a stop to injustice. Apparently, what we want to do is make sacrifices for people in need."



Atheist hero Damon Fowler

Bill to curb sharia courts in the UK gets NSS backing

A PARLIAMENTARY Bill has been tabled in the House of Lords that would stop sharia courts in the UK claiming that they have legal jurisdiction over criminal or family law. At two meetings to introduce the Bill to the press and to peers, Baroness Caroline Cox was joined by Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society who also spoke.

There is a broad base of support for the Bill by religious and women's groups among others. The One Law for All movement was represented at the meetings, and copies of their publication, *One Law for All*, were distributed to participants. Both meetings were lively and constructive.

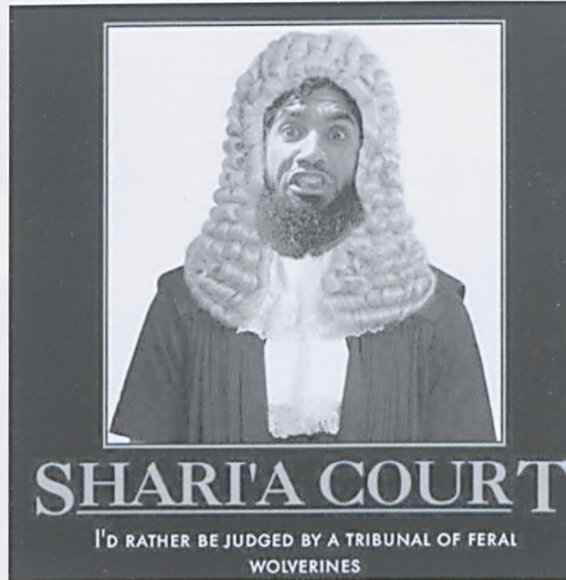
The Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill, was introduced into the House of Lords by Baroness Cox (Independent). Its intention is to tackle the discrimination suffered by Muslim women within the sharia court system. The Bill, which applies to all arbitration tribunals, will firmly outlaw the practice of giving women's testimony half the weight of men's. The Bill addresses human rights issues and does not mention Islam.

The Bill's proposals include:

- A new criminal offence of "falsely claiming legal jurisdiction" for any person who adjudicates upon matters which ought to be decided by criminal or family courts. The maximum penalty would be five years in prison.
- Explicitly stating in legislation that sex discrimination law applies directly to arbitration tribunal proceedings. Discriminatory rulings may be struck down under the Bill.
- Requiring public bodies to inform women that they have fewer legal rights if their marriage is unrecognised by English law.
- Making it easier for a civil court to set aside a consent order if a mediation settlement agreement or other agreement was reached under duress.

Lady Cox said: "Equality under the law is a core value of British justice. My Bill seeks to preserve that standard. I have no desire to interfere in the internal theological affairs of religious groups, and my Bill does not do that. My Bill seeks to stop parallel legal, or 'quasi-legal', systems taking root in our nation. Cases of criminal law and family law are matters reserved for our English courts alone.

"Through these proposals, I want to make it



perfectly clear in the law that discrimination against women shall not be allowed within arbitration. I am deeply concerned about the treatment of Muslim women by sharia courts. We must do all that we can to make sure they are free from any coercion, intimidation or unfairness.

"There is considerable evidence that many women are suffering in many ways (such as domestic violence or unequal access to divorce) due to discriminatory practices in our country today and we cannot continue to condone this situation. Many women say, 'we came to this country to escape these practices only to

find the situation is worse here'."

Keith Porteous Wood said: "Laws should not impinge on religious freedom, nor should courts judge on theological matters. But by the same token democratically determined and human rights compliant law must always take precedence over the law of any religion. Yet religious law can already be enforced under English law through the Arbitration Act and that is what this Bill is seeking to address.

"Religious arbitration has already been outlawed in two Canadian provinces and under this new Bill the Arbitration Act would not be able to determine family or criminal matters nor agreements that are discriminatory against women. A nation could be defined by those subject to one law. This Bill aims once more to give every citizen equal protection by the same just law – one law for all."

Anne Marie Waters of the One Law for All campaign commented: "We welcome any Bill that can halt the advancement of sharia courts and religious tribunals in Britain and promote equal rights. It is particularly important that women are informed of their rights under British law, and that domestic violence or other family or criminal law matters are not dealt with by sharia-based bodies – these put women at a grave disadvantage and treat children as the property of their fathers."

Anti-gay stickers: Muslim fanatic fined

A £100 fine was imposed last month on a Muslim fanatic who plastered homophobic stickers in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. Mohammed Hasnath, 18, was convicted at Westminster Magistrates Court of posting stickers warning gays that homosexuality was wrong and that "Allah is severe in punishment".

District Judge Coleman told Hasnath: "I think you used these stickers deliberately to offend and distress people, you certainly succeeded in doing that."

Hasnath, who is on benefits, admitted putting up a handful of the notes but said he had been given them, and pointed out there were "hundreds" of similar offensive stickers in the area.

Hasnath said he had put up the stickers because in the Koran it was forbidden for any person to be a homosexual.

The stickers deeply upset many in and around the area. In a statement read to the court Jack Gilbert, a board member of the Sandy Row Synagogue and co-chair of the Rainbow Hamlets community forum, said: "For me I read this no differently from a sign that said 'Jew free zone'. When I see that sticker I see the signs my mother saw in the 1930s which actually carried less suggestion of punishment. For me I perceived an immediate threat of violence and had to make an instant risk assessment to my personal safety."

Hasnath, who was representing himself, pleaded guilty to the offence.

Young Filipinos spearhead a secular a

A DECADE ago – probably even less – the photograph on the left most likely could never have been taken in the Philippines – or any other country where religion holds sway. It shows a shy 11-year-old clutching a copy of Professor Richard Dawkins' *The Greatest Show of Earth*, and other teaching materials aimed at steering youngsters away from creationist propaganda.

The shot was snapped during a recent outreach event organised by the recently-formed Philippines Atheists and Agnostics Society (PATAS) which we reported on in the last issue.

A leading figure in PATAS (which means "equal" in Filipino) is 25-year-old Levi Monton, who is doing a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology in the city of Cavite. His earlier attempt at a Bachelor of Science major in information technology was cut short due to financial financial problems.

Levi, the society's corporate secretary, began a dialogue with the *Freethinker* earlier this year as part of its mission to forge links with secular groups around the world. In this way, he believes, the society can garner the best in international atheist ideas and activities, and use them to promote atheism in his country, which is predominantly Catholic.

Levi was good at prayer from a very early age, having been taught that prayer was the pathway to "being a good kid". Both his parents died when he was just four – and he continued praying, until his fourth grade when he began rejecting religion.

"At first, I never knew the word 'atheist'



until I began my own research as to what I should I call a person who has no belief in a deity or a god," told us. "What was most challenging about coming out as an atheist were the many negative perceptions people had of non-believers. It was not unusual to be grouped with Satanists, criminals and the like. What I did to change people's perception of me, as an atheist, was by engaging humanitarian activities."

Levi became involved with PATAS because he believes it is an organisation best placed to help fellow atheists and agnostics

to have more confidence in themselves, and understand that they are as worthy of recognition and trust as anyone else.

"Atheists and agnostics", he says, "should have equal rights in our society."

PATAS principally works to promote an awareness among non-believers that they can be good contributors towards society – without resorting to religion. To this end, PATAS staged two Atheist Come Out weeks in March and April 2011.

"We also conducted meetings in public while carrying our PATAS banners. At every discussion we've held, we made sure our meetings were open for public to join and know more about PATAS, Levi said.

"Our pioneering team initially encountered many obstacles, such as finding meeting places, and selecting people to help. All of this changed when we began getting good feedback from the people who attended of our very first "Good without Religion" feeding programme. We fed more than 300 kids. The first "Come Out" week held in March gave us enough courage and eagerness to embark on more activities, and we sensed a great acceptance from people. After seeing our books, films and other educational material, their attitudes began changing"

Levi believes that the young people who have come into contact with PATAS hold out the best hope for a shining, secularist future in the Philippines. For example, he met the 11-year-old girl featured in the photograph at the recent feeding program held in



Enthusiastic youngsters attending a PATAS event. The background banner reads: 'I can be good without religion.'

...awakening in their Catholic country

Cavite. “She grew up in a religious family, and her mother was member of a religious group in their locality. She asked many questions about the creation of the world and as to how dinosaurs lived on earth. John Paraiso, PATAS President talked to the girl and explained evolution using Richard Dawkins’ *The Greatest Show on Earth*, and *The God Delusion*, plus other material we brought and gave to her. We were amazed by her reaction and acceptance of explanation of John’s explanations. We also received many queries from parents of the children, and we were so happy that their feedback was positive. They event wanted to learn more from our science lectures!

Asked to what extent the Internet has played in boosting PATAS activities, Levi said that he had known Mr Paraiso since 2006, even before PATAS and other atheist groups were formed. “I’ve been so grateful that world wide web has become affordable nowadays here in the Philippines. The Internet has helped PATAS gain members from USA, Europe, Asia, Middle East and other countries. Without the Internet, we could have not have made these connections. It also makes it easy for PATAS members to keep up-to-date with our progress.”

Levi is also a great believer in the power of social networking sites to promote PATAS – and it was on Facebook that we discovered he was gay. What role, we wondered, did his homosexuality play in his rejection of religion?

“Yes,” said Levi. “It’s true that I am a gay – and I am happy about what I am. And yes, my sexual orientation did play an important role in my rejection of religion. I had been sexually abused when I was eight and I prayed to God to help me, to no avail. The trauma caused by that experience changed my belief in the existence of what people called ‘God’. I always ask my theist friends ‘If God is love, why hate?’

“Right now, PATAS is giving me a lot of emotional support. It serves as my counselor whenever I feel haunted by my past.”

Levi came out as a gay when he was approaching his third year high school. “I didn’t find coming out difficult because I had friends who understood and supported me. What’s difficult was the attitude of the society. If you are from a religious country that rejects gays and lesbians you encounter a great deal of hostility. But I managed to deal with discrimination by demonstrating my skills such as singing, martial arts, boxing as well as academic prowess.”



Levi Monton pictured with a young helper at a PATAS feeding programme

Jesus & Mo



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The Death and Life of Jack Kevorkian

JACQUI LAINE looks back on the colourful career of a controversial agnostic who championed assisted suicide – and spent eight years in prison for his ‘crime’

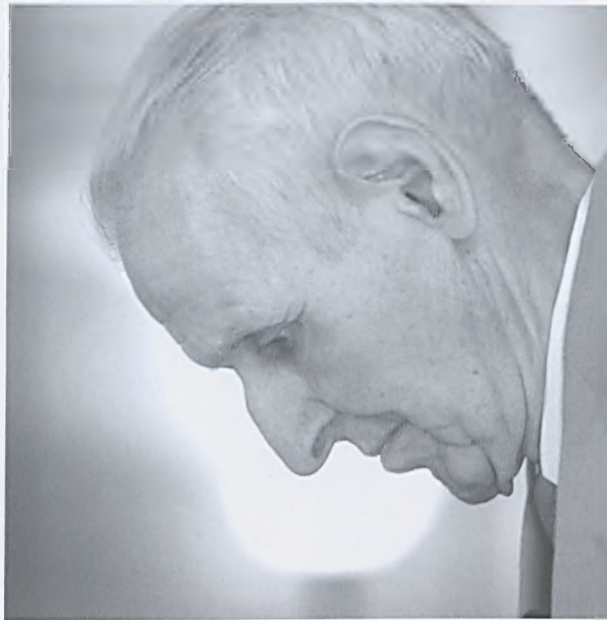
Dr Jack Kevorkian, the medical pathologist who became the central figure in a national debate surrounding assisted suicide in the United States, died in Michigan last month at the age of 83.

Kevorkian *did* believe in a god: Johann Sebastian Bach. The man who helped dozens of people to end their lives, made clear in a *60 Minutes* interview broadcast on May 19, 1996, that he was an agnostic. He also said that Americans have to stop basing public policy on pure emotion and that a great majority of the wars in our history were started because of the “irrationality of religion”. Kevorkian then revealed who his god was: “Bach ... At least I didn’t make my god up”.

And when he died at William Beaumont Hospital – to which he had been admitted with kidney and respiratory problems – Kevorkian, who was also a musician and artist, departed life to the strains of Bach, played to him by nurses.

His detractors – and there were many – lost little time in branding Kevorkian a hypocrite for not opting for suicide when he became terminally ill with liver cancer. Ned McGrath, for example, who is the Archdiocese of Detroit’s Communications Director, said: “It is both ironic and tragic that Kevorkian himself was afforded a dignified, natural death in a hospital, something he denied to those who came to him in desperation, only to be poisoned ...”

But Geoffrey N Fieger, the lawyer who represented Kevorkian at several of his trials in the 1990s, said that the physician – weakened as he lay in the hospital – simply could not take advantage of the option that he had offered others and that he had wished for himself. “This is something I would want,” Kevorkian told him. “If he had enough strength to do something about it, he would have,” Fieger said. “Had he been able to go home, Jack Kevorkian probably would not have allowed himself to go back to the hospital.”



Jack Kevorkian, pictured at the age of 79, (Photo Bill Pugliano, Getty Images)

In arguing for the right of the terminally ill to choose how they die, Kevorkian challenged social taboos about disease and dying while defying prosecutors and the courts. He spent eight years in prison after being convicted of second-degree murder. Originally sentenced in 1999 to 10 to 25 years in a maximum security prison, he was released after assuring the authorities that he would never conduct another assisted suicide.

In Oregon, where a schoolteacher had become Kevorkian’s first assisted suicide patient, state law-makers in 1997 approved a statute making it legal for doctors to prescribe lethal medication to help terminally ill patients end their lives. In 2006 the United States Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that found that Oregon’s Death With Dignity Act protected assisted suicide as a legitimate medical practice.

Kevorkian’s confrontational strategy gained wide publicity, which he actively sought. National magazines put his picture on their covers, and he drew the attention of television programmes like *60 Minutes*. His nickname, Dr Death, and his self-made suicide machine, which he variously called the “Mercitron” or the “Thanatron,” be-

came fodder for late-night television comedians. In 2010 his story was dramatised in the HBO movie *You Don’t Know Jack*, with Al Pacino portraying the doctor. Pacino received Emmy and Golden Globe awards for his performance. In his Emmy acceptance speech, he said he had been gratified to “try to portray someone as brilliant and interesting and unique” as Kevorkian. Kevorkian, who was in the audience, smiled in appreciation.

Given his obdurate public persona and his delight in flaying medical critics as “hypocritical oafs”, Kevorkian invited and revelled in the public’s attention, regardless of its sting.

The American Medical Association in 1995 called him “a reckless instrument of death” who “poses a great threat to the public”, and Diane Coleman, the founder of Not Dead Yet, which describes itself as a disability-rights advocacy group which once picketed Kevorkian’s home in Detroit, attacked his approach. “It’s the ultimate form of discrimination to offer people with disabilities help to die,” she said, “without having offered real options to live.”

But Jack Lessenberry, a prominent Michigan journalist who covered Kevorkian’s one-man campaign, wrote in *The Detroit Metro Times*: “Jack Kevorkian, faults and all, was a major force for good in this society. He forced us to pay attention to one of the biggest elephants in society’s living room: the fact that today vast numbers of people are alive who would rather be dead, who have lives not worth living.”

Energised by the attention of law-makers and the news media, he became involved in the growing national debate on dying with dignity. In 1987 he visited the Netherlands, where he studied techniques that allowed Dutch physicians to assist in the suicides of terminally ill patients without interference from the legal authorities.

A year later, he returned to Michigan and began advertising in Detroit-area newspapers for a new medical practice which would offer patients and their fami-

lies “death counselling.”

He made reporters aware of his intentions, explaining that he did not charge for his services and bore all the expenses of euthanasia himself. He showed journalists the simple metal frame from which he suspended vials of drugs — thiopental, a sedative, and potassium chloride, which paralyzed the heart — that allowed patients to end their own lives.

He also talked about the “doctrine” he had developed to achieve two goals: ensuring the patient’s comfort and protecting himself against criminal conviction. He required patients to express clearly a wish to die. Family physicians and mental health professionals were consulted. Patients were given at least a month to consider their decision and possibly change their minds. Kevorkian videotaped interviews with patients, their families and their friends, and he videotaped the suicides, which he called medicides.

On June 4, 1990, Janet Adkins, an Oregon teacher who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease, was the first patient to avail herself of Kevorkian’s assistance. Adkins’s life ended on the bed inside Kevorkian’s rusting 1968 Volkswagen van, which was parked in a campground near his home.

Afterwards Kevorkian called the police, who arrested and briefly detained him. The next day Ron Adkins, her husband, and two of his sons held a news conference in Portland and read the suicide note Adkins had prepared. In an interview with the *New York Times* that day, Kevorkian alerted the nation to his campaign.

“My ultimate aim is to make euthanasia a positive experience,” he said. “I’m trying to knock the medical profession into accepting its responsibilities, and those responsibilities include assisting their patients with death.”

Kevorkian assisted in some 130 suicides over the next eight years. Patients from across the country travelled to the Detroit region to seek his help. Sometimes the procedure was done in homes, cars and campgrounds.

Prosecutors, jurists, the State Legislature, the Michigan health authorities and Governor John Engler seemed helpless to stop him, though they spent years trying. In 1991 a state judge, Alice Gilbert, issued a permanent injunction barring Kevorkian from using his suicide machine. The same year, the state suspended his licence to practise medicine. In 1993, Michigan approved a statute outlawing assisted suicide. The statute was declared unlawful by a state judge and the state Court of Appeals, but in 1994 the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that assisting in a suicide, while not

specifically prohibited by statute, was a common-law felony and that there was no protected right to suicide assistance under the state Constitution.

None of the legal restrictions seemed to matter to Kevorkian. From May 1994 to June 1997, Kevorkian stood trial four times following the deaths of six patients. With the help of his young and flamboyant defence lawyer, Geoffrey Fieger, three of those trials ended in acquittals, and the fourth was declared a mistrial.

But on March 26, 1999, after a trial that lasted less than two days, a Michigan jury found Kevorkian guilty of second-degree murder. That trial came six months after Kevorkian had videotaped himself injecting Thomas Youk, a patient suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Lou Gehrig’s disease), with the lethal drugs that caused Youk’s death on September 17, 1998.

Kevorkian sent the videotape to *60 Minutes*. The tape showed Kevorkian going well beyond assisting a patient to cause his own death by performing the injection himself. The programme portrayed him as a zealot with an agenda. “They must charge me; either they go or I go,” he told Mike Wallace. “If they go, that means they’ll never convict me in a court of law.” The broadcast, which prompted a national debate about medical ethics and media responsibility, also served as prime evidence for a first-degree murder charge brought by the Oakland County prosecutor’s office. In a departure from his previous trials, Kevorkian ignored Fieger’s advice and defended himself — and not at all well. It was an act of arrogance he regretted, he said later.

“You had the audacity to go on national television, show the world what you did and dare the legal system to stop you,” said Judge Jessica R Cooper, who presided over the trial in Oakland County Circuit Court. “Well, sir, consider yourself stopped.”

On June 1, 2007, Kevorkian was released from prison after he promised not to conduct another assisted suicide.

Writing in the *Washington Post*, atheist journalist and commentator Susan Jacoby said that Jack Kevorkian “deserved better than he got after his death”, and gave as an example the words of conservative *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat: “He helped anyone whose suffering seemed sufficient to warrant his deadly assistance”.

“Douthat’s screed”, said Jacoby, “ran under the headline, *Dr Kevorkian’s Victims*. “Victims? Kevorkian videotaped interviews with all of the people he helped die, and they stated their reasons for wanting to end their lives before Kevorkian supplied them with heart-stopping drugs that they

administered themselves.

“He also videotaped the deaths. He was acquitted three times by Michigan juries on various charges before, in 1999, he taped himself injecting the lethal drugs into an ALS patient who no longer had the muscular strength to push a button. (ALS, popularly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease, imposes the cruel fate of living, until the moment of suffocation, with an intact mind in a completely helpless body.)

“That time — the only time Kevorkian actually administered a lethal drug — a jury had no choice under the law but to convict him of first-degree murder.”

Jacoby continued: “Victim is a term that would be better used to describe anyone forced to go on living by a legal system, a medical system, and religious dogma insisting that human beings have no right to take their own lives under any circumstances or that those who do so must be mentally ill.

“I do not consider Kevorkian a hero. He was, however, one of those indispensable people who, by going to extremes and risking their own liberty (for Kevorkian was bound to be convicted one day, since he was in fact breaking the law) force respectable ‘moderates’ — like those who fought so hard for physician-assisted suicide in Oregon — to do something about a situation that nearly everyone is afraid to face.

Jacoby made clear in her book *Never Say Die*: “I do not see suicide as a way out of suffering that will ever be chosen by more than a small number of people. This is hardly an original observation, and it is borne out by overwhelming evidence of the rarity of suicide even in the most extreme circumstances. Since the 1996 passage of Oregon’s Death With Dignity Act — which allows physicians to prescribe lethal drugs (but not to administer them) only for those whose diagnosis is that they will die within six months — just 525 people have ended their lives under the law’s provisions. That hardly constitutes a rush to embrace death. One of the astonishing beliefs of those who oppose physician-assisted suicide is that if the means of suicide become more readily available, there will be an epidemic of self-murder.

“I consider suicide a human right as basic as the right of adults, if they so desire, to go on living as long as nature and medicine can sustain them. It is a tragedy when people kill themselves, at any age, as a result of depression and despair over a condition that, with proper psychological, medical and financial assistance, is remediable. It is not a tragedy when people kill themselves because they do not wish to live with a condition that cannot be changed.”

Osama bin Laden's legacy

JAMES A HAUGHT on the baffling era of religious suicides and massacres

Osama bin Laden achieved a remarkable feat: he mobilized the power of religion to spur devout young men to kill themselves in order to murder defenseless strangers. Grotesquely, the suicide-killers felt they were performing holy acts that would please God and assure them martyr rewards in paradise.

The annals of faith-based killing are long: human sacrifice, the Crusades, the Inquisition, witch-hunts, Reformation wars, drowning of Anabaptists, jihads, pogroms against Jews, China's Taiping Rebellion, Mexico's Cristero War, cult horrors, abortion clinic murders, and many modern ethnic conflicts fueled by "religious tribalism."

A new phase was led by bin Laden, who orchestrated the 21st-century phenomenon of Islamic suicide-bombing. Mercifully, his personal chapter ended when Navy Seals stormed his Asian hideout on May 1.

The modern Islamic "cult of death" – the worst menace of current times – baffles most Westerners. Logical minds cannot comprehend why idealistic young men, and a few women, volunteer to sacrifice their lives to slaughter unsuspecting, unarmed folks. It makes no sense.

Pundit Anthony Lewis wrote: "There is no way to reason with people who think they will go directly to heaven if they kill Americans." Columnist William Safire said the volunteers do it because their "normal survival instinct is replaced with a pseudo-religious fantasy of a killer's self-martyrdom leading to an eternity in paradise surrounded by adoring virgins." And columnist David Brooks wrote that the bizarre phenomenon is "about massacring people while in a state of spiritual loftiness."

These fanatics lack normal empathy for fellow humans. While in foreign lands or amid dissimilar ethnic groups, they don't see surrounding families as affectionate mothers, fathers and children, but as "infidels" deserving death. If the suicide-killers ever acquire nuclear devices, the unthinkable will be upon humanity.

The raid that ended bin Laden culmi-



Osama bin Laden

nated a three-decade saga of "blowback." Inadvertently, the Reagan-Bush White House in the 1980s unwittingly helped ignite the Muslim terror movement that now hurts America. Here's the record:

In the late '70s, radical reformers seized power in Afghanistan and created a Western-style government that began educating girls. Horrified, Muslim extremists and armed tribes rebelled. One of the rebel leaders was warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, an extremist known for throwing acid on unveiled schoolgirls while he was in college.

Such *mujahideen* (holy warriors) were on the brink of toppling the new Afghan government when the Soviet Union sent its Red Army in 1979 to suppress the uprising. Globally, the Cold War was seething. To damage the Soviets, the Reagan administration secretly sent the CIA to arm, train and pay the rebel tribes to kill Russians. Hekmatyar's group got millions of US dollars.

Meanwhile, ardent young Muslims from many lands rushed to Afghanistan to join the "holy war." One was Osama bin Laden, 17th son of a rich Saudi contractor who had a dozen wives. A pious Wahabbi Muslim, bin

Laden used his wealth to recruit and pay fighters.

The combined CIA-zealot resistance worked. The Russians were driven out and Afghanistan's modern government was crushed. Warlords like Hekmatyar took over, but soon fought among themselves. Then an Islamic student group, the Taliban, seized control and created a cruel theocracy that stoned women to death and inflicted other extreme Puritanical strictures.

Covertly, bin Laden assembled numerous former Afghan volunteers into a shadowy international network, al-Qaida, dedicated to waging jihad (holy war) against the West. His suicidal operatives helped kill US soldiers in Somalia in 1993, blow up two American embassies in Africa in 1998, and bomb the USS Cole in 2000.

Bin Laden issued a *fatwa* (sacred edict) calling on "every Muslim who believes in God and hopes for reward to obey God's command to kill the Americans and plunder their possessions wherever he finds them and whenever he can." He was indicted by US authorities and put on international "most wanted" lists.

Then 19 al-Qaeda suicide volunteers perpetrated the historic atrocity of September 11, 2001, when they hijacked airliners and crashed them into US landmarks, killing 3,000 people. It was the most horrifying day in the memory of most US residents.

The holy killers left behind a testament they had shared among themselves, saying they were doing it for God: "Know that the gardens of paradise are waiting for you in all their beauty," they assured each other, "and the women of paradise are waiting, calling out, 'Come hither, friend of God.' They have dressed in their most beautiful clothing."

Idiocy. Infantilism. It's sickening to realize that 3,000 unsuspecting people died because of this adolescent male fantasy. To believe that God wants mass murder is lunacy. As famed British biologist Richard Dawkins wrote: "The 19 men of 9/11 – having washed, perfumed themselves and shaved their whole bodies in preparation for the martyr's paradise – believed they were performing the highest religious duty. By the lights of their religion, they were as good as it is possible

to be. They were not poor, downtrodden, oppressed or psychotic; they were well-educated, sane and well-balanced, and, as they thought, supremely good. But they were religious, and that provided all the justification they needed to murder and destroy."

The mastermind of this crackpottery is dead in a hail of Navy Seals gunfire. But the suicide-martyr phenomenon he fostered probably will continue impelling idealistic young men to sacrifice their lives in massacres.

Bin Laden wasn't the sole creator of the

Islamic cult of death. His Egyptian partner, Ayman al-Zawahiri, pioneered it in the 1990s. Since then, many far-flung Muslim extremist groups have adopted suicide-bombing – often using it on fellow Muslims of opposing sects, or against disapproved Islamic governments. Some researchers list as many as 17,000 Muslim terror attacks since the 9/11 horror, with a total body count beyond 60,000 victims. That's an average of five murder missions per day – so many that news media ignore smaller assaults. The phenomenon has a boundless supply of right-

eous-feeling volunteers eager to throw away their lives to kill for God and their faith.

As Nobel Prize-winning physicist Steven Weinberg said: "For good people to do evil things, it takes religion."

• James A Haught is editor of West Virginia's largest newspaper, *The Charleston Gazette*, and is author of two books on religious violence: *Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious Murder and Madness*, and *Holy Hatred: Religious Conflicts of the 90s*.

Intellectual decline of the Muslim world has thrown it into a dangerous state of denial

THEY were furious. They were chanting slogans. They were swearing to crush the conspiracy being hatched against Islam. They were cursing the Western "flawed" way of life. The rally was organised to condemn the banning of the burqa (full face veil) in France.

Paradoxically, hardly any of the protesters had actually read the text of the French enactment banning, from April, the full face veil. In countries like Pakistan, the nucleus of present Muslim extremism, where literacy is not more than 15 to 20 percent and centuries-old feudalism has been successfully forestalling education, who'd bother to find out and go through the text of the legislation?

The intellectual decline which has engulfed the Muslim world has thrown it into a dangerous state of denial. Everything that other, especially advanced, countries do is perceived and analysed in the light of "conspiracy theories". The majority of Muslims are suffering from a devastating persecution complex, which, in turn, is begetting and aggravating militant extremism. Such has been the reaction to the French burqa ban.

Every Muslim knows that wearing the burqa has never been irremissible in Islam. A considerable number of Islamic jurists do not support it. Millions of Muslim women, while reaping crops in agricultural fields, picking cotton in plantations of central Pakistan, handling herds in Central Asian pastures, teaching in universities, working in banks and elsewhere, do not wear the burqa.

Millions of Muslim women have never, and will never, cover their faces while performing the pilgrimage to holy Mecca. They are not allowed by Islam to do so during pilgrimage.

In France, as elsewhere, only a handful of Muslim women cover their faces. Yet fanatics

By Muhammad Izhar ul Haq



A Muslim woman (or a man in Islamic drag) protests the French burqa ban

are making the French enactment an issue and presenting it as anti-Islamic sentiment. The full face veil is being jumbled up with the hijab (head-covering). France has not prohibited the covering of head. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia has made the wearing of abaya (robes) mandatory for all women who visit that country or live there, irrespective of their religion.

This brings us to another issue being thrown into oblivion by protesting Muslims. Millions of Muslims have migrated to the developed world where 'flawed secular' values are at variance with Islamic, or so called Islamic, requirements. There are more than 50 Muslim countries, some of which (such as Saudi Arabia, Libya, Qatar) are fabulously wealthy. Why it is that not one of all these countries can accommodate Muslim immigrants?

Statistics are mind-blowing. According to 2009 figures, 365,000 Muslims have made Australia their home, 281,000 live in Belgium, 657,000 in Canada, 3,554,000 in France, 4,026,000 in Germany, 946,000 in Netherlands, 650,000 in Spain, 1,647,000 in UK, and 2,454,000 in USA.

Millions are ensconced in Italy, Greece,

Scandinavia, Switzerland, Austria, Japan and New Zealand. Millions more are struggling to follow. There are long queues in front of the embassies of Western countries. Asylum seekers are setting ashore from boats and cargo vessels. Many manage to land with tourist visas and vanish.

Economics is not the only catalyst. The unemployed destitute and the affluent lucky ones are equally enthusiastic to reach these promised lands. The rule of law, democratic norms, equal opportunities, better education prospects, and religious, political and personal freedom attract them to these countries. None of these is available in their homelands.

A strange Kafalah (sponsorship) system is prevailing in oil-rich Middle Eastern citadels of Islam. Every migrant worker needs, by law, a guarantor who must be a local citizen. The guarantor legally owns the business and all movable and immovable property of the migrant, and documents are held in his custody. Nothing belongs to the migrant, whether he is an entrepreneur or employee, except his passport, which he must carry wherever he goes.

"When employers have near total control over migrants' ability to change jobs, and sometimes to leave the country, workers can get trapped in exploitative situations in which they are forced to work without wages, get beaten or face other abuse," says a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report.

Outrage over slights such as the burqa ban in France are a distraction from these more important issues. Look at the protests against this backdrop. Isn't it a farce? Albeit a tragic farce!

• Muhammad Izhar ul Haq is a poet and writer from Pakistan, now living in Melbourne. He has written extensively on religious extremism and terrorism. His piece first appeared in the on-line magazine, *Eureka Street*.

Moral cartography

PETER BRIETBART catches up with Sam Harris to discuss his new book, *The Moral Landscape*. (Illustration: Many Artists Who Do One Thing)

Sam Harris is not enamoured with philosophy. It's turgid and boring, he tells me with a smile, whilst gently stirring his tea. But it's not just his opinion, he says – almost nobody reads philosophy – and fewer still read moral philosophy. Academic philosophy has managed to take something very familiar to us – talk of morality – and make it distant and abstract. But Harris is changing all that.

I'm sitting in a London hotel opposite the author of *The End of Faith, Letters to a Christian Nation* and now, *The Moral Landscape*. The central thesis of his new book is simple: the David Hume-inspired concept of a mental split between facts and values is false. There are objective moral truths, and these truths relate directly to shifts in conscious creature well-being. Words such as "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong" mean and have always meant "well-being improving" and "well-being damaging", and that "well-being" can be understood and illuminated by neuroscience. We really will be able to test, he says, to see which of two people are objectively happier, and a science of well-being will be able to give expert advice on how we can live best.

This is about as contentious a claim as can be made in moral philosophy. Hume famously declared that one cannot derive an "ought" from what "is"; that any normativity, will be lost in an objective description of the world. But Harris thinks this is all wrong. Where else could we get our "oughts", he asks, apart from what is? Traditional philosophy says this simply isn't possible, and an appalling unified front of opposition against this thesis has emerged, made up of comedically vacuous pseudo-thinkers like Deepak Chopra, but also well-respected philosophers such as Thomas Nagel and Russel Blackford.

But Harris's argument is compelling. He asks us to imagine a world in which every conscious creature is suffering the worst misery they can suffer, and for as long as they can possibly bear it. This "worst possible misery for everyone" argument allows Harris to say with confidence that if there exists any "ought" in the world, it is that we ought to avoid that state of affairs. If any action can be said to be morally good, it is in moving further away from that world. Whenever we

say "good" or "bad", what we mean is "that will improve my/her/his/their well-being", or "that will damage it".

A science of well-being is now emerging. It, like the science of health, has an axiomatic foundation, in that you must value the object of study. The question, "Why value well-being?" is equivalent to "why value health?" or "why value truth?". If you don't care about these things, you discount yourself from the conversation.

Philosophers argue that defining morality as talk of conscious creature well-being merely gives us inter-subjectivity, not objectivity, but this is entirely missing the point. If talk of morality is to mean anything, conjuring non-natural moral truths or weird metaphysical imperatives does nothing to assist us down here in the real world. The philosophers' objections to Harris's arguments may be fair in the language game of philosophy; they may object to the assumption that the well-being of conscious creatures is what really matters, but I fail to see any plausible alternatives.

Harris retells the story of an encounter with an ethics advisor for the Obama administration. In a lecture, Harris had been strongly critical of the Taliban's ethics, and argued that in objective terms, Taliban society was less conducive to human flourishing than ours, particularly with regard to the enforced veiling of women. This ethics adviser approached him afterwards, challenging his views on this, and asserted that it was "merely his opinion". Ultimately, she said, science could never have a say on right or wrong, no matter how damaging the cultural practice might be to an individual, or how reprehensible we might find it.

This kind of moral relativism is the target of Harris's book. Shamefully, the religious have been able to usurp the moral high ground in the light of their ability to justify their moral codes (even if we think such justification is tripe). In a godless world, we must base our moral judgments on *something*.

Philosophers had made moral talk absurd, making it seem as if there was some kind of stalemate in moral progress between religious divine command theorists on one hand and the scientifically-minded (but morally unjustified) on the other. If we can't

say, as we once might have done, that what is good is what God commands, what can we say good is?

Harris insists: "The well-being of conscious creatures." But what, cry the philosophers, can we mean by "well-being"? Harris argues that the term is very much like "health" – difficult to define, constantly being revised, but scientifically meaningful. The difference between a healthy person and a dead one is clear-cut.

Harris's ideas are modest, but revolutionary. If we recognise that moral language is all about conscious creature well-being, we can make scientific, objective claims about the relative moral standing of different cultures. More than that, though, we can start to place these cultures onto what Harris calls "the moral landscape", a theoretical conceptual landscape that represents the highs and lows of human well-being.

The Taliban, he reckons, are in a pretty vicious dip, whilst the liberal, egalitarian societies of Scandinavia are much higher up. And there are many peaks, he says, and many different ways of having extremely good lives, as many as there are ways of having terrible lives.

I challenge him on this: what if there was some woman in Afghanistan that was made truly happy by her subservient role, simply because she'd always been taught the Koran. If she's internalised the claims of the Koran so well that her well-being is shaped by her understanding of how well-being should be sought, and as a result feels very happy most of the time, what position do we take in speaking with her?

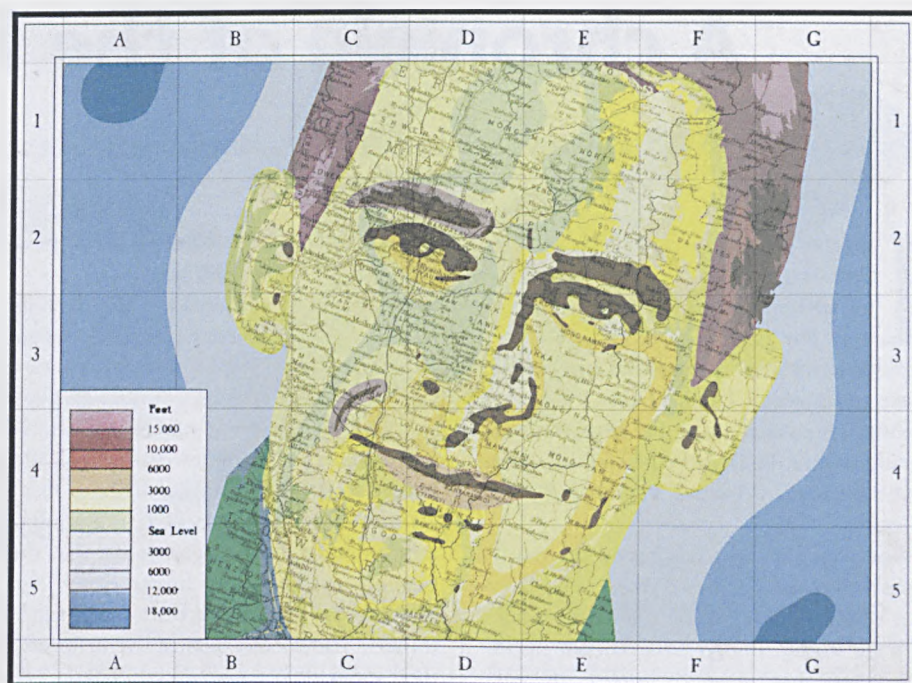
He considers the question for a moment before replying that we wouldn't need to persuade her of anything. She really could be very happy, he says. It's very possible. He continues that, even if she is happy by some chance alignment between her personal idiosyncrasies, the dogma she's been indoctrinated with and her psychology, it still can't be a peak on the moral landscape because there are so many other ways to become that happy that don't entail liking to throw battery acid in the faces of little girls.

These other ways allow for the happiness of many other people who aren't made happy in that way of life. So her happiness

is coming at the price of others' well being; the entropy is being exported to the rest of society.

Harris has crafted us an excellent tool here: the viewpoint of a science of well-being, and the ability to make objective claims about right and wrong. Religious practices are objectively morally wrong from this viewpoint, because they sacrifice human well-being in the pursuit of (imagined) divine well-being. Ritual circumcision is an excellent example of this – barbaric, sacred and needless.

The *Moral Landscape* is what freethinkers have needed for quite some time. It is the response to the accusation that we god-free fellows have no basis for our morality. It is about time we reclaimed the moral conversation from the religious in the battle for human progress, and Harris has forged an extraordinary weapon for our use. For the philosophers to disregard it for petty reasons allows the religious to dangerously distort the moral conversation.



Opposite sides of the humanist-Christian divide

PETER SUTHERLAND reviews two books by the Hitchens brothers

CHRISTOPHER and Peter Hitchens started adult life as good lefty humanists. Sadly, Peter in his middle age has turned right and religious and now writes for the *Mail on Sunday*. He campaigns against humanism in favour of orthodox Christianity. So, what made him regress?

Like so many of us (not including me – my father brought me up as a freethinker) Peter rebelled against his Christian upbringing during his adolescence. However, during his middle age he found the call of the Church of England version of Christianity irresistible. He loves his evensong and his Xmas service. He now argues the case for God. However, he is not content just to practise his faith. He is so angry with people like his brother and us that his anger turns to rage in *The Rage Against God: Why Faith is the Foundation of Civilisation*.

Peter equates freethinking with Communism. He picks ridiculously extreme examples of atheism as straw men to knock down on behalf of Christianity. He cites Kim il Sung's North Korea as an example of a freethinker regime!! I think we would all give up our subscriptions to the *Freethinker* if North Korea set our values!

Peter implies that only Christians can give their children moral values during their upbringing. He claims not to loathe atheists, but, whilst reading his book, this is hard to believe.

Peter's short book is divided into three

sections:

1. A personal journey through atheism.
2. Addressing atheism: three failed arguments.
3. The league of the militant godless.

This culminates in the so called "Great Debate" between the two brothers at Grand Rapids in Michigan in 2008.

Christopher has remained faithful to our outlook and *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* is a valuable collection of essays by his favourite humanists. This is a project I've long wanted to do. So I am rather envious.

There are 47 chapters in all, including (sadly) only two by women. He starts from Lucretius in Roman times; then comes Omar Khayyam. After this there is a long break for the Dark Ages until the greats of the Renaissance such as Hobbes and Spinoza.

He includes my supreme humanist hero: Albert Einstein. Einstein writes about religious humanism: a sense of awe at the universe, but absolutely no belief in any supernatural god. However, Christopher does NOT include the second hero of my youthful commitment to humanism: Julian Huxley. Huxley is apparently no longer fashionable.

There are three contributions from Professor Richard Dawkins, including the classic *Why there almost certainly is no God*.

Christopher claims many writers of

modern times for our movement: Conrad, Hardy, Orwell, Updike and Ian McEwan.

He finishes with a number of current writers, including two of the American school of new atheists: Sam Harris and Daniel C Dennett. Then finally Salman Rushdie and two ex-Muslims who have dared to break away, but have had to disguise their real names with pseudonyms.

So here we have the two brothers: Christopher staunchly defending the freethinker standpoint and living in the United States; Peter campaigning passionately for the Church of England (and the Conservative Party) and living in Britain. Apparently they seldom meet or speak to each other. This is a pity as a debate between them could make an excellent public meeting or *Question Time* type programme on television.

Not surprisingly, I recommend Christopher's book to freethinkers but not Peter's. Unless that is, you would like to rage against *The Rage Against God* as I did.

• *The Rage Against God* (2010) by Peter Hitchens is published by Continuum. Hardback. 168 pages. ISBN 978-1441-10572-1. £16.99.

• *The Portable Atheist* by Christopher Hitchens (2007) is published by Da Capo Press. 499 pages. ISBN 13 978-0-306-91608-6. Retails at Amazon at £6.99.

A chronicle of the faithless

MARCO VEGA reviews S T Joshi's *The Unbelievers: The Evolution of Modern Atheism*

Imagine you are having a friendly conversation with a religious acquaintance in which you are trying to explain why one of his or her favourite passages of scripture is inconsistent and doesn't make much sense. Think of that frustrating feeling when, after using the soundest reasoning at your disposal, the person still insists that the passage is factual "because scripture says so".

Now compare that frustration to how it must have been for freethinkers who lived two centuries ago; people who were encircled by hostile hordes of irrational opponents. Still they managed to conjure up persuasive arguments to prove their religious counterparts wrong.

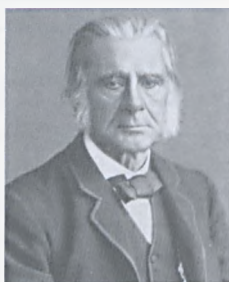
This is exactly what *The Unbelievers* is about; it is the story of how and why a handful of outspoken thinkers created powerful anti-theist arguments that would eventually lead to the powerful rationalist movement we have today.

Sunand Tryambak Joshi is known as a novelist, literary critic and bibliographer. He has been praised by critics such as Harold Bloom and Joyce Carol Oates for his extensive bibliographies of H P Lovecraft and H L Mencken. But more admirable is his work on disseminating these (and other) authors' lesser-known poetry, essays, letters and short stories. More recently, however, Joshi has focused on politics, atheism and religion, publishing a handful of anti-theist texts, including *Atheism: A Reader* (2000)

and *God's Defenders: What They Believe and Why they are Wrong* (2003).

In Joshi's newest work, *The Unbelievers*, he gives a detailed historical account of 14 thinkers from the past two centuries who – through debates, court cases, poetry and fiction – heavily contributed to building enlightened societies that would allow people to speak their mind without fear of censorship or persecution. It is an important reminder for today's atheists that their freedom to "come out of the closet" owes much to the painstaking battles that brilliant thinkers had to win against the believers of their times.

Joshi starts his journey with Thomas Henry Huxley, known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his zealous support of Darwin's theory of evolution. *The Unbelievers* covers Huxley's most important debates in which he uses



Thomas Henry Huxley

the concept of natural selection as a powerful weapon to undermine rigid religious doctrines. Thus Huxley, a declared agnostic, will repeatedly argue that the existence of human beings can be explained without recourse to supernatural entities.

Another example is Joshi's account of Leslie Stephen, generally only remembered as Virginia Woolf's father. Here Joshi points out how Stephen, unlike Huxley, is interested in tackling religion from a different angle. Whilst Huxley is more interested in challenging the faithful by resorting to advances in science, Stephen attempts to exhibit how our notions of morality can (and should) be independent of religious values.

The Unbelievers also brings into context many issues that have recurrently emerged in recent history. It recalls the self-proclaimed "most hated woman in America", Madalyn Murray O'Hair, who conducted a successful campaign in the 1960s to remove obligatory Bible reading from American public schools. It also recollects the infamous 1920s Scopes trial, in which John Scopes was taken to court for the "crime" of teaching evolution, which was at the time against Tennessee law. If one compares these cases to today's America, in which scientists still have to fight to ensure evolution is kept in classrooms, it becomes clear that American secularism, as

envisioned by its founding fathers, has still to be defended against the religious right's same old assaults.

Overall, Joshi's new book is an insightful and engaging read. Most chapters contain a contextual introduction, a short biography and an account of events and arguments of the individual at hand. Towards the end, however, when discussing Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens, Joshi's presentation and tone change quite dramatically. He uses these chapters to propose a number of personal praises and criticisms of their works – some justified, but others not so much.

He succeeds, for example, in pointing out Harris's and Dawkins' naivety for not recognising the political, historic and economic issues surrounding many of the world's problems. This is evident when discussing 9/11 and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Joshi rightly criticises Harris and Dawkins for solely blaming religion. At other times, however, he seemingly goes out of his way to show his disapproval by conjuring obscure and pointless assertions. This is particularly apparent when he condemns Dawkins' invention of the term "meme" and its (supposed) failure as an explanatory tool. His justification is that memes don't act the same way genes do, and thus Dawkins should drop his "misleading" and "pseudo-scientific" explanation of how cultural transmission occurs.

If you plan on picking up *The Unbelievers*, make sure you are interested in the details surrounding each of these thinkers' many disputes, because at times Joshi patiently discusses long sequences of exchanges between these dissidents and their peers. If this does appeal to you, and you are looking to attain a nuanced understanding of the movement's development, then *The Unbelievers* is a well-researched historical account of how each of these minds fought the atheist battle in their own times.

Michael Irwin to address Bromley Humanists

MICHAEL Irwin, founder of the Society for Old Age Rational Suicide (mentioned in the June issue of the *Freethinker*) will be speaking on the subject to the Bromley Humanists on Thursday, July 14 at 2pm at the H G Wells Centre, a short walk from Bromley South station. There are frequent trains from Victoria. Admission is free.

Subscription inquiries and events notices

PLEASE note that all inquiries regarding *Freethinker* subscriptions should now be addressed to:

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Events notices for the back page of the magazine should be sent directly to barry@freethinker.co.uk, or by post to PO Box 234, Brighton, BN1 4ND



points of view...

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PO BOX 234, BRIGHTON BN1 4XD.



THE CRITERION OF EMBARRASSMENT

WILLIAM Harwood (*Points of View*, June) claims “Those who insist there was not a Jesus of history take on the obligation of explaining why Jesus’ sycophantic biographers wrote tales that portrayed their hero in an extremely unflattering light”. Whilst there’s an interesting issue to be addressed here, are mythicists really “obliged” to provide an explanation? If Jesus’ “biographers” believed in miracles, they were deluded, and requiring a mythicist to unravel the workings of a deluded mind from two thousand years ago seems rather harsh to me. But it’s interesting trying, so let’s have a go.

Harwood invokes a principle known as the Criterion of Embarrassment (or “C of E”, to use an apt abbreviation). Since some story elements seem too embarrassing to make up, isn’t it reasonable to suppose that they had some kind of basis in fact? By this reasoning, the more absurd the claim, the more justified we’d be in believing it to have a historical basis.

If the gospels portrayed Jesus as hopping backwards in a bikini, the burden of proof would lie firmly with sceptics to explain this absurdity away. There’s another problem: if embarrassing elements enhance a story’s plausibility, an author may have invented such elements with this end in view.

The C of E assumes that embarrassing claims don’t get made up. Let’s see where this reasoning leads. “Superman must have a basis in fact because his biographers mentioned Kryptonite!” “Achilles must have been real because his biographers mentioned his heel!” In both cases, “embarrassing” weakness help the audience to empathise with their hero; it’s an embarrassment to the hero, but it improves the story, and so benefits those trying to spread the word. To take a possible gospel example, crucifixion was regarded as a shameful way to die. Wouldn’t Christians have invented a more dignified exit for their

hero? Not at all; the story of Jesus ends not with his death but with his resurrection and ascension. A shameful death provides a useful contrast, making the triumph of the resurrection seem all the greater. The emotional response to a tale of suffering tends to dampen critical faculties, and sets the scene for emotional blackmail: “Jesus died a really nasty death for you – the least you could do is believe in him!”

Christians never apply the C of E’s evil twin, which I call the “Criterion of Convenience”: If a teaching sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Everlasting life for believers? Obviously made up! Able to demonstrate divine status by performing miracles? Made up! The sudden flow of blood and water from Jesus’ side proving that he really died on the cross? How convenient! And so on, and so on.

Harwood applies the C of E to the New Testament. But if the principle is sound, why not apply it to the Old Testament as well? “Those who insist there was not an Old Testament God take on the obligation of explaining why God’s sycophantic biographers wrote tales that portrayed their hero in an extremely unflattering light”. Not a very convincing argument for God’s historicity, is it?

Robert Stovell
Brighton

RC CHURCH SCANDAL

BEHIND its verdict on the failure of the Roman Catholic Church to protect children (*Freethinker* report, June) lies another scandal. This is the cowardly and contemptible readiness of governments to look away from the horrific evidence of what has been placed before them.

They appear to place their wish to mollify the Pope and the Vatican above the need to challenge, and call to account, those responsible for decades of child

abuse. As a consequence the Pope, in a grotesque charade, is free to visit countries, including the UK, and lecture them on their moral failings. The victims of his priests, in their muted outrage, have no such public voice.

Denis Watkins
Wales

SAME-SEX UNIONS

JUST because the Roman Catholic Church opposes same-sex marriage, does that mean that the *Freethinker* has to support it?

Same-sex marriages are perverse and unnatural. My opinion is “live together and shut up”. Also, stay away from children and do not flaunt your affliction.

Freethinker articles give me the impression that you approve of gays adopting children.

You oppose the Catholic Church’s cover-up of priests molesting children, yet you approve of homosexuals raising a boy in a gay environment. Where are your priorities?

No, I am not a Roman Catholic. I am an agnostic.

David Rogers
Canada

EDITOR’S reply: The *Freethinker* has, and always will, champion universal human rights, and that, of course, includes the rights of gays and lesbians to enjoy equality under the law with regard to, *inter alia*, the formation of civil partnerships or marriage, and adoption.

After drawing a ludicrous and offensive parallel between priestly paedophilia and gay adoption, you then go on to suggest that gay adoption only involves homosexual males adopting boys.

This is sheer nonsense. Adoption agencies are as likely to place girls with gay male parents as they are boys.

The same principle applies to lesbians adopting.

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, July 6: AGM. No meeting in August.

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

Bromley Humanists: Meet second Thursdays at 2pm at the H G Wells Centre **e** asad.65@hotmail.com.

Central London Humanist Group: **i** Chair: Alan Palmer.

Sec: Josh Kutchinsky.

e info@centrallondonhumanists.org.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 01296 623730.

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

Cotswold Humanists: **i** Phil Cork Tel. 01242 233746.

e phil.cork@blueyonder.co.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists:

e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

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

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:

i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

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

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

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

w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):

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

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

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

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

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday of the month at 8pm (except Jan, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. No evening meeting in July but on Wed, July 13, there will be a daytime excursion to Etham Palace. Non-members welcome. **i** Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

Ireland: **i** Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** brianmcclinton@btinternet.com.

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

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

Humanist Society of Scotland: 272 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Local Scottish Groups:

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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@lanzere.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. July 21, members' AGM. No meeting in August.

w www.lewisham.humanist.org.uk

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

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

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

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

Marches Secularists: **w** www.MarchesSecularists.org **e** Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

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

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

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

North East Humanists (Teesside Group):

i C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):

i the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North London Humanist Group: Meets third Thursday of month (ex-August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact Sec: 01707 653667

e enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

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.

Scottish Humanists:

w www.ScottishHumanists.org.uk. Free membership. Charity SCO42124. Next meeting Sept 4, Old Course Hotel, Prestwick.

i 07935272723

Sheffield Humanist Society: **i** 0114 2309754. University Arms, 197 Brook Hill, Sheffield. Wed, May 4, 8.00 pm: Iain Crowe: *Ethical Issues in Dealing with Violent Criminals*.

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

w www.southhantshumanists.org.uk

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or

e edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings, Sundays 11am at Conway Hall Brockway 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** Brian Dougherty 07913 734583. **w** www.suttonhumanists.co.uk

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. **i** 01923-252013

e john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk **w** www.watford.humanists.org.uk

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

w www.wmhumanists.co.uk **e** rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

Please send your listings and events notices to barry@freethinker.co.uk or to PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4ND Notices must be received by the 15th of the month preceding publication.