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'You can expect threats if you discuss sharia'

Following the abandonment of a *Sharia Law and Human Rights* meeting at the University of London last month after threats were made against members of the audience, Maryam Namazie, who heads the One Law for All campaign, appealed to the organisers to "re-arrange another meeting on the same topic and invite us back again".

One Law for All's co-representative, Ann Marie Waters, a National Secular Society council member, was scheduled to speak at the meeting, but the event – organised by the Queen Mary Atheism, Secularism and Humanism Society – ended in disarray when, according to Namazie, "one Islamist filmed everyone at the meeting and announced he would hunt down those who said anything negative about Islam's prophet. Outside the hall, he threatened to kill anyone who defamed the prophet. Reference was made to the *Jesus and Mo* cartoon saga at University College, London (see page 6).

Writing on her *Nothing is Sacred* blog, Namazie said "The University's security guard – a real gem – arrived first only to blame the speaker and organisers rather than those issuing death threats. He said: 'If you will have these discussions, what do you expect?' Err, to speak without being threatened with death maybe?"

She added that the subject was "an important battleground for atheist, secularist and humanists groups and must be taken seriously. We can't – and won't – allow the Islamists to have the final word on this.

"Again, this is not about lacking cultural sensitivity or discrimination as the pathetic UCL Union thinks. It is not about racism and 'Islamophobia'. It is not our fault for raising the issues. We are not to blame for 'provoking' the Islamists; they need no such provocation ...

"It's about being able to criticise and speak out against that which is taboo, and the barbarism of our century. Free expression is all we have at our disposal to do so. Stand up for it and refuse to budge or

there will nothing left when they are through with you."

Waters, writing on the National Secular Society website, said: "Rather fittingly – and as if to prove my point – my human rights were quashed by a person demonstrating one of the effects of sharia law; the threat of violence for criticising religion."

Waters added: "On reflection of the incident, I am left wondering what exactly we could have done. I would love to say that we stood up to him and carried on bravely in a valiant defence of free speech, but it was a frightening experience and I know that people

felt genuinely threatened and upset. In any case, is it the role of speakers and students to face off against potentially violent Islamists in defence of our free speech, risking our safety in the process?

"Just whose job is it to defend freedom of speech, and can we be expected to fight for it when the state and other powers refuse to back us up?"

And she asked: "Can you remember the last time you heard the Government – or any political party – give a robust and dogged defence of free speech? No, neither can I. But there have been plenty of opportunities.

"Take the Danish cartoon affair

for example. Look at the pathetic response of the British Government at the time: 'There is freedom of speech, we all respect that ... But there is not any obligation to insult or to be gratuitously inflammatory. I believe that the republication of these cartoons has been unnecessary. It has been insensitive. It has been disrespectful and it has been wrong'.

"Even the UN said it would investigate whether the cartoonists were racists. How can we expect people in a university lecture hall to stand up to violent threats when this is the reaction of our leaders? The message is very clear – don't insult religion. And if you do, and you get in to trouble for it, you have only yourself to blame (or

(Continued on page 4)



Maryam Namazie (photo: Peter Marshall)

Poop and ponies

BARRY DUKE POKES ABOUT IN CYBER-DUNG WITH INCURABLE OPTIMISM

In explaining to 12-year-old me the difference between an optimist and a pessimist, a wise old uncle told me the tale of parents who had twin sons, one irrepressibly cheerful, the other a perpetually sour little sod. In a bid to even up their personalities, they hit on a birthday plan. When the kids turned ten, they were led to different rooms in the house to receive their gifts.

Master misery-guts was taken to a room full of fabulous toys. His brother was led into a room filled with manure. A while later they checked on the boys. The dour one was sitting grimly eyeing his gifts with disdain. The other was delightedly rolling around in the manure, a look of sheer bliss on his face.

Asked why the gift pleased him so much, he whooped: "Where there's shit there's just gotta be a pony!"

The internet is like a room full of crap – only much, *much* bigger. And me? Well, like the boy optimist, I am happy to spend hours each day poking through cyber-dung in the hope of finding that elusive "pony" – for

every now and again it *will* come trotting out.

Last month it appeared in the form of a discussion between an atheist and a Muslim on the *New Humanist* website sparked by the *Jesus and Mo* cartoon kerfuffle (see report on p6).

"Aboosalik", of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, littered the message board with links to Islamic sites "proving" the "prophet" Mohammed was a paragon of virtue – "the very essence of the perfect human being".

My prize was the retort "Aboosalik" drew from "Jeff900". I can't shake his hand, but what I *can* do is reproduce his brilliant response in full:

"I'm sorry, but you will not like my reaction to the links you posted. I don't mean to be hurtful. I'm just honestly giving my thoughts in hope that it might help illuminate the gulf between those who find *Jesus and Mo* humorous, and those who find it insulting and wish to suppress it.

"I started to take a look at the links you provided, but I'm afraid this is just not the kind of writing I'm able to relate to. I could barely get past the 'About the Author' section because it was so crammed full of obsequious flattery that I felt nauseated, as if I had eaten a meal of pure sugar.

"The prose was so bombastically florid and ornate and full of exaggerated praise that I felt like reading it was the psychological equivalent of being forced to grovel in the mud like a worshipful slave.

"I was hoping to find some information there, but instead I was wading through poetic embellishment so romantic and adoring that it could have been written by a besotted 16-year-old. It seemed clear from this inauspicious beginning that bits of concrete information would be too few and far between.

"Here is just a brief example of what I'm talking about:

Words flowed from his tongue like honey dripping into their ears to reach the depths of their soul to fill them with knowledge and invigorate their faith.

"And that wasn't even written about the Prophet, but about the author of the book you linked to.

"I don't doubt that if members of the Islamic community are used to such delicate coddling and pampering and inflation of their egos, that even the slightest insult might be unbearably painful to them.

"This kind of writing bothers me because it's like an invitation to enter into someone

else's fantasy that I just don't care to accept. To wallow about in such treacly slop would make me feel corrupted and violated, and urgently in need of a hot bath. There is nothing there to excite my curiosity or to stimulate the mind. It is so disconnected from reality, its author so devoid of critical judgement, that I couldn't possibly trust a word that he wrote.

"I'm sorry to be so insulting, but I'm being honest. The fact that you find this kind of writing worthy of recommendation may provide some clue as to why the Islamic world has stagnated intellectually for so many centuries.

"Consider the following excerpt from an interesting article on this subject, a link to which I have provided below:

There are roughly 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, but only two scientists from Muslim countries have won Nobel Prizes in science (one for physics in 1979, the other for chemistry in 1999).

Forty-six Muslim countries combined contribute just one percent of the world's scientific literature; Spain and India each contribute more of the world's scientific literature than those countries taken together. In fact, although Spain is hardly an intellectual superpower, it translates more books in a single year than the entire Arab world has in the past thousand years.

'Though there are talented scientists of Muslim origin working productively in the West,' Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg has observed, 'for forty years I have not seen a single paper by a physicist or astronomer working in a Muslim country that was worth reading.'...Between 1980 and 2000, Korea granted 16,328 patents, while nine Arab countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, granted a combined total of only 370, many of them registered by foreigners. A study in 1989 found that in one year, the United States published 10,481 scientific papers that were frequently cited, while the entire Arab world published only four.

Here is the link "Jeff900" provided: www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/why-the-arabic-world-turned-away-from-science.

"Jeff900" closed his case with the words: "If I were a Muslim, I would surely want to work hard toward bettering this dismal record of achievement and not waste time bickering about trivialities as inconsequential as *Jesus and Mo*, or who is insulting who."

"Jeff900", you are my prize pony of the month. Big lump of sugar? Just kidding!



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justplaincrazy

GODLY SEX

AN evangelical pastor and his wife spent 24 hours in bed on the roof of his church in Texas last month in a bid to underline the importance of regular sex between married Christian couples.

Ed Young, author of a book, *Sexperiment*, leads the Fellowship megachurch in Grapevine, near Dallas. He used the time in his roost to do interviews, answer relationship questions and “teach about God’s purpose for intimacy in marriage” – heterosexual marriage, that is.

Young strongly disapproves of gay unions. In 2007 he wrote that: “To allow gay marriage means to redefine marriage as it has been in the social structure of humankind since the very creation of man and woman.”

CARDINAL'S ‘GAY KU KLUX CLAN’ APOLOGY

DESPITE an apology from Chicago’s Cardinal Francis George for recently likening the church’s clash with the gay rights movement to the anti-Catholicism of the Ku Klux Klan, a handful of gay rights activists demonstrated outside Holy Name Cathedral last month, saying his contrition wasn’t enough.

“It is totally inadequate,” said Andy Thayer, co-founder of the Gay Liberation Network, referring to the statement posted on the archdiocese’s website.

George’s controversial comments, broadcast on Fox Chicago TV, came in response to a question about whether next summer’s gay pride parade would disrupt morning services at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church in the Lakeview neighborhood.

“You know, you don’t want the gay liberation movement to morph into something like the Ku Klux Klan, demonstrating in the streets against Catholicism,” George told two Fox News reporters last December.

WORLD WILL END IN MAY

RONALD Weinland, a US-based “prophet of God” claims Jesus is set to return on May 27 of this year, and that anyone who fails to take his message seriously will get cancer and die. According to Weinland’s Church of God blog, the path to Jesus’ return opened up on January 7. Weinland is also predicting that “the United States will collapse” and that there will be a nuclear war before May 27 this year.

BBC blasted for not mentioning Islam in ‘honour attacks’ report



Ahawa Akther Jui, 21, pictured after her husband, Rafiqul Islam, 30, cut off all five fingers of her right hand because she pursued higher education in Bangladesh without his permission.

THE BBC revealed last December that UK police recorded at least 2,823 so-called honour attacks in 2010. The figures were published following a freedom of information request by the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (Ikwo), and revealed that nearly 500 of these were in London.

Honour attacks are punishments on people, usually women, for acts deemed to have brought shame on their family. Such attacks, said the BBC, can include mutilation with acid, abduction, beatings and in some cases, murder. What the BBC failed to mention is that such attacks overwhelmingly take place within Muslim families.

Robin Shepherd, owner and publisher of *The Commentator*, reacted angrily to the BBC report, saying that the words “Muslim”, “Islamic” or “Islam” had not appeared once, and pointed out that “the families giving the orders, as well as the victims, are, in the overwhelming majority of cases, Muslim. Surprised? No, of course you’re not. Honour attacks ranging in brutality from beatings to murder are commonplace in many parts of the Muslim world.”

In December, for example, a man from the United Arab Emirates working in Bangladesh tied up his 21-year-old wife, taped up her mouth and then cut off all five fingers of her right hand because he objected to her college studies. A police spokesman said: “Rafiqul Islam was enraged because he did not like her studying at college. He was jealous because while he only had a grade 8 standard education, she was off to college to pursue higher studies.”

The *Daily Telegraph* said that the attack was the latest in a gruesome series of acts of domestic violence targeting educated women in Muslim-majority Bangladesh. In June, an unemployed husband gouged out the eyes of his wife, an assistant professor at the prestigious Dhaka University, apparently because could not stand her pursuing higher studies at a Canadian University.

Commenting on the BBC’s reluctance to mention words like “Islam” and “Muslim”, Shepherd said: “This is how societies go down: when matters of the profoundest significance to their character, and potentially their very existence, have been rendered undiscussable by the people that set the terms of public debate. Clearly the people who wrote and edited that story should be dismissed.

“They won’t be of course because the mind-numbing, multiculturalist narrative that demanded censorship of the salient evidence is effectively institutionalised as the dominant narrative across the BBC as well as the wider liberal establishment.”

Shepherd also criticised the *Daily Telegraph* (“the UK’s flagship, right-leaning, ‘quality’ newspaper”), saying that its report was “openly parasitic on the BBC’s, meaning that they also make no mention of Islam. So you can see the problem. The power of the BBC is such that it is not only capable of influencing what *is* said, it can also influence what is *not* said.”

Freedom of speech under threat

(Continued from page 1)

don't come crying to us').

"Freedom of speech needs to be defended from above. We need prosecution and punishment of those intent on frightening people into staying silent. Until the state speaks out and makes it clear to the likes of this guy that this behaviour is not acceptable – no excuses, no apologies – these things will continue to happen and more and more people will be frightened in to shutting up. We can then say goodbye to freedom for good."

Jennifer Hardy, President of the Atheism, Secularism and Humanism Society said: "Five minutes before the talk was due to start a man burst into the room holding a camera phone and for some seconds stood filming the faces of all those in the room."

"He shouted 'listen up all of you, I am recording this, I have your faces on film now, and I know where some of you live'. At that moment he aggressively pushed the phone in someone's face and then said 'and if I hear that anything is said against the holy Prophet Mohammed, I will hunt you down.' He then left the room and two members of the audience applauded."

The fanatic also filmed students in the foyer and threatened to murder them and



National Secular Society council member Ann Marie Waters

their families.

Hardy added: "This event was supposed to be an opportunity for people of different religions and perspectives to debate at a university that is supposed to be a beacon of free speech and debate. Only two complaints were made to the Union prior to the event, and the majority of the Muslim students at the event were incredibly supportive of it going ahead."

"These threats were an aggressive assault on freedom of speech and the fact that they led to the cancellation of our talk was severely disappointing for all of the religious and non-religious students in the room who wanted to engage in debate."

It appears as if the disruption of the sharia meeting had been orchestrated by extremists from Islam Awakening, which posted this lamentably illiterate call on its blog: "Brothers, the Queen Mary Athiest Society, sister of

the shaytaani UCL Athiest Society (which published pictures of Rasoolullah(saw)) are holding an event today at Queen Mary University of London at 7:00 pm on 'Is Shariah in violation of human rights'.

"We need your presence. Who gave these kuffar the right to speak? Let me ask you – if a bunch of kuffar got together and were given the right to touch your mother up and analyse her, then would you stand by and let it happen? Then what about your deen?!!

"Remember, these guys hate religion and are not looking to have an unbiased debate. Please be here by 7 pm. to let them know what we think.

"Back in my day no-one in UNi would dare even look the wrong way at a muslim, because we used to represent our deen and didnt take kindly to it being insulted. It is only when the pacifists became numerous that the kuffar dared to raise their heads."

Sir Salman is still in danger

SIR Salman Rushdie was forced last month to withdraw from the Jaipur Literature Festival in India after he received assassination threats from fanatical Indian Muslims.

A leading Islamic institute, in demanding that the Indian government ban his scheduled appearance, revived hostility over *The Satanic Verses*, his 1988 novel that Muslim groups condemned as "blasphemous".

Vice chancellor of the Darul Uloom seminary in Deoband, Maulana Abul Qasim Nomani, said tens of millions of Muslims remain hurt over the novel. He added:

"I call upon the Muslim organisations of the country to mount pressure on the centre to withdraw the visa and prevent him visiting India where community members still feel hurt owing to the anti-Islamic remarks in his writings. The Muslims cannot pardon him at any cost"

Rabbi sacked for signing an anti-gay declaration

FURY erupted among young Jewish Amsterdammers last month after Aryeh Ralbag, the city's Chief Rabbi, signed a statement saying that homosexuality was "sinful" and could be "cured". Shortly after, the rabbi was sacked by Amsterdam's Orthodox Jewish community.

Ralbag, who lives in New York and visits the Netherlands once or twice a year "to rule on legal matters", signed the *Declaration On The Torah Approach To Homosexuality*, detailing all his official functions, including that of Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam.

Ralbag will remain suspended until he and community leaders have spoken about the issue. A press release from the Jewish community board, NIHS, said: "Rabbi Ralbag's signature may give the impression the Orthodox Jewish community of Amsterdam shares his view. This is absolutely untrue. Homosexuals are welcome at the Amsterdam Jewish community."

Five Muslim men face charges of inciting hatred against gays

IN THE first prosecution of its kind in the UK, five Muslim men appeared in Derby Crown Court last month charged with unlawfully distributing hate literature that targeted homosexuals.

One leaflet said the death penalty had been passed against all homosexuals and showed a mannequin hanging from a noose. Another depicted a figure burning in a lake of fire, along a list of punishments for homosexual acts.

The five accused, all from Derby, are the first to be prosecuted under new laws banning the stirring up of hatred due to sexual orientation.

Ihjaz Ali, 42, Razwan Javed, 28, Kabir Ahmed, 28, Umar Javed, 38, and Mehboob Hussain, 44, were arrested following complaints about leaflets distributed in Derby before a gay pride parade in July 2010.

According to a *Daily Mail* report of the court proceedings, the material was handed out in the street as well as posted through letterboxes.

The first, called *Death Penalty?*, claimed that Allah permitted the destruction of gay people and "the only question is how it should be carried out".

The second, *Turn or Burn*, featured a figure in a blazing lake with the warning that the decriminalisation of homosexuality was "the root of all problems".

A third, *GAY – God Abhors You* – told of severe punishment for homosexuals.

Bobbie Cheema, prosecuting, told Derby Crown Court the pamphlets were threatening, offensive, frightening and nasty and had been "designed to stir up hatred and hostility against homosexual people".

Gay men who received the leaflets told the court they feared they had been personally targeted.

One witness, who cannot be named for legal reasons, said he was handed one leaflet in person and received three more in the post.

"Being a gay man, I thought it was meant for me," he said. "I felt like I was being targeted. I thought it meant I was going to be burned or something like that."

Another, who received two of the leaflets in the post, said: "I felt threatened. I wondered whether I would be getting a flaming rag through my letter box."

Miss Cheema told the jury: "These five defendants were part of a small group who distributed horrible, threatening literature,



A sketch of the accused drawn inside the court shows, from left, Ihjaz Ali, Razwan Javed, Kabir Ahmed, Mahboob Hussain and Umer Javed. Their trial, which began last month, was expected to last for three weeks. (Source: The Daily Mail).

with quotations from religious sources and pictures, which were designed to stir up hostile feelings against homosexual people."

The court heard that all five defendants accept they distributed the leaflets but deny charges of intending to stir up hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation under laws

introduced in March 2010.

The maximum penalty for the offences is seven years in jail.

Ali faces four charges while Hussain and Umar Javed are charged with two counts each. Razwan Javed and Ahmed are charged with one count each.

Strong case for assisted suicide

THERE is a "strong case" for allowing assisted suicide for people who are terminally ill in England and Wales. The Commission on Assisted Dying – set up and funded by campaigners who want to see a change in the law – said the current system was "inadequate".

It said it was possible to allow assisted dying within a strict set of rules to ensure it was not abused.

But the Commission's report was immediately slammed by the Right Reverend John Goddard, who is against any form of assisted dying. He said the commission had been "stuffed" and was biased in favour of a change in the law.

"If you set as up a commission in which all but one person is totally committed to moving forward to assisted dying or assisted killing that will give you the report we've got. It's a flawed report.

"It's built on hard cases rather than good cases to make good law. Only one person on the commission, a priest, stood against the findings and there has been no mention in the general media of him."

The commission was chaired by Lord Falconer, a barrister and former justice secretary, and included a wide range of experts including doctors, an ex-police commissioner and a former president of the General Medical Council.

The panel received evidence from more than 1,300 sources during its year-long inquiry, although some groups opposed to a change in the law refused to take part because of its remit and way it was put together.

The commission was funded by the author Sir Terry Pratchett, who has Alzheimer's disease, and set up by Dignity in Dying, which like Sir Terry, has called for the law to be changed. More than 1,300 gave evidence to the panel which found there is a "strong case" that assisted suicide should be allowed for mentally sound people over 18-years-old who are terminally ill and judged as having less than 12 months to live.



bits&bobs

SECULARIST OF THE YEAR EVENT

THE National Secular Society's annual Secularist of the Year prize will be awarded in Soho, London, on Saturday, March, 17. The £5,000 award – sponsored by Dr Michael Irwin – will be presented to someone who has made a significant contribution to the cause of secularism during the past year. The presentation will take place at a special luncheon. Tickets are £45 (£15 for students with identification) fully inclusive of all the food and entertainment. Booking is now open, and you can buy your tickets securely online www.secularism.org.uk/tickets or by post from NSS (SoY), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL.

ONLY CHRISTIANS NEED APPLY

AMTECHNICA Ltd, a small UK plumbing and electrical business based in Crawley, was on the look-out last month for a PA/Marketing administrator – a *Christian* PA/Marketing administrator! In an ad posted on Totaljobs.com, it declared: “We are a Christian business, and meet on Mondays to pray for the company and for each other. The successful candidate would be involved in this aspect too.”

Graham Martin-Royle, who brought this to the attention of the *Freethinker*, said: “I thought this shit only happened in the US. Have they never heard of the Equality Act 2010?”

OFFENSIVE PHOTOS SEIZED

THREE photographs were removed from an art exhibition by municipal authorities in Izmir, Turkey. One shows two headscarfed women kissing each other. Another has two men kissing each other, and the third features a headscarfed woman wearing a bikini.

Izmir Photography Art Association (IFOD) members called on its members to contribute to an exhibition titled *Aykir* (Contrary). A total of 33 images were selected and put on display at the Izmir Art Centre in January.

But after negative press publicity that suggested that the pictures were an insult to “religious values”, they were seized. IFOD members then gathered in front of the gallery and demonstrated their disapproval by removing the other photos from the exhibit. IFOD Chairman Beynan Ozdemir said: “We cannot accept this censorship”.

Jesus & Mo cartoon sparks freedom of expression row

THE University College London Union's Atheist, Secularist & Humanist Society last month staged a spirited fight-back over an attempt by the UCLU to censor its Facebook page.

The group used a *Jesus & Mo* cartoon to publicise its weekly pub social in London, but was told to remove it because it may cause offence to Muslim students.

The National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies immediately launched a petition against this brazen assault by the UCLU on freedom of expression, and within a couple of days the petition drew over 3,000 signatures. It reads:

“In response to complaints from a number of students, the University College London Union has insisted that the UCLU Atheist, Secularist & Humanist Society remove the following image from a Facebook event advertising a pub social. It has done so on the grounds that it may cause offence to Muslim students.

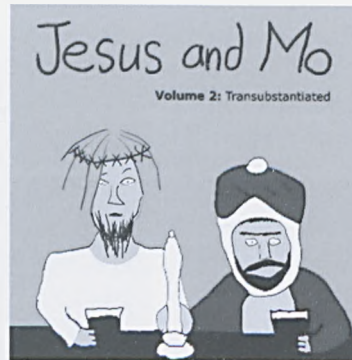
“This is a gross infringement on its representatives' right to freedom of expression taken by members of the first secular university in England. All people are free to be offended by any image they view. This does not give them the right to impose their beliefs on others by censoring such images.

“We the undersigned urge the University College London Union to immediately halt their attempts to censor the UCLU Atheist, Secularist & Humanist Society and uphold its members' right to freedom of expression.”

Explaining the background to the controversy, the Alex Gabriel blog said that the group had been sent a message by a student union official which stated that “a number of complaints” had been made about the use of the image – partly because, contrary to Islamic teachings, it depicts the “Prophet” Mohammed, and partly because it depicts him around alcohol.

The union then told the atheist society to remove the image immediately and inform them once this had been done.

Responding to controversy, S M Tahir Nasser, Treasurer of UCLU Ahmadiyya Muslim Students Association (AMSA) wrote on AMSA's Facebook page that “numerous Muslims wrote in their individual capacities to the UCL Union, complaining of this



depiction of Mohammed, citing grounds of religious offense” and went on to complain that the “debacle” had unleashed a great many *Jesus & Mo* cartoon strips on Facebook and on other sites. These show *J & M* in scenarios “such as comparing Twitter followers, playing music at an ‘open mic night’ and sleeping in the same bed together”.

Nasser pointed out that Richard Dawkins had praised the cartoon strip, saying “*Jesus and Mo* cartoons are wonderfully funny and true. They could offend only those actively seeking to be offended – which says it all.”

Nasser commented: “It is not for Mr. Dawkins or anyone else to decide what views are and are not to be found offensive to others. Once a particular act is deemed to be offensive to another, it is only good manners to refrain from, at the very least, repeating that act. In this particular case, when at first the cartoon was uploaded, it could have been mistaken as unintentional offense. When certain Muslims voiced their offense over the issue, for any civil, well-mannered individual or group of individuals, it should then be a question as to the feelings of others and the cartoons should then have been removed ...

“Freedom to insult is the very worst aspect of freedom of expression. It may be argued that such cartoons are in the manner of satire and that satire is a key element in freedom of expression. When examined however, it is clear that these cartoons are not satirical in the least. Satire is characterised by the bringing to light of vices for the purpose of initiating reform within the individual or group of individuals who are satirised. Was this the purpose of cartoons with Jesus and Mohammed (peace be upon them both) lying in bed together, or comparing the number of Twitter followers they have?

“It is clear that the purpose of the cartoon panels is not to initiate serious discussion regarding the holy founders of either religion. The cartoons only have one purpose – to mock and deride and poke fun.

“If Christians or Muslims take offense at this, it is not for atheists to rejoinder with “they could offend only those actively seeking to be offended”. It is not for atheists to decide what will or will not offend believers of different religions.”

We're having Jesus for dinner

Fomer BBC producer and ex-Catholic **PAUL ARNOLD**, now a freelance journalist based in Spain, attempts to get to grips with the doctrine of transubstantiation

In most cultures cannibalism remains the ultimate taboo, yet for Roman Catholics it's the order of the day. In hundreds of thousands of churches across the world millions of Catholics are tucking into flesh and drinking blood, accompanied not by tribal beats, but by pastoral organ music. This unappetising menu comes courtesy of the doctrine of transubstantiation, which to put it mildly, is seriously weird.

This is the Roman Catholic belief that the bread and wine served at Mass are literally transformed into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ when consecrated by a priest, though they seem to all the senses and to scientific investigation to be as they were before, maintaining the appearance, odour and taste of bread and wine.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it like this:

By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation.

The belief stems from the Last Supper when Jesus held some bread in his hands and apparently said "this is my body".

The most obvious interpretation of his words would of course be a non-literal one, but that wouldn't do for the leadership of the Catholic Church. It went straight down the fairy-tale, you-couldn't-really-make-this-stuff-up-but-we're-going-to-anyway route.

This is a teeth-gnashingly irritating affront to reason, but then that should come as no surprise from a body that believes in the virgin birth, hell, God, life after death, guardian angels and all the other mumbo jumbo.

Many other Christian denominations have a more refined view, believing that the words are symbolic and that Christ is physically present during Mass in some other way (yes I know he isn't there but it makes the religious folks happy thinking he is).

Yet for some baffling reason Catholics cling onto a literal interpretation and Jesus becomes food, something to nibble on before the end of the service.

So just what part of Christ's body are they consuming? His head, legs, nose, eyes, feet? And what if you are a vegetarian? Nobody

appears to know exactly what they are tucking into when they are cannibalising the supposed son of God. They just state that it's the "body of Christ". And I don't know about you, but doesn't the drinking of his blood have something of a satanic ring about it?

How the heck did we get to this stage of human evolution and sophistication with people actually believing this hokey? These are ideas that hail from a time when the worldview of most was awash with magic and superstition as they had no other way of explaining cause and effect and the rules and laws that governed nature.

The Church offers no explanation of how the substance of bread and wine can be the body and blood of Christ at the same time. They do start to invoke Aristotelean thought and some old tosh about substance and accidents, calling it one of the religion's greatest mysteries. But to anyone with at least half a functioning brain, there is no mystery.

I know people who in most respects are perfectly intelligent and rational, except when it comes to religion, particularly transubstantiation; they actually believe it. And their get-out clause for accusations of cannibalism is that Jesus is a "divine" being and so the charge doesn't apply.

I can't for the life of me begin to imagine how transubstantiation occurs: that bread and

wine made within the last year are converted into the flesh and blood of a bloke who snuffed it around 2,000 years ago doesn't add up.

Flesh decays after death and in any case, unless Jesus was the size of Jabba the Hutt and then some, there wouldn't be enough to go round. Maybe you can work it out – answers on a postcard please.

However, credit where credit is due, transubstantiation did inspire my most recent *eureka* moment, one that could potentially net me millions.

In a quiet ceremony the other day I uttered a few magic words over my coffee table and it magically transformed into a pile of gold bullion. Impressive I know, but that was just for starters. The really clever part is that it managed to retain the appearance and feel of a coffee table.

I think I am on the cusp of something big here, although I have yet to convince any buyers of my new found ability. I can't really prove how I did it, but you believe me don't you?

Look, I know that my comments may sound silly and facetious, but the atavistic thinking behind this quack of a doctrine doesn't warrant anything more.

Like all other religious beliefs, transubstantiation is very hard to swallow.

US student win prayer mural lawsuit

A STUDENT at Cranston High School West in Cranston, Rhode Island, has been hailed a hero by the American Humanist Association for taking a stand against a prayer mural hanging for over 50 years in the school's auditorium. Its presence was in clear violation of church-state separation, and this prompted Jessica Ahlquist demand its removal.

She brought a lawsuit against the school – and in doing so unleashed torrents of abuse from some fellow students as well as Christians in her community. One outraged Christian, in a comment posted on the Internet, described Jessica as "a despicable little monster", adding: "I try really hard to be a good Christian, but this is just too much. This is what happens when kids don't get discipline, and when parents are deadbeats. Boo these people, I hope they lose their homes."

But her stance, however, earned her praise from US District Court Judge Ronald R. Lagueux, who, in ordering the removal of the mural last month, said of Jessica: "The Plaintiff is clearly an articulate and courageous young woman, who took a brave stand, particularly in light of the hostile response she has received from her community."

Judge Lagueux stated in the ruling that the "guiding principle" of the First Amendment to the US Constitution is "government neutrality" and that "no amount of debate can make the School Prayer anything other than a prayer, and a Christian one at that."

The judge also noted that the open meeting conducted to get the public to oppose the student's case "at times resembled a religious revival."

LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

BARBARA SMOKER discusses the fundamental question

“WHY is there something rather than nothing?” Cribbed from Leibniz, this question is often posed by theologians – especially, in my experience, by the intellectual Catholic “order of preachers”, the Dominicans.

If you reply “Why not?”, they will insist that when something is not self-explanatory – that is, it exists but does not have to exist – it is natural to ask why, and there should be an answer. Probably so, you counter – within the system of continuous cause and effect in which we find ourselves, but not necessarily for the total universe. After all, what the questioner is demanding is an explanation for the whole of existence – but explanation means finding causal relationships between one event and another, and by definition there is nothing known beside the universe to relate it to. Not known in the experiential sense, agrees the theologian, but known by inference: “Unless the incipient universe somehow came into existence from nothing, we are forced to assume the existence of an eternal necessary being – God – independent of the universe, and in a causal relationship with it.”

It is the old cosmological argument – one of the five arguments for the existence of God put forward by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, and still the main argument (though usually less philosophically expressed) underlying most god-belief.

Now, I agree that something could hardly have come out of nothing; I also agree with the theologians that it is reasonable to assume a “first cause” from which everything has sprung in this universe of ours – meaning this finite known universe, to which the opening words of *Genesis*, “In the beginning”, obviously refer. That “beginning” is not, of course, necessarily the ultimate beginning of everything – if there ever was such a beginning.

The anonymous author of *Genesis*, some two-and-a-half millennia ago, would surely have been astounded to be told that this universe had so long a history as 13,700-million years, as has now been indisputably calculated from its expansion rate. Furthermore, if we peer backwards beyond this universe, to before the “Big Bang”, I fa-

vour the notion of eternity: in theological terms, an eternal uncaused cause, rather than an absolute beginning.

Modern physicists tell us it is meaningless to say “before the Big Bang”, since that is when time itself began. I remain unconvinced. If this universe is merely one phase of an oscillation, as seems likely, then before the Big Bang there would be the final collapse of the previous universe, and so *ad infinitum*, with a serial “first cause” of each universe, completely compressed after each dissolution. The latest beginning, we now know, set off with an explosion just under fourteen billion (formerly the American billion) years ago – conjecturally following an utmost implosion.

But by what reasoning do theists give this speculative compression of force a personal name, “God”? There is no logic in that. I reject, unequivocally, their unwarranted assumption that the uncaused cause would have consciousness, purpose, and will. A simpler and more credible supposition is surely that it was some sort of basic energy/matter – hardly a supernatural personage with a sudden grandiose creative urge.

In any case, the postulation of a creator fails to answer the original question of “the beginning”, since it leaves open the next obvious question: did this creator have a prior creator, and so on, *ad infinitum*? (Small children, on first hearing the creation story, often ask “Who made God?”)

To be fair, it seemed impossible in past centuries that the whole complex universe could have come about without the deliberate intervention of a supernatural

magician, of even greater complexity. Today, however, physicists are in the process of discovering how, under certain physical conditions, this could have happened. Also, biologists are now on the cusp of fathoming the emergence of life by certain combinations of chemicals forming self-replicating matter. For present-day theologians to ignore these current discoveries and projections suggests an element of wishful thinking in their faith.

A leading exponent today of the cosmological argument for God is the American philosopher William Craig. His thesis begins logically enough: “(1) Everything that begins to exist has a cause of its existence; (2) the universe began to exist; (3) therefore the universe has a cause of its existence.” But I can perceive no logic behind his jumping to the corollary that this uncaused cause was a conscious person.

So I agree with his cosmological argument on every point bar one: the consciousness that he ascribes to the uncaused cause. The theistic scenario seems to be that such a being, after an eternity of non-creation, suddenly decided to actualise a universe, which would expand to enormous proportions – in order, supposedly, to provide one tiny inhabitable planet in a small solar system of a particular galaxy for the rise of a congenial Man Friday life form.

Coincidentally, I had just finished drafting this article when (on December 13) two teams of physicists working on the collision of sub-atomic particles in the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva announced that they are hovering on the verge of finally detecting “the God particle”.

This is more technically called the Higgs boson – named after Peter Higgs who, in 1964, theorised its existence within a nano-second of the Big Bang, to explain why particles have mass and so create matter with gravitational force. But it would hardly be recognisable as creationists’ father-figure superman!

An arrogantly anthropocentric belief, shared by many millions of god-believers, is that the whole complexity of the universe, of space and time, was designed by this God of theirs with the sole motive of producing human beings on Earth, as “objects of his love”. I like



‘Well, either we’ve found the Higgs boson, or Fred’s just put the kettle on.’



The Higgs boson is the particle that is thought to give everything else in the universe mass, but that bit of theoretical physics is unlikely to be the reason most people have heard of it. Its theistic nickname – ‘the God particle’ – was coined by Nobel-prize winning physicist Leon Lederman, but Higgs himself, pictured above, is no fan of the label. ‘I find it embarrassing because, though I’m not a believer myself, I think it is the kind of misuse of terminology which I think might offend some people.’ Photo: The Guardian/Murdo McLeod

Voltaire’s fairytale mockery of this idea, in which a house-fly, finding itself in the Palace of Versailles, looks around in amazement at the size and splendour of the structure and its decor, and thinks to itself: “Fancy, all this has been created just for me!”

Anyway, what sort of love is it that the purposive creator is supposed to have for his creatures? It inevitably raises a philosophical problem from all the suffering endured by sentient earthling creatures, including ourselves – a problem, however, only for those who cling to the belief that the first cause was a conscious being and who choose to think that he(?) was a caring creator. On the evidence of all the suffering caused by parasites, predators, diseases and natural disasters, as well as human inhumanity, the dreamed-up creator, supposedly purposeful and omnipotent, lacks a sense of morality as we conceive it, and cannot possibly empathise with us.

We non-believers have no such philosophical problem, since we posit no wilful intention behind all the widespread suffering – which we see as merely random, not deliberate. For us, the only problem that arises from it is how to meliorate the suffering.

In my book for teenagers, *Humanism* (first edition 1973), I espoused the theory that the vast observable universe in which we find ourselves, comprising many billions of stars with their satellites, in each of many billions of galaxies, began with a colossal explosion (the “Big Bang”) –

though, at the time of my writing, this hypothesis was still vying for scientific acceptance with that of the “steady state” cosmological model of the universe. Before long, the idea of the steady state was dropped, since calculated predictions based on it proved to be false while those based on the Big Bang model turned out right, and microwave radiation from it can still be detected when tuning a radio set.

To avoid the unlikely corollary of supposing “something out of nothing”, I also put forward in my book the speculative theory that our present universe might be in the expanding phase of an eternal

“oscillation” – thus being destined after a few more billion years to collapse almost to nothing (when, say, the original force is exceeded by gravitational pull and black holes prevail, to an ultimate coalescence of infinite density) until the next Big Bang sets it all off again.

An even more mind-blowing notion has more recently arisen that this universe of ours might actually be just one of billions of simultaneous universes having variant physical laws (and therefore being undetectable by us), known collectively as the multiverse or meta-universe or megaverse – a speculative theory that is given credence in Stephen Hawking’s latest book, *The Great Design*.

The best model of this speculative multiverse is a huge conglomeration of bubbles, each of which has its period of existence before bursting – our own universe being one such bubble. In that case, the “first cause” of our universe would be the surrounding multiverse.

If the physical laws of all the supposed simultaneous or sequential universes did indeed happen to differ, this would enhance the possibility of at least one of them containing at least one galaxy containing at least one solar system that has at least one planet (say, Earth) with the fine-tuned parameters necessary to bring about and maintain self-replicating matter – ie life – and most probably many.

With all this wonder around us, what need is there for jejune creationist fairytales? In his recent book for children, *The Magic of Reality*, Richard Dawkins concludes with the words:

“The truth is more magical – in the best and most exciting sense of the word – than any myth or made-up mystery or miracle. Science has its own magic: the magic of reality.”

Aliens most likely did it

TALK Radio Europe in Spain last month tackled the subject of the origins of the universe, life and everything by having US “expert” Lloyd Pye on air for about 15 minutes.

Pye, author of *Everything You Know Is Wrong*, has concocted “Intervention Theory” which, according to his website, “challenges Creationism, Intelligent Design, and Evolution, by offering plausible explanations for many of the conundrums left unanswered by those other theories”.

Pye believes that “Intragalactic Terraformers” are much more likely to be the actual source of life on Earth “than anything Creationism or Evolution can hope to rationally account for”.

His new eBook – *Intervention Theory* – begins with a consideration of the true origins of the universe; then to the origin of life itself, “which almost no one understands”; then suggests that new forms of ever more complex life seem to have been brought to Earth on a schedule rather than to have developed here.

Pye thinks some of the earliest Miocene apes, which appeared 23 million years ago, live on today as the hair-covered bipedal primates (bigfoot, yeti, etc.) he calls “hominoids”.

– Barry Duke

Rising to the creationists' challenge

With a set of 15 questions, Creation Ministries International challenges us to 'Question Evolution!' **JAMES MERRYWEATHER** agrees – but suggests in this two-part essay that anyone who decides not to *believe* in evolution (an oxymoronic concept requiring its oxy only out of politeness) ought really to acquire a working knowledge of evolution biology first. That is, they should make sure they have a reasonable grasp of what it is they protest they do not believe in – as if belief were necessary anyway.

A bus timetable contains information without which the aspiring traveller will not get far. Likewise, the scientific theory of evolution consists of information without which – as Theodosius Dobzhansky¹ famously observed – the study of biology makes not a lot of sense (assuming sense, not bias confirmation, is what you are after).

Neither bus times nor biological facts constitute a matter of opinion to be adopted simply by personal choice. You cannot presume a wished-for bus will pick you up at the time you believe it will if the timetable says otherwise. Darwin's marvellous theory persuasively explains the facts of biology for which personal acceptance emerges from understanding not casual whim. If you know the truth, you don't need to believe too; belief is not the alternative of knowing.

If, after mature informed reflection on evolution, rejection is then chosen, the evolution rejected should surely be the version being opposed – as understood and published by biologists – not the caricature advanced by CMI throughout their 'fifteen critically important questions'.

A major stumbling block for CMI and other creationists is that when they argue against evolution as it really is they rapidly come unstuck, whereas by brazenly arguing their own bogus version – it is easily shown to be so – they can at least feel safe, huddled with their friends of a similar mind, in their own, private little intellectual *cul-de-sac*.

However, creationists make so much noise it is impossible to ignore them. Their questions must be answered.

Creation Ministries International (CMI) has launched a campaign aimed at flummoxing the "Evolutionists" by posing questions they can't answer:

"Our exciting 'Question evolution' tract, 15 Questions for Evolutionists, provides 15 critically important questions that evolutionists cannot adequately answer. Share them with your friends, family and fellow students."
How very odd it is that the 15 questions

are aimed at "Evolutionists" whilst potential distributors are encouraged to "Share them with your friends, family and fellow students." How many of those are likely to understand evolution to the extent they could be fairly examined on the subject? This leaflet reads as though it has been devised (not particularly cleverly) in order to wrong foot scientists who have not yet heard The Good News – yet the recommended target audience is friends, family and fellow students.

Should we biologists ever find ourselves confronted with the 15 questions, the campaign makes it possible for CMI's naïve door-to-door zealots to tax our knowledge of evolutionary theory, whilst saving them the bother of actually knowing what evolution is about. Instead, all they need do is thrust this ready-made leaflet, Jehovah's Witness-style, under the nose of their chosen confoundee and demand, "Bet you can't answer these questions", possibly followed by assurance that when we have completed the process we will realise that the Genesis myth is supported by science.

Most leaflets of any sort get dropped in the bin unread, and this one is unlikely to buck that trend. However, the few who take time to read *Question evolution!* will find CMI's 15 questions have been carefully formulated to stop "Evolutionists" in their tracks and oblige them, using an argument that purports to be scientific (and is demonstrably nothing of the sort), to acknowledge the truth of God's creation and, in the fullness of time, convert them to CMI-style fundamentalist Christianity.

According to the CMI definition, I am probably an "Evolutionist", and indeed so I am if that means I have a pretty reasonable working acquaintance with biology and its unifying theory, evolution. Even so, the stopping-in-tracks tactic proved very effective, but not in the way CMI intended, that is by baffling me with disconcerting biological truths I could not face.

You see, the CMI version of biology is different from biology as understood by

biologists. If I had assumed the 15 questions were reasonable, I would have found them very difficult to answer. However, by design or – let's allow them benefit of the doubt – by accident, CMI got all their questions wrong, so it was only after a bit of head-scratching that I felt I could begin to tackle the unanswerable 15.

What chance, therefore, a non-biologist and what chance the CMI foot soldier? Imagine the quality of debate between two ardent opponents neither of whom has the slightest knowledge of the subject they are discussing: I believe "A" and I'm right. Well, I believe "B", so you're wrong. Imagine the quality of debate, though, between an evolution-illiterate CMI rep. and a quick-witted, well-informed biologist?

The science is ultimately irrelevant to CMI. What really matters to them is: are you a Christian or are you an "Evolutionist"? Note that to CMI "Evolutionist" is a religious stance, not a biological discipline.

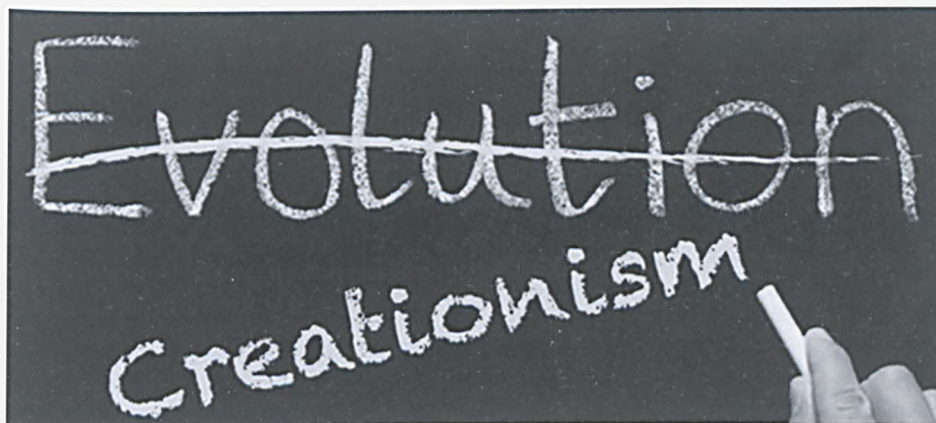
In the present context, "Evolutionist" is a derogatory label applied by creationists to anyone who believes in evolution – no biological special training necessary. If you consider that the creation as described in Genesis is a little too primitive for serious consideration in these post-Darwinian times, then you are an "Evolutionist". Evolutionist = Atheist; Atheist = Evolutionist.

"I was an atheist and evolutionist for 50 years. If I was still an evolutionist then I would still be an atheist. Belief in evolution is one of the reasons why people reject Christianity"

– Michael M.²

If you are an "Evolutionist", you are also – they will assure you – pathetically doubtful about the purpose and meaning of life, distressed by having no idea how you came to be here and woefully fretful about what will happen to you after death. That's hardly my experience, though Philip Bell of CMI seems to know better:

"In their wilful unbelief, they have chosen an evolutionary philosophy of life to avoid a sense of accountability to their Maker." and



he goes on to warn, under the heading Evolution, Heaven and Hell: “[E]volution ... so often leads to pessimism and a rejection of eternal life.”³

This is so wide of the mark he might as well be advising Tinkerbell to mow the lawn with a soufflé. What biologists do is study biology. While we are getting on with that, we are not bothering about accountability to any “maker”, which spectre most of us consider to be a figment of human imagination anyway. This “maker and eternal life” which Mr Bell alleges we are rejecting, just do not come into it – irrelevant – and in spite of our atheism and evolutionism, scientists tend to function poorly if not optimistic.

Biology enters into the creationist view of evolution only when they seek to undermine it, and they are not very clever at that. To them it’s a sub-intellectual faith-choice thing, so to be their sort of “Evolutionist”, you don’t necessarily have to know the subject. All you need to do is choose to believe in evolution, their only alternative to believing in the truth of the Bible.

The scaffold divers of Pentecost Island believe that the closer they get to the ground (ankles bound with vines to ensure their “safety” as they do so), the better their crops will grow the following year. Does it work? Hindus believe that without cremation by outdoor funeral pyre the soul will be trapped in the skull forever – not even CMI Christians believe that.

Many people believe in the healing power of crystals, communication with dead ancestors, energy channelling, foot-stroking, hyperdilute non-drugs, ear-candles, Dead Sea mud and so on. Some people are certain they have been abducted by alien creatures or flown to Jupiter and conversed (even mated) with the residents. People believe all sorts of guff that isn’t true. What about knowing or being persuaded by things that are demonstrably true or at least plausible?

When asked, “Which do you believe in: creation or evolution?” I reply that I believe in neither, emphasising the philosophical point that I do not actually believe in evolution. That tends rather nicely to provoke discussion rather than run it into the buff-

ers. Of the two, evolution better explains all my personal biological observations, but I have no need to believe those observations or the theory that so elegantly unites them. Currently, on balance, I’m a shed-load more than fifty percent persuaded and that’s plenty, whereas Genesis provides ‘scientific explanations’ that are a shed-load less convincing in the light of tangible evidence.

So, the “Evolutionists” to whom the 15 questions are aimed are probably not biologists, let alone biologists who have a competent knowledge of evolution and creationism who can unravel the 15 questions (which can at best be described as appallingly muddled) and reply to the questionnaire. Most will be potential converts who at the time of asking admit to an insipid belief in evolution they have picked up through social drift rather than informed scientific persuasion.

Moreover, it is likely that in most situations neither questioner nor questionee will actually understand the 15 questions, not only because of knowledge deficit but also because of the content of the questions, which is incorrect, and presentation, which is muddled and/or shamelessly leading (see Q13b). [The image of Horace Rumpole rising in all his corporate magnificence in protest to Judge Bullingham about a leading question sneaked in counsel for the prosecution is irresistible.] In spite of those considerable intellectual obstacles, the questioner will be persistent whilst the victim will be expected to attempt a reply and decide, according to personal whim, which god (God or Science?) they will worship in future.

Evolution is science, not a yes/no choice alternative to religion. CMI generously defines evolution for us as “the naturalistic origin of life and its diversity”. We should be grateful for a definition (no irony intended) because creationists are usually reluctant to say precisely what it is they’re on about and it suits sceptics like myself if they provide some structure before their interrogation begins. For once, they have got their definition half right, fifty percent better than usual. Diversity yes, origins no, for evolution is change over time, not invention.

Evolution is a theoretical suite of natural

processes that generated and continue to generate biological diversity. The origin of life is another matter altogether. Let’s begin with a few proper definitions of evolution:

- The process of giving off a gaseous product, or of heat (not applicable here).
- Change over time (this is our definition).
 1. Geological: eg mountain building; rock formation; plate tectonics.
 2. Topographical: eg landscape change due to glaciation, erosion and deposition in riverbeds.
 3. Physical: The star birth and death creation of chemical elements and everything, ever since the Big Bang.
 4. Chemical: Formation and growth of molecules by pairing and aggregation of their elements driven by their inbuilt affinities until they eventually had the property (among others) that allowed 5) to begin: self-replication.
 5. Biological: Descent with modification among living organisms. The processes by which different kinds of living organisms are thought to have developed and diversified from earlier forms during the history of the earth.

Having established precisely what “evolution” means in its own scientific world we might now concede that definition 4 can be considered part of the evolutionary process, even 3, then the CMI definition of evolution is acceptable, meaning that this analysis need not be quite so devastating a hatchet job as I had intended. It really doesn’t matter a whole lot because, set against what follows, that concession is a tiddler.

What follows are the first four of CMI’s questions and my answers. The rest will appear in the second part of this essay in the March issue. To experience CMI’s *Question evolution!* campaign and their devastating 15 Questions, with all the associated commotion, you can do so at <http://creation.com/question-evolution>.

Q1. How did life originate?

A1. A good question which goes horribly wrong in CMI hands.

I agree with the delightfully outspoken biologist P Z Myers that evolution is what happened after the origin of life, so this question ought to be irrelevant in this context. However, having already argued myself beyond this point (temporarily, in order to reduce detail and elaboration to a minimum), let’s give this question a hearing.

CMI begins by quote mining and continues to do so throughout. Anyone can find quotations that in part or wholly support their case, and they are particularly valuable if they appear to be utterances that represent the opposing view on your behalf. Quotation can be an almost poetic way to show that other people agree with what you are proposing but often more elegantly put. How-

ever, what other people – particularly nincompoops – have written does not provide proof of anything. The two given accompanying Q1 contribute little, other than potentially impress the ignorant. I intend from here on to ignore CMI's quotations, dismissed as sheer obfuscation. Many have been lifted out of their original context resulting in changed meaning, a malevolent procedure.

There is nothing more awkward than trying to answer a question based on premises that are wrong. As a student I sometimes faced this sort of questioning when defending my research before academic inquisitors. I found it embarrassingly intimidating, yet struggled to blurt out an intelligent reply and came unstuck. It soon sank in just how hazardous it can be to assume that an expert knows what s/he's talking about and thereafter would always question the question before answering.

Later in Q1 the anonymous CMI interrogator asks:

"A minimal cell needs several hundred proteins. Even if every atom in the universe were an experiment with all the correct amino acids present for every possible molecular vibration in the supposed evolutionary age of the universe, not even one average-sized functional protein would form. So how did life with hundreds of proteins originate just by chemistry without intelligent design?"

The question is based on erroneous premises, so just don't try to answer it. Creationists are always demanding to know how a complex cell can have just popped into existence like that and the question is monumentally wrong. Dr Farid Abou-Rahme, representing the Creation Science Movement in Portsmouth, has propounded some typically absurd claims:

"Scientists still cling to the idea of the spontaneous generation of microscopic animals" and "Evolution tells us that the first living cell came out of dead matter".

Biologists never suggested life began as the sort of complex single cell imagined here, thousands of components spontaneously assembled from scratch in a soup of chemical basics. Some creationists have even gone to the bother of calculating the odds against (which, of course, comes out super astronomical), but life didn't begin with a cell – not of the advanced construction creationists imply – such as an amoeba or even the most rudimentary bacterium. We're dealing with evolution here, a process that goes way back in time to basic simplicities, the complex chemistry that preceded the very simplest biological entity. If we call it a "cell", it's likely to have been no more than a molecule trapped inside a fatty globule.

The concept RNA World⁵ is now generally accepted as a probable precursory chemistry that led to life: perhaps short strand

self-replicating molecules encapsulated in self-assembling phospholipid vesicles. In laboratories around the world, experimental scientists are recreating the components of early life in the laboratory, (bottom-up) and Craig Venter has manufactured an entire bacterial genome (DNA) from scratch and made it work in a bacterium (top-down).⁶ It has been confidently predicted that any day somebody will report having synthesised new life forms entirely from their basic components. They are unlikely to be exactly the same as our ancestor (maybe we will never know), but will be parallel versions, enough to satisfy biologists at least that life on Earth could have begun in a similar manner.

Even though it is not, strictly speaking, a question about an evolutionary process, we can answer the sensible part of Q1 *How did life originate?* Like anything in theoretical science it will be provisional: "At present nobody precisely knows, but we have a very good idea and, before long, we will have a convincing explanation for you, and here are some suggestions." Science is homing in on an answer and not ashamed of its incompleteness, but will CMI and other creationists ever be satisfied with ever-improving plausible explanations that relentlessly contradict their scriptures? Unlikely (because it is forbidden).

If people are going to argue with the scientists, they should not make up a false version of the science. If they want reality, there is plenty on the internet, and even more in the science literature and in readily available, highly readable books. But that's not the CMI way. First, as in Q1, they tell their poorly informed audience how scientists' work is not. Then they proceed to rubbish their special bogus version and denigrate science that it is not and the scientists who did not devise it.

Q2. How did the DNA code originate? How did the DNA coding system arise without it being created?

A2. The question is wrong.

If CMI were to take the trouble to find out, they would *know* this is all adequately explained by the scientists who are doing the research. For easy learning I recommend to listen to: *Frontiers: Acts of Creation*⁷ and to watch: *The Cell: The Spark of Life – Part Three* (BBC).⁸ Let's argue about facts and informed speculation rather than CMI-style fantasy.

Q3. How could mutations create the huge volumes of information in the DNA of living things?

A3. The question is wrong.

There is a lot of text in this question, which does nothing but generate fog that obscures the fact that the question is, once again, wrong. No scientist would ever assert that the information in DNA came into being entirely through the occurrence of mu-

tations. Mutations happen, true, but they are, like the driver turning the steering wheel is part of the bus travel experience, just part of a multi-functional story. To think that asking such a question threatens the integrity of evolutionary theory is naïve.

The bearer of leaflets has "scholarly" examples for you, dressed up as science with the intention of taxing your scepticism re Intelligent Design (ID):

"How did a 32-component rotary motor like ATP synthase (which produces the energy currency, ATP, for all life), or robots like kinesin (a 'postman' delivering parcels inside cells) originate?"

Why not ask him or her to tell you all about rotary molecular motors, how adenosine triphosphate and kinesin work, accompanied by, "What do AMP and ADP do?" Also ask, "Why have Michael Behe's habitual blood clotting cascade example of ID disappeared from your case and why has the old 'bacterial flagellar motor' now got a new name: 'rotary molecular motor'?" If they want to discuss science, robustly oblige them to do so. I'd stake a lot on their inability even to pronounce their examples, let alone explain and defend them. If they do get beyond that point of confusion, then oblige the doorstep inquisitor to justify ID in depth and see how they get on.

Q4. Why is natural selection, a principle recognized by creationists, taught as "evolution"?

A4. The question is wrong.

Creationists keep saying this again and again and the answer is: "Is it? Show me."

Perhaps some inept biology teachers get their subject wrong, but when properly taught, natural selection occupies a position as a vital, but nonetheless subsidiary process within evolution. It is not evolution itself (because it is not).

Once more, having asked the wrong question, the questioner unnecessarily develops the illegitimate argument. Natural selection does not explain evolution, but it is an extremely important evolutionary function and probably Darwin's most significant realisation during his formulation of the theory.

CMI goes on to ask: "How does natural selection explain goo-to-you evolution?" Answer: On its own, it doesn't. Now let me explain this properly ... well, I could, but not here, or anybody can read a good book about it.

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Denys Drower: a tribute

LAST December 9 Denys Drower, a notable contributor to the *Freethinker*, died at his home in Cambridge, surrounded by friends and family.

At 93, Denys was quite literally my oldest friend, though I only had the pleasure of knowing him since 1999. Then working on a small town paper, I had been invited to a party to launch a CD, *Ferni's Paradox*, based around material by a notorious left-field local poet and satirist. The most remarkable thing about the CD (apart from the subject matter) was the narrator, who sounded for all the world like a BBC announcer from the era when the shipping forecast was read by chaps in evening dress. Denys – father to the CD's creator – was that narrator, but then his son thought I might help “the old man” with another project. Within another year, as other remarkable folk joined us, that project became the Isle of Man Freethinkers.

Denys was born the year the First World War ended, and was a Cambridge engineering graduate just as the next one broke out. After Eight Army service as a captain, he joined the BBC as an announcer on the old Third Programme and Home Service. He also worked on the early *Goon Shows* and *In Town Tonight* before moving to BBC management, where he later reorganised talk and current affairs broadcasting for Radio 1 and 2. On his eventual retirement he moved to his wife's “homeland”, the Isle of Man.

Denys cherished those high BBC standards he helped create, and was scathing about lower current ones. As he once said to me, in his day there was a formal way to introduce a Bishop or a Prime Minister, but equally a formal obligation to ask them straight questions and for them to answer. His criticism included the sloppiness of senior BBC management like Mark Damazer for their failure to respond to public enquiries or suggestions – even from BBC “vets” like Denys.

The octogenarian Denys I and the other freethinkers knew also found time, amongst other things, to start the Manx Model Engineering Society (who built and ran a model railway at the local wildlife park) and the Manx Poetry Society (at whose pub evenings his anti-clerical sonnets got huge laughs). He also wrote a novel, and even, for a while, acted as Commodore to a local yacht club.

He only started slowing down in 2008 when, following the sudden death of his son and the deteriorating health of his wife, he moved back to be with other family in Cambridge.

One of my last memories of Denys is of visiting the wildlife park with my small daughter and her asking to go on the train. At the “station” a familiar figure rose from a deckchair, pocketed the book he was reading and punched our tickets. My sharp-eyed daughter turned and asked, “Daddy, how can a watchmaker be blind?”

How typical, and marvellous, that Denys could still provoke such questions from a child, over 80 years his junior, in his final years.

Editor's note: Shortly before his death, Denys submitted a poem to the *Freethinker*, entitled *Second Chance – Tunisia, April 1943*. In his introduction, headed *The Great US Army Lie – There are no atheists in foxholes!* he wrote: “Rubbish! quite untrue. Casting my mind back nearly 70 years, I remember being in a slit trench (what the Yanks call a fox hole) with my company signaller in the front line of the 8th Army, as we approached Tunis. In front of us a regiment of German 88mm guns had our range precisely. They set about a prolonged bombardment of our line. Our terror factor varied, because we could tell, by listening to the boom of the gun and the whine of the approaching shell whether it would land close to us or further along the line. If the gap was about two seconds, it would land a good way away. If it was only a half second we cowed down in our trench. My

By Stuart Harthill

signaller said: ‘This makes one begin to think about praying, sir, doesn't it?’ ‘Who to, Jimmy,’ I replied, ‘God? I don't believe there is one. I put my faith in Lady Luck! And in this hole and my tin hat!’ Jimmy laughed. A few minutes later an event occurred which I chronicled several decades later in a poem entitled *Second Chance*.”

“You don't hear the shell that kills you!” they said.

Not true at all; not true;

They knew with absolute certainty,

He and his signaller knew.

“This is it!” he said as they cowered down;

They had said “You will turn to God!”

That's just tosh! He was cursing the Boche.

When the shell hit the ground with a thud – a thud?

The trench edge it hit and it spun away

Tumbling, unburst, into mud.

More than one failed to explode that day.

He wondered who'd made it a dud.

Some slave worker from Prague perhaps

Or one of the luckier Jews,

Or someone from Antwerp, or Budapest

Left out a small part of the fuse.

Did he live through the war? Was he found out and shot

Did he die of severe malnutrition?

He wished he'd been able to give him thanks –

His thanks for that vital omission!

New Turin Shroud findings welcomed by the Vatican

A RECENT investigation carried out by scientists at Italy's National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development reportedly shows that the markings on the Turin Shroud could only have been created by a “blinding flash of light”.

Monsignor Giuseppe Ghibert of the commission in Turin, which supervises the “holy” rag in which the dead Jesus was allegedly wrapped, told the official Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*: “Revelations about the shroud easily assume a sensational tone, but in this case the measured way the scientists speak of their research is to be appreciated.”

The researchers reportedly found that the markings had been created by a “flash” similar to an ultraviolet laser – a technology far beyond the medieval forgers which sceptics argue must have made the 14ft by 3ft shroud. The findings have led to fresh suggestions that the imprint “was indeed created by a huge burst of energy accompanying the resurrection of Christ”.

Professor Paolo Di Lazzaro, who led the study, said: “When one talks about a flash of light being able to colour a piece of linen in the same way as the shroud, discussion inevitably touches on things such as miracles. But as scientists, we were concerned only with verifiable scientific processes. We hope our results can open up a philosophical and theological debate.”

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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THE BURQA AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

I THANK John Radford for replying to my letter in the December issue, which expressed my dismay over his article about not banning the burqa in Britain (*Freethinker*, Nov 2011). From the facetious start – “We can’t do it anywhere else” – to his misrepresentation of my argument about “wrong is wrong”, his letter just proves that I was right in my opinion.

John Radford admits that clothing can be used as an instrument of control, but apparently can’t see that the burqa is an example of that. Does he really think that the burqa is not that bad? As a Professor of Psychology, I would have thought that he would be well aware of the damaging affects of discrimination and dehumanisation that the burqa has on women, and of the offensive, patriarchal undercurrent that drives its use. (Did you know that the word burqa was originally the name given to a harness used by Arabic men to control their livestock? – I’m sure that there are at least eight sexist jokes in there somewhere!) However, if he isn’t, then I would again ask him to read articles by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Maryam Namazie about the subject to get a better idea.

He then asks what should be banned ... “overcoats?”! The clue is in the heading ... The burqa! It is a specific garment for a specific purpose, and we should find it deeply offensive. However, I would like to add a *caveat* to my letter and a reminder of my previous letter on this topic from the October issue. What I actually want first is a proper debate about the burqa; about its affects and merits. Every time a debate starts, it is smothered by an appeal to a wrongly defined liberty – “They should be allowed to wear it, if they want to”.

This is a fallacious, manipulative statement. Do women have the right to wear their skin with pride and walk around naked? Do sa-

do-masochists have the right to walk around with butt-plugs exposed? If people want to wear things in their own home or in specific venues like nudist camps, places of worship or S&M clubs, then that is up to them, but the public domain is a different matter. How would the Muslim community react if naturists exercised this form of liberty? Why should Muslims be exempt from the responsibilities that the rest of us live by?

John Radford goes on to try and clarify his comments about the violent reaction from Muslims over the ban as just an indication of their “strength of feeling”. So what? What if they do feel strongly about it? If we find that the burqa goes against our society’s movement towards egalitarianism, and therefore is unacceptable in the public domain, their “strength of feeling” should not influence the decision about the ban. I ask again, if members of the BNP objected “strongly” enough to equality laws, should they be exempt?

Where I *do* agree with John Radford is in the point that he made in a letter in the same October issue (ironically next to mine!) where he said, “Personally, I think there is still a great need for the *Freethinker* to show up the falsities of religion and the damage it all too often does.” The burqa is a clear example of this damage and it’s just a shame that he doesn’t believe in his own words.

Richard Francis
London

HOMOPHOBIA

I WAS pleased to read that Mark Taha (*Freethinker*, January) also regards himself as a libertarian. However, the brevity of his letter supporting the “right to be gay” and the “right to be homophobic”, as well as his assertion that “anti-discrimination and equality laws violate freedom of speech, choice and asso-

ciation” is indicative that his particular brand of libertarianism is in need of further refinement. There are bonkers right-wing libertarians who might share Mark’s views. Some of them think we should also legalise class A drugs and child pornography. There are also bonkers left-wing libertarians who think we should free all prisoners and abandon our already flimsy border controls. Libertarian freethinkers cannot support either position, as what these extremists advocate is not a “free society” but a “free-for-all” society.

Not for one moment do I think that Mark falls into either camp, but I suspect I have been around the block a few more times than he has, so perhaps he will appreciate a mature libertarian critique of his position.

Firstly, being gay is something innate to one’s being; being homophobic is just an opinion, hence the freedom to be gay (ie be yourself) necessarily trumps the right to abuse or discriminate against gay people. Furthermore, being gay does not impact on the homophobe, whereas being homophobic impacts directly on the gay person, in a way that is detrimental to the freedoms they are entitled to enjoy and which heterosexuals take for granted. Because one cannot equate homosexuality with homophobia, one cannot accord equal status to the two social phenomena.

Secondly, it is naive to assume that society is a level playing field on which its various social constituencies compete on an equal basis. Majorities almost always wield more power than minorities, unless those minorities are either rich, or have their privileges protected by ideological constructs like apartheid. The trouble with Mark’s vision of a “free-for-all” society, is that it ends up with the strong seizing privileges for themselves and exploiting or disregarding the weak. This is one reason why libertarian freethinkers oppose organised religion, which inevitably seeks special

privileges over non-believers and the outcast whom they seek to disenfranchise.

Equality laws act as a civilising bulwark against those who would cheerfully put up signs saying "No Blacks" in the windows of their businesses, or Christian bigots who open guesthouses to the public, only to turn away that section of the public that is gay. Such laws underwrite our freedoms, they do not take them away. None of these laws prevent anyone from being racist or homophobic if they want to be, nor does it stop them speaking out or campaigning against those they personally dislike (within reason).

Freedom, for the libertarian freethinker, is not about allowing everyone to "do as they please". It is a fragile, complex and nuanced balancing act that is permissive up to a point, but recognises that human beings are not always kind, rational and altruistic, but often flawed, insecure and inclined to selfishness and bullying. We therefore need sensibly framed laws to protect and prioritise all of our conflicting freedoms, with effective sanctions for those who seriously violate the freedoms of others.

Diesel Balaam
London

CELIBATION

WITH regard to László Bitó's piece on the role of celibacy in sexual abuse cases what must be stressed is that priests will continue abusing regardless of any safeguards.

The supposed safeguards by their Church is posturing in an attempt to deflect public outrage. The primal urge within humans to procreate cannot be stilled. The appearance of indifference when priests seem to ignore this urge masks a deep sexual need.

Their celibate existence is in the context of a working life which must daily frustrate and torment them. They hear the sexual practices of their parishioners described in intimate detail in the confessional. They are required to meet and work with young women, who respect them and whom they admire, in parish work.

The certainty of mutual attraction arising, however forbidden, cannot be doubted. They offer guidance to those who intend to marry. In the depths of their personal and hidden sexual anguish, they must perform the marriage ceremony for often nubile young women and their partners. The priest is often an honoured guest at the wedding while being aware that the young couple will soon be enjoying their honeymoon. He will return to his lonely bed and his inflamed imagination.

While mandatory celibacy is demanded the priest is subjected to the misery of an unrequited sexual life. Not only is sex denied but also the possibility of a loving rela-

tionship with a supportive partner.

A priest cannot extinguish the ineluctable sexual drive of human nature. The response to this need may be met by healthy sexual practice, the use of pornography, sexual perversion or dulled by alcohol. Thus the priest is forced to suffer a lifetime of agonising frustration and the stunted emotional life which results.

His sexual satisfactions are bought at the cost of guilt and fear. The pity of it all for the inevitable future victims, and the anguished priests with their bitter awareness of a full life denied, is that the Roman Catholic Church still insists on mandatory celibacy. And mandatory celibacy means many future victims. Until that is accepted little of substance will change.

Denis Watkins
Wales

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

CHRISTOPHER Hitchens was indeed a fiery, and very witty, atheist. I enjoyed his *God Is Not Great* and his articles in the US secular humanist journal *Free Inquiry*. But he was also a complicated personality full of unresolved contradictions and, at times, too much Johnnie Walker Black Label.

In the hedonistic 1960s he opposed the recreational use of drugs but later advocated legalisation of cannabis for medical use. Expelled from the Labour Students for his opposition to the Vietnam war he was re-

cruited into the Internationalists. By day he wrote fiery articles on socialism but at night he swilled champagne with Oxford's elite.

He supported Thatcher's military efforts to free the Falklands from Argentine rule, claiming that this would bring down the army dictatorship. This it did, but at the price of the lives of innocent conscripts.

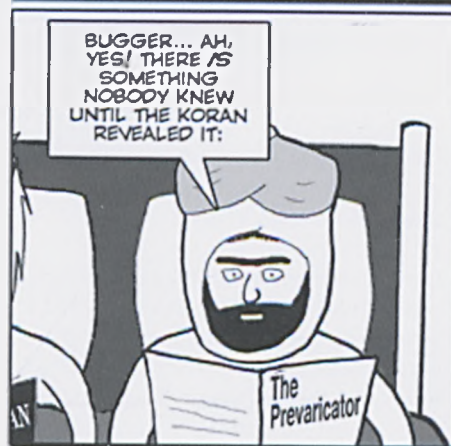
He claimed he was still a Marxist, but not a socialist, seeing the answer to today's economic crisis in Marx's writings. He continued to admire Che Guevara and Lenin's creation of a secular Russia while hobnobbing with Thatcher who he thought was "sexy"! Worst of all he supported the Anglo-American attack on Iraq, seeing this as a better option than "fascism with an Islamic face" He opposed Zionism and supported Irish unity. Perhaps like his opponent in debate the teetotal George Galloway he made the mistake of thinking his enemies' enemies were his friends.

Hitchens deserves to be neither praised nor condemned, but all the complexity and contradictions of his thoughts needs to be understood. That would be a far better tribute to a man who at least made people think and examine again their long cherished ideas and values.

Meanwhile raise a glass to his memory.

Terry Liddle
London

Jesus & Mo



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