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Beast caged: Christian Brother sentenced for sex attacks on young boys in Australia

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Swallow this: Young lad compelled to write an apology to God – then eat the letter!

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Devout pharmacists jump on the 'persecuted' Christian bandwagon

Guidelines issued this summer regarding the sale of the morning-after pill have been cited by the Christian Institute as another example of religious persecution, and it quotes a Sunderland pharmacist as saying the new guidance "forces pharmacists to act against their consciences" and would cause legal conflicts between staff and employers.

The "non-mandatory" guidance, issued by General Pharmaceutical Council, advises pharmacists that they are obliged to refer a customer to a specified chemist who is willing to distribute the pills, and should also call ahead to check that the product is in stock.

For the first time under the guidelines, pharmacists are told that their right to conscientious objection on religious grounds is secondary to the contractual demands of employers, such as the NHS.

When applying for a job, pharmacists should inform their potential employer of any moral objections they may have to the morning-after pill, according to the document.

The new guidelines follow cases in which staff working in chemists have been criticised but have kept their jobs after refusing on religious grounds to dispense emergency contraception.

Those opposed to selling the pill – strict Christians, Muslims and Jews – say their moral objections are based on their belief that the drug can abort a conception, and claim that there is little difference between being forced to recommend another outlet and being forced to sell it themselves.

Lawyer Neil Addison, who comments on religious discrimination law, said: "What many people do not seem to grasp is the fact that if you are refusing to do something because it is morally objectionable you cannot be obliged to recommend someone else. If they (the GPhC) accept that a person has a right to conscientious objection, they cannot take it further than that."

Anna Sweeting-Hempsall, the Sunderland hospital pharmacist, who is a Catholic, claimed the guidance means that "now the em-

ployers have the right to impose any contractual obligations that take precedence over the right of conscience.

"The need to notify people beforehand makes you virtually unemployable," she said.

"Anybody who values the sanctity of life from the moment of conception will be forced from the profession."

The guidance will also compel pharmacists to make drugs available for IVF, to which some object because of the high numbers of embryos created then destroyed in the process.

Christian groups expressed outrage earlier this year when it was announced that emergency contraception would be offered free for under 16s in pharmacies across Wales.

Ministers said the move was vital in reducing unwanted teenage pregnancy rates in Wales, where some places have the highest number of teenage pregnancies in the UK.

With the new guidelines under 16s can get the pill for free if the pharmacist decides it is clinically appropriate to dispense it and the girl knows exactly what she is asking for.

The plan was criticised by Josephine Quintavalle, founder of Comment on Reproductive Ethics (Core) for promoting promiscuous sex among teenagers.

She told the BBC: "It's absolutely the wrong way to address the problems of high rates of teenage pregnancy in Wales. The idea that young girls can just walk into a chemist will mean they become even less responsible about sexuality."

The Christian Institute is also dismayed about mounting opposition to the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (EHRC) decision "to defend the religious liberty of Christians". The EHRC, as reported in last month's *Freethinker*, revealed that it was planning to intervene in four religious liberty cases heading for Europe, saying that employers should do more to "reasonably



The morning-after pill, Levonelle

Continued on page 4

An unkindness of burqas

BARRY DUKE EXPERIENCES A CULTURE CLASH ON BRIGHTON BEACH

One of the most chilling scenes in Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 cult classic, *The Birds* (based on Daphne du Maurier's short story) shows actress Tippi Hendren sitting on a school bench, puffing away on a cigarette. (Ah, those were the days!) A solitary crow alights on a jungle gym behind her. It is soon joined by others, and, within minutes, the playground equipment is densely packed with the sinister birds, who then launch a vicious attack on a group of schoolchildren.

The revulsion I experienced when I first saw that scene was repeated two years ago when, on a sunny Sunday morning on Brighton beach, an invasion of human crows – women shrouded in black burqas – occupied a spot uncomfortably close to where I lay sunbathing.

Nearby – sitting with his back against a stone wall – was an English gent who had dozed off before finishing his *Times* crossword.

When he awoke, sheer alarm showed on his face when he realised that he had been totally hemmed in by this abominable pack

of faceless picnickers, whose number had swelled to around 20.

They had encroached well into my space too – and one even had the effrontery to position her deckchair over my legs. I reacted angrily by kicking the thing aside, and – as one – the black-clad horrors turned to glare at me, and much muttering in a language I could not understand ensued. Though their faces were completely concealed, they managed to exude palpable waves of hostility.

What made this encroachment even more objectionable was that most of the beach was sparsely occupied. They could have set up camp, complete with their prayer-mats, in any number of spots without invading anyone's space. But no, they chose to pick the one area where the biggest concentration of worshippers had laid out their towels – then stood around glowering at the scantily-clad Brightonians, muttering their disapproval.

I regarded this as not only extremely rude, but deliberately provocative – and so did a number of people around me. One woman, clearly incensed by this behaviour, whipped off her bikini top and jiggled her tits at the burqa brigade.

This did the trick. The women grabbed their belongings and headed towards a quieter part of the beach.

Those of a politically-correct bent will, no doubt, be appalled by what happened that day, seeing it as an act of religious intolerance, or, worse, a manifestation of racism. It was neither. It was a simple message to the invaders that their behaviour was unacceptable.

Now it appears that veiled Muslim women can even physically attack those who offend them without fear of prosecution. Last month Canadian freelance writer David Menzies was punched in the face by an hysterical Muslim woman because she thought he had taken a photo of her in Toronto's Yonge-Dundas Square.

Menzies was in the square with his nine-year-old son, and was using his new camera to photograph what he described as "this neon shrine". Writing in the *Toronto Sun*, he said: "Suddenly, a woman wearing a hijab ran toward me. She was part of a group that included two women wearing burqas. She was screaming: 'We are Muslim! You do not take pictures of us!'"

The woman then punched him in the face, and almost knocked the camera from his hands. Said Menzies: "My son and I were then surrounded by a mob of about 20 people, many of whom were speaking Arabic.

One kept demanding I surrender my camera to him."

The punch was a clear case of assault, but what annoyed Menzies was that the police simply didn't see it that way. After reporting the attack to the police, one officer interrogated the woman. Menzies said: "She was still hysterical. Good. The constable would encounter firsthand what I had been forced to deal with earlier." The cop then informed the victim that no charges would be brought against the woman because he accepted her claim that she was merely trying to knock the camera out of Menzies' hands.

An outraged Menzies said: "Apparently, attempted property damage is OK. If a face gets in the way of a would-be vandalising fist... hey, accidents happen.

"The fact we have Islamists living amongst us who despise Western values isn't news. But surely you can't just sock someone in the mouth? Well, apparently you can – as long as the intent of the aggressor was merely to inflict property damage."

It's been almost a year since I moved to Spain, and I am delighted to report that since settling on the Costa Blanca I have not encountered a single burqa or niqab.

This is not to say that there are few Muslims here. On the contrary, there seems to be a sizeable number in the area, and the women seem happy enough with simple head-coverings. Actually, "simple" is the wrong word. Many go out of their way to choose elaborate and colourful headscarves to match some quite stunning full-length dresses, and they are an absolute delight to see.

But how long will it be before Spanish Muslims are infected with the same fundamentalist virus that has been allowed to run unchecked through British society, and is apparently now taking hold in places like Canada?

There are 1.2 million Muslims living in Spain. Last year, the Socialist government considered banning full-face coverings, but no decision was reached.

I sincerely hope that Mansur Escudero, President of the Islamic Commission of Spain, was correct when he suggested that Muslim women here would never allow themselves to be forced into grotesque garments such as the burqa. He said the last woman he spotted wearing a burqa in Spain was ten years ago in the southern city of Marbella – and she was most probably a Saudi Arabian tourist.



BARRY DUKE
FREETHINKER
EDITOR

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Freethinker/GW Foote & Co Ltd
PO Box 234
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Australian Christian Brother jailed for sexual crimes against boys

VICTIMS of Robert Charles Best – a paedophile Christian Brother – last month hurled abuse at the 70-year-old as he was led away to begin a 14-year, nine-month sentence for sex crimes committed against young boys over a period of almost 20 years.

Robert Best will be in his 80s when he is finally released from prison.

Best's sex crimes against 11 boys in Ballarat, Box Hill and Geelong were committed between 1969 and 1988. Most of his victims were aged between eight and 11.

In jailing Best, Judge Roy Punshon told the sadistic pervert: "You have caused a great deal of human damage and misery."

The judge said the impact statements of many victims provided "a salutary and powerful reminder of the devastating and long-lasting effect that sexual offending against children can have ...

"Because of your power and position of authority the victims who were young and immature felt powerless and unable to complain either at all or effectively."

Best taught in Ballarat, Box Hill and Geelong and later in Warrnambool.



Robert Charles Best

The Catholic Church funded much of Best's defence, which victims said added to their anguish.

As Best was led away into custody, several victims and members of their families shouted at him. "You're a mongrel," one said. "Suck it up Best," said another. A third yelled "karma".

Best must serve a minimum of 11 years and three months before being eligible for parole.

Judge Punshon said any rehabilitation would be dependent on how Best participated in a sex offenders programme in jail.

Among those who testified in this high-profile Australian trial was a man, now in his 50s, who was just nine when he was raped by Best – his school principal at the time at St Alipius in Ballarat.

After the assault, the boy was beaten and threatened by other Catholic brothers and priests when he tried to tell what had happened to him. The man wept as he told the court his story.

Five more of his victims struggled through their statements, describing him as a mentally deranged sadist and a pervert, who exploited and ruined them.

One faced him in anguish, others wept and one broke down, unable to complete his testimony.

Police believe at least 26 men committed suicide in the years after being abused by Best and other Catholic priests and brothers.



Rabbi Asher Dahan

ALLEGEDLY employing "mystical" powers, Rabbi Elazar Abuhatzzeira, of Beersheva in Israel, gained a reputation as a formidable fixer of all manner of problems.

But the infamous charlatan proved useless when it came to solving Rabbi Asher Dahan's marital woes, and Dahan, 42, wasn't happy. Indeed, he was so unhappy that he stabbed Abuhatzzeira to death in July.

Last month, following a psychiatric evaluation, Dahan was declared unfit to stand trial. He is quoted as saying

Crazy rabbi slays rich rabbi

"I don't know what devil or Satan got into me".

According to a report in Israel's *Arutz Sheva*, Abuhatzzeira was worth tens of millions of dollars at the time of his death – although observers believe the figure is actually in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

He was under investigation in the US for fraud, and had settled tax fraud charges in Israel by paying 20-million shekels to the Tax Authority.

He was close to members of Israel's political elite from several different political parties and factions, and his endorsement was coveted by them – which may have protected him from further criminal charges.

Relying on his reputation as a miracle worker, Abuhatzzeira extracted huge "donations" from devotees in exchange for promised results – an illness healed, a

daughter married, a business deal made. Those "donations" to Abuhatzzeira often ran well into six figures in US dollars.

Disgruntled former devotees whose promised results did not materialise threatened Abuhatzzeira, and the rabbi's life of "mystical seclusion" was as much a security precaution as an act of alleged piety.

Abuhatzzeira even had a tunnel built from his home to his synagogue and yeshiva (religious college) across the street, so he would not be exposed to "impure" sights – and angry former devotees – during his short walk.

Besides finding Dahan unfit to stand trial, the psychiatrist for Israel's Southern District recommended that Dahan be committed to a psychiatric facility for further evaluation.

Abuhatzzeira was descended from a long line of Moroccan Jewish mystics and rabbis. His grandfather was the great mystic Rabbi Yisrael Abuhatzzeira, who was known as the Baba Sali, which means Praying Father. Rabbi Elazar Abuhatzzeira was frequently referred to as Baba Elazar.

A lesson in superstition

A YORKSHIRE mum claims that her seven-year-old son was left traumatised after he was made to engage in a superstition ritual conducted by Christian fundamentalists at his school in Northallerton.

Celia Mullen, 46, revealed last month that Luis and other children at Ainderby Steeple primary, a C of E school, had been targeted by members of the local New Life Baptist Church who visited the school, and told children to write an apology to God on a piece of paper ... then eat it!

Mullen says the incident had left her son so disturbed that he now refuses to sleep on his own and scrawls pictures of the Devil.

The first she knew about the visit by the evangelicals was when her son came home from school upset. In tears, the boy told her: "We had to eat a piece of paper with the word sorry on it."

She then discovered that this daft exercise formed part of the church's "Kidzone Roadshow" and was called "The Big Prayer Experience". "It went into the need for adoration of God and to ask God for help. It said, 'We confess when we say sorry for something wrong. Today we are going to

say Sorry to God. We will write sorry on a piece of paper and eat it'. I was horrified."

At home Luis refused to sleep in his room and presented his mum with pictures he had drawn – of the Devil with horns, tail and a trident fork, and an angel.

"Since all this happened Luis has not been able to sleep alone. It has left him disturbed," said Mullen.

She said she complained to headteacher Fiona Sharp, and claims that when she confronted Miss Sharp over making pupils eat their 'apologies to God', written on rice paper, she was told: "That is what we do."

Celia has asked her local MP, Foreign Secretary William Hague, to investigate, and has found Luis a place at another school. To her horror, she later discovered that the church group makes monthly day visits there too.

She said: "I had no choice but to accept. There aren't any other schools around here they don't go into, but I have added that he



Luis Mullen (Photo: David O'Neill)

must not attend these sessions."

Another concerned parent who has asked not to be named has also switched his children's schools to avoid the prayer sessions. He said: "I have my religious beliefs, I have my faith, but this is indoctrination of young minds on an unprecedented scale."

The church's assistant pastor Steve Cowie confirmed the incident but added: "We are sorry that anyone should be upset, we have no intention to upset, we do not intimidate, we do not force anyone to do anything."

The school's board of governors is investigating the incident.

'Persecution' of Christians in the UK

accommodate" employees with religious beliefs. But, according to the CI, "three MPs are scrambling to distance themselves from the EHRC decision to defend the religious liberty of Christians.

It declared on its website: "While the commission's decision was welcomed by Christian groups, homosexual activists and humanist campaigners were outraged. Now three of the nineteen MPs who signed an Early Day Motion welcoming the Commission's decision have withdrawn their support.

Labour MP John McDonnell has claimed that some MPs only signed the motion because they misunderstood what it was about.

It added that the Labour MP has now tabled an amendment to the motion claiming that the EHRC should "ensure that religious belief cannot be used as an excuse for discrimination".

The amendment also claims that two of the religious liberty cases in which the EHRC intends to intervene are "not legitimate".

Liberal Democrat MPs Mike Hancock and John Hemming have both declared their intention to remove their names from

Continued from page 1

the Early Day Motion.

Hancock explained his decision saying: "I do believe, very strongly, that people's beliefs should be taken into account when they are working, but that shouldn't come at the expense of people of whatever religion or sexual preference living as equals in our society."

Meanwhile, it was announced last month that the National Secular Society had been given leave by the European Court of Human Rights to intervene as a third party in the controversial appeals against judgments of the UK courts by: Nadia Ewedia, who refused to comply with British Airways' uniform policy; Shirley Chaplin, a cross-toting nurse who was ordered to remove the totem while working on hospital wards; Lillian Ladele, the Islington registrar who refused to conduct civil partnership ceremonies; and Gary McFarlane, a counsellor for Avon Relate who refused to give an unequivocal commitment to counsel same-sex couples.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the NSS said: "These four cases have a major bearing on the extent to which em-

ployees' manifestation of their religion can impinge on others. We want to make sure that the European court considers all aspects of the relevant law.

"The National Secular Society submission will deal with the implications for equal treatment that would be raised by the granting of greater protection to actions motivated by religious belief than is granted to actions motivated by fundamental beliefs that happen to be non-religious in nature.

"The NSS will further focus on the degree of protection which it is necessary under the convention to afford third parties who may be subjected to a detriment which is motivated by, or a manifestation of, a religious belief.

"We will also deal with the significance of a religiously neutral public space for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

"Finally, we will address the nature of the limitations prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society in the interests of the protection of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

Humanists gather in Oslo in the aftermath of July's terrorist attack

MORE than 500 delegates from around 50 countries gathered in Oslo for the triennial World Humanist Congress last month.

Surrounded by damage from the July 22 terrorist atrocity by Anders Behring Breivik, the congress delegates mourned the dead and pledged their commitment to the congress theme of "Humanism and Peace".

Congress speakers, including His Royal Highness Crown Prince Haakon of Norway, spoke of the role that humanists can play in building a world of peace based on human dignity.

The congress was opened by Sonja Egg-erickx, president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), on the morning of August 12, at the Oslo Congress Center. She was followed by Åse Kleveland, President of the Norwegian Humanist Association, who welcomed delegates to Oslo and asked them to join her in a minute of silence for the people killed on July 22. The Congress Center itself was affected by the Oslo bombing, with more than a dozen large windows still boarded up.

The theme, venue and time of the World Humanist Congress were chosen four years ago, but the July attacks gave them a new significance and poignancy, said conference organisers. "Now that the terrorist attack has brought this issue to our own doorstep, we want to show the world that we can respond to violence by renewing our commitment to peace," said Roar Johnsen, vice president of IHEU (www.IHEU.org) and former president of the Norwegian Humanist Association.

The Norwegian commitment to peace-



Anders Behring Breivik



Crown Prince Haakon of Norway

building was also reflected in the other speakers and venues for the opening day of the congress. After speeches by Prince Haakon and Professor Johann Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist who founded the discipline of Peace and Conflict Studies, the congress moved to Oslo City Hall, the site of the annual Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony, for a formal reception, followed by dinner at the Nobel Peace Center.

In his speech to the congress delegates, the Prince welcomed the congress to Oslo. Noting that the attacks of July 22 had "caused sorrow, pain and loss for a large number of people" and "shook the entire nation" he said "I am proud and encouraged by the way the Norwegian people have responded to the terror."

The Prince also spoke about the congress theme of Humanism and Peace, saying, "Every day we are reminded of our differ-

ences and the reasons why there is confrontation and violence in the world. But what is truly needed is the opposite: to emphasise what unites us. Once we realise that every human being has the right to lead a dignified life, our differences become less important. On this common ground we can work out how to live with our differences and take advantage of the positive opportunities that reside within them.

"The vision of the International Humanist and Ethical Union is a world in which human rights are respected and everyone is able to live a life of dignity. It is a bold vision, which is not difficult to share regardless of spirituality or religion. But it is also a constant challenge that each and every one of us faces on a daily basis in practical life."

Professor Johann Galtung spoke about the development of rational procedures for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

He illustrated the issue of conflict and violence with a discussion of the beliefs and behaviour of Breivik, who killed 77 people in his attack. Galtung revealed that his granddaughter was at the youth camp on Utoya and hid behind a rock a few feet from Breivik as he shot her friends. Yet, in conclusion, Galtung said "we can put Breivik behind us."

Other speakers included Sophie in't Veld, MEP, Chair, European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics, who was handed an International Humanist Award by the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Earlier this year she was named Secularist of the Year by the National Secular Society at a ceremony in London.

NSS to host Secularism conference

THE National Secular Society's Secularism11 conference will take place in central London on September 11. Speakers at the all-day event, which will take place at the Conway Hall, London, include:

- Sir Jonathan Miller (British theatre and opera director, author, and TV presenter)
- Terry Sanderson (NSS President)
- Nick Cohen (Journalist)
- Dr Evan Harris (Secular campaigner and former MP)
- Baroness Mary Warnock
- Baroness Turner of Camden
- Anne Marie Waters (One Law for All)
- Diana Nammi (Iranian & Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation)
- Sue Cox (Survivors Voice Europe)

Visit <http://www.secularism.org.uk/conference-on-secularism.html> for times and registration details. Free admission for NSS members. Students or unwaged, £2 and all others £5.



Saudi cleric justifies paedophilia

OUTRAGE has been expressed by feminist and human rights groups over a fatwa issued this summer by Dr Salih bin Fawzan, a prominent cleric and member of Saudi Arabia's highest religious council, regarding child-brides.

Attacking what he sees as "interference" with sharia law by "uninformed" journalists, the cleric repeated what other Muslim experts have said before: paedophilia is perfectly acceptable in Islam.

Of course the "P" word isn't used, rather it is referred to as "child-marriage" – and Fawzan asserted that there is no minimum age for marriage in Islam, and that girls can be married "even if they are in the cradle".

The cleric expressed anger that press interference – "including their interference with the question of marriage to small girls who have not reached maturity, and their demand that a minimum age be set for girls to marry – was undermining sharia law.

Fawzan relies on Koran 65:4, which discusses marriage to females who have not yet



Dr Salih bin Fawzan advocates paedophilia and slavery

begun menstruating (ie, are prepubescent); and the fact that the "prophet" Mohammed married Aisha when she was just six, "consummating" the marriage – or, in modern parlance, raping her – when she was nine.

The only question open to debate, according to Fawzan, is whether the girl is physical-

ly capable of handling her husband. Fawzan emphasises this point by quoting Ibn Batal's authoritative exegesis of Sahih Bukhari:

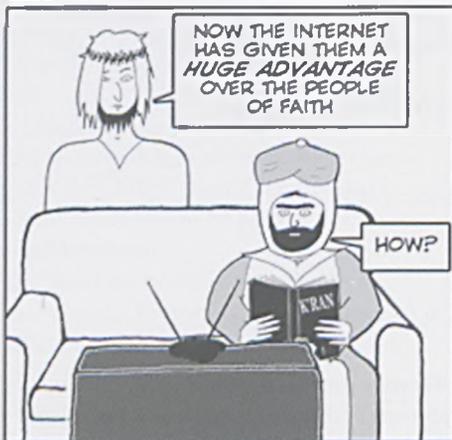
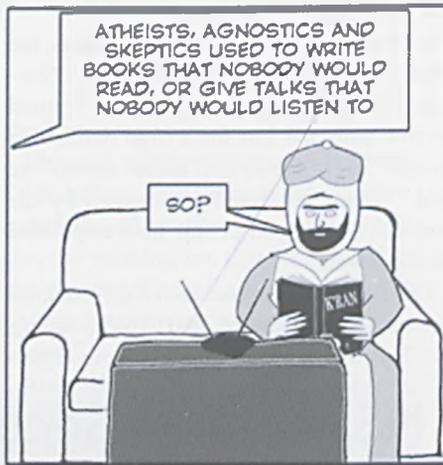
"The ulema [Islam's interpreters] have agreed that it is permissible for fathers to marry off their small daughters, even if they are in the cradle. But it is not permissible for their husbands to have sex with them unless they are capable of being placed beneath and bearing the weight of the men. And their capability in this regard varies based on their nature and capacity. Aisha was six when she married the prophet, but he had sex with her when she was nine (ie, when she was deemed capable)."

Fawzan concluded his fatwa with a warning: "It behooves those who call for setting a minimum age for marriage to fear Allah and not contradict his sharia, or try to legislate things Allah did not permit. For laws are Allah's province; and legislation is his exclusive right, to be shared by none other. And among these are the rules governing marriage."

Commenting on Fawzan's statement, US-based Raymond Ibrahim, who writes and lectures on Islamic affairs, said: "Fawzan, of course, is not the first to insist on the legitimacy of paedophilia in Islam. Even the former grand mufti of Saudi Arabia supported 'child-marriage', since 'the Koran and Sunna document it'.

"Nor is this just some theoretic, theological point; the lives of many young girls are being destroyed because of this ruling. Recall, for instance, the 13-year-old girl who died while her much older husband was copulating with her (it was later revealed that, due to her reluctance, he was tying her up and "raping"

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pedophilia and slavery in Islam

her – as if there is another way to describe sex with children); or the 12-year-old who died giving birth to a stillborn child; or the 10-year-old who made headlines by hiding out from her 80-year-old ‘husband’.

“Then there are the countless anonymous girls who do nothing to warrant any media attention – such as dying—and have learned to live with their elderly husbands pawing at them, like, no doubt, the girl who married Islam’s most popular cleric, Yusuf Qaradawi, when she was 14.

“What do we make of the fact that it is always Islam’s religious, authoritative voices – not aberrant voices, not ‘terrorists,’ ‘extremists,’ or any other euphemism coined for the occasion – that are constantly demonstrating sharia’s savageries?

“Weeks before this fatwa, a female politician and activist in Kuwait called for institutionalising sex-slavery (recommending that

Muslims buy and sell female Russian captives from the Chechnya war); a popular Egyptian preacher – Abu Ishaq al-Huwaini – not only said the same thing, but added that the solution to Islam’s poverty is to go on jihad and plunder the lives and possessions of infidels.

“Sounds odd? Perhaps; but it is perfectly consistent. Sharia law is nothing less than a legal system built atop the words and deeds of a 7th-century Arab, whose behaviour – from paedophilia and sex-slavery to war-mongering and plundering – was very much that of a 7th-century Arab. Having enticed or enslaved his contemporaries into following him, his teachings continue to entice and enslave their descendants; and, now as then, it is always the innocent who suffer.”

Fawzan, according to the independent Saudi Information Agency, or SIA, also supports slavery. In a lecture recorded on tape by SIA, he said “Slavery is part of jihad, and jihad will

remain as long there is Islam.”

His religious books are used to teach five million Saudi students, both within the country and abroad.

Fawzan says Muslims who contend Islam is against slavery “are ignorant, not scholars. They are merely writers. Whoever says such things is an infidel”.

Fawzan opposes elections and demonstrations as Western influences, is against Arab women marrying non-Arab Muslims and has issued a fatwa forbidding the watching of television.

He has threatened to behead a Saudi writer and scholar, Sheik Hassan Al-Maliki, for his criticism of Wahhabism, the hard-line version of Islam which Fawzan embraces.

Al-Maliki was fired from his position with the ministry of education after writing a 50-page paper criticising Fawzan’s book *Al-Tauheed*.

Four-year-old slain by religious maniac leader for being ‘gay’

A NORTH Carolina man who headed a religious cult in the city of Durham has been charged with the murder of a four-year-old boy whom he believed was gay.

Peter Lucas Moses, 27, faces first-degree murder charges in the deaths of Jadon Higganbothan, 4, and also Antoinetta Yvonne McKoy, 28. Prosecutors said they will seek the death penalty against him.

They said Moses killed Jadon because he believed the child had homosexual tendencies, and McKoy was slain after Moses learned she couldn’t have children and wanted to leave the religious group he headed.

Prosecutors said the cases came to police’s attention in February when a young woman escaped from a house where she had lived with McKoy, Jadon, eight other children and three women who have also been charged in connection with the two slayings – Jadon’s mother, Vania Rae Sisk, 25, Lavada Quinzetta Harris, 40, and Larhonda Renee Smith, 40.

Some of the women counted themselves as Moses’ “wives or common-law wives”, Durham County District Attorney Tracey Cline said, adding: “The arrangement was the women would periodically occupy the master suite with Moses.

“In the religious belief of that organisation,

homosexuality was frowned on,” Cline said.

Sometime in October 2010, Moses ordered two of the women to set up computers and speakers in a garage. Witnesses told police that he started playing music with the Lord’s Prayer in Hebrew, took Jadon in the garage and shut the door. A gunshot was then heard.

Prosecutors said a witness told them that the women helped clean up the body of Jadon, who had been shot in the head, and put it in a suitcase in Moses’ master suite. He later told them to get the body out because it was beginning to smell.

Moses killed McKoy in a similar manner on December 21 or 22, 2010, prosecutors said. McKoy found that she couldn’t have children and wrote diary entries begging “Lord” Moses not to kill her.

On the day she died, prosecutors said, McKoy ran to a neighbour’s house and asked to use a cell phone to call her mother in Washington, DC. The neighbour said she didn’t call police because she thought that McKoy might be mentally disturbed.

McKoy was then dragged back to Moses’s house, where he beat her throughout most of the day, with the women joining in at least once, and tried to strangle her with an



Jadon Higganbothan

extension cord, according to the witness. She was then shot dead.

The group threw a party a few days later, and Moses showed McKoy’s body to several relatives.

McKoy’s body was kept in the house for some time, taped up inside black garbage bags placed in a garbage bin, prosecutors said the witness told them.

Later, Jadon and McKoy’s bodies were buried in the backyard of a house where Moses’ mother lived until early this year. Plumbers led police to discover the remains in June.

Sisk, Lavada Harris and Smith face first-degree murder charges with regard to McKoy’s death and as accessories in Jadon’s death. Police said two of the women are pregnant.

Heaven, Hell ... and Souls

PAUL WILLIAMS and Denys Drower air their views on three elements common to most religions

There are endless versions of Heaven. In fact there are more versions than there are religions, as the followers of those religions can't even agree among themselves, writes PAUL WILLIAMS.

But what about Hell?

How many versions of that are there? Many have the usual pits of fire, but, for example, some Norse sects claim that everyone attends Valhalla where those that died in battle enjoy feasting and fornication and those who merely died of natural causes only get to look on and be jealous.

Some scripts claim the "damned" have to serve the warriors for eternity, but never get to join in. There are not many followers of Norse mythology as religion these days so I'm not going to take this "Hell is being a waiter" idea any further for the moment.

The evangelical wing of Christianity confirms the existence of Hell as a genuine place of fire and brimstone and torture and eternal damnation. There are even websites to promote this happy news and in fact "Hell Houses" have been built in the US to scare children into believing in God.

At the other end of the Christian scale of foolishness is the good old Church of England. The General Synod has changed its position on Hell often, from adopting the fire and brimstone approach early in its history to the relatively recent abolition of Hell as a place.

On July 14, 1996, the General Synod considered a report by the Doctrine Commission of the Church of England called *The Mystery of Salvation*. This greatly updated the C of E's position as set in the early 1900s, when Hell was considered a mere separation from God.

The 1996 report suggested that those who didn't pass the entry requirements would suffer separation from God ... and then "Annihilation." No pain, no torture, no brimstone, no pits populated by time-

share salespeople, no nothing.

I have a copy of the report, and at this point I will admit that I have not read it all yet. Partly because I'm not sure I have the strength, and partly because I find Harry Potter a much more realistic read. But I do note that there is no given time limit for this Annihilation.

The C of E has never accepted the Roman Catholic concept of Purgatory, and so I don't believe that they think God will let

Announcer: YES.

Atheist: Every cell in my body, every taradiddle of my soul destroyed in a blink of an eye?

Announcer: YES INDEED!

Atheist: My brain and my thoughts too?

Announcer: YESYESYES!

Atheist: So it's not actually going to hurt at all then?

Announcer: Err, well no, but...

Atheist: There will be nothing left?

Announcer: NO.

Atheist: not an atom?

Announcer: NO NO NO.

Atheist: So I won't feel regret or even be slightly perturbed then?

Announcer: Oh do fuck off.

It is clear that just as Christianity has not been able to define a Heaven that is remotely appealing, mainstream Christianity has not been able to come up with a proper version of Hell either. Writers much better than me have noted that Hell does not have to be fire and brimstone, etc, to be somewhere you don't want to spend eternity. An airport check-in queue would be just fine.



A Buddhist version of Hell

the damned hang about a bit waiting for their Annihilation.

But what would be the point in that? If at the moment of death a dirty heathen's soul is annihilated, then he will never know of the existence of the Heaven that he has been denied.

In fact, as a dirty heathen this is what I'm expecting anyway!

So perhaps there is a waiting room in which an atheist can languish as the saved walk past him or her through the Pearly Gates. I can picture the scene ...

Announcer: Would J Smith, T Smith and L Smith all like to come through to St Peter. Foul Atheist, please wait. You will be annihilated in a moment.

Atheist: Annihilated! What's that?

Announcer: You will be destroyed in a blink of an eye! You will never enter Heaven. You will never meet God.

Atheist: In a blink of an eye?

scare me either: that just sounds like real life. Even fire and brimstone doesn't scare me, because it is not something capable of being boring!

As for Heaven? There are many good people that I simply don't find agreeable company. No doubt they feel the same about me. It could not BE my heaven if they were there. I'd rather have the annihi-

lation... and more to the point, after 80 or so years on this planet we should welcome it, if for no other reason than to make room for our children.

This is the real problem with the concept of an afterlife of any kind, good or bad. It encourages childlike behaviour. It prevents the individual adults forming an adult society.

We don't own this planet, we merely borrow it from our children. We owe it to them to go – and go completely – because it is the only way they will properly become adults and throw away infantile things.

Funnily enough, there is a simple way to reach this happy state. The application of a simple thought... Reason above all.

Some thoughts on the improbability of life after death

NEARLY all religions, writes DENYS DROWER, believe that after death the deceased somehow achieves a new and usually eternal existence. By this they do not mean the decaying corpse or its ashes but a hard-to-define intangible thing called a "soul".

It is also presumed that this soul is part and parcel of the individual during life. The question which must follow is: where and of what is this soul composed?

Some might suggest the heart as its site, since many improbable emotions are attributed to that organ. Most people, if pressed (and many people of faith are reluctant to discuss the subject) will say: the head. This must mean the brain since no organ in the head has yet been detected which has no discernible function.

Our character and our reaction to situations, including our reactions to other people and their opinions and actions, are determined by our DNA and our past experience and learning.

Many of our reactions and attitudes are described as "spiritual" and are stored and often cherished as such in our memories. I believe that it is this corner of their memories that the religious regard as their soul. Indeed, religion itself fosters and seeks to nurture this "wing" of stored memory and thus reinforce the concept of a soul.

The idea that when the person dies and his body and brain begin to disintegrate and decay, somehow the soul is liberated and flies free, is the basis of belief in the afterlife. The faithful believe that the soul has all the attributes of a living mind, including sight, thought and memory.

Before we start to speculate on where the soul goes and for how long, we must insist that any theories must obey the laws of nature. If there is such a thing as a soul, it is to be presumed that all people have them and that therefore all our ancestors have released their souls to join the ever-increasing throng.

To those of the Abrahamic religions, the bundle of souls, whether in Heaven or Hell, is at least finite, dating back a mere six thousand years. Furthermore, the possession of a soul is confined to *homo sapiens*.

But to those whose thought is less restricted and who accept that man has evolved, the volume of souls becomes an absurdity, unless a soul has no volume, no

and the latter a place of eternal torture. Which of them is to be the destination of the dear departed entirely depends on the extent to which the religion was served by them in life (to include the deathbed).

The location of Heaven and Hell are questions that have embarrassed the faithful ever since cosmology got going. Heaven is "somewhere up there" and Hell is "somewhere down there". (Unless, that

is, you were Jean Paul Sartre who decided that "Hell is other people".) In other words, they simply don't exist.

My beliefs are expressed in a poem, *Soulless*, that I wrote some years ago:

"You atheist," they cried, "You have no soul!"

*Quite right. It's not a soul I have;
I have a brain – no insubstantial thing
That's all wired up to fill me with
delight*

*If I should see a rose in bloom, a bumble
bee,*

Or hear a blackbird sing or baby laugh.

*My brain reacts with wonder at the stars,
The rolling breakers of the sea, a thun-
derstorm;*

*It glows with pleasure at a Schubert
song,*

*An organ fugue by Bach, an Irish jig,
The rustling of leaves, the whistle of a
train.*

*It's not a soul that fills my eyes with
tears*

*At slaughtered innocents or starving kids,
My brain it is that bids me tolerate*

*The firm-held theories of the pious ones
Whose armament is faith in place of logic.*

*I'm filled with admiration for the artist
And envy at the work of better poets.
In my brain is wired my moral code
And with it is that vital guiding force
Which all men call their conscience.*

*In death my brain will also end as ash.
No wraith nor spirit left. No 'Other Side'.
I'll still exist, but in the memory of others
And – possibly, just possibly, I hope –
In something that in life I wrought.*



mass and no detectable electronic field. Some religions seek to solve the problem by postulating the idea of reincarnation. Such a theory would make a nonsense of all genetics. It would also mean that the soul would have to lose all its attributes, for how would the mind of Aristotle fit into the brain of a lugworm?

Most religions, faced with the prospect of a vast number of souls of the dead, have invented Heaven and Hell to keep them in. The former a paradise of delight

Kidding the kids

JACK HASTIE reflects on the nature of faith after recently attending a Church of Scotland service

I recently attended a Church of Scotland service. The sermon was based on the text of Matthew 14, 22-31, in which Jesus walks on water and Peter tries to imitate him. More obscurely, the Old Testament text was Isaiah 42, 3, where God says his servant will not break a bruised reed. The children's hymn included the words:

Be bold. Be strong, for the Lord your God is with you,

I am not afraid

I am not dismayed

For I'm walking in faith and victory.

The adult hymn, sung after the kids had left to go to Sunday School, had the refrain:

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.

The central thrust of the address was that while Peter had kept his attention fixed on Jesus and held his faith strong he had been able to walk on water, but when he had become distracted by the buffeting wind and heavy sea his faith had failed and he had begun to sink. For this Jesus had upbraided him: "O ye of little faith."

The moral of the story was that, amid the storms of life, we too must keep our faith firm and need never be afraid.

The adult address detailed a list of circumstances in which we might be tempted to be afraid. With commendable attention to the need to be on top of current affairs the minister headed her (yes! *her* – this is liberal Presbyterianism) list with burning buildings and violent mobs during the riot in Tottenham, which had erupted the previous night.

It continued in similar vein with fear of failure in exams – the results of the Scottish Higher and Standard Grade exams had been posted three days previously. Then followed the usual suspects: financial problems, poor health, job insecurity, loved ones in Afghanistan or Iraq.

The service closed with a prayer for those who might have cause to be afraid, and the congregation left feeling uplifted

(genuinely, I'm sure) by the thought that, as Christians, they need fear no evil.

For me the message was ambiguous. The list of potential terrors, of which we did not really need to be afraid, suggested that the Lord would, in some way, sustain us in our encounter with them, and the passage from Isaiah implied that where the reed was bruised, ie the person was damaged, the Lord would protect it against further harm. In other words, the help of the Lord could be counted upon in material form against



the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.

On the other hand, the star witness (after Peter of course) to the efficiency of the Lord's interventions was a recently deceased cancer victim whose Christian friends had rallied round and supported her during the last months of her illness. Their support, which had been invaluable, was, in some sense attributable to the work of the Lord in influencing the compassion of the congregation; but he had limited his support to this kind of action and she had died of the disease.

Moreover, the hymn sung after the children had left gave as a specific reason for exhibiting such undaunted courage, not that the Lord would in any way help you with your present difficulties, but that he had redeemed you and that you were in the long run "bound for glory" whatever the disasters that you might face in this life.

The children did not hear that hymn, as they had already left the church. Had they still been present, it can hardly be supposed that they would have understood that the soteriological implications of "redeemed" gave them no hope whatsoever that Jesus would get them out of a fix in this real world.

What the children did hear was that when Peter was sinking beneath the waves of Galilee (depicted left), Jesus did not console him with the assurance that he would soon

be in Paradise – a promise he would later make to the thief on the cross – but physically fished him out and sat him down safely in a boat.

The sermon reminded me of a children's address I had heard some years previously in which it was recorded that a cabin boy fell overboard in the middle of an ocean. Although the boy was not reported missing until hours later, the captain did a U-turn and, amazingly, found and rescued him. When asked how he had managed to stay afloat for so long, the lad answered that he knew the captain "would not let me down".

The moral of this story, the children were told, was that, like the sea captain, Jesus would not let you down.

Here there was no ambiguity at all. The cabin boy, like the apostle, was rescued from a real danger in this life.

I had another problem with the service. The story of Jesus walking on water was told as a straightforward factual event, comparable with, for example, the assassination of Julius Caesar. There was no hint that it might be an allegory, symbolically conveying an insight into the importance of placing one's trust in Jesus.

This is significant: if the story is allegorical, the conclusion is allegorical and Peter's rescue refers to the saving of his soul from the consequences of sin. If the story is to be taken literally, Peter's rescue happened as stated and you, children, can count on similar interventions when you get into trouble – provided, of course, that your faith is

sufficiently strong. Perhaps the minister did believe in the literal truth of the anecdote. But this is the liberal Kirk; this minister is female; her colleagues have recently accepted, if somewhat hesitantly, the ordination of a gay man. If the Church can set aside the Word of God as so decisively revealed to Moses in the Book of Leviticus, is it likely that a relatively young, female minister takes the Gospel miracle stories literally?

Of course I should have asked her. But my attendance that day was in the context of a commemorative family occasion and I did not wish to turn it into an opportunity for polemical debate. And, for all I know, the Sunday School teachers may have clari-

fied for the young minds all the ambiguities with which I left the adult service.

So I departed somewhat bewildered. What are the ethics of preaching a message which ambiguously implies that your faith will procure divine intervention on your behalf in day-to-day situations, if you really mean something about the ultimate destiny of your immortal soul? What are the ethics of repeating a dramatic allegory as if it was sober fact? Worst of all, what are the ethics of reciting a tale to primary-school-age kids and then sending them off before any subtleties of interpretation can be raised?

I don't go to church often. I get incensed about the major religious issues of the day;

the intolerance of Muslim fundamentalism; in Scotland segregated Catholic schools and the pseudo-Protestant bigotry of supporters of Rangers football club.

I guffaw when normally placid Hindu shopkeepers riot against the euthanasia of a sacred bull with mad cow disease. But here I encountered, in a moderate, mainstream denomination, liberal enough to ordain women and gay men, a low-key, almost subliminal deception of children and unsophisticated, often elderly adults.

Perhaps Muslim honour killings and the predations of paedophile Catholic priests present less insidious dangers in the long run.

Catholics pin hopes on dead Pope's blood to stop gang violence in Mexico

A REPORT from the Vatican last month revealed that a vial containing the late Pope John Paul II's blood had been despatched to Mexico in a bid to help bring down crime rates in the largely Catholic country.

An episcopal conference in Mexico asked that the relic be sent over and, according to Vatican Radio, the blood was scheduled to arrive in the country on August 17 before being taken to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

A week later the blood from the "blessed" Pope John Paul, a title he acquired posthumously after his successor, Ratzinger, beatified him in May, was taken on a pilgrimage to other Catholic dioceses around the country.

The relic was accompanied by a statue of the late Polish Pope, born Karol Wojtyła, with a message of reconciliation.

Killings in parts of Mexico have shot up in recent years amid a military crackdown on organised crime and drug cartels which have sent soldiers onto the streets.

Mexican bishops, in a statement broadcast on Vatican Radio, said: "The reminder of John Paul II and the love he had for our country should push us to reinforce the faith of the Mexican people at a time when our nation is undergoing profound social change."

The vial of blood is one of four taken from Pope John Paul II before he died. Two were put on display at his beatification in Rome earlier this year, and the remaining two were gifted to the late pope's private secretary, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, now archbishop of Krakow, Poland.

After being extracted, the blood was mixed with an anti-coagulant in the container to ensure it didn't get too goopy,



Sister Marie Simon-Pierre Normand holds a glass reliquary containing the blood of the late Pope John Paul II during his beatification mass in Saint Peter's Square at the Vatican on May 1, 2011

Some of the Pope's hair was taken too, and this prompted Dziwisz to declare: "The blood and hair, these are from the Pope's body, so these are relics of the first degree."

When the story broke, a *Freethinker* reader emailed us, jokingly saying she hoped the Church would be more careful with the Pope's blood than they were with one of the most important of Jesus's foreskins.

In 1983, the residents of Calcata, a small town 30 miles north of Rome, prepared for their annual procession honouring a lopped-off fragment of the saviour's penis. But a shocking announcement from the parish priest ruined the festivities: "This year, the holy relic will not be exposed to the devotion of the faithful. It has vanished. Sacrilegious thieves have taken it from my

home," the devastated priest said.

In a piece entitled *Fore Shame*, David Farley – writing for *Slate* magazine – asked: "Just what the holy foreskin was doing in the priest's house – in a shoebox at the back of his wardrobe, no less – and why and how it disappeared has been debated ever since the relic vanished. Some suspect the village priest sold it for a heavenly sum; others say it was stolen by thieves and ended up on the relics black market; some even suggest Satanists or neo-Nazis are responsible."

Depending on what you read, there were eight, twelve, fourteen, or even 18 different holy foreskins in various European towns during the Middle Ages. Farley pointed out that while most of Jesus's foreskins were destroyed during the Reformation and the French Revolution, Calcata's holy prepucce "lived long past its expiration date, like a dinosaur surviving the meteoric blast of the scientific revolution. But if it had survived, it would have been only a matter of time before someone wanted to clone it. And that could have given the Second Coming an entirely new meaning."



A depiction of the eight-day-old baby Jesus having his foreskin removed

The miraculous survival of the

British historian, broadcaster and 'benign atheist' **JOHN JULIAN NORWICH** wondered why the *Catholic Monarchs: A History of the Papacy*. The result, **GARETH DAVIES** discovers, is an entertaining and

In a recent interview with Canada's *National Post*, John Julian Norwich said: "I thought it was absolutely astonishing that this institution [the Roman Catholic Church] had survived as long and as successfully as it has. Nothing else has lasted 2,000 years. And I longed to know why it had. Well, I've failed to find out. I still can't imagine why. It remains a mystery to me."

He referred to a letter he received from a friend who wrote: "We were taught in school that Christ founded the Church and he promised to guard it and be with it forever. I often found comfort in remembering a dictum from devout Catholic Hilaire Belloc that a proof of the divine foundation and protection of the Church is to be seen in the fact that no purely human institution, whose affairs were conducted with such knavish imbecility, would have lasted for six months."

Random House Inc, the publisher of *Absolute Monarchs*, says this of Norwich's work: "With the papacy embattled in recent years, it is essential to have the perspective of one of the world's most accomplished historians. In *Absolute Monarchs*, Norwich captures nearly 2,000 years of inspiration and devotion, intrigue and scandal. The men (and maybe one woman) who have held this position of infallible power over millions have ranged from heroes to rogues, admirably wise to utterly decadent."

"Norwich, who knew two Popes and had private audiences with two others, recounts in riveting detail the histories of the most significant popes and what they meant politically, culturally, and socially to Rome and to the world."

"He presents such brave popes as Innocent I, who in the fifth century successfully negotiated with Alaric the Goth, an invader whose civil authorities could not defeat, and Leo I, who, two decades later, tamed (and perhaps paid off) Attila the Hun. Here, too, are the scandalous figures: Pope Joan, the mythic woman said (without any substantiation) to have been elected in 855, and the infamous "pornocracy," the five libertines who were descendants or lovers of Marozia, debauched daughter of one of Rome's most powerful families."

"Epic and compelling, *Absolute Monarchs* is the astonishing story of some of history's

most revered and reviled figures, men who still cast light and shadows on the Vatican and the world today."

Reviewing the book for Canada's *National Post*, Charles Lewis noted that in Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, a parody of the life of Jesus, the miscommunication of holy messages is used as a comic device. When, for instance, during the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," those in the front of the crowd hear his every word. Not so those pilgrims standing at the back who strain to hear their saviour.

Man in the crowd: "I think it was 'blessed are the cheesemakers.'" Woman: "What's so special about the cheesemakers?" Woman's husband: "Well, obviously it's not meant to be taken literally. It refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."

Lewis adds: "In *Absolute Monarchs*, the Roman Catholic Church seems to have grown out of a similar miscommunication, or at least a serious misreading of the events upon which the Church grew and thrived."

"Norwich does not so much record the history of the papacy as shred it, so much so that it is hard to imagine a devout Christian getting past the first few chapters before hurling it away in disgust."

"Yet Norwich does this in a surprisingly light tone, as if the truth of what he writes is self-evident."

"From the first pages of *Absolute Monarchs*, Norwich – who describes himself as a 'benign atheist' – makes it clear that the Church most likely rests on a myth. The Christian belief is that Jesus commissioned Peter to build a church that would be the bearer of the Gospels and the truth of God. From Peter on – through what orthodox Christians call 'apostolic succession' – each pope became a link in a chain, with one end tied to the words of Christ and the other pulled by divine guidance into the future."

"St Matthew records Christ's words as: 'And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.' But Norwich finds several flaws here. He is really not convinced that Jesus ever thought of building a church and he thinks that word 'church' was probably a bad translation from whatever Christ said. And then

there's the question of Rome. 'Why would he have gone to Rome? ... Rome was a backwater by then. The whole focus of culture and so forth had moved eastward across the Mediterranean.'"

Norwich believes Peter likely never made it to Rome – and if he did, he was only there a short time and not even important enough to be singled out for martyrdom. If that is the case, then the whole enterprise "is built on thin air".

Norwich himself says: "I think it's built on practically nothing. I'm not for a moment saying anything against Christian teaching. Christian teaching is perfectly splendid. I'm only talking about the origins of the Church in Rome, and that is quite a different thing."

Norwich notes that it was only in the late fourth century that Pope Damasus I made a claim to apostolic succession, "deliberately using Christ's declaration in St Matthew to support his claim to power".

It was Damasus' successor, Siricius, who first employed the title "pope", and it was not until Pope Innocent I in AD 401 that the Church, in Norwich's estimation, finally received a worthy leader.

"[He] gave the Papacy an international prestige of a kind that it had never before known, and he marks the first milestone on its road to greatness," he writes.

His praise for Pope Innocent aside, Norwich does not find many popes over the centuries to admire. His description of Pope Vigilius (537–555) is a particularly nasty case in point. He is portrayed as both hapless and double-crossing. Vigilius had the misfortune of coming up against one of the most powerful men the Roman Empire ever produced, the Emperor Justinian. The two men clashed over issues of doctrine and finally Justinian had enough. Vigilius fled for his life with the Imperial Guard in hot pursuit.

Writes Norwich: "Meanwhile, the various priests and deacons surrounding him remonstrated with the guards, and a scuffle ensued in which several of them were wounded but none seriously. The soldiers then seized hold of the pope himself, who was by this time clinging tightly to the columns supporting the altar, and tried to drag him – some by the legs, some by the hair, others by the beard – forcibly away. But

f the Roman Catholic Church

by the Church had managed to endure for 2,000 years. After extensive research he wrote *Absolute Monarchs* – a witty and darkly slapstick work – but one that fails to solve the mystery of the Church's survival.

the more they pulled, the tighter he clung, until at last the columns came loose and the whole altar crashed to the ground, narrowly missing his head.”

Jump ahead a few hundred years and the Church enters into the the “porno-crazy” papal era – a time of over-the-top sensual indulgence for Church leaders who seem to have forgotten about such irritating Christian teachings as prudence and celibacy.

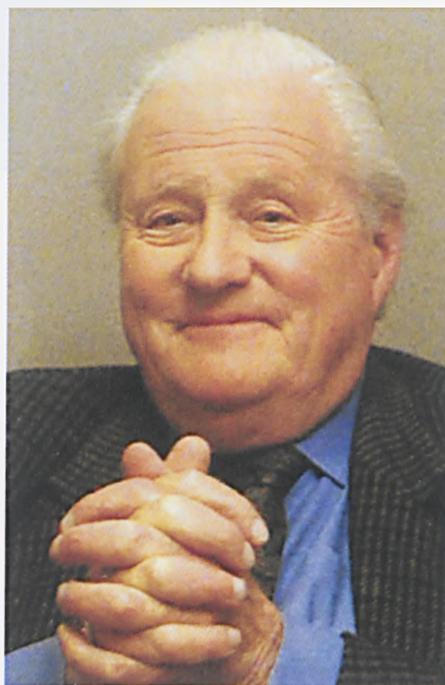
“It is not surprising,” wrote Lewis, “that Norwich’s descriptions about Pope Urban VIII’s treatment of Galileo and of Pope Pius XII’s alleged indifference to the plight of European Jewry during the Second World War have already triggered reaction by members of the Church, weary of what they see as anti-Catholic propaganda.

Bill Keller, reviewing the book for the *New York Times*, wrote that *Absolute Monarchs* “sprawls across Europe and the Levant, over two millennia, and with an impossibly immense cast: 265 popes (plus various usurpers and anti-popes), feral hordes of Vandals, Huns and Visigoths, expansionist emperors, Byzantine intriguers, Borgias and Medicis, heretic zealots, conspiring clerics, bestial inquisitors and more. Norwich manages to organise this crowded stage and produce a rollicking narrative. He keeps things moving at nearly beach-read pace by being selective about where he lingers and by adopting the tone of an enthusiastic tour guide, expert but less than reverent.

“A scholar or devout Roman Catholic would probably not have had so much fun, for example, with the tale of Pope Joan, the mid-ninth-century Englishwoman who, according to lore, disguised herself as a man, became pope and was caught out only when she gave birth.

“Although Norwich regards this as ‘one of the hoariest canards in papal history’, he cannot resist giving her a chapter of her own. It is a guilty pleasure, especially his deadpan pursuit of the story that the Church, determined not to be fooled again, required subsequent papal candidates to sit on a *chaise percée* (pierced chair) and be groped from below by a junior cleric, who would shout to the multitude, ‘He has testicles!’

“Norwich tracks down just such a piece of furniture in the Vatican Museum, duti-



John Julius Norwich

fully reports that it may have been an obstetric chair intended to symbolise Mother Church, but adds, ‘It cannot be gainsaid, on the other hand, that it is admirably designed for a diaconal grope; and it is only with considerable reluctance that one turns the idea aside’.”

Keller adds: “If you were raised Catholic, you may find it disconcerting to see an institution you were taught to think of as the repository of the faith so thoroughly deconsecrated.”

The popes who achieved greatness, Norwich makes clear, were outnumbered by the corrupt, the inept, the venal, the lecherous, the ruthless, the mediocre and those who didn’t last long enough to make a mark.

Keller points out that “sinners, as any dramatist or newsman can tell you, are more entertaining than saints, and Norwich has much to work with. If you paid attention in high school, you know something of the Borgia popes, who are covered in a chapter succinctly called ‘The Monsters’. But they were not the first, the last or even the most colourful of the sacred scoundrels.”

Of the minor 15th-century Pope Paul II, Norwich writes: “The pope’s sexual proclivities aroused a good deal of speculation. He seems to have had two weaknesses – for good-looking young men and for melons

– though the contemporary rumour that he enjoyed watching the former being tortured while he gorged himself on the latter is surely unlikely.”

Sexual misconduct figures prominently in the history of the papacy, but is hardly the only blot on the institution. Clement VII, the disastrous second Medici pope, oversaw “the worst sack of Rome since the barbarian invasions, the establishment in Germany of Protestantism as a separate religion and the definitive breakaway of the English church over Henry VIII’s divorce.” Paul IV “opened the most savage campaign in papal history against the Jews,” forcing them into ghettos and destroying synagogues. Gregory XIII spent the papacy into penury. Urban VIII imprisoned Galileo and banned all his works.

“By the time we reach the 20th century,” writes Keller, “our expectations are not high. We get a disheartening chapter on Pius XI and Pius XII, whose fear of Communism (along with the Church’s long streak of anti-Semitism) made them compliant enablers of Mussolini, Hitler and Franco. Pius XI, in Norwich’s view, redeemed himself by his belated but unflinching hostility to the Fascists and Nazis. But his indictment of Pius XII – who resisted every entreaty to speak out against mass murder, even as the trucks were transporting the Jews of Rome to Auschwitz – is compact, even-handed and devastating.”

Whilst less “benign” atheists, such as myself, would celebrate the total collapse of the Roman Catholic Church, Norwich would rather see it reformed. He writes: “It is now well over half a century since progressive Catholics have longed to see their Church bring itself into the modern age. With the accession of every succeeding pontiff they have raised their hopes that some progress might be made on the leading issues of the day – on homosexuality, on contraception, on the ordination of women priests. And each time they have been disappointed.”

• *Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy* is published by Waterbrook Press (a Division of Random House Inc). Hardback, 512 pages. ISBN 13: 9781400067152 ISBN 10: 1400067154

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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GAY AND LESBIAN ADOPTION

THE recent correspondence in the *Freethinker* concerning gay and lesbian adoption highlights once again how ingrained, and how impervious to fact, anti-gay prejudice can be, even among (failed) freethinkers like your trio of correspondents, David Rogers, Alex Hill and John Hunt.

All three, to varying degrees, unquestioningly accept that the happiness and well-being of children and the “demands” of would-be adoptive lesbian and gay parents to be treated as equals (how unreasonable of them!) are somehow mutually exclusive. This is not rational. The rights of the child are indeed paramount, but those rights include the right not to miss out on being loved and cared for by two competent, stable adults, who just happen to be homosexual.

These lazy prejudices ultimately flow from the religious assertion that the mere fact of being heterosexual, and perhaps married, brings with it some innate ability to provide love and care, stability, security, appropriate discipline, intellectual stimulus and a moral compass. Hah! Tell that to the children of Fred and Rosemary West! Tell that to Victoria Climbié, or Baby P!

The problem starts with the bigoted assumption that gay people are an inferior, separate and distinct species from their heterosexual counterparts, accompanied by a secondary assumption that the ability to be an appropriate role model – kind, strong, loyal, patient, funny, responsible etc – rests exclusively with one type of sexual orientation only. Bizarre!

There are plenty of lesbian and gay people who do, or would, make exemplary parents – and plenty who should not be allowed anywhere near a child. Exactly the same can be said of heterosexual people. What is galling about the quasi-religious faux liberality of Rogers, Hill and Hunt, is

their inability to grasp that an individual’s parenting skills, or lack thereof, exist quite independently of their gender or sexual orientation.

Sexual identity is not watertight, in any case, it is fluid. I was once involved in a relationship with another man who had, at one stage of his life, been married and raised a daughter. From the outset of our relationship he stated that his daughter, then aged eight, would always come first, to which I replied, “Good! If it was otherwise, I would walk away right now.”

I also have family experience of children being brought into the world by IVF and raised by two women. This decision was not taken lightly, the irony being that, while countless children are brought into this world via casual heterosexual bunk-ups in back alleys and in the back seats of cars, a measured and responsible approach by two women, who happened to be lesbians, was intimately scrutinised by the authorities for months on end before they were allowed to proceed. Needless to say, the two children they now have are perfectly well-adjusted and happy, as well as accepted and integrated into their extended family and local community. I am just one of several male role models in their lives.

Some time ago, I remember watching a TV studio debate on this subject, in which a young man who had been fostered by two gay men spoke movingly of how he could sleep safely in his bedroom in their house, without fear of molestation – a situation quite different from that which had existed in his biological, heterosexual parents’ home.

All of which goes to prove that gay people are not, by and large, the hard-nosed, self-obsessed monsters that Messrs Rogers, Hill and Hunt suggest. This dubious trio should take note of what the eminently

sensible and astonishingly perceptive Sarah Palmer (aged 14) said in the August issue of the *Freethinker*: “Universal, non-discriminatory human rights would be a good starting point. Teaching tolerance – that would be good too.” Out of the mouths of babes ...

Diesel Balaam
London

EDITOR Barry Duke (August *Points of View*) makes a strong case for homosexual adoptions, but the evidence mentioned does not address the main issue, that of an absence, in every instance, of either a mother or a father.

A Florida Court “[finding] the best interests of children are not preserved by prohibiting homosexual adoption”, may be so but assuming unimpeachable adults with similar parenting skills, I am convinced that most sensible children would opt for heterosexual parents rather than same-sex parents (although the latter, of course, would normally be better than none).

The same applies to the American Psychological Association’s claim that “there was no evidence that their [homosexual] parenting caused harm [to children]”.

English law insists the best interests of the child are paramount and does not here take account of potential adopters’ human rights. Further, it is considered that a boy of eight is better off with his father, implying that a girl is better off with her mother. These are not arbitrary opinions, they have been determined by the facts.

Now, Barry tells us that [with a “useless” father] “... in his formative years he sought support and guidance from a much stronger individual ... who was a far more powerful and influential father figure.” Well done. I have no doubt he has much to thank his uncle for. Evidence does not come better than that and what was best

for Barry surely is what is best for every child – being raised by a father figure and a mother figure.

John Hunt
Camberley

FREETHINKER STRATEGY

IN one sense I am much impressed by the way in which the *Freethinker* has maintained its continuity of publication since 1882. But in another sense I am disappointed at the uncritical persistence of its Victorian strategy directed at the virtual destruction of religion and the removal of the institutional church.

Clearly all institutions ought to be in a state of perpetual self criticism and improvement. I would not like to be under the care of a Victorian dentist or an 18th-century lawyer. The need for such institutional change has been made manifest recently in relation to banking, Parliament, the media and the police. But what present-day “freethinkers” ignore is that they adopt a strategy towards religion that lets religious leaders off the hook from making fundamental changes in the operation of institutional religion. A strategy that by its attack upon religion as a totally unnecessary encumbrance on the body politic leaves the way open to something far worse: magic in the form of pseudo-science or what Churchill more accurately referred to as “perverted science”. For magic these days is not in the hands of flowing cloaked magicians but in the white coated psychiatrists and psychologists playing the part of doctors.

In their uncritical pursuit of this strategy “freethinkers” ignore the way in which, during the 19th century, religion started to be critically examined from both within and without its own belief system. The criticism from within established religion is most notably indicated by the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 – the year after the *Origin of Species*. *Essays and Reviews* was written by seven leading members of the Church of England, dubbed “the seven against Christ”, the thrust of which was that the Bible needed to be as critically read as any other book. At the time, *Essays and Reviews* created a much greater todoment than did Darwin’s *Origin* – with two of the authors prosecuted. But whilst *Origin* has gone through innumerable editions, *Essays and Reviews* has been virtually dustified into oblivion.

If the *Freethinker* is to persist for another century and more, then I contend it too will have to radically examine its established strategy based simply upon attacking religion and exposing its absurdities. For there is today a pressing need not to kill

off religion but to contribute to a radically changed religion that responds to people’s needs in the here and now. For what is needed is not the perpetuation of a religion of 2,000 years ago but a religion that is fit for purpose within a post-industrial society. To address, in short, what is the purpose of religion – a question addressed by 19th-century writers such as Emile Durkheim.

John Linsie
Coventry

ARMSTRONG REVIEW

JOHN Radford, in reviewing Karen Armstrong’s book (“The wrong sort of religion?”, August), listed Jesus among founders of a religious movement who saw themselves as returning to a truer, more genuine or original version of their faith.

However, this is not true of Jesus, who did not found Christianity (Paul did that) and did not want to change Judaism, except to cleanse it of ritualism. Jesus made it clear that he was fulfilling Judaism’s Messianic hopes and expectations, albeit he failed to do so. In a way he was evolving a new interpretation of Judaism, not trying to retrieve an original form, whatever that was.

Steuart Campbell
Edinburgh

RITUAL SLAUGHTER

I HAVE read very little of the Talmud, and none of Islam’s extra-koranic cannon, so I am in no position to report what they do or do not say. But I can state with confidence that neither the Torah nor any readily-available English translation of the Koran decrees that sacrificial animals may not be stunned before being ritually slaughtered.

Supporters of animal cruelty attribute to their sacred writings, and by implication their deity, the moral retardation they see in the mirror. But what pusher of the god delusion does not?

William Harwood
Canada

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

I WAS prompted by the Oslo atrocity on July 22 to respond to Graham Newbury’s letter (*Points of View*, June) responding to mine published in May.

His references contain insufficient source details to trace the original documents, and it is therefore impossible to verify whether they support his argument. So the references do not constitute evidence.

In his pseudo-academic argument he refers to “some scholars” without naming them. Not only is this an argument from authority – which is no argument at all – it

is impossible to assess the vailidity of this claim.

He begins his argument with the implied claim that all Muslims are fanatics, which is not substantiated by the evidence: neither Islam nor sharia is monolithic or uniform. He claims to establish that Islamophobia is a legitimate response by a perfectly circular argument.

Islamophobia is not a legitimate psychiatric term: it means unfounded derogatory claims about Islam and Muslims, and while it can be misused as a stick with which to belabour legitimate criticism of Islam, the concept would be better termed “Muslim-baiting”, just as anti-Semitism would be better termed “Jew-baiting”.

His argument, purportedly based on evidence and reasoned argument, falls to the ground.

Colin Mills
Amersham

THE article on the front page of the August *Freethinker* is misleading. Menstruating Muslim girls are not allowed to perform their obligatory prayers. They are not allowed to fast during the month of Ramadan. They are exempted. Similarly a Muslim is not allowed to have sex with his wife during her menstruation. Islam is a clean and pure religion.

With regard to education, Muslim children in state schools feel isolated and confused about who they are. This can cause dissatisfaction and lead them into criminality, and the lack of a true understanding of Islam can ultimately make them more susceptible to the teachings of fundamentalists like Christians during the Middle Ages and Jews in recent times in Palestine. Fundamentalism is nothing to do with Islam and Muslims; you are either a Muslim or a non-Muslim.

There are hundreds of state primary and secondary schools where Muslim pupils are in the majority. In my opinion all such schools should be opted out to become Muslim academies. This mean the Muslim children will get a decent education.

Muslim schools turn out balanced citizens, more tolerant of others and less likely to succumb to criminality or extremism. Muslim schools give young people confidence in who they are and an understanding of Islam’s teaching of tolerance and respect, which prepares them for a positive and fulfilling role in society.

Such schools are attractive to Muslim parents because they have better discipline and teach Islamic values. Children like discipline, structure and boundaries.

Iftikhar Ahmad
London School of Islamics
London

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, September 7, 7:30 for 8pm *Doctor-Assisted Suicide*. Speaker: Dr. Michael Irwin.

w <http://homepage.nitworld.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 Feb, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. September 14: Jeremy Rodell, British Humanist Association trustee, will explain the background to the BHA Consultation Document and answer questions.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagemb@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland:

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

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

Humanist Association Dorset:

Information and programme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

Humanist Society of Scotland:

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

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

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Dundee:** 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Edinburgh:** 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Glasgow:** 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Highland:** 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire:

i Robert Tee on 0113 2577009.

Isle of Man Freethinkers:

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

Humanists4Science:

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

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

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

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group:

i David Broughton on 01983 755526 or **e** davidb67@clara.co.uk

Jersey Humanists:

Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780

e Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com **w** <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/>

Lancashire Secular Humanists:

Meetings 7.30 on 3rd Wed of month at Great Eccleston Village Centre, 59 High St, The Square, Great Eccleston (Nr. Preston) PR3 0YB.

w www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk **i** Ian Abbott, Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Flyde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 **e** ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society:

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

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Liverpool Humanist Group:

i 07814 910 286.

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lhghumanist@googlegmail.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 Thistedown 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 (except 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.

South East London Humanist Group (formerly Lewisham Humanist Group):

i Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6.

w www.lewisham.humanist.org.uk

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@iscali.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.