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Anti-gay pastor is voted UK's 'most inspirational Black person'

Controversy erupted around Nigerian-born cleric Agwu Irukwu, senior pastor of Jesus House in London, following his recent nomination as "an inspirational Black person" in a Black History Month award scheme initiated by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson and the *Metro* newspaper.

Irukwu went on to win the award after garnering 54 percent of votes cast in the competition.

After his nomination, the *Evening Standard* ran a piece on October 13 which pointed out that Irukwu's opinions "don't fit so well with modern London or current Tory thinking. He is an ultra-evangelical who, in 2006, was a signatory to a letter saying that laws forcing churches to accept homosexuality were an affront".

The *Evening Standard* added that, "according to the liberal website *Ekklesia*, the church has also carried out exorcisms of gay people", and asked: "Does the Mayor of London really want to endorse Irukwu should he win the public vote? Johnson has already been in hot water over his tolerance of Irukwu, when he accepted an invitation to a carol service hosted by the pastor at Jesus House five years ago."

The married father of three and former investment banker signed a letter sent to a national newspaper, attacking laws which force churches to accept gay people.

Immediately after the paper criticised Irukwu's nomination, the Evangelical Alliance rushed to his defence, saying: "It is a deeply disappointing turn of events that the *Evening Standard* could not celebrate with tens of thousands of Londoners that such a respected statesman and leader of a large and thriving church was nominated for this award. Pastor Agwu has had a profound and incredibly positive influence on the UK church over the past 20 years.

It added: "The article suggests that to hold an orthodox interpretation of what the Bible teaches is a problem and reflects a deep intolerance of Christian beliefs and the evangelical tradition."

Steve Clifford, General Director of the Evangelical Alliance, commented: "Pastor Agwu is a friend and excellent leader and worthy of this nomination. Boris Johnson should be proud to be associated with the leader of a thriving church bringing hope and well-being to its congregation and surrounding community.

"Many churchgoers, regardless of their ethnic background will be shaking their heads today in disbelief that the *Evening Standard* decided to play politics rather than recognise Pastor Agwu as an inspirational leader."

Irukwu's church also vehemently denied being involved in gay exorcisms. A church spokesperson said: "Jesus House does not advocate ex-



Pastor Agwu Irukwu: Photo Ben Fitzpatrick

orcism for people with same-sex attraction. As part of the Evangelical Alliance, the church holds a traditional orthodox interpretation of the Bible in relation to marriage, sexual relationships and family life. Such a view is held by hundreds of millions of Christians across the world."

Writing for the Christian website Lapido Media, Jenny Taylor held *Ekklesia* - "a Christian think-tank which campaigns for gay rights" - directly responsible for the "vicious attack on the reputation of London's 'most inspirational black person'.

"*Ekklesia* carried unsubstantiated reports in 2009 that Pastor Agwu Irukwu presides over a church that 'admits to carrying out exorcisms of gay people'. The piece cited unnamed 'critics' who compared Irukwu to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the fundamentalist Muslim cleric who has endorsed death for homosexuals."

Taylor added: "The lurid smears were repeated two weeks ago by the *Evening Standard*, in a clash of minority interests that could embarrass the Mayor of London Boris Johnson as he announces the winner of a poll to find London's number one black hero."

Dr Joe Aldred, Coordinator of Minority Ethnic Christian Affairs at Christians Together in England was shocked at what he called "lazy journalism".

He added: "It is clear the writer has neither met Irukwu, listened to him preach, or has the faintest idea about black American culture, black British culture or religion in general. If quasi 'theologians' and journalists are going to start slinging this kind of stuff around and try and pass it off as fact, I suggest they become a bit more religiously literate first."

Art attacks

BARRY DUKE ON THE TENSIONS BETWEEN FREE EXPRESSION AND RELIGION



One of my earliest assignments as a young journalist on the *Star* in Johannesburg was to report on the banning, in the late 1960s, of a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's 1492 *Vitruvian Man*. This work has always conjured up an image in my mind of a butt-naked fella on a trampoline, but to the ever-vigilant South African censors the poster was simply smut, because the subject's dangly bits were in full view.

My coverage of this gross act of stupidity so impressed my editor that he decided that I should follow every move of the Publications Control Board, a body headed by Dr J J Kruger, a stone-deaf Calvinist who was also as blind as a mole. I was given free rein to expose the board's daft decisions to the utmost ridicule, and I did so with gusto – until a law was passed making it illegal to lampoon, or even question, the work of the censors.

But by this time I had developed such a passion for the subject that I found myself spending hours, sometimes days, winking out examples, many quite bizarre, of the clash between free expression and the mainly religious organisations and individuals who were determined to crush it.

One such clash, for example, occurred in London in the late 1920s when Jacob Epstein's relief on the exterior of 55 Broadway – the new headquarters of London Transport – was unveiled. Simply titled *Day*, the work, which portrayed a father and his nude son, elicited howls of protest from various members of the purity brigade, mainly because of the size of the boy's penis.

I was reliably informed by a London Transport historian that enraged Christians had attempted to deface the work, and pressure was put on Frank Pick – acknowledged as “the man who built London Transport” – to have it removed.

Pick, who had commissioned the work and threatened to resign if anyone tampered with it, would not be swayed, and stood by Epstein. Epstein, however, took it upon himself to quell the furore by ascending the building one night and reducing the length of the offending appendage by 1.5 inches, though some reports say that 2.5 inches were, in fact, removed.

A remarkably similar statue – Eric Gill's *Prospero and Ariel* – was put on the façade of the BBC's Broadcasting House, built be-

tween 1930 and 1932. This work caused further outrage – and for the same reason. Purse-lipped, pious Londoners claimed that little Ariel's dick was far too large for any 13-year-old to possess.

I have no doubt that, had the stone phal-luses been within easy reach, some crackpots would have attacked them with a hammer.

Fast forward to April of this year, when a hammer – and a screwdriver – was used to damage *Piss Christ*, a photo exhibit at The Collection Lambert in Avignon, France. Three museum guards were also attacked and threatened by a bunch of angry young Christians who invaded the gallery.

Piss Christ, also known as *Immersion*, is the work of American artist Andres Serrano. He created it by placing a crucifix in his own urine and blood.

Had the gallery exhibited something deemed offensive to Muslims, it would probably have been razed to the ground.

This is precisely what happened last month when a Molotov cocktail destroyed the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, the French satirical magazine after it published a front-page cartoon of the “prophet” Mohammed saying “100 lashes if you are not dying of laughter”. The magazine's website was also hijacked by Turkish hackers, who left a threatening message reading: “You keep abusing Islam's almighty Prophet with disgusting and disgraceful cartoons using excuses of freedom of speech ... Be God's Curse On You! We Will be Your Curse on Cyber World!”

I am not sure which annoyed me more: the attack on the magazine, which has a long history of taking the piss out of ALL religions, or the fact that none of the mainstream media in the UK had the guts to reproduce the cartoon, or the one that immediately followed it, which declared “Love is stronger than hate” and depicted a Muslim man and a *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonist exchanging tongues.

Earlier, officials at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery removed a four-minute video by the late artist David Wojnarowicz, after William A Donohue's right wing extremist group, the Catholic League, called it “hate speech” designed to insult Christians. The video in question, *A Fire in My Belly*, showed Jesus on the cross being gnawed on by large black ants.

Let's face it, if there's one thing worse than censorship it's self-censorship.



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NSS raises concerns in the wake of St Benedict's school abuse report

THE National Secular Society raised awkward questions last month in relation to an official inquiry into clerical abuse of pupils at St Benedict's Catholic Independent School in Ealing, west London, said to have taken place over the past 20 years.

The inquiry, commissioned by the school and conducted by Lord Alex Carlile of Berriew, concluded that monks, from the neighbouring Ealing Abbey who are, at present, in charge of the school, were unfit fit to continue operating St Benedict's.

Lord Carlile QC released his report – which detailed more than 20 accusations he had received – at a press conference attended the national media. Lord Carlile lambasted the monastic community for its “lengthy and culpable failure to deal with what at times must have been evident behaviour placing children at risk”.

Present too at the press conference was NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, who suggested to Lord Carlile some obvious improvements to the new child protection procedures set out for the school – and which the headmaster, Chris Cleugh, had just heralded as the best there was.

Why, Mr Porteous Wood demanded, were there multiple exceptions permitted to the requirement to report concerns to the police or local authority or rather than, as there should be, an absolute requirement to do so? He also suggested that the school should widely publicise a telephone number to which concerns could be raised with an independent external body.

He added that if St Benedict's procedure to protect pupils – with all its obvious flaws and loopholes – was, as had been claimed, the best available, what were the implications for other schools?

The NSS says that “to his credit, Lord Carlile picked this point up and expressed his agreement”.

The NSS pointed out that, “all too predictably, even in front of the press corps, the child protection officer refused to take the suggestion onboard, with the lame assertion that they always did report abuses, something that has clearly not happened in the past. The BBC picked up our point and taxed the headteacher with them in a televised interview. He was similarly evasive. One would have imagined that those anxious to do their best to avoid any repetition would have welcomed such suggestions for making the procedures watertight”.



Ealing Abbey had run St Benedict's School for about a century

The NSS reports that another questioner, blogger Jonathan West – without whom much of the school's history of abuse would not have been brought to the public's attention – was particularly incensed by the headteacher's assertion in a formal speech in 2010 that “I absolutely refute that anyone associated with St Benedict's school has misled the Inspectors or protected offenders.” He proceeded to warn off those seeking to bring the rape and abuse into the public by smearing them as an “anti-Catholic movement linked to the papal visit”.

The NSS says that “the problem at Ealing is part of a more disturbing national picture. The suffering of the victims has been further intensified by the supine Cumberlege Commission (responsible for RC child protection in England and Wales) and the former Chairman of the Catholic Office for the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults, Vincent Nichols, now Archbishop of Westminster.

Keith Porteous Wood was adamant that Vincent Nichols and the Cumberlege Commission's “complacency, failure to tackle the problem head on and vested interest in protecting the Church's reputation has directly led to these criminals being harboured to offend again. We call on Vincent Nichols and all those responsible for the Benedictine Order and other Catholic bodies outside the diocesan structure to publicly instruct everyone under their control to report all known or suspected abuse, whether physical mental or sexual, to the prosecuting authorities. They must also be required to make available all evidence, if necessary calling for its return from Rome, where it is

believed that much of it has been mandated to be sent.”

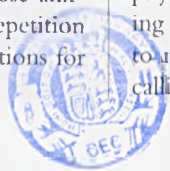
Keith Porteous Wood added: “We urge that developments in law in the UK and US to be exploited to ensure that the Church is required to pay much more generous compensation for the often life-destroying harm done and to ensure that the many who have impeded investigation should now also be punished appropriately through criminal and civil processes.”

Following the publication of the report, headmaster Chris Cleugh said that Lord Carlile's recommendations would be implemented by September next year and a new system of governance would be established to separate the abbey from the running of the school: “Past abuses at the school have left a terrible legacy for those affected and have tarnished the reputation of St Benedict's. On behalf of all at the school, I offer my heartfelt apology for past failures. The school could have, and should have, done more.”

In a statement issued by Ealing Abbey, the Rt Rev Dom Martin Shipperlee who was appointed the Abbot in 2000 said: “The revelations of abuse which took place in the past have led to a time of shame to the monastic community and to myself.

“I can only repeat what I have said many times before; we absolutely and unconditionally apologise for the hurt and harm caused by members of the monastic community.

He pointed out: “There have been no cases of abuse in the school since I became Abbot and since the present Headmaster came to the school.”



justplaincrazy

UNDER THE 'PINK JACKBOOT'

GAYS are the New Nazis, according to the leader of the Christian Peoples Alliance, Alan Craig.

In an article – *Confronting the Gaystapo* – published last month in the *Church of England Newspaper* and reprinted on his personal blog, *Alan's Angle* – the loon holds “a permissive New Labour government” mainly to blame “for the rise of the gay Wehrmacht”.

He also noted that “the UK’s victorious Gaystapo are now on a roll. Their gay-rights storm troopers take no prisoners as they annex our wider culture, and hotel owners, registrars, magistrates, doctors, counsellors, foster parents, grandparents, adoption agencies and traditional street preachers find themselves crushed under the pink jack-boot ...”

JESUS CLIFF

AN AMERICAN tourist who travelled to Ireland to reconnect with her Catholic roots claimed to have spotted an image of Jesus Christ in the Cliffs of Moher.

Sandra Clifford, 42, snapped a photo of “Jesus” on November 4. “To me it was Jesus Christ straight away,” Clifford told website Irish Central.

After seeing the picture, local pub owner Teresa O’Flaherty said: “It’s very definitely an image of Christ.”

WHAT A SHOWER!

THE CHRISTIAN community on YouTube was buzzing last month over a “revelation” that “Time’s Up” and that the end is near. It started with a woman named Charity warning her YouTube audience that she heard “the spirit of the Lord” speaking to her with an urgent message that she was supposed to share.

“I was in the shower, and I heard the Lord speaking in my spirit very clearly and succinctly,” she claimed. “No more time. No more time. No more time. And then He stopped. He said it three times.”

Her message was well-received by fellow believers. “I seldom hear a word from someone that shakes me, and this does!” wrote one commentator. “As much as I am ready for Him to receive us, it’s still very frightening, in the sense of “awe struck”, to know that we are soon to be in His presence. Glory to God, Praise Jesus! We are going home!!!!”

One Law for All notches up another art contest success



AS part of its vigorous campaign to halt the spread sharia law in the UK, One Law For All – headed by Iranian exile Maryam Namazie, who won the National Secular Society’s Secularist of the Year award in 2008 – staged a highly successful art competition in London last month.

The event – the third of its kind – brought together a short-listed collection of works by international artists who focused on controversial issues ranging from female genital mutilation and the executions of homosexuals in Iran to censorship in the Muslim world and the veiling of women.

The competition and exhibition, held at the Unit 24 Gallery, was won by Sandra Ackermann. Her entry, *No Man’s Land*, is pictured above.

One Law For All followed up the art event with a seminar on sharia law and the Children Act at the Conway Hall in London on November 22.

The seminar was organised to examine the protections provided to children by the provisions of the Children Act and ask if youngsters in Britain, by virtue of their parents’ religion or culture, were at risk of being denied statutory protections.

In addition, One Law for All provided information on Catholic Canon Law and how this has been used to facilitate the continued abuse of children in Catholic institutions. Speakers included Sue Cox, of Survivors Voice Europe and Yasmin Rehman, Chair of the Board of Trustees of Domestic Violence Intervention Project.

The two events follow a visit by Namazie to Australia, where – in an interview with *The Australian* – she denounced media silence and inaction by the British Government over what she said was “sharia’s attacks on the fundamental rights of Britain’s Muslim citizens”.

During her week-long speaking tour, she said she hoped that Australia would learn from Britain’s mistakes in dealing with the issue.

“You are facing quite a lot of similar issues in Australia. It might not be as entrenched as it is in Britain, where sharia tribunals enjoy a form of legal recognition in family law, but you can see a lot of similarities,” she said.

Namazie insisted that any form of legal accommodation with sharia “is like trying to incorporate apartheid into a non-racist system of law – they are simply incompatible”.

As a long-term British resident, Namazie’s views on the rise of Islamism are based on direct experience.

Her group has gathered 28,000 members, many of them Muslims who she says have moved to Britain to escape authoritarian rule. She is also responsible for founding another group known as the Ex-Muslims of Britain.

Freethinker Fund

WE would like to express our sincere thanks to the following subscribers who have given generously over the past year to the *Freethinker* fund, which enables us – in the face of ever-rising costs – to keep the magazine going:

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Sadistic Christians insist that good behaviour must be beaten into kids

A BOOK entitled *To Train Up a Child* – written by Tennessee preacher Michael Pearl and his wife Debi – became the focus of an intense debate over child discipline last month after a third youngster died of abuse at the hands of parents who were found with the Pearls' book in their possession.

In the latest case, Larry and Carri Williams of Sedro-Woolley, Washington, were charged at the end of September with killing their adopted daughter, Hana, 11. The deeply devout couple were home-schooling their six children when they adopted Hana and a boy, aged 7, from Ethiopia in 2008. According to a report in *The New York Times*, in May Hana was found face down, naked and emaciated in the backyard; her death was caused by hypothermia and malnutrition.

A police report said the parents had starved her for days at a time and made her sleep in a cold barn or an outside closet and shower. And they often whipped her, leaving marks on her legs.

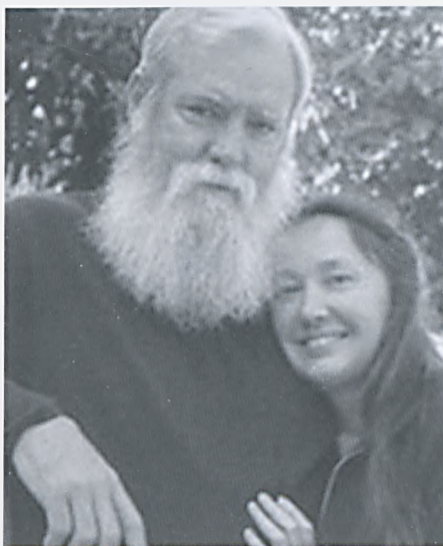
Carri Williams had reportedly praised Pearls' book and given a copy to a friend. Hana had been beaten on the day of her death with a 15-inch plastic tube – the Pearls' weapon of choice for dealing with unruly youngsters.

Michael Pearl, of the Church at Cane Creek in Pleasantville, Tennessee, boasts that his book is based on "the same principles the Amish use to train their stubborn mules", and he and his wife provide instructions on using a switch from as early as six months to discourage bad behaviour. The sadistic pair describe how to make use of various objects to strike kids on the arms, legs or back – including a quarter-inch flexible plumbing line that, Mr Pearl notes, "can be rolled up and carried in your pocket".

Michael Pearl, 66, and his 60-year-old wife, insist that blaming their book for extreme abuse by a few unstable parents is preposterous and, according to the *NYT*, they explicitly counsel against acting in anger or causing a bruise. They say that their methods, properly used, yield peace and happy teenagers.

Dr Frances Chalmers, a paediatrician who examined Hana's death for the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, says of the Pearl methods: "My fear is that this book, while perhaps well intended, could easily be misinterpreted and could lead to what I consider significant abuse."

The *NYT* pointed out that the same kind



Michael and Debi Pearl

of plumbing tube was reported to have been used to beat Lydia Schatz, 7, who was adopted at the age of four from Liberia and died in Paradise, California in 2010. Her parents, Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz, had the Pearl book but ignored its admonition against extended lashing or harm; they whipped Lydia for hours, with pauses for prayer. She died from severe tissue damage, and her older sister had to be hospitalised, officials said.

US politician wants Muslims slung out of the military

A TENNESSEE politician – State Representative Rick Womick – found himself in the midst of a firestorm last month when he called for the removal of ALL Muslims from the US military.

In a newspaper interview, Womick asked: "Who are we at war with? We are at war with al-Qaeda and the Taliban, who are Muslims. It's a Catch-22. They are not allowed to kill their fellow Muslims; we're at war with Muslims. The only solution I see is that they not be allowed in the military."

In a separate interview, he said: "Personally, I don't trust one Muslim in our military. If they truly are a devout Muslim and follow the Koran and the Sunnah, then I feel threatened because they're commanded to kill me."

The Schatzes, who were home-schooling nine children, three of them adopted, are both serving long prison terms after he pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and torture and she to voluntary manslaughter and unlawful corporal punishment. The Butte County district attorney, Mike Ramsey, criticised the Pearls' book as a dangerous influence.

The Pearls' teachings was also the focus in the trial of Lynn Paddock of Johnston County, North Carolina, who was convicted of the first-degree murder of Sean Paddock, four, in 2006. The Paddocks had adopted six American children, some with emotional problems. After they discovered the Pearls' website, Sean suffocated after being wrapped tightly in a blanket. His siblings testified that they were beaten daily with the same plumbing tube advocated by the Pearls.

Not surprisingly, Michael Pearl insists that the deaths cannot be credibly linked to the contents of the book. Writing in his capacity as head of the money-spinning No Greater Joy Ministries, he said: "If, as alleged, Hana's (sic) parents owned a copy of the book, it is obvious ... that they either have not read it or totally ignored its contents. The book repeated warns parents against abuse and emphasises the parents' responsibility to love and properly care for their children, which includes training them for success. There are thousands upon thousands of parents (the book has sold over 660,000 copies) who have and are properly applying the philosophy in the book with the joyous results of happy, productive, well-adjusted children in loving successful families."

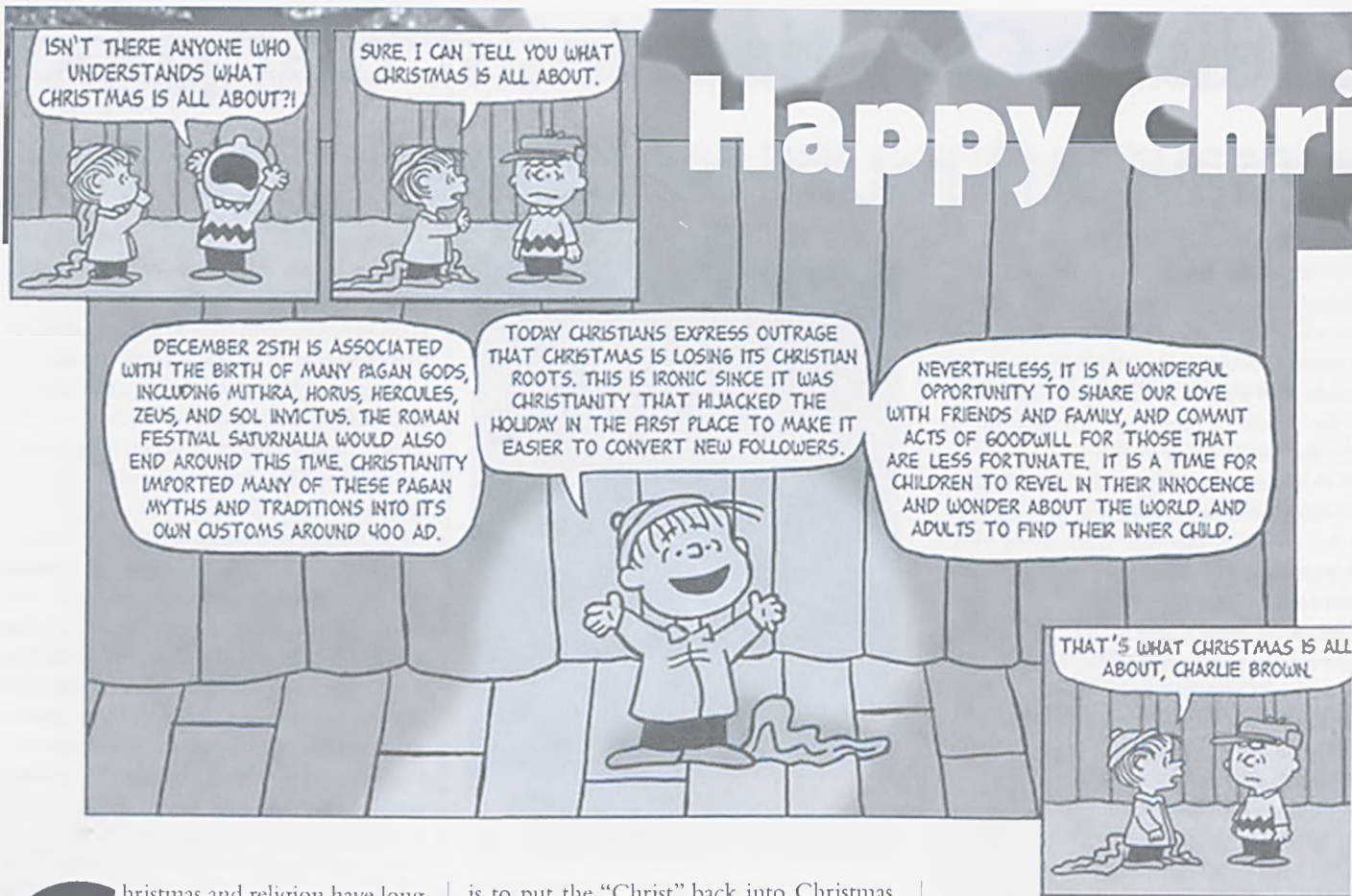
He added: "The alleged presence of the book makes it no more responsible for Hana's death than the presence of a weight loss book in the home of an overweight person is responsible for their obesity. Its presence is actually recognition that there was a problem and obtaining the book was an effort to solve it.

"Unfortunately, if Hanna's parents own a copy they chose to ignore (or twist) the contents of the book that could have corrected their poor parenting and prevented the abuse and her death.

"It is our desire to redouble our efforts to help families and to prevent future tragedies."

Michael Pearl has now published a new "faith-based" child rearing book, *Training Children to be Strong in Spirit*.

Happy Christmas



Christmas and religion have long since doffed their hats at each other and gone their separate ways. The idea that the festive season is something of a religious festival is as fanciful as the concept of a jolly fat man riding around the night sky on a magical sleigh delivering presents to the world's children.

Some atheists refuse to celebrate Christmas, believing that they are submitting to Christian practices and beliefs, but the celebration has precious little to do with either. It's primarily a secular festival with a sprinkling of Christian adaptations of pagan customs.

I have no conflicting emotions about whether or not to celebrate Christmas. Everything that I truly love, value and cherish about this time of year – enjoying great times with friends and family and the giving and receiving of gifts – is built on the solid secular humanist principles of peace, love and harmony. Life is too short, occasionally difficult and sometimes depressing, so we should make the most of any excuse for some happiness, merriment and charitable feelings towards others.

That being said, it's jingle hell all the way as Christmas has long been taken over by nauseating over-indulgence and greedy consumerism, with people buying gifts they can't afford, for friends they don't like, and who don't need them anyway.

These sentiments are also shared by Christians who take issue with the holiday season's over-commercialisation. Their answer

is to put the "Christ" back into Christmas, but you don't need a mythical religious entity to stop the juggernaut of excess. All it requires is some healthy dissent against the following stomach-churning features that threaten to send us into bottomless pits of anger and despair.

Christmas Commercialisation

The obscene amounts of money spent on presents, and crass commercialisation is truly sickening. Christmas is just one extended shopping fest as shelf after shelf is lined with identical and overpriced bath sets, chocolate confections and gadgets that no one ever uses. Most of the time shoppers buy just for the sake of buying. The hideous vulgarity of it all is too soft a target, but perhaps with the recession people will start to think twice about digging deep into their pockets and spending whatever credit they have left on their cards.

Enforced Jollity

Yes, I know Christmas is a time for us all to feel warm and fuzzy inside, but forgive me if I'm not dancing in the streets every day. Some days I'm happy, other days less so. The pressure to be eternally ecstatic at this time of year drives me to utter distraction. And any smile is definitely wiped off my face when I see the enforced jolliness of tinsel wearing shop assistants with their fake smiles and seasonal "Santa's little helper" name badges. *Grrrr.*

Office Christmas Parties

Fortunately, now that I am a freelance writer I no longer have to endure the dread-

ed round of office Christmas parties. I used to loathe the fake camaraderie of colleagues who have no scruples about treading all over you to climb the corporate ladder, yet fuelled by free booze want to be your best friend at the office party. Why does anyone want to spend time socialising with people they have nothing in common with other than work? The excessive alcohol consumption by Santa-hat-wearing adults waving sprigs of mistletoe in the air is a ghost of Christmas past that I'm still unable to exorcise from my memory banks.

Early Start

Call me old-fashioned, but I prefer it when Christmas is celebrated somewhere around the 25th December and not the orgy of gluttony and greed that kicks off in early November.

Christmas Spirit

Really? Where? You go shopping in any town or city during December and you're pushed, pulled, scratched, kicked, bitten and trampled underfoot as the zombie-like masses battle to empty the shelves and get to the tills. Peace and goodwill to all men, but you just know there are parents out there who'll kill to get the latest toy their little Johnnie or Jemima wants.

Christmas Television

A few notable exceptions aside, television is pretty lousy all year round, but it plumbs new depths of awfulness at Christmas. The schedules are stuffed with anodyne and brain cell-zapping quiz shows and TV "spe-

Christmas – from an atheist!

PAUL ARNOLD loves Christmas – but not its mass of crassness

cial” full of half forgotten actors trying to re-heat their careers with performances no one wants to remember. And that’s in addition to all the repeats that were even considered stale and hackneyed ten years ago. Every year the nation gathers round the television set only to be let down by unimaginative fare. It’s groundhogTV year after year.

And then there are the adverts. If they’re not from self-satisfied stores promoting their shops as magical Christmas wonderlands, it’s grade D celebrities flogging their own perfumes (honestly, why would anyone want to smell like Peter Andre or Britney Spears?), or some flavour-of-the-month toy that the kids think will make their life complete, but will be old hat come Boxing Day.

The Christmas Rush

Why, it’s a mystery that would even outfox Sherlock Holmes. Christmas hardly sneaks up on us, so there is ample time to prepare and purchase whatever we need to ensure that our festivities go off without a hitch. So why the Franklin D Roosevelt is there a blood pressure-raising frenzy on the high streets? And why are the shops still full of punters on Christmas Eve? Avoid the herds, pour yourself a glass of wine and shop online instead.

Festive Music

Look, Slade’s *Merry Christmas Everybody* is still a rollicking good party tune, and the beautiful melody of *Silent Night* can occasionally move me to tears, but other than that most Christmas songs and carols are utterly banal. For the last few years we’ve also had to suffer the merciless slaying of a ballad by whichever wannabe warbler wins the *X Factor* before drifting back to the obscurity from which they came. And there is no punishment strong enough for the supermarket manager who first thought it was a good idea to transmit panpipe versions of Christmas “classics” over the loudspeakers while you shop.

Christmas Lights

The global economy is still at the bottom of the abyss and the planet is heating up. But hey, who cares about any of that, it’s Christmas. So let’s send the electricity bill soaring

and slap down a giant carbon footprint by lighting up our houses like an explosion at a fireworks factory.

Christmas Waste

The excessively garish packaging and wrapping is snowballing out of control. You need a chainsaw to get at what’s inside and even small items are covered in the kinds of wrappings and bindings that are used to send rare archaeological artefacts around the world.

Christmas Cards

I used to work in an open-plan office of 50 or so people and we saw each other nearly every single day. So really, what was the point of exchanging Christmas cards? An appalling waste of time and paper. And nothing says “I don’t really like you” than a card that comes out of a box of 50 identical cards showing the same twee nativity scene.

Deep breath Paul, deep breath.

Christmas is a time to Celebrate

So let’s dial down the frippery and excess and focus more on what’s really important about Christmas – peace, love and goodwill to all. Christians don’t have the monopoly on these sentiments – in fact there’s plenty of evidence to suggest that they are not particularly good at any of them.

Those of a religious persuasion don’t own this holiday, they never have done. The Christmas that we celebrate today is a hodgepodge of traditions, religious and pagan. I am not particularly bothered that its central myth is about the birth of a nice Jewish boy in a stable some 2,000 years ago. Whether it happened or not is of no importance to me and is not a reason not to celebrate along with everybody else, and to look forward to the future with hope and joy.

Of course we could do this at any point in the year, but it just so happens that traditionally the time for it falls on the 25th of December. Yes, the early church may well have subsumed a pagan festival but I think it’s churlish to strike a preference for celebrating the solstice, the New Year, or simply the holiday period. Or worse, ignore it all together.

To get into the spirit of the season you don’t have to be a Bible-bashing god-

botherer. As an atheist there isn’t a glaring contradiction in my decking the halls with boughs of holly. And what’s not to love about many of the peripheral joys around Christmas, such as the smell of the tree and the pulling of crackers. If Christmas was to rest solely on its religious underpinnings it would just be another boring, blink-and-you-miss-it feast day.

I also have no problem with the name of the festival; it sends a cold shiver down my spine when I hear the words “warm winter greetings” or other such euphemisms when atheists refuse to say “Christmas” because it contains the name of a religious figure. Obviously people are free to say what they want, but really there are a zillion more things to get het up about than what a particular festival is called.

I will happily wish everyone a “Very Merry Christmas” and then go home to watch my chestnuts roasting on an open fire as I reach over to pore myself another generous measure of eggnog.

Claus tipped to take title

By Jack Hastie

SANTA Claus, formerly of Rovaniemi, Finland, now based in Harrods, London, is the bookies’ favourite (William Hill, 5:1 on: Ladbrokes is no longer accepting bets) to become spiritual champion of the world when he takes on the holder Jesus Christ, of Nazareth, Israel, in the Cardiff Millennium Stadium to-night.

Christ first took the title, left vacant by the retirement, due to Alzheimer’s disease, of “Old Thunderer” Jupiter Pluvius, himself a legend who had held the title for hundreds of years, when he unexpectedly knocked out the number one contender and Persian title-holder, Mithras in the Colosseum, Rome in the 4th century. Christ comes from a fighting family. His dad, Jehovah, achieved some local fame, dispensing with the likes of Amen “the Ram,” Baal, Moloch, Rimmon and others in local, non-title bouts. After one successful defence against Odin, the one

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Celibation

LÁSZLÓ BITÓ, PhD – in an exclusive for the *Freethinker* – argues that the term ‘paedophilia’ has been wrongly applied in relation to the Catholic Church’s global abuse scandal

The alliance of the *Ecclesia Catholica*’s hierarchy and its clergy – the throne and the altar – made it possible over the centuries to conceal even the most grossly unnatural and illegal sexual offences committed by clerics forced into mandatory celibacy. Only during the past 20 to 30 years have their victims dared to come forward with their complaints in increasing numbers.

The exposés published in the course of the past few years and months have dealt almost exclusively with so-called priestly “paedophilia.” Moreover, there is proof that high-ranking clergy – bishops and cardinals – have covered up the immoral and illegal practices of their priests. They even transferred the criminals from parish to parish, where they could continue abusing children and adolescents.

As convincingly documented by a recent CNN report (*What the Pope Knew*, September 25, 2010), all this took place not only with the Vatican’s sanction, but also on its instructions. For example, as proved by a letter bearing the signature of the present Benedict XVI, then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith – an office he held from 1981 until his election as Pope – he refused to defrock an abusive priest. At his instruction, the offender’s bishop let him stay on as an ordained priest, despite the fact that his guilt had been established by a secular court, and that the Church did not question the validity of his 14-year prison sentence. Such cover-ups are scandalous and distressing, and, without doubt, add to the victims’ anguish.

What I find curious is that the Church, along with most others, accepts the stigmatising term “paedophilia” without question in regard to this scandal. I do not see any proof that these priests, or at least their majority, fit within the clinical definition of this psychiatric disorder. The more appropriate terminology for the cases that have gained publicity is child abuser or perhaps ephebophilia (sexual preference for pubescent youths, rather than paedophilia,

which refers to the sexual preference for prepubescent and sometimes very young children).

However, in the cases we hear about there is no compelling evidence that the offending priests suffered from an inherent compulsive pathology. It seems much more likely that the prohibition of satisfying their normal adult sexual urges due to celibacy drove them to the most vulnerable: the children entrusted to them.

Real paedophilia is, as a rule, an incur-

trators relapse, and, for fear of going insane, do everything to satisfy their compulsive craving, including engaging in “sex tourism” in places where poor parents sell their children. They typically return from such trips guilt-ridden and filled with self-hate.

For me, the most disturbing aspect of clerical “paedophilia” is precisely that, in the cases that have gained publicity, we do not see any signs of overwhelming guilt or struggle to be cured at any cost. It rather seems as if there were those among the

perpetrators who regarded it their priestly privilege to use defenseless children as recompense for the frustrating austerity of celibacy. And some of their bishops might have even accepted this recompense of priestly sexual deprivation as the lesser potential financial burden, as it avoided possible paternity suits.

There might have been, of course, even more sinister reasons for not reporting such abuses to the authorities. We have heard comments, for example, that, because of the great shortage of priests, the Church could not afford to allow abusers to end up in prison. Has it not occurred to them that there might be less of a shortage of priests if they were to abolish the travesty of celibacy?

I am convinced that the Catholic Church has so far talked about paedophilia because it wants to distract attention from the role of celibacy in abuse cases.

A paedophile, in the medical sense, periodically feels a compulsion to engage in some sort of sexual perversion with children, even if living a normal married life. Moreover, he typically craves very young, four-to-eight-year-old or even younger children. In known cases older children were also molested by priests, so they should be regarded as ephebophiles and not paedophiles. And this is not just a question of semantics: while paedophilia is unquestionably a pathology, sexual predation on teenagers may be initiated simply because young people can be the most vulnerable to such predation when they begin to feel the stirrings of their own sexuality, but do not yet know what to do with it.



able disorder, which can, at best, be somewhat controlled. It is a pathological, irresistible sexual attraction to small children, sometimes even infants. People suffering from this illness typically despise themselves after committing their shameful acts and willingly submit themselves not only to regular analysis and other psychotherapies, but also to even the most aggressive medical treatments that offer the least bit of hope – including “pharmacological castration”. And, in the past, also to surgical castration, although this was not necessarily voluntary.

Unfortunately, the success rate of common therapies is very low, and it is generally only a question of time before these perpe-

They may not know what is normal and what is not. At this age, they may actually welcome someone who offers them fatherly advice, and reassurance that everything that is happening to them is completely normal. The step from theoretical to practical teaching then becomes easy, even tempting. By the time the child realises that something is not right, it is too late: he (or she) may be more guilt-ridden than the predator – and this too can be used by the priest to keep him or her silent, even while suffering repeated abuse. Actually, we should regard most of the known cases to be rape, since sexual contact with a minor of either gender is statutory rape.

I would even go so far as to say that 90 percent of abusers are probably not paedophiles, because pathological paedophiles probably do not make up even one percent of the population, although reliable figures are hard to come by.

But it is possible, of course, that paedophiles are drawn to the priesthood because of the opportunities offered by the Church for contact with young people and because of the protection it provides against prosecution. Therefore, as long as there is mandatory celibacy, the majority of priests who cannot engage in “paedophilia” will simply satisfy their sexual urges with older age-groups – maybe with consenting adults, which is not against any secular law.

The unnatural state of celibacy can lead not only to the abuse of minors, but is likely to many other compulsive substitute gratifications. The lack of a partner, children, grandchildren, and the hopelessness of passing away without descendants, can lead to numerous (perverted) displacement activities. Childlessness, for instance, may contribute to the impulsive attraction to other people’s children, and their corruption might yield a feeling of gleeful satisfaction.

Has the Church has always known and accepted that its priests were preying on their congregations? If so I would suggest – although this may sound extreme – that the Vatican, in the interest of retaining “celibacy” in a less anti-social manner, might reintroduce some sort of temple of prostitution. In India, girls as young as six are given to the god of the temple, but sexual contact with the priests is supposed to be consummated only at maturity. In Western countries this could be limited to adult women who want to serve men with their bodies. This could be a “two birds with one stone” approach, since it would not only provide a non-predatory sexual outlet for “celibate” priests, but also a safe and well-controlled environment for prostitutes.)

After learning the hard way that sexual urges among “celibate” clergy inevitably find a way of being satisfied, sometimes in

the most perverted ways, the Church could also tacitly allow its priests to openly enter the singles’ scene. While I certainly find the idea abhorrent that a priest would pick up a woman or a man for a night in a singles bar, I regard it more acceptable than allowing him to prey on members of his parish – even on married women (and men) – over whom he has considerable influence as a servant of God, their spiritual adviser, and about whom he has much confidential information as their father confessor.

Moreover, the Catholic Church ought to do everything in order to prevent its priests entering into a sexual affair with anyone – regardless of age and gender – with whom he is in a professional relationship as a teacher, care-giver or pastor. Even if the secular authorities do not have the power to prosecute priests who prey on adults, Canon Law should condemn them most severely, and at least defrock all priests who enter into a sexual relationship with someone whose confessor he has been, however long ago.

So long as the Catholic Church upholds mandatory celibacy for the priesthood, it is unlikely to be able to stop the abuse of children and other deviances as substitutes for a normal sex life

I would have been 12, perhaps only 11, when my father confessor asked me whether I had touched myself. I didn’t understand what he meant by this, so we talked about it in some detail. It is possible that in the darkness of the confessional he did not see how my face was burning – nor did I see him well through the grille – but he must have sensed from my voice how his questioning embarrassed and distressed me.

My mother, who had been waiting for me impatiently, noticed how much I would have liked to hide my shame as I stepped out from the confessional, and all those who queued up during my prolonged confession turned toward me. She quickly led me away.

At the time I thought that she told me never again to go to that priest for confession because I had held up the others who were waiting for him. It seems that she must have said something to my older brother as well, as he bragged to me that his confessor had asked him the “with a

boy or a girl” question. That was how I learned that one could imagine some sort of sexual relationship with a boy.

Only as an adult did I realise how unfair it was to expose a man – living a celibate life – to temptation by having to listen to, or have the right to solicit confessions that might cover the most intimate aspects of sex.

According to reports, there are, at last, some people in the Vatican who have had the courage to speak up for the abolition of celibacy. This would have been a great step forward a hundred years ago, or even at the time of the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican (1992-1995) if for no other reason than that it would have helped to overcome the Church’s portrayal of Eve – the symbolic representation of all women – as the corruptor of Adam, the representation of men.

But abolishing celibacy is not enough. Society has to be liberated from all of those displacement activities – which I call collectively celibation – that have resulted over time from the unmarried state of priests leading to stark, bleak deprivations. I include among these surrogate activities the indulgence in peacock-like vanity in the Vatican (and the palaces of some bishops). This self-embellishment exceeds that of most transvestites.

There is an abominable waste of “Peter’s Pence”, collected from the faithful, on expensive silks, gold-embroidered brocades, ermine and the like, in which the Pope sometimes appears, even before the poor.

So long as the Catholic Church upholds mandatory celibacy for the priesthood, it is unlikely to be able to stop the abuse of children and other deviances as substitutes for a normal sex life. It is hardly likely that the effective proscription of paedophilia would impel all priests to live a monastic life. Complying with such a lifestyle outside a monastery is almost impossible for most people. Especially not in today’s world, where one is inescapably bombarded by sexually explicit material – giant posters, magazine covers, TV, radio, and the like. It is more likely that the effective proscription of “paedophilia” would simply induce mandatorily celibate priests to exploit other age groups.

Since the Catholic Church takes it upon itself to promote its moral values on the whole of society – think of the denial of the right to self-determination of women and the dying – it cannot take it amiss if we expect it to abide by society’s fundamental, much more rational and readily justifiable moral expectations. This means not protecting common criminals from rightful justice so that they may carry on their depredations in yet another parish.

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Nasty Freethinkers on

EDWIN SALTER responds to an article in *The Economist* which labelled

“UTILITARIANS are not nice people” announced a recent headline in *The Economist* (24/9/11). They are “psychopathic, Machiavellian misanthropes”. Not good news given that most of us who are irreligious value the philosophy of Bentham and Mill. Their achievement was to separate ethics from religious authority and its alleged representative, the individual conscience. Absolute rules, commandments, had been sought, even by Kant. Instead, utilitarianism began with a simple principle of the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and proceeded to refine that notion. Morality was directed to the relative consequences of our actions in terms of human happiness and well-being.

Psychologists (here Bartels and Pizarro reporting in *Cognition*) quite rightly take an interest in moral problems. What do we do when confronted by a dilemma involving benefit or harm to ourselves and others? The lazy way to study this is just by asking, never as valid as observing behaviour as far as possible (about which they could learn from Derren Brown). The well-known Prisoner’s Dilemma plays off the risks of selfishness versus cooperation.

Trolleyology presents situations where harm, say by a runaway railway trolley, is inevitable, but a morally dubious action could affect the outcome. Here is an example: I, a small person, am standing beside a weighty stranger on a railway bridge when, sure

enough, here comes the trolley certain to kill a group of workmen. Pushing said large stranger to his death will be sufficient to stop the trolley. Do I do it?

Before dismissing this as nonsense isolated from context and consequence, we should recognise there may be seeming approximations in real life. During World War II providing false information to the Germans re-directed doodlebug bombs to different, less populated areas. In famine situations how food is issued will mean that some die so more may live. Medical triage has the same practicality. Though such utilitarian decisions are regrettable there seems to be no moral alternative to this reasoned response except, for a few religious, to do nothing – the escape of “leave it to god’s will” or to superstitious fate.

But the stranger-pushing example is much less comfortable. Partly this is because of the unreality. I could not possibly be certain of the outcome whatever action I do or do not take. Yet if we accept this fiction, can the utilitarian agree to any calculation other than the murder of the stranger?

Part of the answer lies in the word “murder”, a deliberate act. Accidents, like runaway trolleys, we have to accept as an inevitable part of life. As freethinkers we certainly don’t suppose them to be designed by God either to punish sinners or to test ourselves. But where there is agency, the greater the deliberation, the greater the ethical burden – one reason why the declared viciousness of all-great gods in Bible and Koran is so appalling. Consequently, I object to institutionalised judicial execution as a punishment for crime. Equally, individual suicide (perhaps with controlled access to decent means) seems to me less morally problematic and far safer for society than euthanasia managed by the state.

It appears from other tests that the ten percent or so of people identified as inclined to stranger-hurling are thoroughly unappealing and immoral. Do we, like them, enjoy seeing fist fights, handle people by fobbing them off with what they want to hear, and think that life is hardly worth the effort? Certainly not humanists. But can we find a strictly utilitarian response to separate ourselves from this nasty subpopulation?

It should also be noted that no group of self-declared utilitarians has been tested

Celibation

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Since marriage is an institution sanctioned by the state and is regarded as a fundamental human right, the question arises whether the rejection of this right can be mandated as a condition of acceptance into a public service, namely the priesthood. And while we are on the subject, we have to pose the question: how is the exclusion of women from the Church hierarchy compatible with constitutional rights and with the laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of gender?

So long as the state exempts the Church from the enforcement of laws instituted to protect minorities, we can hardly expect the Vatican to honor secular laws protecting minors. Churches cannot be exempt from the enforcement of the provisions of equal rights – which we consider by now to be an integral part of human dignity – on the basis of freedom of religion, because the state would not have to interfere with what the Church teaches, only to ensure that it complies with current laws and accepted rules. Just as an example: at one time human sacrifices were conventional parts of religious practice. The Catholic Church still honours such sacrifice symbolically in its liturgy, but does not practice it. It could most likely institute a symbolic celibacy – maybe an oath of purity within marriage – that does not deprive anyone of fundamental human rights and does not encourage anti-social behavior.

We can also consider a more recent ex-

ample of a church keeping up with changing societal-moral standards: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (generally known as the Mormon Church) accepted or even encouraged polygamy until the end of the 18th century. Since then it forbids it under pain of excommunication, because it is against the law of the land. Now, discrimination on the basis of gender or marital status is against the law of the land that the bishops and the Vatican must respect, and it must bring an end to mandatory celibacy, as well as all discrimination on the basis of gender associated with celibacy and related to sexual paranoia.

• Budapest-born László Bitó fled to America after the Hungarian revolution of 1956 was crushed by Russian forces. Later he graduated from Bard College in 1960 as a pre-med biology major. In 1963 he gained his PhD from Columbia University in medical cell biology.

His research led to the development of Xalatan, the drug that has saved the sight of millions of glaucoma sufferers. He has published more than 150 scientific articles and received, among many other honours, the highest recognition in the field of eye research, the Proctor Medal. After retiring from Columbia University as Emeritus Professor of Ocular Physiology, he returned to Hungary to devote his time to writing. Of his 14 non-scientific books – novels, essays, and three anthologies of some of his more than a hundred newspaper and magazine articles – some have appeared in translations in half a dozen countries.

We are delighted that László Bitó has offered to contribute exclusive articles to the *Freethinker*.

or daft Trolleyology?

which labelled utilitarians as 'psychopathic, Machiavellian misanthropes'

here, and there are hardly likely to be many such thoughtful people in the sample studied. It is the experimenters' assumption that these are utilitarian values.

It would presumably be agreed that the general utilitarian answer to "Would you



Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was the most influential of the utilitarians. After his death, Bentham's body was dissected as part of a public anatomy lecture. Afterward, the skeleton and head were preserved and stored in a wooden cabinet called the "Auto-icon", with the skeleton stuffed out with hay and dressed in Bentham's clothes. Originally kept by his disciple Thomas Southwood Smith, it was acquired by University College London in 1850. It is normally kept on public display at the end of the South Cloisters in the main building of the college, but for the 100th and 150th anniversaries of the college, it was brought to the meeting of the College Council, where it was listed as "present but not voting".

torture prisoners to perhaps save your own military from attack?" has to be "no". Any torture is a most weighty fault and once we begin it hardly seems possible to limit it: all sides may torture indiscriminately for advantage and finally, corrupt and degenerate, just for revenge or pleasure. With restraint may come less psychological damage to ourselves and the practical gain that surrender to us, and a transfer of loyalty, will be far more plausible events. If we lose then the victors may find the customary trial and execution for war crimes a little harder, reconciliation a little easier.

This reminds us that the world extends beyond the example. If Earth was populated only by me, the stranger and a small crowd of others, then the desperate cost of inaction seems to require the objective calculation for the greatest number and for all human future. As an aside, I believe that in such circumstances he would opt to leap. But if, on the instant, I push then might I be tempted to take (for the general good as distinct from shame or the avoidance of criticism) the moral cost of an undiscoverable lie that he died by altruistic choice? Or, even setting aside the dodgy "undiscoverable", is it both right and potentially better to report the truth? It is interesting to speculate at what extreme point a murder could be balanced against the saving of lives, so that I would kill and then accept, for morality's sake, what-

ever penalty followed as society's means of just closure. What of such cases as Osama bin Laden and Gaddafi?

But the essential point is that, reframing the stranger-pushing example into the wider world, the context of reality changes everything. It is possible to imagine a society so rational that killing one to save two is always a proper and automatic act. But I doubt if we evolved and empathic humans are anywhere near that simple reckoning. We assess cases and judge actions on a spectrum other than a mechanical rationalism.

My real world is full of strangers, as I am a stranger to them. How would it be if we were all constantly calculating whether or not to inflict harm on innocent bystanders? The short answer is that it would be intolerable. Such a general predisposition would vastly destroy our happiness and well-being: any exceptional hard cases should not become bad laws. We can only strive to repair misfortune and to engage others with mutual trust and care, the "Golden Rule" that has no need of supernatural edict.

Should we succumb to nasty trolleyological contrivances? Better that utilitarianism can balance reason and human nature, and be a socially acceptable basis for morality.

• **The full article in the *Economist* can be read online at <http://www.economist.com/node/21530078>**

Santa tipped to take title

(Continued from p7)

eyed Norwegian number one, Christ lost his title when he was outpointed over several centuries by Muhammad ibn Abdullah of Mecca, Saudi Arabia in the Grand Haram, Jerusalem.

Muhammad was stripped of the crown when, after successful defences against token challengers, four armed Parameshwara Shiva, the self styled Lord of the Dance, and Gautama Buddha (you'll hear the sound of one hand clapping), he failed to defend it in Renaissance Europe and subsequently refused to fight outside his native south west Asia. Christ was reinstated and since then has seen off some formidable challengers, including French stylist Francois Voltaire, German hitman Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud the deceptive Austrian, and England's fa-

vourite, Charlie, "the ape-man" Darwin.

To-night, however, he faces his stiffest test yet. Claus boxed a draw with him in Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas last century and now claims to be fitter and stronger than ever.

"Christ's over the hill," says Claus' manager, Mohamed al-Fayed. "All his recent opponents have been bums, like that Red Indian spirit guide, Gitchee Manito and L Ron Hubbard with his gimmicky scientology training routine.

"And look at Christ's last serious fight, when his corner had to use illegal substances – "new and most cruel" according to ringside observers – to see off Japanese icon Hirohito. My boy's gonna be the first to take the title to the Market Place where it really belongs."

Is God the most sadistic, evil, mass-m

WILLIAM HARWOOD says that – if the Almighty's official biography, the

Christian sects tend to regard the capricious rules in what they call the Old Testament as superseded. While they accept the declaration of Leviticus that the victimless recreation practised by homosexuals is forbidden by their deity, they reject the same book's prohibition of eating pork, lobster or cheeseburgers, or wearing a cotton-and-polyester shirt.

They argue that their junior god, Jesus, changed the law, so that only those taboos Jesus endorsed are still valid. Their rejection of Leviticus's death penalty for homosexuality stems from their dogma that Jesus abolished capital punishment. But while they reject the status of the Old Testament as unchangeable divine law, they accept it as a revelation whose portrayal of its paramount deity is totally accurate. It follows that, if the OT god was intrinsically evil when the OT was composed, then he must be intrinsically evil today.

Consider the following passage from Deuteronomy, chapter 7: "When Yahweh your gods [dual-sex, generic plural] has settled you in the land you're about to occupy, and driven out many infidels before you ... you're to cut them down and exterminate them. You're to make no compromise with them or show them any mercy ... You're going to exterminate them in a massive genocide until they are eliminated."¹

Jews see that passage as justification for

the Likud Party's continuing annexation of Palestinian land never recognized by the United Nations as part of Israel. Christians tend to ignore it in the hope that it will go away. I have yet to encounter a godworshipper of any stripe willing to concede that his Sky Führer was once a capricious, partisan, mass-murdering psychopath, but is much nicer now. But either the OT is a product of the human imagination, or its protagonist was and is exactly that.

Consider also Genesis chapter 3: "Yahweh informed Eve, 'I'm going to intensify your pain in childbirth. You will give birth to your children in agony. Your man is going to exercise authority over you.' ... He informed Adam, 'Wresting food from the ground is going to exhaust you, every day of your life'."

Even if the crime of Adam and Eve had been far more serious than worshipping the Mother Goddess by eating the pomegranate that was her sacramental vulva, the imposed punishment is bound to strike the morally evolved as disproportionately severe – even if it had only been inflicted on the perpetrators. But the author of the fable was trying to justify Yahweh's infliction of such unspeakable sadism on *all* humans.

Not only did Yahweh inflict such monstrous atrocities on Adam and Eve; he did the same to all of their descendants. Hitler executed descendants of persons guilty of the crime of choosing to be Jewish. Can



identical behavior be evil when Hitler did it but not evil when a god does it? God-worshippers think it can.

Genesis chapter 6: "The time came when humans had begun to proliferate upon the surface of the land ... Yahweh then said, 'Humankind must not retain forever the breath that is mine, since he is mere protoplasm. Henceforth his life is to be limited.' Yahweh saw that the disobedience of humankind was great in the land, and that he was continually plotting disobedience in his heart [thoughtcrime]... So Yahweh said, 'I'll destroy the humans that I created from the surface of the land ... for I regret that I ever made them'."

Whether one sees the offence for which Yahweh murdered the entire human race, except for one family of his pets, as thought-crime, or their failure to grant blind, unquestioning obedience to an unelected dictator (as Syrians are currently refusing to obey their unelected dictator), it makes the genocide of Hitler and Stalin pale into insignificance. And believers hail such a homicidal maniac as a loving father figure? The filicidal King Herod was a more loving father.

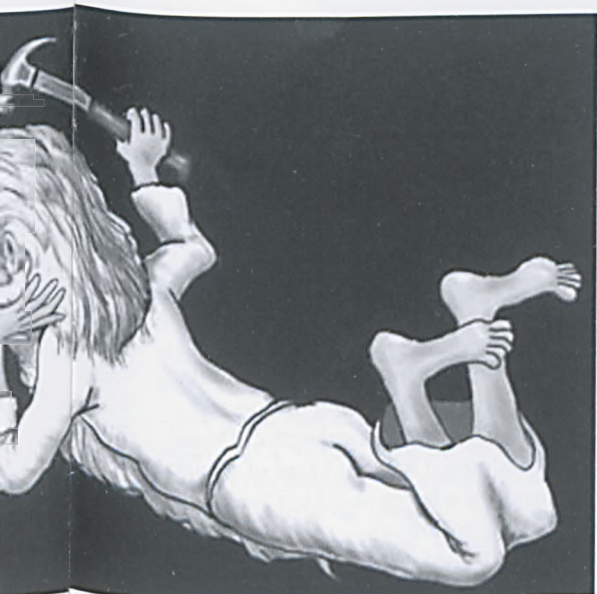
It was the deity of the OT who perpetrated such atrocities. But the New Testament god is no nicer. Matthew 10:29 reports, "Aren't two sparrows sold for one coin? Yet not one of them can fall to the ground except through your father." The gospel author thus affirms that the reason 250,000 humans die every day is that the Christian sky father executes them.

What others have said about God

- All your Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a senile delinquent – *Tennessee Williams*.
- When you consider the opportunity and power He had to really do a job, and then look at the stupid, ugly little mess He made of it instead, His sheer incompetence is almost staggering – *Joseph Heller*.
- I find it discouraging – and a bit depressing – when I notice the unequal treatment afforded by the media to UFO believers on the one hand, and on the other, to those who believe in an invisible supreme being who inhabits the sky – *the late US comedian George Carlin*.
- I don't know if God exists, but it would be better for His reputation if He didn't – *Jules Renard, French writer*.
- To you I'm an atheist; to God, I'm the Loyal Opposition – *Woody Allen*.
- In the first place God made idiots; that was for practice; then he made school boards – *Mark Twain*.
- A key to the understanding of all religion is that a god's idea of amusement is 'Snakes and Ladders' with greased rungs – *Terry Pratchett*.

s-murdering psychopath in all fiction?

graphy, the Bible, is to be believed – God is all that and much, *much* more



The god of the Jews murders every human being ever born for the crime of being descended from disobedient ancestors. But having exterminated a human, it cannot punish him further. So when capital punishment strikes it as inadequate, it magnifies its punishment by the means reported in Exodus 20:5: "I, Yahweh your gods, Jealous Allah, will make the descendants of the third and fourth generation of those who despise me, victims of the same crimes committed by their ancestors."

The god of the Christians is subject to no similar limitation. According to Jesus (Mark 9:47-49), the god's imagined enemies are going to be posthumously "tossed into Gehenna, where the maggot never dies and the fire is never extinguished. For everyone is going to be pickled with fire." That sadistic torture in an underworld Auschwitz is described as "eternal" (Matthew 25:41). And to guarantee that there will be no shortage of victims to barbecue with flamethrowers, Jesus explained to his followers (Mark 4:10-12) that, while he preached to them in plain language, "to those who are on the outside, all things are to be told in fables, so that in seeing they may see but not perceive, and in hearing they may hear but not understand, in case they convert and obtain forgiveness."

That speech alone shows Jesus to have been a sadistic psychopath. But there is more. He is depicted in Luke 16:1-9 as preaching a fable whose moral can be summarized, "Swindle those who can no longer be of use to you, and use the stolen money to bribe

those who are in a position to do you good." Reminder: While historians view Jesus as a mortal who may or may not have been a real person from history, Christians see him as the incarnation of their god.

The god of the Muslims is equally reprehensible. Only a statistically insignificant number of Muslims, and not all Christians, buy into the Big Lie that, despite their unrelated origins, the Christian "God" and the Moslem "Allah" are the same deity under interchangeable names. But even those Christians who believe that Christians and Muslims adhere to the same Sky Führer reject the Koran's pretence to be a divinely-inspired revelation from their god.

Passages from the Koran that portray Allah as morally depraved will only convince such people that it was Mohammad, not Allah/God, who was an evil madman. Nonetheless, the point that the Muslim deity is every bit as evil as its Christian counterpart is worth making. Consider: "Men have authority over women because Allah has made the

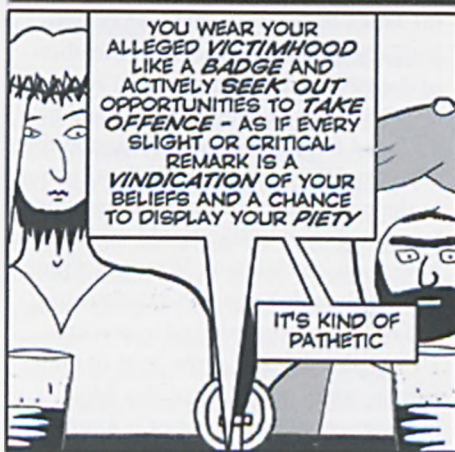
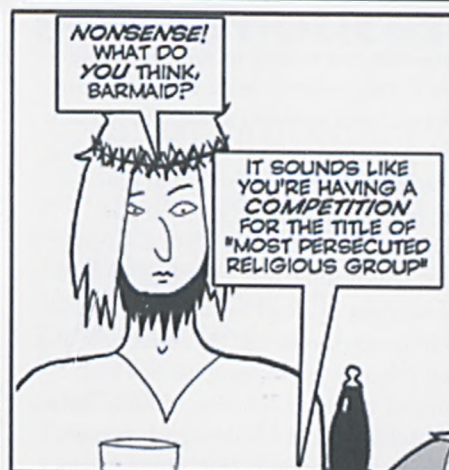
one superior to the other ... Good women are obedient ... As for those from whom you fear disobedience ... beat them" (4:34). "Allah misleads whom he will, and guides to the right path whom he pleases" (6:39). "You are forbidden to take in marriage married women, except captives whom you own as slaves" (4:24). "Slay the pagans wherever you find them. Make war on the unbelievers and the hypocrites and deal rigorously with them. When you encounter the unbelievers, strike off their heads."²

The Jewish Tanakh, the Christian Bible and the Muslim Koran present dissimilar philosophies. But the one point on which they present identical portraits is that their paramount deities are as evil as Hitler, as insane as Caligula, and as subhuman as the Marquis de Sade.

References: 1. All translations are from *The Protestant Bible Correctly Translated*, World Audience, 2010.

2. *Islam Unveiled*, Robert Spencer, pp. 1, 18, 29.

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points of view...

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MORE ON ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

ANGUS Roxburgh's book *Preachers of Hate: The Rise of the Far Right* (Gibson Square Books, 2003) describes the resurgence of fascism in the 21st century, and is well worth reading. This book was reviewed, for instance, by David Lammy ("Light in the Dark"), *Guardian*, January 11, 2003).

There is not space here to summarise the book and develop the argument, but I should like to make the point that the far right has played upon popular insecurities and fears over the past 20 years with renewed vigour, emphasising for instance immigration as the scapegoat.

(Worse still, parties of the centre and left were only too willing to present immigration as the problem, instead of promoting tolerance and understanding.) Immigrants were portrayed as alien and other, not just because of their appearance and skin colour, but also because of their religion.

During the 1920s and 1930s anti-Semitism, Jew-baiting, was a principal tool of the far right in attacking "the other", and nothing was too bad to say about Jews and their religion. Jew-baiting has not been dropped, but Islamophobia, Muslim-baiting has been added to the far right's arsenal of tools for promoting hatred. The far right has no scruples about promoting the most vulgar distortions about Islam.

Graham Newbery (*Points of View*, November), a self-proclaimed Islamophobe, rejects the term "Muslim-baiting" and denies any link with the Oslo atrocity. Well, he may not have been personally involved, but like many others, he has helped create an atmosphere in which no slander need be left unsaid about Islam and other religions. He cannot so easily absolve himself of the consequences which flow from that atmosphere which he has helped develop. I leave it to others to assess the merits of the rest of his arguments.

To conclude, Richard Dawkins will find he has cause to regret using the phrase "alien rubbish" ("Muslim leaders react angrily to Dawkins' 'alien rubbish' claim, November) if he has not done so already.

Inayat Bunglawalah (same article) is an example of someone who is both a Muslim and accepting of Darwinian evolution.

Colin Mills
Amersham

I WAS dismayed to read John Radford's article (*Freethinker*, November) about whether Britain should ban the burqa. He seems to think that the negative aspects of the burqa merely amount to either unfriendliness, an "imposition" on women(!), or the risk of deficiency in vitamin D.

Seriously? Has he not read anything from women like Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Maryam Namazie who can speak first hand of the harmful and offensive affects on the individual and society as a whole?; how it is an act of discrimination, dehumanising women into mere objects to be past from father to husband?; how it is used as a device to train women through indoctrination to be submissive?

He also proposes that we shouldn't ban the burqa because it could lead to "violent" resentment. Really? So if members of the BNP resent being held to equality laws "violently" enough, they should be excluded from those laws? Why stop there? If paedophiles were to be "violent" enough in their anger over being prevented from living their way of life, should we let them have sex with children? Wrong is wrong and we shouldn't give in to threatening behaviour, in principle and in practise.

I was also shocked at the level of his naivety when he suggested that Muslim women will grow out of it from free choice. Honestly? Does he not understand

the kind of peer/family pressure that they are under; the kind of manipulation and conditioning that they experience? Please!

Up until now, I had not heard of a valid argument for why we shouldn't ban the burqa. I still haven't.

PS: Can I thank Asad Abbas for reminding us in *Points of View* of the story of how Mohammed destroyed all of the Meccan idols in Kaba? With toleration like that, who needs oppression?

Richard Francis
London

READING letters to *Point of View* I find that people have a problem with the word Islamophobia. How about trying the word "Wahabiphobia. I think it is more appropriate. It does not include ALL the Islam population, only the more extreme faction.

Mohan Chauhan
London

THE ANDREA YATES CASE

I TAKE issue with the slants that Susan Allen Perna (*Andrea Yates: monster or compassionate mother?*) puts on the horrible events in Texas.

Perna suggests that the murderess Andrea Yates made a big mistake in "discontinuing her medications", but fails to grasp that it may have been therapists and psychiatric medications that made her crazy in the first place.

There are now thousands of documented cases where people committed acts of violence while under the influence of the SSRI drugs – drugs which cause permanent neurological damage and brain shrinkage.

All of the notorious school shootings in the United States, including the Columbine massacre, were done by

people on SSRIs. The drugs are highly addictive, and withdrawal from them is dangerous. For further information I recommend Peter Breggin's magnum opus, *Toxic Psychiatry* (1991), and his more recent book, *Your Drug May Be Your Problem: How and why to stop taking psychiatric medications* (1999). Perna writes: "She had no evil intentions. Her only motive was to protect the children she loved ..."

I think it more likely that "hatred", of her husband and the male sex, was the motivation for drowning five little boys, one after the other.

Although I'm not friend of fundamentalist religion, I think Michael Woroniecki may be getting a bum rap. However reprehensible he and his wife Rachel may be, the photo of them with six happy, healthy children tells its own story.

Let us be skeptical of the story that Yates was a victim, with no will of her own. Perna believes the eventual "not guilty by reason of insanity" verdict brought justice to Yates. What about justice for her husband and the poor murdered boys? – and for future children, who may be murdered by mothers who think they can get away with it?

John Lauritsen
MA, USA

Editor's note: Andrea Yates' youngest victim was, in fact, her daughter, Mary.

SUSAN Alan Perna's horrific account of Yates tragedy prompted me to do some background reading on the case, and I discovered that Andrea Yates had been a member of the Quiverful movement, which, according to *Wikipedia*, "promotes procreation, and sees children as a blessing from God, eschewing all forms of birth control, including natural family planning and sterilisation".

Yates' first psychiatrist, Dr Eileen Starbranch, warned Yates and her husband against having more children, stating in Yates's medical record "Apparently patient and husband plan to have as many babies as nature will allow! This will surely guarantee future psychotic depression."

Three years ago, a US blogger, Kitty Wampus, pointed out that, as members of the fundamentalist Christian Quiverful movement Andrea Yates and her husband believed strongly in 'God's will', and had clung to Quiverful principles despite the fact that previous pregnancies had led to Yates' mental illness.

It seems to me that a range of faith-based factors led to the tragedy, and that travelling evangelist Michael Woroniecki, who had some influence over the Yates', cannot

solely be held to blame for the death of the couple's five children.

Incidentally, another member of the Quiverful movement – Michelle Duggar of Arkansas – announced last month that she and husband Jim Bob were expecting their 20th child in April 2012. *ABC News* quoted Duggar as saying:

"After recently turning 45, and since it has been almost two years since Josie was born, we didn't know if we would be able to have any more. We do not take for granted the wonderful blessings of life that God has bestowed upon us!"

Janet McBride
Manchester

THOMAS AIKENHEAD

SOME of Peter Sutherland's claims about Thomas Aikenhead (October *Freethinker*) are questionable. He claims that he had no counsel at his trial, but other accounts claim that he did. While it may be true that there was no evidence given in his defence during the trial, there is a record that, on the occasion of his first petition to the Privy Council, two ministers and two Privy Councillors pleaded on his behalf.

I very much doubt that the Lord Advocate referred to "the state religion of England." In 1697, Scotland was still an independent country, albeit sharing a monarch with England, Wales and Ireland but having no state religion (even today, it has none).

Steuart Cambell
Edinburgh

I DON'T know where Peter Sutherland gets his quote that Thomas Aikenhead was charged with showing "ireverance toward the state religion of England," since Aikenhead was prosecuted by the Lord Advocate of Scotland, appealed unsuccessfully to the Scottish Privy Council and was hanged in Edinburgh after the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland refused to intercede on his behalf.

And all this happened ten years before the Act of Union!

Jack Hastie
Kilbarchan

Editor's note: Peter Sutherland did not, in fact, make the claims about Aikenhead that Steuart Campbell and Jack Hastie dispute. I was responsible for fleshing out his article by quoting from the Aikenhead entry in *The Freethought Almanac* (<http://freethoughtalmanac.com/?p=929>), which I took to be a credible account. It seems as if I was wrong, and I am pleased that the two correspondents have set the record straight.

INSULTING LETTER

DIESEL Balaam responds to Alex Hill, David Rogers and John Hunt with a hotch-potch of smarminess and insults (*Points of View*, November).

Is this the same Diesel Balaam who, in July 2010, described himself as "a progressive, freethinking cultural commentator"?

Bill McIlroy
Hove

SOUTER AND MORMONS

I READ in the October issue of the *Freethinker* that Mormons have been targeting Stagecoach passengers and that "Peter Tatchell refers to a University of Georgia study which indicated that eight out of 10 homophobic straight men were sexually aroused while watching gay pornography."

This for me conjures up the nightmare image of travelling by Stagecoach with a Mormon missionary sitting on my right trying to convert me while Brian Souter, sitting on my left, tries to grope me ...

Graham Livingstone
London

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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 Dec 7, 7.30 for 8pm: *A Merry Mythmas to You!*
– Speaker: Ken Humphreys.

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

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

Central London Humanist Group: **i** Chair: Alan Palmer.
Sec: Josh Kutchinsky.

e info@centrallondonhumanists.org.

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

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 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.cotswold.humanist.org.uk>.

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

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

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

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

w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists:

e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

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

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:

i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

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

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

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

w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):

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

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

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: **i** John Coss:

0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday, 7.30pm) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Phone John Coss for details.

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

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday of the month at 8pm (except Feb, July and August) at the HAVS Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow. December 14: Annual Victorian Yuletide party, with a quiz, crossword and a pantomime.

i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

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

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

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

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

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

Local Scottish Groups:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella, Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780 **e** Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com **w** <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/>

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

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

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

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

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

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

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

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

Marches Secularists: **w** www.MarchesSecularists.org

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@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

Oxford Humanists: Chair: John White, 01865 891876.

e jdwhite@talk21.com

Peterborough Humanists: **i** Edwin Salter Tel:

07818870215.

Scottish Humanists:

w www.ScottishHumanists.org.uk. Free membership. Charity 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 Gwinnett on 01935 473263 or

e edward.gwinnett@talktalk.net

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings, Sundays 11am at Conway Hall Brockway Room, Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8031/4

e programme@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists: 25 Haughgate Close, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1LQ. Tel: 01394 387462.

Secretary: Denis Johnston.

w www.suffolkhands.org.uk **e** mail@suffolkhands.org.uk

Sutton Humanists: **i** Brian Dougherty 07913 734583. **w** www.suttonhumanists.co.uk

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

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

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

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

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

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