



Crazy crusade:
American fanatics declare war on 'godless' Girl Scouts and their cookies



Cross words:
Rowan Williams annoys Christians by saying cross-wearing is more fashion than faith



REG2142
A silly parable:
Weather on seeds & trees



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Afgan Koran-burning: why did Obama apologise?

In mid-February 2012, several Korans were burned with garbage at the Bagram US airbase in Afghanistan. US authorities stated that Korans were available on the base, but the ones in question were destroyed because detainees had written several extremist messages on the pages. The burning triggered anti-US riots that resulted in the killing of two American soldiers and 12 others. The violence continued into early March and took the body count to nearly 40, six of which were American soldiers.

Shortly after the story hit newspapers, President Obama sent a letter to the President of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai. He apologized for the burning, and promised to "hold accountable those responsible" for the incident.

President Hamid Karzai championed President Obama's stance by stating that he "condemned with the strongest words" the burning of the Korans and said "the perpetrators should be punished." In apparent support for the violent acts by fundamentalist Muslims, President Hamid Karzai further stated: "Now that we have shown our feeling it is time to be calm and peaceful."

President Obama promised to bring those responsible to justice; but the question arises, for what? The Bagram airbase is controlled by the United States, and for all intents and purposes, is solely under the law of the United States. It would seem that those responsible were doing nothing more than throwing out the trash. Under United States law, there was no crime committed; and since President Obama would, presumably, not be in favor of handing over those responsible to the Afghan authorities, treating those responsible as criminals would be unjustified.

The letter, then, was a political statement with a reprieve for Afghan retaliation, as the letter included no condemnation of the deadly protests that ensued after the burned Korans were discovered. President Obama would seem to be condoning the acts of violence and other

similar acts for the American people.

And this comes as no surprise. At first glance, one would think the American government would condemn these violent acts, but United States politicians give a pass to the offended religious in fear of repercussions, and this exception is not solely for Muslims.

In 1989, the photographer Andres Serrano won the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's "Award in the Visual Arts" for his work *Piss Christ*, which portrayed a crucifix submerged in the artist's urine. The art was displayed at two exhibits that were federally funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Later that year, the controversial photograph prompted public protests, which gained the support of the federal government when Senator Alphonse D'Amato tore up a copy of *Piss Christ* in the chambers of the US Senate. In 1990, Congress reacted to the controversy by adding amendment §954(d)(1)

into the NEA's reauthorization bill, "directing the Chairperson to ensure that artistic excellence and artistic merit are the criteria by which [grant] applications are judged, taking into consideration general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public" – a federal act that effectively limited the free speech of controversial artists in the United States.

Piss Christ first offended, then drew protests, prompted death threats, and provoked legislation to ban controversial artistic renderings as unsuitable for federal funding. In fact, the violent

protests of the image have continued for over 20 years, with the most recent being a 1,000-person march of fundamentalist French Catholics that resulted in the vandalism and destruction of a print of the work at a museum in Avignon, France.

Like the burning of the Korans, *Piss Christ* was never meant to be offensive, but that does not change either act from being offensive.



Protesters in Afghanistan express their fury over the Koran-burning

(Continued on page 5)

AMERICA'S COOKIE WAR

BARRY DUKE IS GRIPPED BY AN ALL-OUT ASSAULT ON THE GIRL SCOUTS

There are days when I *seriously* wonder whether a sizeable chunk of the American population got wired up all wrong in the manufacturing process. Example: last month I stumbled upon the fact that the American Girl Scouts – who number around 3.2 million – are celebrating their centenary.

Not having even the *remotest* interest in the scouting movement, I was about to move my mouse into more fertile Internet territory when I spotted a side panel in the *USA Today* report that quickened my pulse. It indicated that not all is well with the hundredth birthday bash; that there are people out there who actually *hate* the Girl Scouts with a passion – and they don't want folk to buy their trademark cookies, or engage with them in any other way.

Who are these cookiephobic kooks? Well, there are the Catholics for a start. Some churches gleefully seized on the fact that money raised from the Girl Scouts' cookie sales allegedly support an organisation called

Planned Parenthood, and – most recently in a Virginia diocese – banned Girl Scouts from meeting in their parish halls.

The Girl Scouts' association with Planned Parenthood was enlarged upon by over-Christianised cretin Catherine Glenn Foster on the right-wing *American Thinker* blog:

"A watershed moment for the Girl Scouts came in 1993, when they amended their 'promise' so as to omit the word 'God'. Since then, there has been a slow but steady slide that has landed the organisation in the not-so-loving arms of Planned Parenthood, and the feminists and hard-left politicians whom Planned Parenthood attracts."

Foster added: "Indiana State Representative Rob Morris (Republican, Fort Wayne) sounded a clarion call on these matters last month, when he noticed that out of fifty role models the Girl Scouts currently provide for their members, 'only three have a briefly mentioned religious background – all the rest are feminists, lesbians, or communists'."

It gets crazier. Wendy Wright, former President of Concerned Women for America, and "an outspoken opponent of evolution science, reproductive freedom and LGBT rights", has reportedly made the Girl Scouts a primary target in her war against reason.

Her stated mission right now is to mobilise right-wing forces to, well, make them change their ungodly ways, or, failing that, force them to relocate to some place else – preferably Mars. Part of this demented woman's strategy is to tell all "right-thinking Americans" that "the Girl Scouts and Planned Parenthood are working together to steal children's innocence and make them vulnerable to the negative consequences of promiscuity thereby creating clients for their abortion and STD services".

Wright also said that parents should demand an investigation into whether cash raised from Girl Scout cookie sales goes towards teaching "young girls to be activists and advocates for a radical sexual agenda". She also blamed the Girl Scouts leadership for supporting a "radical, feminist, pro-abortion form of activism, and training these girls up to be feminist activists".

Enter another character from America's pantheon of posturing prats, Family Research Council President Tony Perkins. Perkins wants a national boycott of Girl Scout cookies, which, he alleges, are churned out in their delicious millions to fund a "political agenda"

that not only supports Planned Parenthood but promotes something quite monstrous called "sexual diversity". And just when I thought things could not *possibly* get more insane, Perkins' sidekick, Cathy Cleaver Ruse, bashed the Scouts for employing "cross-dressers" and for not discriminating against transgender scouts. "Last year," she trumpeted, "the Girl Scouts decided to admit boys who dress as girls – which shouldn't come as a surprise, since they have a cross-dresser in their front office."

Rob Boston, of the *Secular News Daily* blog, was as gripped by the "Cookie War" as I had now become – and his take on it was to urge a national buy-up of Girl Scout cookies, which include such tasty-sounding variations as Thin Mints, Trefoils and Samoas.

He pointed out that "the right-wing attacks on the Girl Scouts are fuelled by misinformation and, in some cases, outright lies. For example, the American branch of the Girl Scouts takes no stand on issues like abortion.

"And their alleged godlessness is also a myth. The Girl Scout Promise includes a vow 'to serve God and my country'.

"Most girls still say it, but it's no longer required. The Girl Scouts favour inclusion and didn't want any girl who might feel uncomfortable reciting a religious oath to be excluded."

He concluded: "So take my advice and pick up a couple of extra boxes of Girl Scout cookies this year. If you're watching your weight or can't eat the cookies due to allergies, give them to friends as gifts or donate them to a local food bank. You get great-tasting cookies, the Girl Scouts get support and the Religious Right gets a merit badge in impotent intolerance."

Incidentally, there is an alternative to the Girl Scouts that the godawful Christian conservatives will find far more to their taste: American Heritage Girls. AHG requires members to honour God, and keep their minds and bodies "pure". Their leaders and charter groups must adhere to a statement of faith that requires them to reserve sex until after marriage, which it defines as "a lifelong commitment before God between a man and a woman". It does not allow homosexuals to be leaders or adult members.

Their cookies, if they have any, probably taste like crap.



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justplaincrazy

LESBIAN HUMILIATED BY PRIEST

A LESBIAN who was humiliated by a Catholic priest at her mother's funeral in Maryland, US, has decided to stick with the Church. Barbara Johnson said she was "stunned" when Father Marcel Guarnizo denied her communion at her own mother's funeral because she was a lesbian living "a sin"

The priest also walked out in the middle of Johnson's eulogy to her mother. Last month the Archdiocese of Washington apologised for the episode and admitted that the priest had followed "improper protocol". Johnson later claimed that the outpouring of support she received from within the Church and from other Catholics had "strengthened my faith in the Church itself."

CIRCUMCISION DEATH

NEW YORK prosecutors last month launched an investigation into the death of a newborn boy who died in last September after contracting herpes following his ritual circumcision with oral suction. The cause of death of the two-week-old boy, who died at Maimonides Hospital in Brooklyn on September 28, was Type 1 herpes.

The ritual of oral suction – or in Hebrew, *metzitzah b'peh* – is practiced almost exclusively in ultra-Orthodox communities, despite efforts by the city to curtail it and educate communities about its health risks.

The procedure occurs during the circumcision ritual of the *bris*, as the practitioner, or *mohel*, removes the foreskin of the penis and then sucks the blood from the wound to clean it.

In 2003 and 2004, the city reported three cases of Type 1 herpes that were linked to the circumcision of a boy on Staten Island and twin boys in Brooklyn, one of whom died. The procedures were done by one *mohel*, Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer, who was later prohibited from performing the ritual in New York City.

APOCALYPSE FEARS BOOST BIBLE

HAROLD Camping, 91, has admitted that he got his end-of-the-world dates wrong (May 21 and October 21, 2011), but this was not necessarily a bad thing because people began taking a closer look at their Bibles.

"The Bible," he said in a letter last month, "has, in some ways, come out from under the shadows and is now being discussed by all kinds of people ... Reading about and even discussing the Bible can never be a bad thing, even if the Bible's authenticity is questioned or ridiculed."



Christians do not have a right to wear crosses at work, insists Government



Nadia Eweida, one of a nest of 'persecuted' Christians

SOON-to-retire Archbishop of Canterbury last month annoyed Christians – including his predecessor, Lord Carey – by downplaying the significance of cross wearing.

Speaking at a church service in Rome, where he met the Pope Dr Rowan Williams said the cross had been stripped of its meaning as part of a tendency to manufacture religion. The cross, he said, had become something "which religious people make and hang on to" as a substitute for true faith.

His comments came on the day it emerged that the Government is to argue in the European Court that Christians do not have the right to wear a cross as a visible manifestation of faith.

Williams was immediately slammed for failing to stand up for the rights of believers. Andrea Williams, director of the Christian Legal Centre, which is supporting part of the European Court case involving four "persecuted Christians", said the remarks were "unhelpful".

Judges in Strasbourg are to consider a test case on religious freedom in Britain later this year. It will bring together four separate cases, including that of Nadia Eweida, a British Airways employee who faced disciplinary action for wearing a cross at work.

Lord Cary accused ministers and the courts of "dictating" to Christians and said it was another example of Christianity becoming sidelined in official life.

Documents drawn up by the Foreign Office argue that wearing a cross is not protected under the European Convention on Human Rights because it is not viewed as

an essential component of Christianity.

Carey said that the Government's reasoning was "based on a wholly inappropriate judgment of matters of theology and worship about which they can claim no expertise. The irony is that when governments and courts dictate to Christians that the cross is a matter of insignificance, it becomes an even more important symbol and expression of our faith."

Back in 2010, the ex-archbishop complained: "In recent years, there has been a wave of relentless and shameless attempts to hollow out our nation's deep-seated roots in the Christian faith. This is despite the fact that 72 percent of the population say they are Christian."

The Christian women bringing the case, Nadia Eweida and Shirley Chaplin, claim that they were discriminated against when their employers barred them from wearing the symbols.

They want the European Court to rule that this breached their human right to manifest their religion.

Lawyers for the two women claim that the Government is setting the bar too high and that "manifesting" religion includes doing things that are not a "requirement of the faith", and that they are therefore protected by human rights.

They say that Christians are given less protection than members of other religions who have been granted special status for garments or symbols such as the Sikh turban and kara bracelet, or the Muslim hijab.

Israeli army views influx of ultra-Orthodox Jews with alarm

NEW tensions between secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews have erupted following the Israeli government's decision, earlier this year, to annul the *Tal* Law, which exempted ultra-Orthodox yeshiva (seminary) students from conscription to the Israeli Defence Force (IDF). Yeshiva students have been exempt from national service since the earliest days of the state, after Israel's first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, struck deal with the Haredi community.

Many secular Jews greeted the news with an attitude of "about time too. It's high time these religious spongers started pulling their weight."

But will having ultra-Orthodox Jews serving in the army help bridge the gulf between them and those who are less observant? No, argues Nathan Hersh. In fact, it would be a disaster. Hersh, who served in a combat unit of the Israel Defence Forces until 2011 and currently studies at the International Program in Conflict Resolution and Mediation at Tel Aviv University, wrote in *Haaretz* (March 12): "The army is already engaged in a struggle against emboldened religiousness. Haredim have proven that the rabbi's word comes before those of military commanders. And if the Israel Defense Forces were to increase the number of extreme religious soldiers, it would introduce a new, ultra-Orthodox agenda to the military that, at some point, would work against the army's and the state's agenda."

"If the ultra-Orthodox are incapable of adapting to the civilian standards of a free, democratic society, how could we expect Haredi soldiers to abide by the secular standards of our military?"

"Increased Haredi presence in the army will not bridge the gap between ultra-Orthodox and secular Israelis. Instead, it will bring the problems that already divide Israeli society to the military, and the military is not built to handle it."

"For more than a decade the secular community has been responsible for protecting the country, including the ultra-Orthodox, as a result of the *Tal* Law. And while it stands to reason that the ultra-Orthodox community should be equally affected by the burdens of a free society, including compulsory military service, the IDF cannot become another arena for the ultra-Orthodox onslaught against civic equality."

"If the Haredim gain a larger role in the



A religious Jewish soldier pictured at prayer

IDF, the army risks losing its ethical standards to the demands of the ultra-Orthodox, and any friction in the military will greatly limit its effectiveness."

Already, there are disturbing signs of ultra-Orthodox Jews asserting their presence in the military. A Reuter's report (March 5) tells of the experience of a former infantry commander who fought in three Middle East wars and is now the dean of Israeli defence correspondents.

Roni Daniel recently visited military headquarters in Tel Aviv. On entering a urinal he found a sign saying "Forbidden on the Sabbath" attached to a motion sensor that acts to clean the urinal after every use. "Troops, he realised, were being ordered to defer to Orthodox Jewish curbs on the use of electricity between Friday night and Saturday night."

Reuters quoted Daniel, 64, as saying: "In my time, the skullcap-wearers came to the military and served alongside me. They lived their lives as they pleased, we respected them, and they also respected our lifestyle. Today's generation, to a degree, joins up with the object of imposing its lifestyle on others – to dictate how to behave. It's a crawling annexation."

Writing in the *Guardian* (February 27), Seth Freedman pointed out: "Love it or hate it, the IDF is critical to the survival of the Israeli state in its current form – hence most mainstream Israelis willingly send their sons and daughters off to complete their compulsory national service when they turn 18. In their eyes, the army should be the great leveller for Israeli society – rich, poor, tall, short: all know their duty to the state, and all expect their fellow citizens to pull their

weight.

"But to a significant group of Israeli Jews – the million-strong Haredi community – serving their country in either a military or vocational capacity is of scant interest or importance. And, thanks to their political clout in Israel's fragile system of proportional representation, when the Haredim want things their way, they invariably come out on top."

"From taking outrageous sums out of governmental coffers to fund religious schooling to pressurising state-run bus companies to enforce illegal gender-segregation on their routes, the ultra-Orthodox community has been wreaking havoc on civic Israeli society for years – and the problem is only getting worse."

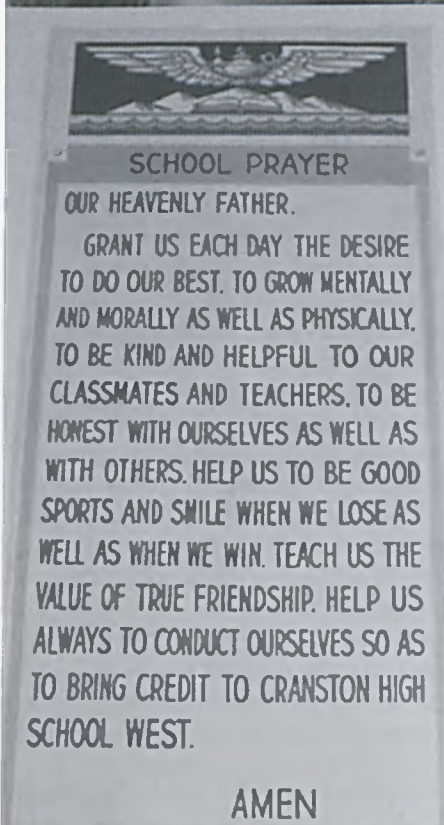
Freedman added that the "massive Haredi birth rate means that the proportion of Israel's population who are ultra-orthodox has rocketed to more than 10 percent, with the vast majority of Haredi males going into yeshiva learning rather than completing their national service. The fiscal capitulation of successive Israeli governments to the Haredim has meant almost every adult Haredi male can now afford to eschew paid employment in favour of yeshiva study, to the chagrin of secular Israeli society. Their sense of injustice is heightened over the issue of national service, and rightly so, yet their pleas to the Haredim to do their bit fall on deaf ears."

"Haredim believe it is their study of Torah and prayers, rather than soldiers' manoeuvres in the field, that provide the last line of defence for the Jewish people – but such ethereal posturing does little to assuage the hostility their draft evasion engenders."

Pray banner creator lashes out at Jennifer Ahlquist

JENNIFER Ahlquist (pictured below), the Rhode Island student who earlier this year successfully forced Cranston High School West to remove a prayer plaque from its auditorium, has incurred the wrath of the plaque's creator.

David A Bradley wrote the words for the plaque when he was 12. When he learned that atheists and humanist had rallied in support of a scholarship fund for Ahlquist, he dashed off a letter of outrage to the *Hartford Courant*:



"I read the article Feb. 26 about a fundraising campaign among atheists to build a \$40,000-plus scholarship fund for Jessica Alquist of Cranston, RI.

How nice of them. Jessica was duped by her ACLU-leaning father and uncle into bringing suit against the city of Cranston over the display of a school prayer that I wrote in 1960.

"Dear Jessica isn't yet old enough to know the meaning of atheism. She was used (and permanently injured) by powers and ideologies in the name of secular liberal progressivism that she can't possibly understand at her tender age.

"I can't believe The Courant would dignify such an award by such a group and to such a person with a piece on its pages. The RI judge's ruling in this case and the subsequent headlines fly in the face of all that is decent and moral about the United States and its Constitution.

"Furthermore, I'd like to think that, as the author of the moral and upstanding school prayer in question, I'd be entitled to ten or a hundred times as much money as Jessica has been awarded for having torn it down

and repudiated decency and morality in our schools. Where are my donors?"

Responding to Bradley's rant, Hermant Mehta, creator of the hugely successful *Friendly Atheist* blog, asked: "Where do you even begin with tripe like that?"

"Jessica's in her mid-teens now. She became an atheist years ago. I became an atheist when I was 14. A lot of people can tell you that they became atheists at a young age. Whenever we first began to think critically and ask questions – that's when it happened. (Obviously, Bradley knew he believed in God at the age of 12, but Jessica can't be an atheist at 16? Hypocrisy, anyone?)

"Jessica wasn't duped by anyone, nor was she a pawn of the ACLU. This was a decision she brought to their attention, not the other way around.

"Oh, and the scholarship for Jessica isn't for \$40,000. I'm still awaiting the final numbers, but it's more than that. A lot more than that.

"Bradley isn't entitled to anything. But if he wants to help pay the \$150,000+ in legal fees the district owes, I'm sure they'd appreciate his help, considering he's part of the reason they got into this mess in the first place.

Implications of Obama's apology

Using these examples, it would seem that a blasphemous act, regardless of intent, justifies a radical response from the religious.

Fundamentalists use fear and sugarcoat it to stand as a message of religious tolerance. Not surprisingly, politicians from the United States and the Middle East submit to these fundamentalist pressures when broaching offensive religious acts.

On April 14, 2010, the popular television show *South Park* aired an episode depicting several religious figures as cartoons, to include Moses, Jesus, and Buddha. Fearing fundamentalist reprisals, the network Comedy Central refused to depict the prophet Mohammed. The creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, in a stroke of comedic genius, depicted Mohammed in a bear costume instead. Unfortunately, the fundamentalists won as the episode was made largely unavailable, further limiting free speech in the US.

Offensive acts do not have to be met with approval. In fact, there are several acts, which many of the non-religious persuasion would

deem offensive, such as flag burning. Due to free speech, Americanism *should* be riddled with offensive material. But that is not the case. Using fear, fundamentalists have successfully manipulated politicians to openly condemn those acts deemed religiously offensive, while remaining silent about violent acts occurring due to those offenses. Silent politicians, too afraid to condemn the violent threats and acts of offended fundamentalists, violate the very morality they hold to be true and, for the United States, poison their role as a non-religious representative of the American people. To borrow the words of Abraham Lincoln: "To sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men."

• Washington-based Paul Karaffa, one of several news contributors to the *Freethinker* works as an environmental scientist. He is the founder & Editor-in-Chief of an Online & Mobile magazine, *The Washington Pastime*, which publishes weekly fiction, articles on the publishing industry, and political & pop-culture satire.

Christianity and male dominance

Almost 70 years have elapsed since C S Lewis expressed his thoughts on the 'perfect Christian marriage' in his book, *Mere Christianity*. Given that the subject is still being hotly debated,

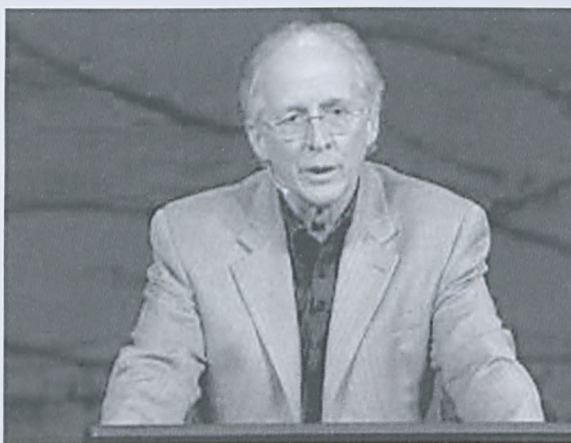
DR THOMAS W SMYTHE and **MARGARET BOCKTING**, of North Carolina Central University, US, examine Lewis's views.

In his book *Mere Christianity*, an assemblage of BBC talks from 1942 to 1944, the popular writer and theologian C S Lewis articulated what has come to be a standard doctrine adhered to by many Christians today. In his chapter on Christian marriage he expresses his view of the right relationship between husband and wife that was, and still is, influential. Our purpose in this essay is to seriously question his view that "In Christian marriage the man is the 'head'."

Lewis argues that the man should (always) be the head of the family, and that wives should be obedient to their husbands. There is a great deal of support for this view in the Bible. In Genesis 3: 16 the author says that God told Eve "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you." Genesis 2:18 says God made woman to be a "helper" to the man. In 1 Corinthians 11: 30 we are told "the head of a woman is her husband." In Colossians 3: 18 we read, "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord." Titus 2: 15 explains that wives should be "submissive to their husbands" while Ephesians 5: 22, 23, 24, says "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord," and "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church," and "As the church be subject to Christ, so let wives be subject to everything in their husbands." There is more, but that should substantiate a position that is often taken by Christians because of what is in the Bible.

We regard this as sheer primitive male dominance that is morally unjustifiable. We think that a good marriage should involve mutual respect and love. We maintain that mutual respect and love are not possible with one person being the ultimate authority, and the other person being obedient. Households with male authority figures are not conducive to the good life. The biblical view conflicts with the good life for everyone. We now turn to the views of C S Lewis:

- Marriage is, and ought to be, permanent.
- When there is a real disagreement, someone has to have the power to decide the



US author and evangelist John Piper, addressing this year's annual Desiring God conference for pastors at the Minneapolis Convention Center in January, claimed that "God has given Christianity a masculine feel" He said: "God revealed Himself in the Bible pervasively as king not queen; father not mother. The Second person of the Trinity is revealed as the eternal Son not daughter; the Father and the Son create man and woman in His image and give them the name man, the name of the male. He continued, "God appoints all the priests in the Old Testament to be men; the Son of God came into the world to be a man; He chose 12 men to be His apostles; the apostles appointed that the overseers of the Church be men; and when it came to marriage they taught that the husband should be the head."

family policy if the marriage is to continue.

- It is unnatural for wives to rule over their husbands.
 - Therefore, the natural thing to do is to let the man decide family policy.
- Lewis gives the following logically independent reasons for premise 3.
- When wives rule their husbands, they are ashamed of it and despise their husbands.
 - The husband should have the last word in order to protect people outside the family from the favoritism the wife naturally shows for her family.
 - Married women admire a husband who can stick up for his rights and hers.

We will countermand each of these three reasons in order. The first is a false generalization about wives who rule husbands. There is no good reason why a wife cannot have the power to make final decisions on family policy without despising her hus-

band. This is unsubstantiated speculation about empirical facts.

Second is likewise an unsubstantiated generalization about an empirical matter. It assumes wives cannot both favor their own family, and at the same time, be fair with people outside the family who may be adversarial. There is no good reason not to believe that such facts vary considerably across individual families.

The third reason appeals to the physical strength of the male. This is the main reason why people think the man should be the head of the family; the man is physically stronger. But if physical strength of the man is the decisive criterion, what about a man who is a chronic alcoholic, or physically handicapped, or mentally ill, drugged, or dying?

It would follow, using the criterion of physical strength, that if the woman can outdo the man in physical prowess, she should be the head of the family. What about a female wrestler or a woman with military training?

Another point about this reason is that the man could use his physical strength to further the ultimate decisions on family policy made by the wife when the wife is intellectually more competent to make final family decisions.

We think there are no general rules about who should be the head of the family – the husband or wife. Since many Christians follow the Bible and C S Lewis on this matter, we would like to make two points:

First, one can be a Christian in good standing and not follow this tradition. Believing that the man is the head of the family, and that wives should be submissive to their husbands is not necessary to be a Christian.

Second, to believe something like this just because of a book written by human beings "inspired by God" some 2,000 years ago is not a reliable way to judge how one ought to live their life. Circumstances have changed drastically since the Bible was written. Women no longer are confined to bearing children and taking care of household chores. Women are more educated, work outside the home on responsible jobs and careers, and should have positions of power

both in the family and society when they are qualified to do so.

We think that organized religions, including Christianity, ought to stop regarding women as inferior and powerless. We think that religious faith should not dictate

how people should run their families unless there is morally sufficient reason to do so. We do not see any such reason in this case. It is morally unjustified to treat women as inferior, and immoral to let religion stand in the way of moral progress. Since the

Bible clearly advocates an immoral position on this topic, it ought to be carefully ignored, and its inadequacy recognized by any mature moral agent. If something is morally wrong, no amount of scripture or theology can make it right.

Treating religion with contempt

By RICHARD WHITE

RELIGION is a funny thing – in the sense of confusion that is, not humour. Faith in one deity or another, at least on the shores of Britain, swings back and forth like a giant, invisible pendulum. Our history is steeped in religious faith, and as time progresses ever increasing numbers of people seem to question it or shun it altogether. Then, as the doubters and non-believers seem to reach a certain number, it swings back in favour of religion again.

Here we are in the second decade of the 21st century with more scientific knowledge – and access to information – than at any point in human history. Indeed, our knowledge of the world is now such that even religious folk often accept scientific notions like evolution, the Big Bang and so on, but on the premise that God was responsible.

The point I'm making here is that no matter how much we progress as a race, there's always a large and vocal group of people clinging on to archaic notions, creeds, documents and beliefs. It's an odd notion, but perhaps even odder is the fact that most people say nothing about it. Only when it comes to religion are we so tolerant of ignorance. Were we to continue believing the world is flat, we would be rightly chastised. But religion seems to have an intrinsic safety barrier to it, a threshold that people are afraid to cross for fear of causing offence or simply under the view that, hey, it doesn't harm anyone, right? Religion is like the spoilt child that only has to bat its eyelids at the parents to get away with murder, because religion has good people do sick things. Only under religion would it be deemed acceptable to mutilate a baby boy's genitalia at birth (although Christians notice the barbarism in mutilating a girl's genitalia); only under religion can a parent deny a child medicine because "it's God's will if they get better"; only under religion can murder be condoned or tolerated (unless it's an act committed by someone from another religion, of course; then the rightful anger surfaces); and only under religion can brainwashing be tolerated and ignored by others.

Brainwashing is a strong word and one that it's safe to say the majority of people prefer not to utter. But if we're to call a spade a spade and not a custom-made manual hole maker, then brainwashing is what it really is.

Taking a child of immediate age and filling its head full of stories written thousands of years ago and making it believe that these stories are true, that rejecting them will lead to an eternity of suffering and pain, that they are judged for everything they not only do but also think is surely an act of child abuse. My problem is not with people's faith in religion *per se*, but I do take exception when children too young to form an opinion are drafted into the fray. There is little that makes me as angry as seeing a three-year-old child talking or singing the virtues of Christ the Lord in church and all that He has done for them. At such a tender age, children believe what they are told to believe, and their minds are thus infiltrated with stories and ideas that they frankly have no choice but to accept.

How we find that acceptable today is beyond me. Should a faith organisation comprising of only 20 or 30 people carry out similar actions, they would be charged with brainwashing and deemed a cult. Yet organised religious sects escape unscathed, because they have existed for millennia and because there are so many of them – which means cults will become accepted and acceptable if they last long enough and recruit enough members. To me, this is one of the real horrors of religion. Yes, we can justifiably point our fingers at the wars and massacres and beatings that take place relentlessly in the name of religion, but damage is being done closer to home in greater numbers to unwitting and defenceless children, and the brainwashing can last a lifetime. While there are of course atheists and agnostics who grew up as Christians, there are many more who feel shame and confusion at growing out of their religion, as though they are tethered to a large pole – no matter how far the tether is, at some distance away they will have a confusing moment and return to the pole.

To give an example, during my time at university I knew a very religious girl. While she wasn't thumping her Bible and preaching at every opportunity, she made no attempt to conceal her beliefs. But, as time passed and she saw for the first time a life that wasn't overseen by religious family and

the local pastor, she grew confused of her belief. It seems that the real world was something not previously encountered and it just needed exploration. Yet the shackles of that upbringing could not be shed, to such an extent that at pretty regular intervals a near breakdown would occur, bringing feelings of guilt, shame, confusion, resentment and embarrassment. The guilt was of not only letting her family down, but God also. The fear was of being disowned by the family and punished to an eternity of suffering for ceasing to be the Good Little Christian Girl that was expected of her.

This level of abuse happens every day in every part of our country. Now try to imagine it happening in any other sector: would we stand so idly by if a BNP member drummed into their child's head that the only way to live is by striving for a country of only Caucasians? Or if a Labour supporter told their child they would be disowned for voting Lib Dem? Society fought hard for years for the rights of homosexuals, because people knew it was simply wrong for people to be rejected, ridiculed and disowned by the family for their nature. The point being that people object when a parent forces something onto their children – except with religion, that has a special safeguard where others hold the opinion that it's simply a personal choice.

The last word is the most important: choice. An adult has the choice to be religious, a child doesn't. So under religion, AIDs in Africa is considered a terrible thing, but not quite as terrible as using condoms; children are actively encouraged to be brainwashed, rampant ignorance is protected, atrocities against our fellow people are committed and defended, a baby's penis can be "modified" and people can be disowned or even killed for loving someone from a different religion. All this begs the question: Is it not high time that we treated religion with the contempt that it so obviously deserves?

• Kent-based Richard White, who runs Word Edit, an online editorial services company, is one of several new contributors to the *Freethinker*. He has also been assigned the role of proof-reading the magazine. Richard is the author of *Smoke Screens: The Truth about Tobacco*, an expose of the dubious scientific methods used to demonise the use of tobacco.

Meet Keith Lowell Jensen, atheist comedian

American comic Jensen hasn't yet had a fatwa issued against him for lampooning Islam. But if one comes along, he tells **RICHARD SILVERWOOD**, he'll know he's made it!

Jensen is not only the *heterosexual* host of the Gay and Lesbian Comedy Show and the *non-disabled* founder of The Comedians with Disabilities Act but is also the only *atheist* stand up comic in the multi-faith Coexist? Comedy Tour.

In a profession where having a niche can make the difference between worldwide superstardom and complete obscurity, he has skillfully crafted a role for himself as the token non-minority. But he is more than just a gimmick. His strength lies in his ability to be hilariously funny whilst at the same time causing people to question their faith in non-existent gods. I caught up with him to see how comedy can be used to gently nudge the brainwashed masses in the direction of the truth.

RS: *What inspired you to incorporate jokes about atheism into your act?*

KLJ: I think more comics are atheist than not. Atheism became a central theme after I started producing and performing with The Coexist? Comedy Tour. It's an important part of the act because it's the truth, and it's being honest about who I am. I also think about how isolating it was when I became an atheist as a teenager.

I think atheists need to be out, loud and proud so that people are more willing to question religion and to see that doing so is a healthy, normal thing. My favourite fan letters are from teenagers who say my comedy is helping them deal with their perception of being the only atheist in their family, school or town.

RS: *Do you think that there is an unhealthy amount of stigma attached to being an atheist in America?*

KLJ: Yes, definitely. Where I live in Sac-



Keith Lowell Jensen: Photo Kiny McCarrick

ramento, things are fairly liberal and progressive, as they tend to be in cities, but I still face stupid comments and prejudice regularly. I talk to people who live in more rural areas and in more conservative states, and they face bullying and harassment constantly.

When I tour, there is the risk that I will meet a Christian who will not be happy to be made fun of. I have a joke where I tell the audience that I get away with making fun of Christians because I promise them that I'll make fun of the other religions afterwards. Turns out Christians will put up with no end of shit so long as they're promised a reward at the end of it. By pointing out that I am, indeed, making fun of everyone and by letting them know that

I've done the same to other Christians, I challenge them to be cool and act like adults – and generally they do.

RS: *The Coexist? Tour is a tour in which an atheist, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Jew, a Buddhist and a Christian team up to deliver religious-based comedy. What was the experience like, and did being surrounded by members of so many different religious groups cause you to hold back any material?*

KLJ: I actually had to hold back less. The great thing about that show is that it's we're all friendly towards each other and that we're not haters. We walk out on stage, say hello, clown around with each other a bit and then take turns at savaging each other. But very rarely is anyone offended. We just did a show at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo and we have a documentary getting ready to hit the festival circuit.

RS: *Has there been anybody who has been particularly outraged by your shows?*

KLJ: There is very little outrage. I've been told I have an "every man" kind of delivery. I think that's very odd, having always identified with punk and queer culture. I think it's a very good thing. I let the audience get to know me. We joke about kids and things we might have in common, then when the atheist stuff comes in, it's harder to demonise me or to get crazy because we've all just had a laugh together.

I also try to follow what I call the "Dick Gregory rule", after the civil rights activist and comedian, which is to make fun of yourself first. Mind you, the audience are folks who choose to come to a comedy show with a two-drink minimum rule, so I don't think there's a lot of fundies in the

crowd. They drink at home in shame with the curtains drawn tight.

On the Internet it's another story. My atheist videos get me all kinds of flack, including threats of violence. I don't worry about it too much, and usually keep my cool and maintain the moral and intellectual high ground. When I do lose my temper, I like to at least make sure it's funny. A lot of my material comes from fighting with Creationists online.

RS: *Were you scared about the death threats? I read about one where you were told that you would go the same way as murdered atheist activist Madeleine Murray O'Hair.*

KLJ: I think that threats are very easily issued by cowards online. I know geeks and they are dangerous people to mess with. Within 24 hours, one of my geek friends had the name, phone number and address of the guy making the threats. When I called his house and suggested that he stopped making threats and mow his lawn instead, he disappeared from my life pretty quickly. I do think there is some danger but the more of us there are, the safer we are. We dilute their anger when they have to spread it out. I am cautious though and I watch my back.

RS: *I know that Muslims have complained about some of your jokes. Are you worried about getting a fatwa issued against you?*

KLJ: I think that they have bigger fish to fry. The day someone issues a fatwa against me is the day I know I've made it.

RS: *You have also had flack from members of Christian extremist groups. Do you think people underestimate Christian fundamentalists, choosing to focus on Islamic terrorists instead?*

KLJ: Absolutely. Most Christians are secure in the fact that they're still the dominant culture in the West, but as that changes, and I believe it will, I'm afraid they'll get more violent. Abortion doctors are already being killed and judges are being targeted. We need to keep an eye on these folks. I joke about being afraid to fly domestically because I don't like to think of having to make an emergency landing in the Jesus Land that is the middle of the US. Other folks worry more about Muslim terrorists but when it comes to dangerous extremists to fear, I prefer to buy locally. USA! USA!

RS: *There has been a lot of negative focus on Muslims in the UK in recent years. What's your take on this?*

KLJ: I see that you have more insular groups of Muslims and more conflict and tension. I try to sympathise, but I get very frustrated at all Muslims being grouped together. They're all Muslim and therefore I disagree with all of them but many are

peaceful, mellow people, regardless of what their books may say. History shows that no matter how insular they try to be, most of their children will just be English.

My friend Hassan Minhaj, a very funny Muslim comedian, was raised here by Indian Muslim parents. He is the all-American boy, way more so than I am. People accept that there are peaceful Christians even though they carry around a Bible full of violence but yet we don't do the same with Muslims. It's hard not to think that there is some racism or xenophobia at play.

I started being more outspoken about this when France outlawed the burqa and played it off as feminism. On stage I complain about the burqa and I make fun of it, but I also rail against trading our civil liberties in out of fear. I guess I love civil liberties more than I hate religion. It doesn't mean that I don't hate religion; I just have a raging boner for civil liberties. And on a more superficial level, France is supposed to be the fashion capital of the world. If they're going to outlaw an article of clothing, couldn't they start with cargo pants or those sweat pants that say 'Juicy' across the ass? Seriously France, priorities.

RS: *You've previously referenced the fact that you belong to a predominantly Christian family. How do they feel about your act?*

KLJ: My brothers are extremely liberal Christians. My brother John is a Christian Anarchist minister. His heroes are folks like The Catholic Worker and other socially progressive and activist Christian groups. I have a niece who is a lesbian and a Christian. They laugh at the same aspects of fundamentalism that I do and they're usually willing to laugh at themselves.

Occasionally I'll have a joke that isn't

their favourite but it's not even necessarily a religious one. They might just not think I'm very funny. I keep my mom away from my stand up for the most part. She knows I'm an atheist and she is proud of me but she doesn't need to hear me spewing "filth". My dad is a godless heathen like me and he loves my act.

RS: *What do you think is the most ridiculous aspect of religion?*

KLJ: Ha! How do I choose? I guess what gets me the most is that they think it's guiding their morality and lifestyle, but most religious folks are in a constant struggle to update their religion to fit their modern morality and lifestyle.

RS: *Do you think it's more important for people to laugh at your stand up or to take in the message?*

KLJ: I want them to laugh. I'm more interested in atheist acceptance than conversion. I think conversion is just a given. Religion is losing followers at an amazing rate. I just want to see as little hate and ugliness as possible as atheism grows and theists get nervous. Any part I can play towards that end is great. And of course I'm a comic; I like people to laugh.

RS: *Finally, what can your fans expect from you in the future?*

KLJ: I hope to put out an hour of original video and audio a year. We're talking about doing an atheist Christmas special this year as well. I've always loved Christmas specials. I'm very excited about The Coexist? Comedy Tour documentary. It was strange for me to do a project that I'm not in charge of. I just performed, put on the show and let them capture our story how they saw fit. I'm very happy with the result.

Will Christians have the last laugh?

A "LIBERAL establishment" – in particular the BBC – was singled out last year as the chief enabler of godless entertainment in the UK by Catholic writer and commentator, Cristina Odone. Writing in the *Telegraph* in support of Catholic comedian Frank Skinner, who proclaimed that we should "stop giving in to atheist bullies", Odone said that the BBC, "a pillar of that establishment, for whom Skinner works, has shown what it thinks of religion. They have nipped and tucked at God slots for years, so now the skeletal model looks nothing like its original, vibrant self. Atheists such as Charles Handy share their scepticism on *Thought for the Day*, and the new 'face' of BBC religion is Dr Francesca Stavrakopoulou, a self-proclaimed atheist. As for Richard Dawkins, his non-stop exposure and fanatically loyal ageing groupies have turned him into the Cliff Richard of atheism."

She added that "they [atheist comics and the like] can afford to be laid-back, because they're in control of what counts: the media, academia, and many of the professions".

But, she asserted, not all is lost. "Frank Skinner is not alone. Despite the strident secularism of most programmers, the media is a hotbed of subversive believers: not only Chris Patten, the BBC chairman, and Mark Thompson, its DG; but Ed Stourton, Gaby Logan, Adrian Chiles and Delia Smith are practising Christians."

She concluded: "Who knows, faith is so subversive, it may play well on the comedy circuit – and not just there. Why shouldn't Christians have the last laugh?"

Mighty misconceptions from little seeds do grow

JAMES MERRYWEATHER advises readers not to take botanical lessons from the Bible

I was still in bed when the BBC Radio news slipped gently into *Sunday Worship*¹ to which I listen as a sort of masochistic learning process; also it's a favourite for railing at the radio. Not far in, the priest said something that really woke me up. His voice showed no sign of wavering as his message made its shambolic departure from basic general knowledge and common sense. It was as though he didn't notice he was saying something daft. I trust there's no need to explain.

"The theme of our worship today is the kingdom that grows among us – like a tree which grows from a humble mustard seed, the smallest of seeds, into a tree in whose branches many find shelter."

Further into the service it dawned on me he was paraphrasing a holy text, the lesson yet to come that underpinned the theme of the service wherein lay the source of his error. From its origin, this passage was intended to be metaphorical, Jesus lining out a parable to the common throng with the underlying message: one day our new religion will prevail over the whole world. The service – rather feebly, I thought – tried to link the burgeoning Christian Kingdom of Heaven (two thousand years and hardly burgeoning) with Queen Elizabeth's sixty-year-old Kingdom of Britain.

"Our Gospel reading is taken from Matthew Chapter 13."

"Jesus put before them a parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

"He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'"

In my judgement, the reverend gentleman might have noticed Jesus' wonky botany beforehand or even stopped mid-sentence to enquire (imagine Kenneth Williams' voice) "Ere. Just *who* wrote this rotten script?"

Mind you, if you are familiar with C of E services, you'll know that it's quite usual for the preacher to drone through his scripted routine (think Alan Bennett: "But my brother Esau is an hairy man...") while the congregation don't really listen, vacuously chant the responses and drag joylessly through the hymns oblivious to the inanity of the words.

The botanical gaffe wasn't the priest's own. He was parroting a mistake first articulated by Jesus; who was, we are assured, the embodiment of God himself, the creator of all things. God is also reputed to be omniscient, so may we not expect Him to remember, or at least have rapid access to, correct information about the nature of everything, including plant life histories? Since, they tell us, God himself wrote the Bible through its human authors, the priest's scriptwriter must have been God himself.

Jesus got a bit carried away with his superlatives in this parable. The parable that succeeds it – of the woman with her flour and yeast – is elegantly concise, convincingly descriptive and factually viable. He would have done well to stick to his second parable and ditch the mustard seed episode – or later ask his stenographer quietly to delete that bit. [Oh. I forgot. The Gospels are hearsay, written down some 50 years to a century after the event. Maybe Matthew, trying to recall what happened that day, more than likely some time after his death, got it wrong. Doesn't the Bible present us with some awkward paradoxes? Compare the already internally paradoxical "Jesus died to save us from our sins" with the perplexing contradiction "Jesus Lives! Of course I know ...have faith!" But that just means stop thinking and does precious little to diffuse the paradox. To unbelievers, the mysterious ways in which God moves are exceeding mysterious.]

So Jesus reckoned mustard has the smallest seed, becomes the greatest of shrubs and then grows into so mighty a tree that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches? Actually, that doesn't have to be as big a tree as we might infer Jesus is making

out. Many birds happily nest in bushes, even atop a telegraph pole or among pebbles on the beach.

Even so, a mustard tree? Was it *Dendrobrassica rapa* perhaps, or *Sinapis arborea*? I can't find either in the *Flora Palaestina*. Joking aside, what mustard species grew in the Holy Land 2,000 years ago? A study of today's local flora could be misleading, thanks to the worldwide proliferation of invasive non-native weeds. Mustards have precisely the sort of lifestyle required for invasion, so any there today might not have been present in biblical times. Does archaeology have anything to say about mustard cropping in the Holy Land of Jesus' time or is it, like many other factoids, just assumed from the Bible? Information sources that discuss this puzzle are usually Christian and desperately trying to reconcile the parable with reality. The botany they cite tends to be Bible-sourced and lacking scientific rigour.

I think we should consider that "mustard seed" might be one of those translations of convenience in which the plant originally named in ancient Aramaic, Hebrew or Greek wasn't known to the translators and wouldn't be recognised by most English-speaking Bible readers anyway. That's how the trombone, an Italian invention of circa 1450, found its anachronistic way into the King James Bible. In early 17th-century England the trombone was a familiar musical instrument known as the saggbut or sackbut, which got inserted four times into Daniel 3 when the ancient text was Englished, 1604-1611. Some sort of lyre seems more likely, but nobody knows.

Does mustard produce the smallest seeds? No. We may confidently assume that Jesus didn't own a microscope, which he would have needed to see the smallest seeds, and rumours that he ever travelled outside the Middle East are less reliable than Chinese whispers. So we must forgive him for not knowing that certain tropical orchids produce seeds so tiny that approximately 850 laid end-to-end would cover a distance of just 1 millimetre. In contrast, if you tried to

fit just two mustard seeds on a millimetre, one of them would fall off.

All right. So he was speaking in metaphors, understandably referring to the limited knowledge of a desert people 2,000 years ago. Does that excuse word-for-word, uncritical repetition in 2012 when such passages sound so utterly unconvincing, assuming you have your brain switched on? It's that "uncritical repetition" that says so much about the Christian church of today. How can an intelligent clergyman trot out a passage that is so obviously barny, with not

a trace of discomfort, and why does his flock listen to such unmitigated balderdash without asking, "How do you mean, a mustard seed grows into a tree. Your Reverence?"

The culprits are those two dubious virtues faith and respect. Because of those it matters not one whit whether something is true or false, sensible or silly; they believe it because of their choice simply to have faith in and respect for the authority: Jesus (ie God), channelled through His earthly messenger, the priest.

There are, of course, Christians who swear the Bible is literally true, every word. They even go so far as to deny facts that stare them in the face, smack them round the chops, get stuffed down their throats and even begin the slow, gooey, hopeless journey in the direction of their cerebral cortex, if those facts contradict their Bible.

"By definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the scriptural record" and *"The science should never determine the Biblical framework."* – Creation Ministries International; Answers in Genesis and others.

The Bishop who gave the sermon briefly alluded to the lesson when he pronounced:

"... a life which is open to us all is the essential ingredient, the mustard seed from which the Kingdom, God's plan for the human race, grows."

God's plan for the human race? Metaphorically presented or not, I think Christians would do well to notice that Islam proposes exactly the same message and rather more robustly: "Death to all infidels!" versus mustard seed and yeast. They claim the same god, but follow an alternative and irreconcilably different religion. In the same way that two one-and-only gods can't exist; and neither can one god among the sev-



18 inch Sterling Silver Necklace

From silly little parables mighty enterprises may grow ... God willing. What we have here is a Mustard Seed Heart of Faith Necklace, which is being flogged on the Internet by a US Christian company for \$39.00 (inclusive of shipping, gift box, mustard seed Bible verse card ... and, of course, a genuine mustard seed.)

eral thousand gods that people believe are one-(or-more)-and-only; so also can no two religions exclusively dominate the world. Somebody's gotta be right and somebody's gotta be wrong, and all the rival religions insist that they are right (whilst at the same time protesting their mutual tolerance). They create a state of affairs in which there's room for only one true god and only one true religion, and they fight over it while the rest of us look on bewildered, like Brian watching the various comical Liberation Fronts squabble to the death in the catacombs beneath Pilate's palace (*Life of Brian*).

If the Bible really is literally true, then it must be true that mustard seed is the smallest seed of all – we know it isn't – and that any mustard plant of any of several brassicaceous species – that we know are non-woody herbs growing no more than a metre or so high – is the greatest of shrubs that becomes a tree.

So are we to understand there is a difference between real truth and biblical truth, and the latter trumps the former or else? Some people, oblivious to the inbuilt incongruity, say yes. We all know religious people who, unlike us, can accommodate pairs of contradictory beliefs in their brains – fact versus faith – numb-mindedly unaware of the logical inconsistency. If that is pointed out, they maintain that faith is sufficient for them and if only we would open our minds and take the leap of faith, we too could ... sigh ... well, you know this stuff that sets us to wearily joking about minds so open your brains fall out.

In Matthew 13 we find not only several classic parables (including the familiar stony ground one) but it is also where Jesus makes it perfectly clear what happens to those of us who stray from His path of compulsory righteousness. The disciples want to know

why he speaks in parables instead of giving it to them straight. Jesus explains that he is patiently making his message easy lis'nin' for those of restricted academic advantage:

10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.

He does his best to help the poor common folk get a grip of what he is saying, but if they don't, there's the nastiest sting in the tail ever devised by God (actually,

rather obviously, by man):

40 As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. 41 The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity [ie who don't do as I tell them]; 42 And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Note that it is the Son of man who shall send forth angels. Here we have another logical irregularity that baffles non-believers. I infer that Jesus is referring to himself, reputed to be the son of Joseph and Mary yet said also to be the Son of God, which I suppose He must have been if his mother was divinely inseminated by the third trinity member, the Holy Spirit. In this sort of context "man" (nb lower case "m") generally means human. If Jesus was who he said he was, then Son of man belies his divine ancestry. You can be confused by this, or dismiss it as tosh or, in the way Christians do it, avoid intellectual inconsistency of this sort by just accepting whatever arrives at the brain without question and defending it by screeching that any reasoned dissent is blasphemy.

Any road, Jesus doesn't give his audience much choice but to believe that a mustard seed will grow into a mustard tree, unless they don't mind being "cast ... into a furnace of fire [and the associated] wailing and gnashing of teeth." He doesn't call it hell, but it sure as hell is the hell option, later outrageously elaborated by generations of priests and theologians, and the cause of misery to gazillions of people for centuries in the wake of Jesus' parable club meeting. If Jesus was the Mr Nice Guy we are told he was and if had he had any idea what his priests would do with what was possibly a

(Continued on p12)

casual aside (thinks: "I'll try fear on 'em this week. That might recruit a few more."), no doubt he have been a bit more careful about what he said when he *ad libbed*.

There are plenty of Bible stories that fly in the face of the facts as we know them. The creation, Noah's flood, virgin birth, resurrection and miracles are so obviously contrary as to require no elaboration. Here are two of my favourites that are less well-known.

Genesis 30: 25-43 After Rachel had given birth to Joseph, her husband Jacob asked Laban if he, his wives and children could return to their homeland. Laban begged him to stay and work for him, inviting him to name his wages. Jacob said, "Let me go through all your flocks today and remove from them every speckled or spotted sheep, every dark-coloured lamb and every spotted or speckled goat. They will be my wages." Laban agreed.

Next the really clever, if incredible, bit: Jacob took fresh-cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes

on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. He placed the peeled branches in all the watering troughs, so that they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink.

When the flocks were in heat and came to drink, they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted. Jacob had outwitted Laban who had to make do with the weak offspring of his flocks while Jacob hung onto the strong ones. "In this way the man grew exceedingly prosperous and came to own large flocks, and female and male servants, and camels and donkeys."

If the Bible is irrevocably correct, then (therefore) Jacob's stripped twig method of selective stock-breeding must itself be completely correct and the way farmers have always bred animals must be false. Alternatively, if reality is true, then the Bible is wrong and we can't have that, can we? [I can hardly believe I wrote that: if reality is true ... but

that's what happens when you try to reconcile religion and reality.]

I thank the theohetical physicist Prof Laurence Krauss for exposing the following breathtaking discrepancy between scripture and reality²:

1 Kings 7: 23-25 For the temple furnishings in his new palace, King Solomon sent to Tyre and brought Hiram, a bronze founder who [among other great works] "... made the Sea of cast metal, circular in shape, measuring ten cubits from rim to rim and five cubits high. It took a line of thirty cubits to measure around it."

Being circular ("completely round" in the King James Version) this sea would have had other dimensions that can be calculated according to standard mathematical laws. The circumference of a circle is πd . If the diameter was ten of any units then the circumference of Hiram's sea would have been $10 \times 3.14 = 31.4$ not 30. This "sea" was massive: five cubits thick, supported by twelve bulls and holding two thousand baths, so the corresponding error would have been anything but negligible. In this universe – I can't speak for parallel others in the multiverse – π is immutable and its value is demonstrably not three.

Three is, however, the number of possible explanations for this conundrum:

1. Hiram's measurements were approximate. If so, the Bible is also approximate. We can't have that.

2. The "sea" wasn't circular, but the scale of the project suggests that Hiram's error should have been catastrophic. It wasn't. The Bible is pretty emphatic that the "sea" was circular, so somebody's not telling the truth. But the Bible is true, so circular it has to be, but then biblical $\pi = 3$ is wrong. We can't have that either.

3. Maybe the author of 1 Kings was ignorant about π so the Bible could be wrong. Surely in the case of a universal law, mathematics should be allowed to determine biblical interpretation? Heaven forefend! We can't have that either.

There is a possible way to get round these obstacles to understanding: faith. Ask no questions, ignore inconvenient facts and let the story slop around in your brain unchallenged. While you consider that, I'm wondering how Hiram, even if he had advice from Solomon the oh-so-wise, managed to fit 2,000 baths, presumably for bathing people-size people, onto a circular plinth with an area (π^2 this time) of only 22 square metres?

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1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01bkhjz> *Sunday Worship*, live from St Martin-in-the-Fields, London. BBC Radio 4, 5 February 2012.
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Religion can wreck your sex life

THE hugely negative impact on the sex lives of people caught up in fundamentalist religions is the fascinating subject of a new book by Kansas-based psychologist Darrel Ray (pictured on the right with Professor Richard Dawkins).

Ray's *Sex & God* is the result of an in-depth study that shows how fundamentalist religions control the sexual nature of believers. Ray asserts that these religions drum into the faithful the idea that a variety of sexual restrictions are the basis for happiness. However, he provides a vast amount of evidence from former fundamentalist believers that sexual performance and happiness significantly increased after they had ditched their religion.

Sex & God examines why religion is so interested in sex, and demonstrates how sexual restrictions are used by major religions, and why it works so well, especially in subjugating women and children. It also shows how one can overcome religious programming about sexuality.

The book further suggests ways of identifying and avoiding religion's psychological traps that inhibit or condemn sexuality, and offers an alternative view of healthy sexuality, free of guilt, ridiculous restrictions, and illogical prohibitions.

Among the facts revealed in Ray's book is that, among all American religions, Mormonism is the single most sexually guilt-ridden. Mormonism scores 37 percent higher in sexual guilt than even Catholics.

Mormons are closely followed by Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Seventh Day Adventists, all of whom score 30 percent higher than Catholics.

Ray, who was raised in a fundamentalist family, but became an atheist at the age of 40, also reveals that 22.5 percent of children from religious homes have been shamed, ridiculed or embarrassed by their parents for masturbating. Only 5.5 percent of children from non-religious homes reported such parental treatment. Furthermore, 79.9 percent of children from religious homes reported guilt and embarrassment about normal sexual behaviour as opposed to 26.3 percent of children from non-religious backgrounds.

His study also revealed that 54.6 percent of respondents reported a major improvement in their sex lives after leaving religion. Only 2.2 percent reported that their sex lives got worse.

Former Jehovah's Witnesses reported the most improvement in their sex lives, with Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, and Pentecostals just behind. Catholics reported a 30.5 percent improvement in their sex life after leaving the church.



My mother I never knew

I have been asked more than once where my hatred of God and Christianity had sprung. That thought crossed my mind the other day when I was looking at some pictures of my mother that I never knew.

Oh, I did know my mother, just not this version of my mother staring back at me from black and white photos taken in the late 1940s and early 1950s. I'll get back to *that* mother in a bit, but first let me tell you about the mother that I *did* know.

My mother was a deeply religious woman. She and my dad were members of a radically fundamentalist church called the Church of Christ. The Church of Christ believed in the hell that the Bible describes as a literal place of eternal torture.

They taught my mother all about hell. Of course the church also taught my mother a lot about Jesus and a little about heaven, but they always reminded her of hell. There was always a fiery eternity waiting for you if you weren't good enough. Jesus or not, there was no guarantee of escaping hell.

What almost all religions do is to convince their victims that they are bad. We are all sinners, you see, horrible unworthy sinners; sinners worthy of the fires of hell and most certainly unworthy of any reward in heaven.

Jesus, of course, can pave your way into heaven and keep you out of hell. Well, maybe, maybe not. You can never be 100 percent sure.

There are those sins that you keep committing, born-again or not. All of this constantly lurks in the recesses of your brain ...

By Phil Greer

and sometimes in the forefront of your mind. You are a bad person, a sinner – and you always will be.

So, my mother – the mother that I knew – was a brainwashed victim of the church, convinced that she was bad, a sinner, hopefully saved for heaven but quite possibly bound for eternal torture in hell.



My mother was bound by a belief in a capricious Christian God who would decide whether to send her to heaven or hell after she died. She was more unhappy than happy, very depressed at times, always unworthy, a low unworthy sinner.

I was like her for a while, until I broke my

Christian chains and escaped to freedom. But this is about my mother, depressed, sad, an unworthy sinner, or so the church had convinced her.

I loved my mother, the one that I knew.

Now, back to my mother that I never knew, the mother staring back at me from those black and white photos. I was looking at my mother as a pretty young woman in her late teens or early twenties. In one picture taken in New Mexico in 1951 by my father she was leaning back against a large stone in a somewhat sexy pose with a look of total happiness and freedom on her face. There is another picture of her and my father, looking young, happy and free, sitting on a bench. My father had a small bag in his hand; somehow I knew he had a gift for my mother in that bag.

These pictures were taken a few years before I was born, and quite a few more years before my mother was “born again” into the slavery of Christianity, with all of the sin and unworthiness that it imposed on her.

By the time I became aware of my mother, the happy and free woman staring back at me from the black and white photos was long gone.

My 87-year-old mother, her mind wracked by dementia, now sits in a nursing home – most of what her life could have been taken from her by her Christianity. But, you know what's a bit ironic? Her dementia has broken the chains of religion that bound her for so much of her life. Sometimes I can see just a little of the mother that I never knew in her eyes.

She looks happy sometimes, she looks free.

Blasphemy abolition gets *Visions of Ecstasy* unbanned

A low-budget, 19-minute film, directed by Nigel Wingrove, came to public attention 23 years ago when it the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) declared it “blasphemous”.

Visions of Ecstasy was banned amid concerns the scene could leave the film open to prosecution for blasphemous libel, but as the blasphemy law was repealed in the UK in 2008, the BBFC invited Wingrove to resubmit his work, and earlier this year the BBC reported that the movie has now been passed for release uncut, with an 18 certificate.

Visions of Ecstasy depicts 16th Century Spanish nun St Teresa of Avila as she caresses Jesus' body on the cross.

Wingrove unsuccessfully appealed the ban and the distributor eventually took the case



to the European Court of Human Rights in 1996.

Although the court did not consider whether the video itself was blasphemous – a matter for the UK courts – it ruled that the UK's blasphemy laws were consistent with the European Convention on Human Rights. In its conclusion, the court said:

“Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of a democratic society. However, the exercise of that freedom carries with it duties and responsibilities.

“Amongst them, in the context of religious beliefs, may legitimately be included a duty to avoid as far as possible an expression that is, in regard to objects of veneration, gratuitously offensive to others and profanatory”.

In a statement announcing the decision, the BBFC said: “With the abolition of the offence of blasphemy, the board does not consider that the film is in breach of any other UK law that is currently in force.” But it added: “The board recognises that the content of the film may be deeply offensive to some viewers.

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS LETTERS TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.
THE POSTAL ADDRESS IS POINTS OF VIEW, *FREETHINKER*,
PO BOX 234, BRIGHTON BN1 4XD.



A RESPONSE TO LIFE, THE UNIVERSE AND EVERYTHING

BARBARA Smoker (*Life, The Universe and Everything* – February) refers to the spurious notion “why something rather than nothing” grasped so fervently by theists when the more puzzling conundrum would be “why nothing rather than something”, except in such circumstance no sentient being would be around to voice it.

Multi-level confusion arises in the concept of nothing. Biblically it is presented as a void which today we would take to be the emptiness of a perfect vacuum. But such a picture presupposes a volume that no matter how bare does inherently contain dimensions of space and time; quantum fluctuations might liberate, however fleetingly, creatures from the sub atomic zoo.

In an uncaused “Let there be light” a pair of virtual particles of opposite charge appear which preserves the energy balance of zero but briefly creates distance, the space between the particles, and may be said to set a clock ticking as this is an event and another may follow. A few years ago it was proved that energy can be extracted from a vacuum confirming the Casimir effect of quantum forces found 60 years previously. Thus there is no need for a prime mover because a featureless void has potential and where there is potential there is something unprompted waiting to happen.

Do believers in a supreme being perhaps assume an absolute nothing? No matter, no energy, no vacuum, no potential, the absence of even an empty space? Such a pure nothing would deny any opportunity for a singularity from which our universe may have sprung. But this idea also denies the cosmological arguments of William Craig to which Barbara Smoker assents.

This real nothing allows no dimensions for any being to exist no matter how supernatural. Such nothing is very hard to envisage, if

only because the very act of imagining relies on picturing something. A prime mover may be postulated outside of our space and time (though how then could it interact with us?) but in its mere act of existing pure nothing is denied and there is no need then for a first cause.

Imagine yourself outside your home, your universe. Now imagine every scrap of furniture, furnishings, fixtures and fittings removed from your home leaving just bare walls. Next all air is extracted (imagination allows a perfectly sealed building) to produce a contained void. Then imagine the walls, floors and ceiling moving towards each other so extinguishing the space between until all surfaces meet and mutually annihilate. However, instead of a gaping hole where once your building stood there is pure nothing – suddenly numbers 21 and 25 either side are next door to each other with no trace of your number 23 nor the space it occupied. Your home has gone, not to any higher dimension, it no longer exists and you, no matter how resourceful, can interact with what is not there.

Extrapolate this effect to your street, your town, your country, the whole world and then onto the solar system, its host galaxy the Milky Way and beyond. We have two conclusions: any entity outside of pure nothing can not communicate in any way with it because there is no it; no matter how much of infinity we collapse into non-existence (or which did not exist in the first place) there remains an infinity of space in which events might take place.

Shivers may ripple down spines when we ponder the eternity that came before us and the eternity that will follow but such enormity is as nought set against trying to comprehend no eternity at all; never ending space and time seem trivial compared to ab-

sence of emptiness everywhere. Speculation as to into what our universe expands may be answered by theories of parallel universes or higher dimensions but all this would be disallowed if pure nothing reigned.

Neither imagination (mine anyway) nor science can frame the infinite existence of non-existence of space. Once we allow the existence of void then there exists a something, a place in which residents may be found which presuppose no creator for them to appear. Something rather than nothing would seem a more natural state of affairs.

Chris Oldman
Cheltenham

‘FREE-FOR-ALL’ SOCIETY

OH dear. It looks like I have to hold up my hands and admit I was wrong about your “libertarian” correspondent, Mark Taha. In his petulant and confused letter (*Points of View*, March), he says he supports a “free-for-all” society in which people can put up signs saying “No Blacks”, or refuse gay people goods and services.

What he fails to grasp is that real freedom doesn’t exist without structure, because one man’s freedom is another man’s oppression, hence the need to regulate our freedoms. His simplistic brand of “anything goes” idealism can only result in a nihilistic dystopia. In previous centuries, unfettered capitalist freedoms led to miserable and dangerous conditions for the working classes and saw children shoved up chimneys, not to mention 12.5 million Africans shipped to the New World as slaves. What about their freedoms, Mark?

In apartheid South Africa, the “No Blacks” signs Mark gushes approval for, were just a tiny part of a grotesque system that deprived

the majority of South Africans of basic freedoms, opportunities, dignity and provisions. In many African and Islamic countries, where gay people have no recourse to the law, they have no freedoms at all and lives are lived on a knife edge and sometimes snuffed out altogether.

Even someone as apparently hard-hearted as Mark Taha must be able to work out that societies that don't have laws regulating hatred and intolerance, or that don't underwrite the freedoms of their citizens, are rather less happy and free than those (mostly) Western societies that do.

He should also be reminded that the equality laws he so despises cut both ways. It is just as illegal to put up signs saying "No Whites" as it is to put up signs saying "No Blacks". It is just as illegal for a gay doctor to refuse to treat heterosexual Christian patients, or an atheist bus driver to refuse passengers wearing turbans, as for religionists to deny goods and services to gays or atheists. This is because a civilised society differentiates between private prejudice, which is perfectly legitimate, and public obligation, where prejudices have to be put aside for the sake of all our freedoms.

In Britain, hard-won freedoms, which were non-existent 20 years ago, such as those granted to same-sex couples, belong to all citizens – even if they are rights that you, Mark, have no intention of exercising. They may appear to favour minorities, but in fact, they are universal. These freedoms belong to all of us and are therefore worth defending against reactionaries and faux-libertarians alike.

Diesel Balaam
London

I KNOW Mark Taha (*Points of View*, March) and know that he is neither black nor gay. If he were, and had suffered vile abuse and violent attacks, perhaps he would be far less enthusiastic about "No Blacks" signs and turning gay men away from hotels. And I am sure he would ardently oppose discrimination and violence against people with an interest in minority sexual pastimes.

How would he close Britain's borders? Station armed guards at airports and along the coast? Surely as humanists we believe as did Thomas Paine that our country is the world.

He writes about extreme right-wingers being hounded out of their jobs for their political views. Has he forgotten that during the Cold War communists were sacked from government jobs because of their CP membership, and that the National Front campaigned against the employment of left-wing teachers? I was refused a civilian clerical job with the Ministry of Defence because of my communist and CND past.

When I was a trade unionist in the De-

partment of Social Security, I took part in the strike against the employment of BNP activist Malcom Skeggs at the Hither Green office. We did not want to deny Mr Skeggs the chance to earn a living, but we were very worried about his having access to confidential information about claimants from ethnic minorities. Sometimes the rights of groups have to take priority over the rights of individuals.

Mr Taha advocates the legalisation of "soft" drugs, although there is still much research to be done on just how harmful they are. But what would he do about the cynical criminals who profit from the misery of others?

We do not need to import American law, but we do need a written constitution which describes and guarantees the rights and duties of the citizen as an individual, and of citizens as groups.

I hope I am no killjoy. I enjoy a pint, rock music and the company and affection of intelligent and beautiful women. But I would urge Mr Taha to think a little longer and harder before putting pen to paper.

Terry Liddle
London

ENGLISH USE AND ABUSE

BARBARA Smoker's letter about "affect" and "effect" (*POV* March) came in handy, as she sent me an advance copy of it, and I received it on the same day as I was invited

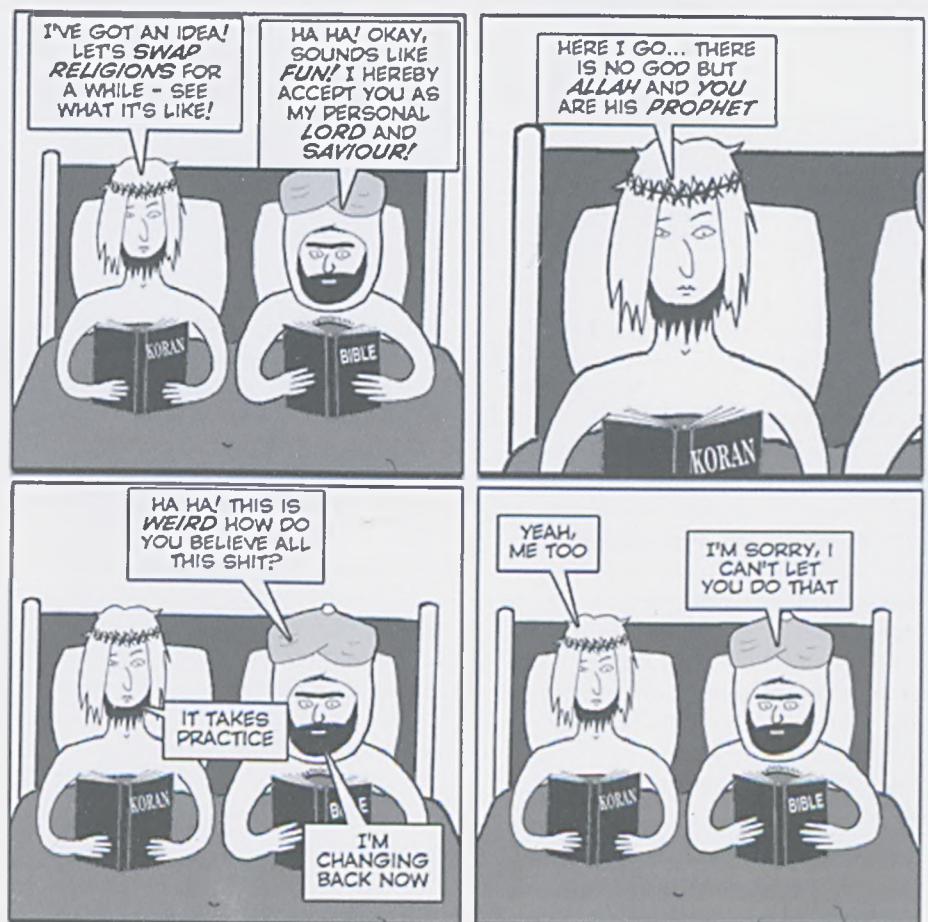
to give a talk on use and abuse of English.

I wrote back to Barbara saying that she was lucky to see "effect" or "affect" in print at all, as they had all but disappeared in the Australian media, both spoken and print. They have been replaced by the (American?) blunderbuss terms "impact" and "impact on". This provided me with a handy introduction to a 24-minute "sermon" which I am to deliver to East Melbourne's Unitarian-Universalists on April 15, with due acknowledgement to Barbara and the *Freethinker*, of course!

My subject will be *Gobbledegook, New-speak, Jargon, Correct and Corrupt Language*. And, as I have a captive audience of Unitarians, I intend to subject them at the end to a prophylactic dose of fine, vintage theological gobbledegook in the form of the Trinity, as laid down and defined in the Athanasian Creed. The Athanasian Creed is a splendid example of repetition, verbosity and opaque waffle, masquerading as wisdom, intelligence, subtlety and learning, but in reality having no sensible or credible substance. It is chilling to think that, once upon a time, your life would be in danger if you did not accept it!

Nigel Sinnott
Melbourne
Australia

Jesus & Mo



the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists:

w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. 0845 2015135.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273 227549/461404. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, April 4: *School Religion and Religious Schools*. Speaker: Andrew Edmondson. Wed, May 2: *Christian Science Debunked* – Robert Stovold. Wed, June 6: *Fairy Stories, Probabilities and Sacred Truths* – Mike Jelley. Wed, July 4 – AGM

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

Bromley Humanists: Meet second Thursdays at 3pm 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 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Cumbria Humanist Group: i Tel. 01228 810592. Christine Allen w www.secularderby.org e info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk.

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

w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists:

e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

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

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:

i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

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

Essex Humanists: Programme available i 01268 785295.

Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, Wood-street 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. On April 11 at 8pm Richy Thompson, BHA Campaigns Officer, will give a talk on *Faith Schools and Education*. w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk e Mike Savage at mfsavage

mha@hotmail.com

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern

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

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

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

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

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

Local Scottish Groups:

Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Dundee:** 07017 404778, dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh: 07010 704775, edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk **Glasgow:** 07010 704776, glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk **Highland:** 07017 404779, highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk i Ian Abbott, Wavecrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fyde,

Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@anzere.demon.co.uk

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

w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286.

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

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

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

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

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

Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group: i Chris Copsy, 1 Thistle-down Road, Horsford NR10 3ST. Tel: 0160 3710262.

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

North East Humanists (Teesside Group):

i C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):

i the Secretary on 01434 632936.

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

Contact Sec: 01707 653667 e enquiries@nondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nondonhumanists.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.

Pink Triangle Trust: The PTT is the only registered gay charity in the UK and publishes *The Pink Humanist* (www.thepinkhumanist.com) i Secretary George Broadhead. Tel 01926 858 450 e secretary@pinktriangle.org.uk w <http://www.pinktriangle.org.uk>

Scottish Humanists:

w www.ScottishHumanists.org.uk. Free membership. Charity SCO42124. Next meeting June, 3, Market Inn, Ayr, 2pm. Subject: *Credit Unions*. 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 7.30 pm at The Goose, Rushey Green, Catford SE6.

w www.lewisham.humanist.org.uk

South Hampshire Humanists: 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 Gwinell on 01935 473263 or e edward.gwinell@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. Programmes on request.

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

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

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

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. i 01923-252013 e john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk w www.watford.humanists.org.uk

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: i 01568 770282 w www.wmhumanists.co.uk e rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tues of the month at Ludlow, Oct to June.

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

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