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the voice of atheism **REG2142**

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Muslim leaders react angrily to Dawkins 'alien rubbish' claim

Professor Richard Dawkins, an outspoken critic of faith schools, found himself at the centre of a new row last month after claiming that he was worried most by the "total nonsense" taught to pupils at some Muslim schools. The evolutionary biologist and former Oxford University professor's incendiary remarks were made during the launch of his new science book, *The Magic of Reality*.

In an interview with the *Times Educational Supplement*, Dawkins said: "Occasionally, my colleagues lecturing in universities lament having undergraduate students walk out of their classes when they talk about evolution – this is almost entirely Muslims. So I think there's a very, very pernicious influence that is lasting up to the university years. That must be coming from certain schools."

He said that he noticed the "utterly deplorable" effect they were having first hand after visiting a Muslim school in Leicester as part of a documentary he made last year called *Faith Schools Menace?*

"Every single person I met believes if there is any disagreement between the Koran and science, then the Koran wins," he said. "I spoke to a group of girls, and to a senior science teacher who believes the world is 6,000 years old.

"It's just utterly deplorable. These are now British children who are having their minds stuffed with alien rubbish."

Immediately after his remarks made headlines here and abroad, the British *On Islam* website quoted Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), as saying: "Faith schools are by and large established to enforce the religious teachings of our lives, and the theory of creation is one of the cornerstones of our faith.

"To expect faith schools not to teach this kind of religious teaching is unreasonable, but I also think it is important for faith schools to teach science to children as well so they are aware of modern day findings and can use the information to ask further questions and strengthen their faith."

He added: "I don't believe any religious teaching prevents people from being creative and independent in their thinking."

On Islam also quoted Inayat Bunglawala, the MCB's Media Secretary,

as saying that it was "important that faith groups came to terms with evolution" and taught it in a fair manner.

Bunglawala has been an ardent defender of evolutionary teaching for a number of years. In 2006, in the *Guardian's* "Comment is Free" column, he wrote: "If its encounter with evolution is not to turn out to be Islam's Galileo moment then Muslim scientists have a crucial responsibility to engage in frank discussion about it with students and with religious scholars in an open and honest manner to help address a dogmatic aloofness which can only harm future Muslim science students."

Writing again in the *Guardian* ("Comment is Free", March 9, 2011) Bunglawala said: "The point is, after 150 years of trying, no one has yet produced any evidence to knock down Darwin's theory, and it has proven itself to be an extremely powerful framework for helping us to better understand our world and the relationship between all organisms residing therein."

Bunglawala concluded: "Since 2006 we have seen the setting up of new websites by Muslim scientists to more openly discuss evolution and its implications for some traditional interpretations of religion.

"This can only be good news, especially for those who are worried that some mosques are no longer fulfilling their role as community hubs and centres for debate and discussion."

In his interview with the *Times Educational Supplement*, Dawkins said there was a difference between faith schools which "just vaguely have a kind of Church of England assembly, and faith schools that actually teach nonsense like this school in Leicester."

Dawkins said he recognised the value of teaching religion – but only as a way of putting the modern world into context. He said it was important to learn, for example, about the Greek gods to appreciate the poetry of Keats, the Norse gods to relate to Wagner, and Judaism and Christianity to understand literature.

The Magic of Reality, he said, was aimed at teaching children about the thousands of myths from around the world.

"I do think it valuable to teach comparative religion as a sort of anthropological study and that's sort of what all my comparative myths in *The Magic of Reality* are about," he said.



Professor Dawkins: Getty Images

The Devil's own Box

BARRY DUKE WANTED A 3D PLASMA TV – DECADES BEFORE ITS INVENTION

One of the most acrimonious exchanges I ever had with a teacher occurred when I was in junior high in South Africa in the early 1960s. The row arose out of my insistence that the only literature worthy of attention was science fiction. I cockily insisted that many things labelled “rubbish” and “outrageous” and “utter nonsense” by detractors of the genre – my English tutor loomed large among these critics – would, in my lifetime, become reality.

I cited as an example Ray Bradbury's *The Veldt*, a story he wrote in 1950 about a futuristic, automated house that he called “The HappyLife Home”. This featured a virtual reality room – the children's nursery – which had wall-sized, flat screen television panels showing 3D images.

The fact that I had never clapped eyes on a TV set – television only made it to South Africa in 1976 – served only to ignite my wishful imaginings that one day huge plasma sets would not only materialise, but be commonplace in virtually every home. *And that*

I would own one. What agitated my teacher most was that I had chosen to link my appetite for speculative fiction on something he considered morally reprehensible. Although – like me – he had never seen TV, he shared the ruling National Party's view that the medium would endanger the apartheid state. He passionately supported the then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, who likened TV to “atom bombs” and “poison gas”, claiming that “they are modern things, but that does not mean they are desirable. The government has to watch for any dangers to the people, both spiritual and physical”. This monstrous fascist, a devout Christian credited with masterminding apartheid, never did get to see TV in his country – although he did figure largely on it abroad when he was neatly disposed of in Parliament by an assassin in 1966.

Dr Albert (“Dr No”) Hertzog, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs at the time, went even further, asserting that TV would come to South Africa “over his dead body”. He expressed his horror that “South Africa would have to import films showing race mixing”; and advertising would make the Black population “dissatisfied with their lot”.

Overall, the new medium was regarded as the “Devil's own box, for disseminating communism and immorality”.

Obviously I refrained from telling my tutor that *The Veldt* was, in fact, a cautionary tale about the dangers of modern technology. The “HappyLife Home” caused parents George and Lydia a great deal of misery, and eventually led to their grisly demise.

Bringing this to the teacher's attention would have weakened my argument, which, in any event, ended abruptly when I provocatively suggested that television would one day rid the planet of what *was* truly reprehensible and immoral: religion and all its superstition trappings. At this point I was thrown out of the class and suspended for a week.

TV, of course, has not made the world a more moral or rational place. Bradbury, now 91, predicted decades ago that it would be used to “dumb people down”, and he once said: “The television, that insidious beast, that Medusa which freezes a billion people to stone every night, staring fixedly, that Siren which called and sang and promised so much and gave, after all, so little.”

I agree with him – but only to a point. TV may be responsible for creating monumental inertia (and monumentally flabby arses), but the religious zealots who will *never* allow TV sets, radios or computers into their homes are

anything but inert when it comes to staging pious tantrums in public places.

Here's an example: Last month, girls between the ages of six and 12 were targeted by angry Orthodox Jews in the Israeli town of Beit Shemesh, who claimed that the pupils at the Orot Girl's Elementary school were dressing in an “immodest and slutty” manner. The BBC reported that, as the girls and their mothers were making their way home, beastly bands of ultra-orthodox Jewish men were waylaying them near the school, screaming abuse and pelting them with stones, tomatoes and faeces.

A few days before, ultra-Orthodox Jews posted signs telling Jewish women to “give way” to oncoming Orthodox male pedestrians in Williamsburg, New York. Said one Hasidic woman: “Sometimes a gentle reminder is needed to keep the neighbourhood the way it should be, and that Jewish values are supposed to be followed.”

To me, these are the words of woman complicit in her own subjugation, and they can only be the product of religious indoctrination and the lack of a *proper* education.

In an 80th birthday interview in August 2000 with the *Peoria Journal Star*, Bradbury made an impassioned plea for better education, saying: “The system we have has gone to hell, so I'm trying to encourage teachers and parents to rebuild it. We're not teaching kids to read and write and think.”

He also lamented the fact that what generally passes for education is merely the force-feeding of useless facts – or “factoids” as he labelled them. His irritation with this form of “education” stretches back to 1953, when he wrote what many believe is his most important book, *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopian novel in which reading is outlawed in a future US, and firemen exist only to burn books. In it he penned this passage:

“Cram them full of non-combustible data, chock them so damned full of ‘facts’ they feel stuffed, but absolutely ‘brilliant’ with information. Then they'll feel they're thinking, they'll get a sense of motion without moving. And they'll be happy, because facts of that sort don't change. Don't give them any slippery stuff like philosophy or sociology to tie things up with. That way lies melancholy.”

If I were in charge of education in the UK, I'd sure as hell make Bradbury mandatory reading, along with the likes of Ursula K le Guin and Kurt Vonnegut Jnr.



BARRY DUKE
FREETHINKER
EDITOR

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Freethinker/GW Foote & Co Ltd
PO Box 234
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Military chaplains cost British taxpayers a bomb

THE Ministry of Defence has revealed that it spends more than £20-million a year funding around 280 Christian chaplains in the armed forces. The chaplains, drawn from the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Methodist Church among others, serve across all three forces. The MOD also supports five non-Christian civilian chaplains, who minister to Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, Muslim and Buddhist recruits.

The cost to the taxpayer of £22-million a year was revealed following a Freedom of Information request from the National Secular Society.

All chaplains employed by the MoD are commissioned officers. The starting salary for a military chaplain is £37,172 on appointment, rising to £55,857 after 15 years' service. Senior chaplains are on a separate pay scale.

Stephen Evans, spokesperson for the NSS said: "A significant part of a chaplain's role is to provide pastoral support – but to all service personnel, not just the religious. It is therefore important to question the Christian monopoly in this area.

"If the MoD determines there is a place for pastoral support in the military, in addition to counselling and psychotherapy services already offered, then those positions should be open to anyone with the skills to provide necessary support, regardless of their religion or belief.

"If religious groups want specific representation then they should fund their own chaplains, and not expect salaries to be paid from the military budget, which is already under immense strain."

In a recent letter to the NSS, a serving soldier expressed concern not only about what they describe as "wasteful" MoD spending on chaplains, but also about the attitudes to homosexuality of some of the churches approved to send their ministers into the forces.

The Freedom of Information revealed that a quarter of all army chaplains are either on medically limited deployability (18 percent) or are medically non-deployable (seven percent). Just 20 out of the 150 army chaplains are currently on active service. As a rule, just 30 percent of chaplains are preparing for, on, or recovering from military operations at any one time.

The MoD, which is said to be assessing the £22m a year spent on military chaplaincy, said that an important part of their role is

to offer spiritual support to forces personnel based in conflict zones. They are there to deal with highly stressful situations, but are not required to fight, and do not carry weapons.

As well as offering one-to-one support, they lead prayer services, including memorials for personnel killed in battle.

Yet, according to a BBC report, in the case of the Army, the MoD says that a quarter of chaplains cannot currently be fully deployed to the frontline because of medical issues.

In practice, this means that some may not be able to travel abroad with their regiments, while others can travel but not to forward bases.

The MoD said that despite this all chaplains continue to provide support to wounded soldiers and bereaved families, wherever they are based, and that some who cannot travel now, may do so in the future.

"It should be borne in mind that many of those who have been medically downgraded will return to be fully deployable after treatment," a spokesman said.

"The army supplies 80 percent of the chaplains in Afghanistan. Non-availability of



Female chaplain Rev Clare Callanan

chaplains for medical reasons has not compromised the chaplains' department's ability to ensure that chaplains are deployed where required."

The NSS is writing to defence minister Andrew Robathan to ask that either churches assume funding of their chaplains themselves, or that the MoD converts the role of chaplains into a more general "pastoral care" function, for which anybody can apply.

The Church of England, which provides most of the chaplains, said that the service they provide, which they characterised as giving spiritual support in the face of death, was unique.

It confirmed that was not currently considering funding its military chaplains.

US Presidential candidate Romney says God wants America to lead the world

THE man who wants to be the next US President said last month that God created America to lead the world, and accused President Barack Obama of deliberately weakening his nation.

Mitt Romney, who was the Republican front runner in October, declared: "God did not

create this country to be a nation of followers. America is not destined to be one of several equally balanced global powers".

He added: "America must lead the world, or someone else will".

He argued that the globe would be more dangerous place without America's leadership. Speaking on the 10th anniversary of the Afghan war, he said "I will never, ever apologise for America."

Republicans have cast Obama's efforts to improve the image of the United States abroad as an "apology tour" and accuse the current administration of settling for a diminished US role in the world.

However, Obama 2012 campaign spokesman Ben LaBolt said Romney's speech "proves once again that he is willing to say anything, regardless of the facts, to get elected."

Romney is a leading Mormon – a bishop in the Church of Latter Day Saints – and is not the only Mormon in the race for the White House. Former Utah Governor, Republican Jon Huntsman, also has his eyes on the prize.

Their Mormon faith became a flashpoint during the contest after a supporter of Texas Governor Rick Perry likened it to a "cult." Romney has called on Perry "to repudiate the sentiment and the remarks made by that pastor". Perry, a right-wing evangelical, has refused.



justplaincrazy

WRONG AGAIN, CAMPING!

HAROLD Camping, the dotty old American evangelist who set a date of May 21, 2011, for the end of the world, boobed again last month when he decided that the positively final date would be October 21 this year – and that Armageddon wouldn't be pretty “The whole world, with the exception of those who are presently saved (the elect) are under the judgment of God and will be annihilated together with the whole physical world on October 21, 2011,” said the 90-year-old on his FamilyRadio.com website.

'MAGIC PENIS' CURSE

ELEVEN people standing trial in South Africa for murdering Pastor Albert Malwane of the Izwi Zion Christian Church are claiming that they have been cursed by the priest's family. The 12 are accused of burning the priest to death because they believed he was using “a magic penis” to seduce women.

One of accused, from a shantytown near Malalane – Sunnyboy Mthalala – died after vomiting blood and complaining of swollen feet, allegedly as a result of a curse. Now, the 11 remaining accused – nine men and three women, between the ages of 28 and 50 – believe the pastor's family used “muti,” or traditional medicine, to place a curse on those charged in his death and make them fall ill. Pastor Malwane's father confirmed that “a curse was released at the pastor's funeral to haunt his son's killers.”

MUSLIMS 'CONTAMINATED'

A GROUP of Muslims who attended a dinner at a Methodist Church hall in Malaysia earlier this year are to receive counselling because Sultan Sharafuddin Idris Shah, the constitutional ruler of Malaysia's central Selangor state, believes they may have been contaminated by their encounter with the infidels.

He said: “We command that Islamic officials provide counselling to Muslims who were involved in the said dinner, to restore their belief and faith in the religion of Islam.”

Church officials had repeatedly denied any proselytisation occurred at the dinner, which they described as a multi-ethnic gathering to celebrate the work of a community organisation that worked with women, children and HIV patients.

Another foolish fundie plays the 'Christian martyr' card

AN OKLAHOMA Republican state legislator who believes that gays are a greater threat to America than any terrorist group, over-egged the pudding when she claimed to have been inundated with e-mailed death threats from angry homosexuals.



Christian zealot Sally Kern, 65, (pictured above) is the wife of a Baptist Minister. She said that she received thousands of outraged emails in 2008, many of which she claimed contained death threats, after she gave a speech on the “gay lifestyle” and the threat it posed to America.

The question on the lips of many US commentators was why Kern chose to bring up the “death threats” issue three years after she prompted an outraged response from gays. The answer, it seems, is that she has a book to plug: her recently released *The Stoning of Sally Kern: The liberal attack on Christian conservatism – and why we must take a stand*. In it she portrays herself as “persecuted Christian”.

During a recent radio interview to promote the book, she told “WallBuilders Live” hosts David Barton and Rick Green that she feared for her life during the days that followed her 2008 speech which caused such anger. Barton sympathised with Kern saying, “If you touch homosexuality, be prepared to pay a price, not just attacks, it's gonna cost you economically, other things as well, may cost your life.”

Kern responded by saying that when she heard about the emails – around 7,000, “honestly, fear gripped my whole body, because I was very aware of the homosexual lobbyists and the power that they have. And people say, ‘oh you're so brave, so heroic,’ but I'm not, I'm just a sinner saved by grace and I was gripped with fear that day. I just said, ‘Lord, what have I done?’”

Unfortunately for Kern, referring to those

emails turned out to be a tactical error, because bloggers all over America immediately dug out a report which showed that while some furious people had wished her dead, no-one actually threatened her with death. At the time three members of the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation were deployed to trawl through all the emails, but apparently found nothing meriting a prosecution.

In her speech to a group of Republicans about gays and their lifestyle, Kern said: “I'm not gay-bashing. But according to God's word that is not the right kind of lifestyle ... Studies show no society that has totally embraced homosexuality has lasted more than a few decades. It is not a lifestyle that is good for this nation.”

After her rant, State Governor Brad Henry said he was disappointed in Sally Kern's comments, which were recorded and posted on the video sharing website YouTube by the Washington, DC-based Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund. Henry said he believed public officials should “cool the rhetoric”.

“I don't think it represents Oklahoma,” Henry said. He said his religious beliefs teach him to be tolerant of diverse lifestyles and viewpoints. “Think before you speak,” the Governor added. “Oklahomans have love and tolerance for all people.”

Chuck Wolfe, President and CEO of the Victory Fund, wrote a letter to Kern, saying her words could have real-life consequences. “What you said is not OK ... your words give aid and comfort to those who would hurt, maim and even kill people who are different from you.”

“The point of the Victory Fund's releasing your speech was to draw attention to the fact that even elected leaders like you are saying some nasty and potentially dangerous things about your fellow citizens. Our mission is to elect people to counter your hate and bigotry with honesty and courage.”

• **Editor's note:** Kern's book is now available at half-price from Amazon. Here is one review on Amazon: “Wow, as a Protestant Minister, I have read a number of twisted false biblical interpretations. But this venom-filled, self-serving diatribe really takes the cake. I have never seen so much misinformation in one place served up with so much hate. No wonder this is a vanity press book. I cannot imagine any legitimate publisher giving this a second look. Stay away from this tripe if you believe at all in the all-powerful love of God!”

Orthodox Jewish chicken-swingers stand accused of animal cruelty



A CRUEL ritual, said to date back some 800 years, involves ultra-Orthodox Jews swinging chickens above their heads to absolve them from their sins. The ghastly spectacle takes place to mark Yom Kippur – the Day of Atonement – and the birds are slaughtered afterward.

But now some concerned rabbis are condemning the practice as inhumane, saying the ritual, along with the cruel conditions in which the chickens are kept, violates Jewish law, which has strict rules on the care and slaughter of animals.

Jerusalem rabbi, Meir Hirsch, began having second thoughts about the practice, known as *kaparot*, or atonement, when he noticed chickens squawking in distress in plastic cages near his house. He said that butchers “bring the chickens from the farm at night, and they spend all day in the sun without food or drink. You cannot perform a commandment by committing a sin.”

As far back as the 16th century, Rabbi Joseph Karo, one of the major codifiers of Jewish law, called it a “foolish custom” reminiscent of pagan practices. Since then Jews of Sephardic, or Middle Eastern, origin have tended to perform *kaparot* without animals, sometimes swinging sacks of coins above their heads before donating the money to charity.

But those following Ashkenazi, or European, customs, have continued to use chickens.

Hirsch said he now waves a \$10 bill above his head instead of a chicken. While Hirsch’s sect of several thousand members in Jerusalem is relatively small, calls for reform are

spreading to other streams of Orthodoxy.

Yehuda Shein, a community activist in the Jerusalem suburb of Beit Shemesh, founded an ultra-Orthodox animal rights group last year. This year, about 50 activists from his group, “Behemla,” or “in compassion,” handed out flyers citing rabbinical opposition to performing *kaparot* on chickens.

Most opposition to chicken *kaparot* has come from progressive Jewish circles, and modern Orthodox worshippers shun the practice, though Friedman said “there are sprouts of an awakening” now among the very religious.

Still, the vast majority of the ultra-Orthodox continue to transfer their sins to chickens ahead of Yom Kippur, he said.

One young chicken swinger, Moshe Friedman, 21, bought a bird and gripped its wings with his left hand while he held a laminated prayer sheet with his right. Then he swung the chicken above his head, muttered a blessing, then took the bird to be slaughtered.

Afterwards Friedman, said he believed the chicken’s death saved him from a violent reaction from above to his own sins.

Londoner Miriam Honig, 30, said her husband waved chickens above her head and the heads of their two young sons.

“I think it’s good for a child to see this. We eat the chicken for a meal, and so now we see the live slaughter.”

Four arrested after Amish hair attack

FOUR Ohio men said to be members of a breakaway Amish group have been arrested for allegedly going into the home of an Amish man and cutting his hair and beard with scissors.

The attack on the 74-year-old man in his Holmes County home last month was thought to be an attempt to degrade and insult him.

A Jefferson County deputy said the authorities had arrested 38-year-old Johnny Mullet, 26-year-old Lester Mullet, 53-year-old Levi Miller, and Lester Miller.

Mullet is the son of “bishop” Sam Mullet, who heads the breakaway group. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that the Mullets and Levi Miller were charged with kidnapping and burglary. Charges against Lester Miller had not been revealed.

bits&bobs

FAITH FLOUNDERS IN BRAZIL

NEW research in Brazil makes grim reading for the Catholic Church. A Getulio Vargas Foundation study says that Catholics are abandoning the church at a higher rate than ever before, and many younger parishioners are simply ditching religion altogether. The number of people under the age of 20 in Brazil who say they have no religious beliefs is growing three times faster than those in the 50 and older age group.

Fernando Altemeyer, a theologian at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo, said: “A considerable part of the Brazilian youth today are agnostic.”

Mexico is now poised to take Brazil’s place as the world’s top Catholic nation, although the Church is also losing members there. According to Mexico’s census, 84 percent of the population was Catholic in 2010. Last year the figure in Brazil was 68 percent, the lowest level ever recorded.

‘STICK TO THE SCRIPT’

MUSLIM preachers in Morocco staged a protest last month against strict rules which say that imams can only deliver sermons prepared for them by the authorities. The rules are in place so that Morocco can keep a very close watch on the nation’s mosques to guard against extremist rhetoric. One of the banners produced by the protesters read “The imams of the mosques demand freedom, dignity, justice and their full rights”.

‘SAINT’ VLADIMIR PUTIN

GERMAN newspaper *Der Spiegel* reported last month that a sect of the Russian Orthodox Church based in the village of Bolshaya Elnya believes Putin is a reincarnation of St Paul. Led by Mother Fotina, who considers herself a reincarnation of Joan of Arc, the female followers in the village spread out prayer mats at the Chapel of Russia’s Resurrection and pray for the success of their political patron saint.

In Putin’s hometown of Saint Petersburg, there are posters all over the place depicting him as an angel and civic and political leaders regularly praise him in quasi-religious terms. Vladislav Surkov, the influential deputy chief of the Kremlin administration, once said Putin was “a man whom fate and the Lord sent to Russia”.



Taking the myth

Fomer BBC producer **PAUL ARNOLD**, now a freelance journalist based in Spain, has joined the *Freethinker* team as a columnist. In his first contribution, the ex-Catholic examines the Church's position regarding evolution.

MAYBE it's the former Catholic in me, but sometimes I can't help but feel a little sorry for the Church. It is lumbered with a fantastical mythology to rival the ancient Greek deities on Mount Olympus, and occasionally science blows a mile-wide hole in the fantasies that it has created to try and explain the world and how we all got here.

This leaves Church bodies with a dilemma; ignore the science or twist and re-jig belief to try and fit in with the facts. When they attempt the latter the results can be a hopeless and unintentionally humorous mish-mash of fact and fantasy.

Over the years, the Catholic Church has quietly distanced itself from the literal historicity of some parts of the Bible. Unlike the numbskull creationists the Catholics don't believe that all of it is factual and accurate, more that what it teaches is the truth. This gives them a lot of wriggle room and is an intellectual cop-out that avoids them asking too many questions, perhaps because the real truth may be unsettling.

Still, I doffed my cap to the previous pope when he at least attempted to look at evolution and tried to explain how he thought it

was compatible with the Christian view of creation. However, what he said was one of the most bizarre things I've ever heard come out of the Vatican. You see, he just couldn't rule God out of the equation.

He affirmed that the Church accepts the evolution of the human body, but then he departed from fact by claiming that the spiritual soul was created by the Almighty: "If the human body has its origin in living material which pre-exists it, the spiritual soul is immediately created by God." And then later: "The sciences of observation describe and measure the multiple manifestations of life with increasing precision and correlate them with the time line. The moment of transition into the spiritual cannot be the object of this kind of observation."

Well, of course it can't because it didn't happen. Now this is where I take a very deep breath and try to prevent my eyebrows from shooting off my face, because, according to the Church, there was a moment of spiritual transition, before which we presumably had no soul and then, hey presto, we had one.

Now when exactly did this happen? A wet Tuesday afternoon a million years ago? An otherwise non-eventful weekend earlier in our Cenozoic era? And in which species in the long line of primates leading up to *Homo sapiens* did this magical transition occur? A 2009 Vatican conference on biological evolution did not shed any light on this.

Let's just look at exactly what Catholics are now being asked to believe. It goes something like this: as God has been around since the dawn of time he was able to observe how plant and animal life emerged from the primordial gloom. For most of the time he was happy to let evolution chug along at its own pace. But then one bright day he decided that a particular branch of life, the primates (why primates and not fish or insects?) needed a little something extra to make them complete, and that was the immortal soul. So he either dispatched the Holy Spirit to do the deed or he did it himself with a wave of his mighty hand.

This is pure hokum. It's just the same as saying a fairy came down and waved some pixie dust over a few apes and, lo and behold, we have humanity. So on Tuesday afternoon

we didn't have an immortal soul and then the next day we did.

Of course the Church dresses all this up in fancy words and adds a little bit of cod philosophy over its reasoning, but, when it comes down to it, all they are trying to do is defend one fiction (the man-made concept of the soul) with another fiction. Frankly I can't blame them for trying. Though the results are farcical it's an understandable exercise to try and cling onto a mythology in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

To present a counter argument sometimes feels like intellectual bullying, because their line of reasoning is so weak that it breaks down under even the lightest of interrogations. It is so very easy to dismiss.

All this is even more extraordinary when you realise that the Catholic Church is more than willing these days to engage with the scientific community and indeed has its own scientific institutions carrying out frontline research.

It must surely understand that science is the most successful way of thinking that has ever been developed in human history. So I find it very difficult to swallow the line peddled by Church authorities that it searches for the truth. How can it when it feels it is still necessary to create myths and made-up stories?

During his time at the BBC, Paul Arnold produced hundreds of programmes in science, news, light entertainment and magazine features. He travelled the world and interviewed celebrated people in many fields – Nobel Prize winners, politicians, film stars and musicians. "It was my great fortune and privilege to work on some fantastic shows with some brilliant and highly talented people," he said. "This included my time



at the world's premier source of science programmes – the BBC Radio Science Unit, and on one of the BBC's most popular programmes, the multi-award winning *Newsround*.

Stoking up skepticism

LAST month saw the incredibly successful launch of Stoke Skeptics in the Pub, featuring guest speaker Professor Chris French on Anomalistic Psychology.

If you live in or around Stoke come and join the skeptics at their second event on Wednesday, November 2, 2011 at the Holy Inadequate free house, 67 Etruria Old Road, Etruria, Stoke-on-Trent, ST1 5PE. (Just off the A500 between Newcastle-under-Lyme and Festival Park.) Time: 7 for 7:30pm, until closing.

For details and updates follow the skeptics on twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/StaffsSkeptics>. Their website is <http://stoke.skepticsinthepub.org/> You can contact the group at staffs.skeptics@gmail.com

Fear and loathing in Uganda

BARRY DUKE reports on the efforts being made by Ugandan radio presenter James 'Fat Boy' Onen to make his country a more humane and rational place

The motto of *Freethought Kampala*, a blog co-founded by Ugandan radio presenter James "Fat Boy" Onen "is Promoting Reason in a Highly Superstitious Society". Goodness knows Uganda could do with a dose of rational thinking, given the country's appalling record of witchcraft-related crimes against children.

The extent of these abuses was revealed by BBC's *Newsnight* in January of last year, and made for grim viewing. BBC investigators heard first-hand accounts which suggested ritual killings of children may be more common than authorities have acknowledged.

One witch-doctor led the BBC to his secret shrine and said he had clients who regularly captured children and brought their blood and body parts to be consumed by spirits.

And a former witch-doctor, who now campaigns to end child sacrifice, confessed for the first time to having murdered about 70 people, including his own son.

Ugandan authorities told the BBC that human sacrifice was on the increase, and, according to the head of the country's Anti-Human Sacrifice Taskforce, the crime is directly linked to rising levels of development and prosperity, and an increasing belief that witchcraft can help people get rich quickly.

Another issue which has served to caste Uganda in an extremely bad light has been rumbling on for number of years. Rampant homophobia, fuelled by home-grown Christian zealots – aided and abetted by evangelical bigots, mainly from the US – led to several attempts to have an Anti-Homosexuality Bill passed by Parliament. So far, fortunately, this infamous Bill has not made it to the statute book, but there seems no let-up to efforts to criminalise gays.

Onen is prominent among a growing number of people in Uganda who are hammering home the message that homophobia is largely being orchestrated by foreign evangelicals, and in February last year Onen penned a piece for the SKZ Kampala blog, pointing out the that "ever since the 'anti-homosexuality' conference, in March 2009, the works of authors such as Richard Cohen (*Coming Out Straight*) have been



James 'Fatboy' Onen

brandished as 'evidence from authoritative sources' that homosexuality is a disorder, and that homosexuals can become straight if they choose to.

He pointed out that "Don Schmierer of Exodus International, Scott Lively of Abiding Truth Ministries, and Caleb Brundidge of the International Healing Foundation, met with Ugandan legislators and other leaders during this same period and made presentations in which they reiterated their various theories on homosexuality – and our MPs uncritically accepted their claims as facts. Their views were heralded as views of 'experts', and today their words can be heard coming out of the mouths of nearly all the proponents of the Anti-homosexuality Bill. Especially the words of Lively."

Onen then did a brilliant job of demonstrating that all of these "experts" were simply no-nothing charlatans, and concluded: "Homosexuals will always exist, and will always be among us. It is not true that they are all defilers, and we are yet to be presented with any verifiable evidence of organised, systematic recruitment.

"In Uganda, incidences of defilement of girls are rampant, but no sensible person claims that heterosexuality is the crime – the crime is defilement. Likewise, even if there are cases of defilement of boys by men (whose numbers pale in comparison to that of defiled girls), it does not mean homosexuality is the crime. The crime, also, is defilement. Many homosexuals and lesbians are kind, loving people who contribute positively to our society. The sooner we accepted this fact, and learnt to be tolerant of

them, the better."

Onen, an on-air presenter for Sanyu FM, believes *Freethought Kampala* is providing the only rational platform for tackling superstition in Uganda, and last month, free-thinkers and skeptics of all shades in the UK had a opportunity to meet the outspoken presenter when he did a series of talks on the work that he and like-minded people are doing to tackle superstition, mysticism and witchcraft in Uganda.

He was invited to the UK by the British Humanist Association (BHA). Addressing small gatherings, he told of how Ugandans had become over-reliant on a "mixed bag" of belief in black magic and Pentecostal Christianity.

At the Camden Head pub in London he said: "On my talkshow, I offer two million Ugandan shillings to anyone that would prove to me that witchcraft works. After three months, one person came forward and took me to a witch doctor, of course he could not do anything." He continued: "But that was not sufficient to change people's minds because they are of the view that evil spirits exist. This is because their pastors are telling them every day that Uganda is cursed and that Uganda suffers from a 'generational curse'."

Onen, according to a report in the *Guardian*, "came out" as an atheist in 2008 after a spate of reports on child sacrifice. He said reading all the "bullshit" about superstition and witchcraft in the press made him co-found *Freethought Kampala*. "I decided that enough was enough. I and some like-minded individuals decided that we should get together to make a rational viewpoint part of the national conversation."

Matthew Cresswell of the *Guardian* pointed out that "before Christianity grew exponentially in Africa, most adhered to African traditional religion, which forms the basis of witchcraft and superstition in Africa. Onen believes it was the rise of Pentecostalism in the 1950s which boosted Africans' fear of spells and superstition. "Charismatic Christianity is making things worse by over-emphasising it, by advertising it, by lending credence to the validity of claims that witchcraft is efficacious, by fully absorbing that worldview into their worldview."

Andrea Yates: monster or compassionate mother?

SUSAN ALLEN PERNA reflects on the case of a Texas mother who – after falling under the spell of a manipulative evangelist – drowned all five of her children

Andrea Pia Yates had what seemed, by all appearances, the perfect life – a husband who was a NASA engineer, five healthy kids, and an ideal home. Then, on June 20, 2001, Houston-born Yates killed her five children, by drowning them in a bathtub.

So what went wrong? Most people think of Andrea – now held in a Texas mental hospital – as a cold-blooded baby killer. But was she really the evil monster the media plays her out to be, or simply a misguided, but caring mother who only wanted to secure a place in heaven for her children?

Andrea Yates does not fit the typical profile of a mother who kills her children. Yates' background is not indicative of someone capable of committing such unspeakable acts of horror. She was a high school valedictorian, captain of her high school swimming team, and an officer in the National Honor Society.

She was working as a nurse at a prestigious medical center in Texas when she met her husband Russell "Rusty" Yates.

All of her family and friends claimed that she was a good mother who adored her children. Yates had no prior history of mentally or physically abusing her children, nor was she ever a victim of abuse. And her decision to kill her children did not happen overnight. It was a process that took years. I believe that multiple factors were involved in her mental deterioration, including severe mental illness and repetitive brainwashing by a Christian fundamental extremist who altered her perception of reality.

Yates' insanity began to surface after she moved to Florida. Her husband moved the family into a 138-foot travel trailer which he purchased. The cramped living conditions became intolerable for Andrea. The once outgoing mother who loved to so-

cialize with friends became reclusive when she became pregnant with her second child. The decision to home-school the children seemed to increase her isolation.

Luke was born, bringing the number of children to four. Then the following year when, when the family returned to Houston, they purchased a 350-square-foot,

the home.

He brainwashed the troubled and isolated mother by teaching her that the role of women was derived from the sin of Eve and that "bad mothers who are going to hell create bad children who will go to hell".

Yates began to seriously doubt her role as a mother when she started internalizing the minister's messages. She no longer believed that she had the capacity to be a good mother and that her children were doomed to hell. She became convinced that the only way she could save them was by killing them, thereby securing their future in heaven. She felt that all hope was gone.

Over time her mental condition worsened. She was hospitalized after she tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of pills. She was transferred to a psychiatric unit and diagnosed with a major depressive disorder and was prescribed an antidepressant and then released.

Once home, she stopped taking her medication and as a result began to self mutilate and refused to feed her children. She also started having hallucinations. She was hospitalized again after her second suicide attempt and stayed in a catatonic state for ten days. After being treated with an injection of different drugs that included Haldol, an anti-psychotic drug, her condition immediately im-

proved. Her doctor warned her and Rusty that having another baby might bring on more episodes of psychotic behavior.

Yates' family urged Rusty to buy a home instead of returning Andrea to the cramped living conditions of the bus. He purchased a home in a decent neighborhood. Once in their new home, Andrea's condition improved to the point that she returned to past activities like swimming, cooking and some socializing. She was also interacting well with her children. She told Rusty that she had high hopes for the future, but they



The Yates family pictured shortly before the tragedy. The youngest of the children is not in the photo

renovated bus from Michael Woroniecki, a travelling preacher whose religious views had profoundly influenced both parents.

They patterned their lives after his teachings. Though Rusty Yates did not agree with all of Woroniecki's ideas, Andrea embraced the minister's radical, outlandish sermons. Woroniecki was a powerful influence on Andrea Yates' impressionable mind. She was totally captivated by him. The minister teaches a very conservative form of Christianity that says that women should have a very subservient position in

were short lived.

In March of 2000, Andrea, on Rusty's urging, became pregnant again – a big mistake – and stopped taking the Haldol, another big mistake. Eight months later Mary was born, bringing the total number of children to five. Yates coped well for a while, but when her father died her mental state deteriorated. She stopped talking, refused liquids, mutilated herself, and would not feed Mary. By the end of March Andrea returned to a different psychiatric hospital, and was released only to return again in May, and was released ten days later.

Two days later, when Rusty left for work, Yates drowned all five of her children. Ironically, at the time of the atrocity, she and Rusty were still devoted followers of Woroniecki.

Is it possible that this tragedy could have been prevented? I believe things could have turned out very differently for Andrea Yates if she had taken to her doctor's advice and not remained under the spell of Woroniecki. I am convinced that, by ignoring the doc-

tor's advice, discontinuing her medications, and not being informed about the dangers of being involved in cults, is what finally pushed Andrea over the edge.

It is critically important for anyone who has thoughts of harming one's own children to seek psychiatric help immediately to avoid a tragedy such as this one. Research shows that women experiencing a psychosis are at risk of committing suicide and, in very rare cases, of harming their unborn child or infants as was the case with Yates. These women need to be hospitalized for their safety and to safeguard their infants.

I do not in any way condone what Yates did, but I am in no position to judge her either. At the time, Yates believed that murdering her five children was her only option. I do not believe that Yates was a cold, calculated, sociopathic killer. She had no evil intentions. Her only motive was to protect the children she loved, and believed with all of her heart that, by killing them, she was going to spare them from

eternal damnation.

Her minister's baleful influence warped her mind, making her feel like she was in a hopeless situation. Her mental illness, combined with Woroniecki's teachings, made it impossible for her rational decisions, and that is what led to the tragic outcome.

Editor's note: Yates was originally convicted on three counts of capital murder and sent to prison, eligible for parole in 2041. Asked the reasons for killing her children, she claimed that she was a "bad mother" and needed to be "punished". She felt the children were not acting in a way that Jesus would find favourable.

Yates was granted a re-trial in 2006. She was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and transferred from prison (where she had spent four years) to a state mental hospital for treatment.

Betsy Schwartz, executive director of the Mental Health Association of Greater Houston, said the verdict brought "justice to a woman whose severe mental illness was never in question."

So, who is Michael Woroniecki?

MICHAEL Peter Woroniecki, 57, is an independent, non-denominational Christian missionary who became known for his ministry on college campuses and at various public events across the US over the span of the last 30 years.

Woroniecki, according to *Wikipedia*, chooses college campuses, large sporting and political events as well as city centres to convey his hellfire and brimstone message. His wife and six adult children are often seen ministering alongside him. The family has travelled together across Europe and even to Africa.

In May 1995, they preached in Casablanca, Morocco, where Muslim law makes it a crime to evangelise. A riot resulted and the family was arrested. They were interrogated for eight hours by state officials, then slung out of the country.

Not surprisingly, Woroniecki vigorously denies having had anything to do with the deaths of the Yates children. In an interview he gave shortly after the killing spree, Woroniecki said his relationship with the Yates family had been "twisted" and "slanted" by news accounts characterizing his family as a "bunch of crazy whackos".

He told the *Houston Chronicle*: "Never once did I say that Andrea was a bad mother or even suggest it or hint at it. That (she was possessed by Satan) would have never come out of my mouth. I don't believe that."



Evangelist Michael Woroniecki, second from right, with his biblically-named family: Joshua, Abraham, David, Elizabeth, Sarah, Rachel, and Ruth

He added: "Of course, people say negative things about us. We talk about sin. We talk about judgment. We talk about hypocrites. We confront people who are hypocrites. We talk about hell. People are offended when they're told they're going to hell."

In a letter to the *Dallas Morning News*, Woroniecki wrote: "We enjoyed our rela-

tionship with Rusty and Andrea for many years as they tried to learn from our ways of following Jesus ... they obviously 'fell short' of salvation."

A former follower of Woroniecki remains convinced the preacher is manipulative and dangerous. Interviewed in 2002 by the *Houston Chronicle*, David De La Isla
(Continued on p10)

Should Britain ban the burqa?

JOHN RADFORD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London, thinks not

In my local library I sat opposite a woman completely swathed in black, head to toe, including black gloves and black glasses. About a square inch of the bridge of her nose was visible. Whether she was aware of this lapse I don't know. This sort of sight is not uncommon, but I find it disturbing. I am not quite sure why. The most obvious reason is that I take such people to be Muslims, and my understanding of Islam is that its ultimate aim is the submission of the whole of humanity to Allah.

I don't imagine that this woman, or the majority of Muslims individually, have any such ambition. But I certainly would not wish to see it. A second reason may be that extreme behaviour of an individual is generally worrying. Why does this person feel that she cannot appear in public without such elaborate concealment? It verges on the pathological, indeed it might well be thought so were it not labelled "religious". This implies that one cannot question "religious" behaviour, it is somehow independent

of normal standards, a view I find disturbing. Again, in our society black is associated with death, and a black shroud is vaguely threatening (covered Muslim women recall to me the ominous Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, or even the traditional Grim Reaper).

Another aspect is that with such concealment, one cannot communicate so well. I would always rather talk face-to-face than by telephone. Faces came first, after all, and we have evolved to respond to them. Babies do it almost immediately after birth. Lack of facial cues is unsettling. There are related questions of identity and security. These have led the governments of France and Belgium recently to "ban the burqa". In fact they have not "banned" any specific clothing. The legislation forbids concealing the identity of the wearer in public.

The aim of the legislators is presumably to avoid implying an attack on Islam. Nevertheless that is how it is being taken, and in one sense it is, since most of those covering

their faces are presumably Muslims. But that is a great oversimplification. There is, first of all, nothing in the Koran that forbids showing one's face. The nearest seems to be Surah 24 verse 31 which states that women should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof. They should cover their bosoms and not display their beauty except to permitted close relatives.

I don't quote this verbatim, and in any case the precise wording only exists in Arabic, but it leaves plenty of room for interpretation. The various schools of Islamic law, and Muslim societies and individuals, vary widely. Covering the face seems to be a matter of local tradition, modified by personal preference or circumstances.

The *Daily Telegraph*, September 26, 2011, reports that three Muslim schools in Britain insist on covering, but also that "mainstream" Muslims condemn this. A website, www.islamicboutique.com, prescribes an Islamic dress code for women thus. It should not be transparent, and should cover the whole body except hands and face, be loose so as not to reveal the shape of the body, be unlike male costume and that of unbelievers (rather a large category), and should not be of bold designs attracting attention, nor worn to enhance status or reputation.

All recorded human societies have some form of body covering, even if only paint, but it can serve many different functions, including warmth, protection, adornment, ritual, indication of rank or status, cosmetic, disguise or conversely identity, and modesty. It is perhaps universal to have different dress for men and women. The cultural practice of women covering their faces long predates Islam. All societies have some formal or informal rules, but these vary widely. As is well known, in classical Greece men exercised and competed in athletics naked, and felt that this distinguished them from other, less civilised, races. Nudity is now generally unacceptable. In 2003 Stephen Gough, an ex-Royal Marine, set out to walk from Land's End to John o' Groat's, naked except for boots and hat. He did it, twice, at the cost of numerous arrests and several periods in prison, particularly in Scotland, where the laws are stricter than in England. On August 24, 2011, after numerous offences and

The Andrea Yates tragedy

revealed that he was a devotee for 12 years – and as a result of the evangelist's influence he once quit his job, broke up with his fiancée, and contemplated suicide.

"He preaches very, very well," De La Isla said. "He tells you that you are going to learn how to come to Jesus. But you never make it ... I never met one person, except his family, who can make it. Woroniecki is a manipulator who judges others. I'm a smart person. I'm not an idiot, and I was sucked into that system for 12 years ... he is a cult figure and he contributed to my mental deterioration. And that's what he did with Andrea Yates."

De La Isla has more than 50 letters and pamphlets from Woroniecki, most of which condemn him.

"Following him is more like taking a correspondence course," De La Isla said. "You write letters. You describe where you are with God, and he evaluates it and writes you back. He tells you you are satanic, diluted and under Satan's influence. But no matter what you do, he still tells you 'You have fallen short.'"

Author Suzy Spencer, who wrote a book about the case – *Breaking Point* – told *Good Morning America* that Yates was profoundly influenced by Michael Woroniecki, and his wife, Rachel, who had been close to the Yates' for years.

"The minister teaches a very conservative form of Christianity that says that women should have a very subservient position in the home, and that Satan is constantly trying to drive people wrong," Spencer said. In correspondence, the couple bombarded the troubled and isolated mother with talk of Satan, and the idea that God can see people's wickedness.

In one letter, Rachel Woroniecki writes, "Life is so short. It is so very cruel. It is so lonely and empty. You must accept the reality that this life is under the curse of sin and death."

Spencer said she thought that because of Yates' deteriorating mental condition, the mother of five may have taken the message more literally than she might have otherwise, somehow believing that her sadness and loneliness meant that she had been overtaken by evil.

"They constantly equate loneliness, depression, anything negative in your life is separation from God and alignment with Satan," said Spencer.

re-offences, he was sentenced to 657 days in prison.

Here is the converse of the burqa: you must not show anything, or you must not show everything. It incidentally makes nonsense of Immigration Minister Damian Green's response to whether we should ban face covering: "Telling people what they can and can't wear, if they're just walking down the street, is a rather un-British thing to do ... it is very unlikely and it would be undesirable for the British Parliament to pass a law dictating what people wore." There is also the fact, discussed by lawyer Clare Murray in *The City Magazine*, August 2011, that case law "overwhelmingly supports the right of employers to impose dress codes on employers to ensure conventional standards of appearance at work".

There have been several recent cases in which employees objected to this. Apart from laws and local requirements, what we wear is more or less controlled by custom or fashion. Gordon Brown, when Chancellor of the Exchequer, attended the Lord Mayor's Banquet in a lounge suit, when everyone else wore evening dress. This seemed to me merely boorish and pointless. Why didn't he wear jeans and an old T-shirt, or go the Stephen Gough way in his birthday suit? It is polite, when in Rome, to do as Romans do. One might argue that this applies to Muslims in Britain.

Britain could certainly have a similar law to those of France and Belgium. There seem to be various possible arguments for and against. For, it can be argued that concealment is potentially a threat to public safety. Or it is anti-social and seems unfriendly; some people feel it is a kind of declaration of not being British. Or it is an imposition on women – but women can be found who claim it enhances their freedom. On the other hand some Muslim men insist on it. There is also a health argument, that all-enveloping black inhibits the sunlight necessary for production of vitamin D, in women themselves and in their unborn children. In general it is not unreasonable to expect most people to conform to the accepted norms of society, unless there are strong reasons not to. But there's the rub. It would be claimed that such reasons exist in the case of the burqa. The suggestion that one of these is the requirements of a religion, however, cannot be upheld.

As noted, Islam does not command women to cover their faces; and if it did, there is no reason to give religious requirements precedence over any others. A stronger argument is that, whatever the reason, some people have the custom of covering, and different customs should be tolerated. Or, it is simply an individual choice. An extension of this is that a ban would violate the wearer's



"human rights". But as Mary Warnock has argued, human rights do not exist independently, they are essentially agreements over what ought to be done, and that is precisely what is under debate. We certainly do not tolerate all cultural customs, for example "honour killing" or female so-called circumcision (in my view we should not accept the male version either). Personally, I would find Stephen Gough less objectionable than extreme Islamic dress. His preference seems to me perfectly harmless, whereas concealing body and face seems undesirable and even objectionable, and may do at least some harm. Whether the custom is so objectionable as to justify legislation against it is more debatable. It seems reasonable to insist that covering should be removed on occasion when required for identification or security.

But complete banning could be counterproductive. Much evidence shows the importance to individuals and groups of a sense of identity, and it is likely that the burqa contributes significantly to this. Clothing, body marking and mutilation frequently serve this purpose, often connected with initiation. Attacks on identity are very strongly, sometimes violently, resented. Further, history suggests that persecution, short of destruction, often makes ideology stronger, as with early Christians.

We are perhaps slowly emerging from the Judaeo-Christian horror of nudity (part of the reason for banning the original Olympic Games in 393 CE). Respectable Victorian ladies required bathing machines to enter the sea, though the notion that legs of tables and chairs were covered seems to be a myth. Nudity does not, perhaps, raise the embarrassed sniggers it once did. Similarly, our society has dropped many rigid rules about

correct dress. (Some may remember Stanley Holloway's monologue about the shame of attending a working-class funeral in "brahn boots".) Even clergy now often sport the most attenuated dog-collars or none at all. But male-female differences are still customary. Minorities sometimes stick to their own ways for long periods, like the Amish. Jews are an outstanding example, but only some remain strictly orthodox. Muslims are still a small minority in Britain (about three percent). It may be that young Muslim girls will over time tend to adopt the less restrictive styles they see all around them. I am sure it is wrong to compel them to cover their faces. On balance I think it would be wrong also to forbid them to do so by law.

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Sultan Shahin: an outspoken critic of Islamic fanaticism

KEITH KELLNER reports on the tireless efforts of a courageous Muslim journalist

Sultan Shahin, 60, is the creator of a website called *New Age Islam*, which has one purpose: to wrest control of a religion he loves from the grip of Islamic fundamentalists and jihadis, and to fight the Islamophobia of far right groups operating in Europe and the United States.

He operates from a small room in east Delhi, and in September this year he stood before the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, and delivered a blistering attack on those he sees as having hijacked Islam.

He began by referring to “the massive human rights violations” taking place in Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Sudan, Egypt and other Islamic countries, and warned of “a growing danger of Islamist extremists sharing, or coming to power in several of these countries. “The only thing clear about the

future shape of Libya, for instance, is that it will have a constitution based on shariah.” Furthermore “a supposedly democratic Iraq has come so much under radical Islamist Iranian influence that it is now supporting the violent suppression of dissidents in Syria. Dissidents in Bahrain have been suppressed by Saudi forces and Pakistan is getting deeper into the morass of religious and sectarian intolerance.”

“It should be a matter of serious concern for us Muslims,” said Shahin, “that the optimism for real change in the Muslim world we had felt from the Arab Spring a few months ago is growing dimmer ... yet the Muslim world shows no signs of introspection. We continue to wallow in victimhood. Conspiracy theories abound. Denial continues. Even 9/11 is not yet accepted generally as the handiwork of Al-Qaeda. We Muslims could have utilised the killing of Osama bin Laden as an occasion for making a new beginning. Not only in Islamist Pakistan, but

even in secular, multicultural India some Muslims offered funeral prayers *in absentia* for the world’s chief terrorist. A War within Islam is clearly going on but we mainstream Muslims don’t seem to realise its grave consequences.”

Shahin added that “we Muslims continue to be in complete denial of our situation. We just do not seem to recognise the danger inherent in allowing petrodollar-funded Islamist groups taking over our mosques and madrassas.”

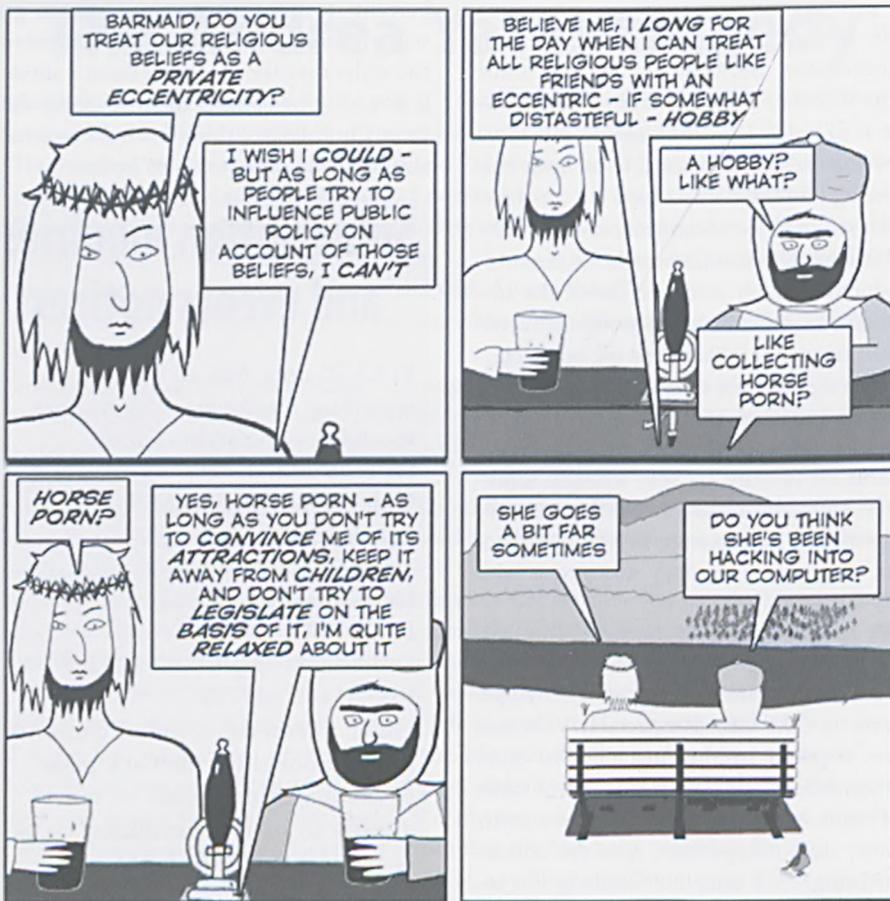
Expanding on the prayers for bin Laden, Shahin pointed out that “even in normal circumstances, holding such prayers for people whose funerals are known to have been already performed with due Islamic rites, is of dubious religious value, and is not even allowed by some theologians. But for Osama bin Laden? Knowing well that the US government had already organised proper rites for him? What message were these Muslims trying to give to the world? What exactly was the idea? One can understand the Taliban of Afghanistan and Pakistan ... wanting to bless Osama as they did. But Muslims of Chennai? Kolkata? Hyderabad?”

He continued: “Mercifully the numbers of Muslims gathered to say these prayers were few, but those who objected or did not participate did not make it a point, as they should have, to make their opposition and even revulsion at this display of support for the world’s chief terrorist known. Our religious scholars have never declared late Osama bin Laden a deviant or kaffur, even though they keep doing that routinely to all members of sects other than their own from what can only be described as their kaffur-manufacturing factories. The implication is not lost on the world and cannot but further fuel a growing fear of Islam in the West and elsewhere.”

He went on to appeal to all the Muslim countries represented at the UN Council “to take this war within Islam seriously and devise strategies to win this war for mainstream peaceful Islam.”

The son of a *maulvi* (an expert in Islamic law), Shahin grew up in a village in the backwaters of Aurangabad in Bihar. A profile piece published recently in *The Times of India*, revealed that he worked part-time

Jesus & Mo





Sultan Shahin

for several local Urdu dailies. He later came to London to edit the weekly *Asia Times*. While in the UK he was “exposed to different strains of Islam and Muslims”. On one occasion, for example, at a friend’s house in Nottingham, he heard a 20-year-old Muslim extolling the virtues of Ahle Hadees, a sect which propagates a puritanical strain of Islam. Shahin asked devotee what treatment he would prescribe for those Muslims who didn’t follow the Ahle Hadees sect. “Kill them,” said the young zealot. “It really disturbed me. The boy had apparently been influenced by radical organisations like Al Mujahidun and Hizbul Tehrir. I knew it would not take long before the fires of fanatical Islam reached the Indian subcontinent and consumed our youth.”

On another occasion, in 1999, Shahin found himself being hectoring by an earnest young man outside London’s Finsbury Park mosque. “You Indian Muslims are cowards,” Shahin was told “but soon you will have just two choices: either to become a true Muslim like us, or to perish.”

For Shahin, the experience was transformative. “It became clear to me that the Islam that I believe in was under serious threat,” he said, “and that I would have to do something if the religion I loved was not to be demeaned by the evil that was being spoken in its name.”

Shahin told *Times of India* reporter Mohammed Wajihuddin that he personally encountered the ugly face of exclusivist, supremacist Wahhabist Islam in India when he left the London job to edit a magazine in Delhi, backed by a group of influential, educated, “enlightened” Muslims. A few months into his new job a member of the management team asked him an odd question: “You have been married to a Hindu (Pragya) for a decade. Why have you not been able to bring her into the fold of Islam?”

Shahin responded by quoting him the Koranic verse that says “there is no compulsion in religion” and said that to convert to Islam or not was her personal choice. “But it

didn’t cut any ice and they sacked me.”

His liberal, rational interpretation of Islamic principles has enraged many Islamists, who hack his website regularly and post abusive letters and comments. Many threaten him with the fires of hell.

Nonetheless, New Age Islam has gained many followers. Two years after its launch, the website had almost 120,000 registered subscribers. Its daily newsletter, brought out by a staff of five, carries debates on issues seldom talked about among pious Muslims.

The feedback, Shahin told *The Times of India*, has been astounding. “When I launched it, I didn’t realise it would generate so much interest, especially among young Muslims, from Australia to Abu Dhabi and Canada to Coimbatore”.

Shahin took the opportunity, during his address to the UN Human Rights Council to address the issue of Islamophobia. Pegging his remarks on Anders Behring Breivik’s shooting spree in Norway earlier this year, he said that the massacre of innocents in that country laid bare what devastation intolerance – in this instance Islamophobia – could wreak on a civilised society. “That it happened on the eve of the 10th anniversary of 9/11 makes it especially instructive. The tragedy of 9/11 was caused by the intolerance of one set of people, the extremist Islamists, and the Norway massacre by the intolerance of another set of people, right-wing extremists in the West. Though a lone individual actually pulled the trigger in Norway, his manifesto reveals that his mindset was shaped by a whole host of Islamophobic groups.”

“It is imperative”, he said “that the West recognises the dangers of such religious intolerance and finds ways of stopping motivated hate campaigns. Intellectuals and mass media should scrupulously stay away from Islamophobic groups and their Eurabia-like conspiracy theories. Fortunately, there are signs that the Western mass media has already embarked on a course of correction. It has exposed groups, for instance, that engage in massive funding of Islamophobes and their networks.”

He then said: “But this does not absolve us Muslims from our own duty to introspect. Are Muslims living in the West, for instance, doing enough to integrate? Or are they seeking to create separate enclaves of obscurantism ruled by some sort of shariah? If the latter is happening, then how can they expect to be acceptable to their fellow citizens in the non-Muslim majority world?”

“Even more urgently, we Muslims have to try and rein in, expose and fight violent extremists within our own community.” The extremists, he said, were determined to “further the cause of an ideology completely alien to mainstream Islam. It tells them

that Muslims should not interact with other religious groups except perhaps to convert them or kill them. But their first targets are Muslims who do not consider Islam a propagator of bigotry and violence”.

This, he claimed, had ultimately led to “a war within Islam that has taken the lives of tens of thousands of Muslims at the hands of people who claim to be Muslims”, but “in this war, we can do nothing worse than to look to the West for support. All that the Global War on Terror waged by the west since 9/11 has done is to hand over secular Iraq to Mullah Iran ... and has protected the fountainhead of Islamic radicalism – Saudi Arabia – and allowed it to spend tens of billions of dollars to radicalise each and every part of the world where Muslims live, whether as a majority or a minority.”

Shahin urged “mainstream Muslims” to save their religion “from a takeover by the obscurantist extremists and uneducated clerics. I think the only option is to state loud and clear our understanding of Islam as a religion of peace and harmony which can co-exist in multicultural societies. Our biggest tools are the verses of the Holy Kotan and the life and conduct of the Prophet”.

“Any number of dispassionate observers who have studied the Prophet’s life consider him a man of peace. He spent a lifetime seeking harmony for his society. He avoided strife all his life, counselling patience and perseverance to his followers in times of great persecution ...

“It is clear that God is conceived Islam as the personification of compassion. The world has nothing to fear from a people who believe in this original concept of Islam. But merely saying that is not enough. We must explain to the world the context in which these verses came and our view of their applicability or non-applicability in present times. Islam-supremacist Jihadis have a seventh-century mindset. They want to continue fighting the battles of Badr and Uhud. We live in the 21st century. We cannot allow this group to hijack our religion, indeed our lives. It is still a small group, but growing enormously in influence, if not numbers, largely because we the silent majority continue to remain silent.

“We must understand that the way the Global War on Terror has been conducted has merely strengthened Wahhabi and Shia radicals. The main beneficiaries of this war have been radical Islamists of both Sunni and Shia variety as well as China. So we should not expect any help from the West. We must recognise that the far right in the West alone is not responsible for the growing religious intolerance, xenophobia and Islamophobia in the world. We must take responsibility for our own silence and inaction and change that.”

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

LINKING me to the Oslo atrocity is as ludicrous as were the criticisms Colin Mills (*Points of View*, September) leveled at my take on Islamic fundamentalism and religion (*PoV*, June).

In the letter at which he takes umbrage, I did not imply that all Muslims are fanatics. I argued that Islamophobia is an inaccurate term, but in the absence of an alternative is a legitimate response to Islamism, and, among other works, referenced Melanie Phillips' *The World Turned Upside Down*, quoting from, but not citing, page xii: "There are, however, scholars who hold that Islam (which I qualified with 'whatever the tribal version') is an inherently coercive ideology and that therefore 'Islamist' is a meaningless word that creates a false distinction."

The book doesn't name the scholars, so I couldn't. Mr Mills presented no evidence to show that my reasoning was circular; and I reject the "Muslim-baiting" slur. Confirmation that Islam is tribal comes from an insider: "Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, the head of Britain's 'Muslim Parliament' told a conference in Birmingham in 2005, 'Our mosques are largely tribal and controlled by old men on the dole with no understanding of the world around them.'"

This revealing quote is from *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe*, p49, by Christopher Caldwell – who cites Munira Mirza, Abi Senthikumar, and Zein Ja'far, *Living Apart Together*, p40.

My understanding of the psychology of belief was formed mostly from the named author's works. For instance, I posited "religious fanatics are right-brain-dominant," which I deduced from Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and his Emissary*. On page 428 he summarises his hugely complex analysis: "The right hemisphere, the one that believes, but does not know, has to depend on

the other, the left hemisphere, that knows but doesn't believe."

Religious belief, therefore, is of the right-brain, objective knowledge of the left-brain, ergo, the stronger the faith, the more dominant the right hemisphere. I also posited "religious fanatics are regressively bicameral minded." By this I suggest opposites: people who aren't religious – atheists, for example – are progressively bicameral minded (ie left hemisphere science-accepting dominant), whilst promoting, by reference, Julian Jaynes' (whom Dr McGilchrist quotes) hypothesis on the ancients' schizophrenia-like neurobiology for the origin of god-belief. The evidence that religious fanatics are science-illiterate and deluded is their irrational beliefs and superstitions, such as ascribing natural phenomena to an imaginary invisible god with magical powers.

In my opinion, bringing ideas that are leading to an understanding of religion to the *Freethinker* is more important than detailing the source evidence – that is for the scholars to provide in their books, which can only be referenced.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

KEITH Bell (*Points of View*, October 2011) is right on one score: it is indeed possible to make legitimate criticisms of Judaism, Islam or any other religion, based on evidence and reasoned argument. Secularists are not, and need not be, afraid to make such criticisms, and nor should anyone else be.

However, Islamophobia is based on prejudice and makes unfounded claims about Islam: for definitions of Islamophobia, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamophobia, www.islamophobia-watch.com/silamophobia-a-definition, and elsewhere. Consequently Islamophobia – that is, Muslim-baiting – has no place in legitimate

political parties: in fact it has no place in any legitimate movement, and I include under that heading the secularist and free-thought movement.

Attempts to identify Islam as monolithic – such as Keith Bell's attempt to identify Islam – and Muslims – as fundamentalist are unfounded and not based on the evidence. (The same applies to attempts to portray Sharia law as monolithic.) Consequently they are Islamophobic and illegitimate.

It is not a valid response to the concept "Islamophobia" to suggest that it places constraints on freedom of speech and opinion. No-one need be afraid to demonstrate that their views are based on evidence and reasoned argument. If anyone is challenged on these grounds, why should they not rise to the challenge by demonstrating clearly that their criticisms are evidence-based, rational and unprejudiced?

Colin Mills
Amersham

IF fundamentalism has nothing to do with Islam and Muslims, as Iftikhar Ahmad alleges (*PoV* September), then who is responsible for the acts of terrorism al-Qaeda has acknowledged responsibility for?

I suppose he is one of those who are so convinced of the infallibility of Muslims that they subscribe to the most bizarre conspiracy theories.

As to Islam's supposed teachings of tolerance, I will just point to one supreme act of intolerance for which Muhammad himself was responsible. After the conquest of Mecca one of the first things he did was to destroy all the idols in Kaba which the Meccans worshipped. What about those who had not converted to Islam? Even though he had claimed the Kaba for the Muslims he could have told the unbelievers to move their idols to another place where

they could continue to worship in safety. Is it any wonder that the Koran is replete with verses concerning the hypocrites – those who professed to embrace Islam but in reality remained unbelievers.

Asad Abbas
London

GAY ADOPTION

ALEX Hill is both gracious and eloquent in his rebuttal of my criticisms over his position on gay adoption (Free-thinker, October).

In fact, following his letter, clarifying his position, it turns out that he and I agree on everything, save, perhaps, for very minor details. We are in complete agreement that gay or straight, adult or child, all of us should be judged as individuals, while we should also seek to accommodate every individual's needs, choices and desires on the basis of equality, regardless of demographics.

It was unfair of me to bracket Alex with the bigoted David Rogers and the irascible John Hunt, so while he evidently dislikes my combative style (no "beige-and-corduroy" humanist, me), he deserves an apology. Sorry, Alex.

Hunt dismisses my letter defending responsible gay adoptions as a "rant" (the most over-used cliché in the lexicon of curmudgeonly atheists everywhere), then tries to defend his own flaky prejudices by claiming that the few instances I cited of successful same-sex parenting don't prove anything because they are statistically insignificant.

Maybe so, John, but they are enough to disprove your blinkered and homophobic assertion that equality in the adoption process exists solely "to satisfy political correctness, to appease do-gooders, or any other barmy excuse". That was the point I was making. How strange that the superior intellect you claim to possess somehow missed it.

Diesel Balaam
London

CULTS

SO the "majority of cult followers are hardworking-educated members of society" according to Susan Allen Perna (*The Toxic World of Cults*, October) but who have also "low self-esteem, trust issues, damaged relationships, and impaired judgement". A

touch *non sequitur n'est-ce pas?*

Judgements made against external norms from outside a group might not necessarily describe the experiences members may feel from within.

Many followers placed a trust (faith?) in Jim Jones, David Koresh, Marshall Herff Applewhite *et al* to the extent of committing suicide on the counsel of these charismatics. More trust shown than I would even place in my own certainties. Moreover, I doubt self-esteem (a term consistently misapplied, especially by Americans and care workers, when self-confidence is meant) was all that low, though perhaps only second to that group once recorded with the highest self-esteem: inmates of death row in US jails. As for impaired judgement, a recent prime minister used (self-)deceit messianically to take this country into a war which cost hundreds of thousands of lives, yet he is bathed in a celebrity worship by many of us non-cultists!

Being one of those who thinks that cults differ from religions only in that the former generally kill their own whilst the latter fervently slaughter outsiders I know which humanity ought to fear most.

Chris Oldman
London

Win a copy of The Onion's *Christmas Exposed*

The Onion – America's premier satirical magazine – has turned its signature irreverence to the subject of Christmas. *Christmas Exposed* features more than one hundred shocking tales of secret Santas, shopping mall mayhem, dysfunctional families, and – don't ask – autoerotic asphyxiation.

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To win a copy of *Christmas Exposed*, published by Quick Books, take a look at the following five quotes concerning religion, and correctly identify their source.

1 I believe there is something out there watching over us. Unfortunately, it's the government.

Was this:

- (a) Woody Allen?
- (b) Douglas Adams?
- (c) Pope Pius XII

2. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him.

Was this:

- (a) Henry Ford?
- (b) James Baldwin?
- (c) Bishop Tutu?



3. When I told the people of Northern Ireland that I was an atheist, a woman in the audience stood up and said, "Yes, but is it the God of the Catholics or the God of the Protestants in whom you don't believe?"

Was this:

- (a) The Rev Ian Paisley
- (b) Quentin Crisp
- (c) Dame Edna Everage

4. A man's ethical behavior should be based effectually on sympathy, education, and social ties; no religious basis is necessary. Man would indeed be in a poor way if he had to be restrained by fear of punishment and hope of reward after death.

- (a) Was this Professor Richard Dawkins?
- (b) The Dalai Lama?
- (c) Albert Einstein?

5. Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me two things: One is that God loves you and you're going to burn in hell. The other is that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love.

- (a) Brad Pitt?
- (b) Butch Hancock, US country/folk singer?
- (c) Thomas Jefferson?

Please email your entries to barry@freethinker.co.uk, heading them *Freethinker Christmas Quiz*. Postal entries to: *Freethinker Christmas Quiz*, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD.

Entries must be received by November 30, 2011. The first correct entry drawn will receive a copy of *Christmas Exposed*. There will be two runners-up prizes of a year's free subscription to the *Freethinker* magazine.

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.

Wednesday Nov 2: *The Folly of Faith Schools* – Speaker:

Trish Penney. Wednesday Dec 7: *A Merry Mythmas to You!* –

Speaker: Ken Humphreys.

w <http://homepage.nworld.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: 01494 726351.

w www.chilternhumanists.webs.com

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.cotswoldhumanist.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 Pintel 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. November 9: *Helping John to*

Die. Speaker: Lesley Close from Dignity in Dying i Secretary on

0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagemba@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

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

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

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

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

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

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Dundee: 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Glasgow: 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Highland: 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

Isle of Man Freethinkers: i Jeff Garland, 01624 664796

Email: jeffgarland@wm.im w www.iomfreethinkers.org

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

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 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 (except August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact Sec: 01707 653667

e enquiries@nondonhumanists.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 SC042124. Next meeting Sunday, December 4. Market Inn, Ayr. 2pm. All welcome

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.

Meets on the 3rd Thursday each month at 7.70 pm at 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.

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 Luclou, Oct to June.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: Luclou: 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
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