



2 True blue:
Stan Jones, who turned his skin blue, features in *Freethinking Aloud*



3 Muslim misfit:
Islamic zealot loses his discrimination case against Rotterdam Council



5 REG2142



Z001521668

BOSTON SPA LS237BQ

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

£1.25 MAY 2012 VOLUME 132 NO 5

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK

Catholic bishop links gay marriage to totalitarianism

The UK coalition Government's support of gay marriage is symptomatic of a "totalitarian" mindset which is hell-bent on discarding Britain's "Christian inheritance of faith and morality as if it had never existed", according to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Shrewsbury, Bishop Mark Davies.

In his Easter sermon last month, Davies said: "Dr. John Sentamu, the Anglican Archbishop of York, was accused of 'exaggerating' when he spoke of the Government's proposals to re-define the identity of marriage as linked to

a totalitarian mentality. Yet his analysis of recent history is clearer than that of many of the leaders of opinion in our society."

Davies suggested that the Cameron/Clegg government was attempting to turn the clock back to pre-Christian times and said: "If Christianity is no longer to form the basis and the bedrock of our society then we are, indeed, left at the mercy of passing political projects and perhaps even the most sinister of ideologies."

Commenting on the sermon, John Smeaton, Director of the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), said on his blog: "Bishop Davies is right to refer to totalitarianism when speaking of the Government's plans with regard to same-sex marriage."

Smeaton then referred to the "far-sighted reflection of another world Catholic leader, Cardinal Pell", who stated in his submission to the Australian Senate's Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee that "changing the Marriage Act would, in practice, compel Catholics and other faith communities to recognise and accept same-sex marriages in their schools, social welfare, health care and adoption services.

Pell said: "When we permit same-sex relationships to mimic marriage we also say that a child gains no benefit from the knowledge that they were created through an intimate act of love between their parents."

Smeaton concluded: "Real marriage as an institution protects children, both born and unborn. Statistics show that unborn children are



The Bishop of Shrewsbury, Mark Davies, centre

much safer within marriage than outside marriage."

In his sermon, Davies cited the recent history of Europe to voice fears that extremism would fill the void if Christianity became weakened.

"It has, indeed, been the experience of this past century, as both Blessed John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have observed, how the most poisonous ideologies have arisen within the Christian nations of Europe," he said. "Thus Nazism or Communism attempted to discard the Christian inheritance of faith and morality

as if it had never existed.

"They sought either to return to the pagan past or to 're-create' and 'redeem' humanity by political will and ideology with terrible consequences.

"If Christianity is no longer to form the basis and the bedrock of our society then we are, indeed, left at the mercy of passing political projects and perhaps even the most sinister of ideologies."

He added: "Today we are becoming increasingly aware that there are those in leading positions within our society who wish to see history somehow reversed, who wish the very light which Christianity brought to these islands would recede.

"This is often done under the plausible intention of 'modernising', yet it is in reality an attempt to turn the clock back: as if the Gospel had never arrived in this land, never shaped its laws and culture and never formed the basis of our civilisation."

Rounding on the modernisers the Bishop added: "They see progress only in terms of moving this nation away from its Christian inheritance, from the very roots of its laws, its culture, its life."

He added: "They wish to discard the corner stone on which so much good in our society has been built"

Seemingly oblivious to the well-documented role that Catholics

(Continued on page 5)

REDEFINING SQUIRRELS

BARRY DUKE REPORTS ON YET MORE SCIENTOLOGY MADNESS

To you, me, and every other English-speaking inhabitant of the planet, the word “squirrel” immediately conjures up the image of a cute little bushy-tailed critter foraging tirelessly for nuts. So I was somewhat intrigued when I recently learned that “squirrel” – in Church of Scientology-speak – has a different meaning altogether. It is a derogatory term used to describe someone who applies Scientology techniques in a form other than that originally laid down by the cult’s founder, L Ron Hubbard.

The “church” has “squirrel-busting” teams that hunt down individuals or groups who commit “high treason” by “squirreling”. These squads then set about making “miscreants” lives a misery.

The most recent target of the “squirrel-busters” is Marty Rathbun, 55, who lives in Ingleside on the Bay, on the Gulf Coast of Texas. According to a report in the *Independent*, a team of four Scientology “heavies”, bearing microphones and video cameras, pitched up on his doorstep last April. Each wore T-shirts

bearing a picture of a squirrel with Rathbun’s picture crudely superimposed on it. Claiming to be members of “Squirrel-Busting Productions”, they said they were there to “do an investigation on you and the squirrel technology you’re promoting”.

“We’ll be here for weeks and weeks,” promised one of the men, after Rathbun ordered them off his property. He wasn’t kidding. The “squirrel busters” stayed in the village throughout May, June, July, and August 2011. They rented homes nearby, carried placards denouncing Rathbun, and posted footage of him on the Internet.

What sparked this shocking intimidation was that, after 27 years – in the latter stages of which he was he was a high-ranking executive in the cult – Rathbun walked away from Scientology, claiming, firstly that it was placing increasingly onerous financial demands on followers, and that he had a series of personal disagreements with its leader David Miscavige, who has reigned over the Scientology empire since the mid-1980s.

Rathbun cut his ties with the cult eight years ago, then turned his home into a “half-way house”, offering refuge to people attempting to leave Scientology.

Since then, he has provided a temporary home to 72 defectors. His blog, *Moving on Up a Little Higher*, gets around 10,000 hits a day. Today, said the *Independent*, Rathbun has become one of the Church’s most public detractors, and has appeared in that guise on virtually every major US news network.

The cult regards Rathbun as “an anti-Scientologist, desperate and delusional” and says he was “expelled from the Church for violating Scripture”.

Whatever sympathy I had for Rathbun when I began reading the report evaporated in a flash when it revealed that, though no longer a Scientology member, he has by no means renounced the “faith”. Instead, he calls himself an “independent” Scientologist.

Said the *Independent*: “In practice, this means Marty still subscribes to many key tenets of the religion. He continues to practice ‘auditing’, the form of counselling Scientologists use to seek enlightenment, and he continues to revere Hubbard, whose books and lectures he frequently quotes. Like L Ron, he believes firmly in reincarnation. ‘The way I see it, this faith has a lot in common with Zen Buddhism’.”

At this point I remembered receiving from a reader a link to a website called *What’s the*

Harm? (<http://whatstheharm.net>), a fascinating agglomeration of a variety of mishaps and disasters that have befallen people who, not to put too fine a point on it, believe in crap.

One entry concerns US Senate wannabe Stan Jones, 69, who succeeded in turning his skin blue after years of drinking a home-made silver solution. Jones, who now looks like an escapee from the set of a zombie movie, got it into his head in the 1990s that the “millennium bug” was for real, and that, after 2000, there might be a shortage of antibiotics. So, to boost his immune system, he turned to colloidal silver, and drank vast quantities of a solution he made by electrically charging two silver wires in a glass of water.

Colloidal silver is marketed as an anti-bacterial agent or immune system booster. But there is no scientific proof of its efficacy.

“People ask me if it’s permanent and if I’m dead,” he was quoted as saying in a BBC report (October 3, 2002). “I tell them I’m practising for Halloween.”

One would have thought his socially conservative views – he supports the death penalty, opposes same-sex marriage, has called abortion a “crime against humanity” and once stated that a conspiracy of the European Union and North American “elites” were on the verge of forming a “one world communist government” – would have made him the darling of right-wing voters, but apparently they could not get beyond his blueishness, known as argyria. He twice ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate in 2002 and 2006, and failed in his ambition to become Governor of Montana in 2000 and 2004.

At any rate, *What’s the Harm?* has a section on Scientology which makes for grim reading. It documents 54 cases of people who, after falling under the spell of the cult, committed suicide, were murdered or committed murder, snuffed it after choosing Scientology “cures” over proper medical treatment for life-threatening conditions, and, most commonly, lost vast sums of dosh.

What’s the Harm? says it exists “to make a point about the danger of not thinking critically”, and I have to take my hat off to it for doing a damned good job in this respect.

I have to say, though, that the older I get, the more pessimistic I become of ever seeing an end, or even a diminution in human daftness and gullibility.



BARRY DUKE
FREETHINKER
EDITOR

the freethinker

the voice of athelism since 1881

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote
UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Freethinker/GW Foote & Co Ltd
PO Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD

Email: barry@freethinker.co.uk
Tel: 01273 782 111

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 unwaged Overseas rate £25 sterling. Special trial subscription for readers’ friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to:
The Freethinker, Unit 8, The Old Silk Mill
Brook Street, Tring
Hertfordshire HP23 5EF

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.

justplaincrazy

GAYS PERSECUTING CHRISTIANS

LORD CAREY, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, claimed last month that “homosexual activists” were in the vanguard of a “drive to remove Judeo-Christian values from the public square”.

In a submission to the European Court of Human Rights, Carey wrote: “In a country where Christians can be sacked for manifesting their faith, are vilified by state bodies, are in fear of reprisal or even arrest for expressing their views on sexual ethics, something is very wrong ... Christians are excluded from many sectors of employment simply because of their beliefs; beliefs which are not contrary to the public good.”

He added: “It is now Christians who are persecuted; often sought out and framed by homosexual activists.”

PELL'S APOLOGY

AUSTRALIA'S most senior-ranked Catholic, Cardinal George Pell, has been forced to apologise for comments during a debate with Richard Dawkins in which he claimed the Jews were an intellectually and morally inferior people.

In a widely watched televised debate last month, Cardinal Pell said “the little Jewish people” were shepherds who lacked intellectual development.

“I’ve got a great admiration for the Jews but we don’t need to exaggerate their contribution in their early days,” he said on ABC television. “They weren’t intellectually the equal of [the Egyptians or Persians – intellectually, morally ... the little Jewish people, they were originally shepherds. They were stuck. They’re still stuck between these great powers.”

Pell subsequently issued a statement clarifying his comments and insisting he did not intend to offend the Jewish community.

HANDSHAKE CASE LOST

MOHAMMED Enait, a lawyer in Holland whose application for a job in the social services department of Rotterdam was rejected after he made it quite clear that his religion forbade him to shake hands with women, has lost a religious discrimination case.

Enait took the council to a court in The Hague, where his case was dismissed last month.

The court found his refusal to shake hands with women “unacceptable”, and said his stance would have damaged the relationship between the council and its clients.

Tatchell is Secularist of the Year

“WORLDWIDE, organised religion is the single greatest threat to human rights; especially to the rights of women, LGBT people, atheists and minority faiths.” These are the words of Peter Tatchell, 50, the human rights campaigner who was named Secularist of the Year at an award presentation held in London by the National Secular Society.

Tatchell, in accepting the £5,000 Irwin prize last month, added: “Religious-inspired dogmas persecute Christians in Pakistan, Sunni Muslims in Iran, Shia Muslims in Bahrain and Jewish people in much of the Middle East. In many countries, atheists and apostates face discrimination, harassment, threats and violence from religious zealots. Some Islamist countries have the death penalty for Muslims who turn away from their faith. Even in the West, the religious right menaces freedom of expression and equality, with its demands for the censorship of the satire that targets religion and with its campaigns in defence of gender and sexual orientation discrimination.”

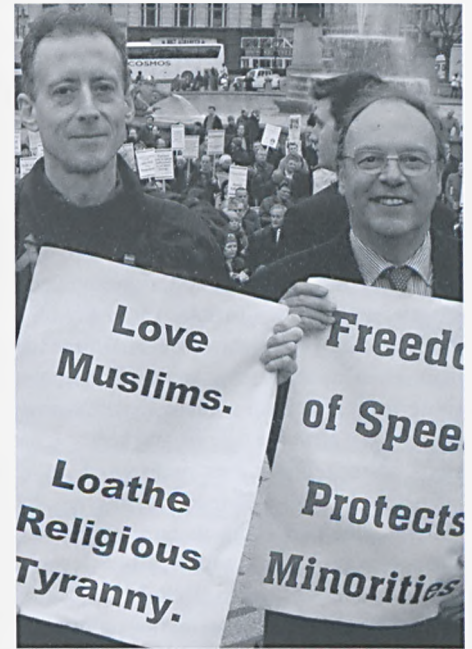
“Secularists support the separation of religion and the state. With no established state religion, there is equality for people of all faiths and none. Secularism is the best guarantor of religious freedom. It is in the interest of people of all faiths, as well as the interests of non-believers. People are entitled to their faith but they are not entitled to insist that their religious values are the law of the land.”

He was presented with the £5,000 Irwin Prize by the author and freedom of expression campaigner Nick Cohen at a highly enjoyable lunch-time event attended by prominent scientists, journalists, campaigners and writers including Richard Dawkins, Lord Taverne, Joan Smith, Oliver Kamm, Professor Peter Atkins and Maryam Namazie.

Terry Sanderson, President of the NSS, told the audience: “We are very pleased to be able to reward Peter’s lifelong commitment to human rights and to honour his support for a just and inclusive secular society. He has been active in many progressive campaigns over the past forty or more years, not least in gay rights, and has had to endure much public and press abuse because of it. But he has persevered and now he has made the unprecedented transition from public enemy number one to national treasure.”

He added: “The NSS first came across Peter when, in 1998, he audaciously climbed into the pulpit at Canterbury Cathedral and interrupted the Archbishop mid-flow. He wanted to call him to account for his antipathy to gay rights, something the Archbishop had consistently refused to address.

“Peter was charged under an obscure piece



Peter Tatchell, left, pictured with Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, at a free speech rally in London.
Photo courtesy Petertatchell.net

of legislation: the Ecclesiastical Courts Jurisdiction Act 1860. It uniquely protects churches from ‘riotous, violent, or indecent behaviour’ and prosecutes anyone who ‘shall molest, let, disturb, vex, or trouble’ a priest. The reverse, of course, doesn’t necessarily apply. For all those who have been molested, let, disturbed or troubled by a priest, there’s little redress – particularly given that the worst offenders are secreted away by the Pope in the Vatican, beyond the reach of those troublesome international arrest warrants.

“It is a law that uniquely protects churches and chapels – in other words a religious privilege – and it was at that point that we took up his cause. A conviction could have resulted in a substantial prison sentence.

“The magistrate could not avoid finding Peter guilty but showed his contempt of the law under which Peter was convicted by fining him a derisory £18.60, the year the Act was passed expressed in pounds and pence.”

The gay humanist charity the Pink Triangle Trust also warmly welcomed the award. PTT Secretary George Broadhead commented: “Peter’s message that religion poses the gravest threat to human rights is precisely what LGBT humanists and secularists, including groups like the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association and the PTT, have been saying for years.

“Warm congratulations on your award and more power to your elbow!”



Drawing a veil over child abuse in

REPORT BY TREVOR BLAKE

YOU can find Agudath Israel of America (AIA) in New York but you won't find them on the Web. These chosen people had the insight that while email is kosher, the Web is *trief*. It seems arbitrary to this *goy*, but I'm sure it's all part of God's mystery. Some people prefer their lives to have more mystery. Perhaps that's why the AIA recommends that when a child is sexually abused, the abuse be reported to a rabbi first. Keeping the mystery alive for parents and police is an arena where religion goes undisputed.

The AIA might defend themselves by making reference to the ancient tradition of *mesirah* (to turn over), which forbids Jews to turn over fellow Jews to a secular authority. Setting aside the question of how much respect is due to the appeal to tradition, there is evidence that when it comes to sheltering child abusers the Orthodox Jewish community continues to practice *mesirah*.

In June 2010 a *yeshiva* (religious college) teacher was charged with aggravated sexual assault and child endangerment in Lakewood, New Jersey. His name will not be mentioned here because this man's trial is ongoing and the *Freethinker* will not presume to know its outcome. But let the hammer fall on Lakewood Rabbi Yisroel Belsky, who wrote: "My ears should have been spared hearing the horrific news that one of your fellow residents in town informed upon a fellow Jew to the hands of the secular authorities, may God spare us, for which the [Jewish] law is undisputed that one who commits such an act has no share in the world to come ... all who have the ability to influence the informers that they should retract their terrible deeds should do so." In 2009 *barnitzvah* tutor Yona Weinberg



A rabbi performing *metzitzah b'peh* on a Jewish infant

of Brooklyn was convicted of sexual molestation of children. Sentencing Weinberg, Judge Reichbach noted that none of the letters of support written by rabbis "display any concern or any sympathy or even any acknowledgement for these young victims which, frankly, I find shameful."

Orthodox Jewish leaders have opposed lifting the statute of limitations for reporting clergy child abuse. In 2009 the Sephardic Community Federation and the United Jewish Organizations of New York petitioned Gov. Paterson not to pass bills A2596 and S2568, avoiding "costly abuse claims."

Orthodox Judaism is not a monolith. There

is some disagreement about how young a child can be to consent to having sex. Some say puberty, some say 14, some say 12. It seems even among those who would shelter child rapists there are some standards. These rabbis know that sexually abusing children below some age or another is wrong; they merely protest that such matters are best addressed within the Orthodox Jewish community and not by secular law. Where Orthodox Jewish leaders stand united is a refusal to acknowledge the tradition of *metzitzah b'peh* as child sexual abuse.

In *metzitzah b'peh*, a rabbi without medical credentials or oversight performs unelected "cosmetic surgery" in a non-sterile room. The rabbi cuts off a portion of an infant boy's penis then sucks blood from the wound with his mouth. The thought of a man sucking blood from a baby's penis while his parents look on with pride should be nightmare enough for Orthodox Jewish leaders to immediately and forever ban *metzitzah b'peh*. Sucking blood from an infant is rightly illegal in every circumstance save for religion. And the Orthodox Jewish community wants to keep it that way.

Rabbi Yitzchok Fischer of New York has performed an unknown number of *metzitzah b'peh* rituals. In 2003 and 2004 he infected three boys with Type 1 herpes by way of this ritual. Two of the boys will have painful weeping sores on their bodies for the

Bishop's Nazism warning

played in supporting Hitler's Third Reich, Davies said last year in a Holocaust Memorial Day address in Manchester that the murder of six million European Jews in the Holocaust must serve as a warning to the people of today to remain vigilant against contemporary threats to human life and against any ideology that undermines the Judaeo-Christian values upon which western civilisation is built.

The Bishop told his audience that both Jews and Christians must be struck by how the Nazis explicitly trampled each of the Ten Commandments in a "systematic eradication of morality".

The struggle against evil continues, he said, adding that society had seen a return of the spectre of "eugenic thinking" directed "against the unborn and the most vulnerable deemed 'unfit to live' or threatened with 'mercy killing'".

He added: "An ideology which grew at the centre of European civilisation sought to remove from the face of the earth in this Holocaust the people called by the Lord before all others. This must surely lead us to recognise every continuing assault upon the value and dignity of every human life and person and to recognise in this the denial of the Creator.

e in Orthodox Jewish communities

rest of their lives. One will not, as the virus killed him. Rabbi David Zwiebel of the AIA has said “We’re not oblivious to what’s going on” regarding *metzitzah b’peh*. Rabbi Zwiebel’s concern is not that sucking blood from babies is wrong, or that it confirms the worst ancient stereotype of Jews, or that children are dying because of *metzitzah b’peh*.

“The worst thing that could happen is if the authorities regulate this practice, then it could go underground. I think the practice would continue, but there could be significant difficulty in gathering evidence.” Rabbi Zwiebel estimates that *metzitzah b’peh* is performed over 2,000 times annually in New York City alone.

Rabbi Fischer was asked to be tested for Type 1 herpes and to refrain from conducting *metzitzah b’peh* until a police investigation had been completed. Rabbi David Niederman of the United Jewish Organization

took exception to the request, stating “the Orthodox Jewish community will continue the practice that has been practiced for over 5,000 years. We do not change. And we will not change.”

Rabbi Fischer did not change and the State of New York sued him.

Governor Bloomberg met with Orthodox Jewish leaders and charges against Rabbi Fischer were withdrawn providing he was tried instead by ... Orthodox Jewish leaders. These leaders made a show of reform by issuing a circumcision protocol in 2006, one so far afield from standard medical practice it was rescinded by the State the next year. Rabbi Fischer infected another baby boy with Type 1 herpes in 2007. In a recent radio interview Rabbi Fischer was asked about *metzitzah b’peh*. He said “No, it’s not a problem. It’s perfectly OK.” Somebody must agree, because in September 2011 another baby boy

in New York died from Type 1 herpes after being infected through *metzitzah b’peh*.

Without a divine source of morality, our only guide is to learn from our mistakes. Let us forgive those who 5,000 years ago had sex with children and sucked blood from the penises of infants. We know better today. Organizations like Survivors for Justice, CHANA and SNAP can lead the way in reform. But if the Orthodox Jewish community cannot police its own, let them be policed by the secular State.

• Trevor Blake is a sign language interpreter and author living in Portland, Oregon USA. He is the author of *Portland Memorials* and his work can be found in *The SubGenius Psychlopedia of Slack* by Ivan Stang, *Strange Creations* by Donna Kossy, *In Extremis* by Bill Babouris and elsewhere. For more information, see ovo127.com.

‘Indiana Jones’ rabbi faces jail over bogus holy Jewish relics

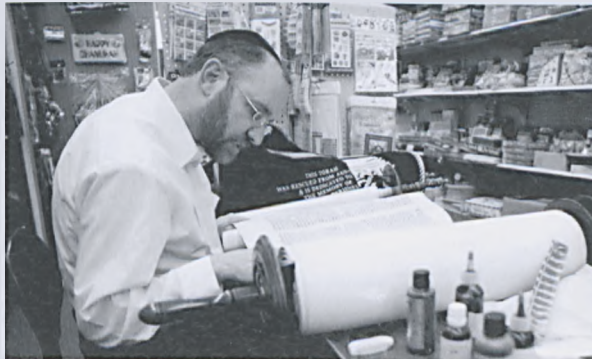
A NEW YORK rabbi, who posed as a “Jewish Indiana Jones” whose mission was to unearth Holocaust-era Torahs, is to be sentenced next month for fraud.

Earlier this year, Rabbi Menachem Youlus, a Baltimore Jewish bookstore owner, pleaded guilty in Manhattan Federal Court to spinning a web of lies that ensnared synagogues and donors – including a billionaire philanthropist. He duped investors into believing he found scrolls at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen Holocaust camps.

He faces up to five years in prison for creating a bogus charity built on fictional tales of rescuing the Torahs, selling forgeries and pocketing the money.

“I know what I did was wrong and I deeply regret my conduct,” Youlus said in court. According to a report in the *New York Daily News*, his lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, said the plea deal “ends an agonising voyage by a good man with the best of intentions who ultimately strayed into fraudulent conduct.”

Prosecutors had charged Youlus, 50, with weaving fantastical tales of international derring-do to impress donors to his charity. He claimed to have used a metal detec-



Rabbi Youlus. Photo: Brendan Hoffman for The New York Times

tor to unearth a metal box with Torah scrolls on the grounds of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

He sold “relics” to investor David Rubenstein, who donated them to the Central Synagogue in Manhattan, and tried to soak him for a \$250,000 donation.

Youlus also convinced a buyer that he found a Torah at the Bergen-Belsen camp by telling a ridiculous account of stumbling onto a hole in the corner of the floorboards.

He used the money to pay private school tuition bills for his kids and to make personal investments.

Youlus, at his trial in Manhattan, told Judge Colleen McMahon of Federal Dis-

trict Court: “Between 2004 and 2010, I falsely represented that I had personally obtained vintage Torah scrolls – in particular ways, in particular locations – in Europe and Israel. I know what I did was wrong, and I deeply regret my conduct.”

The rabbi, 50, then pleaded guilty to mail fraud and wire fraud, admitting that he had used the United States Postal Service and e-mails to further a scheme to steal money while claiming to be saving and restoring historic Torahs.

After the hearing, Rabbi Youlus’s lawyer, Benjamin Brafman, told reporters that his client was “a good man with the best intentions who ultimately strayed into fraudulent conduct” and said he “should be sentenced with great leniency”.

As part of his plea agreement, he will repay his victims \$1.2 million. He is free on \$100,000 bond until his June 21 sentencing. US Attorney Preet Bharara said Youlus had “exploited the profound emotions attached to one of the most painful chapters in world history – the Holocaust – in order to make a profit. He added that his guilty plea “is a fitting conclusion to his story and he will now be punished for his brazen fraud”.

Atheists Helping the Homeless: c

RICHARD SILVERWOOD interviews **JOE ZAMECKI**, founding m

There is a common belief amongst religious types that those who believe in God are somehow morally superior to atheists. They see us as godless sinners who revel in wrongdoing whilst they struggle courageously to right the world's injustices.

This is where Atheists Helping The Homeless steps in. It is a group of philanthropic non-believers who aim to alter the public perception of atheists by carrying out charity work. These altruistic infidels do this not to gain a place in heaven but simply because they are good people. Founding member Joe Zamecki was on hand to talk about the work the group is doing.

RS: *First of all, can you say a little bit about your background as an atheist?*

JZ: I was raised in a Catholic family and by eleven years of age, I had stopped believing in gods. I attribute that to Catholic schools, corporal punishment and forced religiosity.

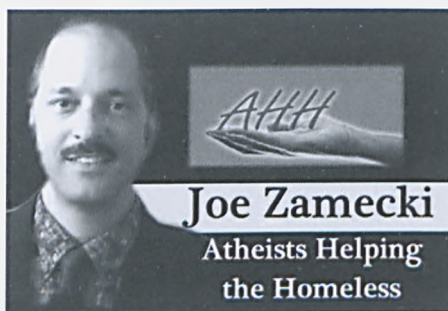
RS: *How did the Atheists Helping the Homeless group first come about and what was the inspiration behind it?*

JZ: In 2009 I made a video documentary about homelessness in Austin, Texas, and learned a lot about how help groups help the homeless on a regular basis. Then I learned that most of the help was coming from religious groups and that some of them preached while they helped. Some theists were still telling the world that atheists don't care to help because they have no morals, which only come from God. Then I found two other proud atheists who wanted to help the homeless. We stopped just dreaming and did it.

RS: *Do you think that the media attempt to propagate the idea that only Christians are capable of carrying out charitable work?*

JZ: No, the media don't attempt to propagate that idea but sometimes the media reports we see about charity do imply a lot about charity groups – mostly that religion is the main theme and focus or that only religious groups do secular help work in one specific area. AHH recently got its first mainstream TV news exposure and it only took us a little over two years of successful operation to get that exposure. I'm glad we're that much more experienced now but we'd be a larger group if they hadn't waited so long to report on us.

RS: *What do you think is so wrong about church*



groups attempting to convert the homeless whilst they help them out?

JZ: I think it's wrong to attempt to convert anyone to Christianity or any other religion. The manner in which they do that matters not to me; it's just wrong. The help groups that do secular help and get something good done I applaud but it's always bittersweet when a religious group does it. It's a little help with a little hurt to go along with it. Just hearing preaching doesn't really hurt. I'm talking about the disinformation and the mistaken notions that arise from preach-

ing religion. Also there's a lot of dishonesty in saying 'Here's something free' when you have to endure preaching, which means it's not really free. It's the same with saying 'Here is God's free gift of salvation. You only have to give yourself up to him.' It's not free and that's not honest. Still, I'm glad about half of their mission: to help. I want them to continue that part.

RS: *Why do you think that it is more ethically sound to carry out good work for non-religious reasons?*

JZ: I think it's more moral to do good deeds for honest reasons. Religion isn't the only dishonest reason but it seems to be the most popular. Again, I'm glad they help; I just wish they didn't lie.

RS: *How successful has your work been so far?*

JZ: AHH has been very successful. We've helped over 2,500 people with our care packages of toiletries and we've made a lot of good friends along the way. We have a lot of repeat recipients and we know them by name. We usually see them make progress

COMMENT: 'Pray for Muamba'

By **GUY KERRIDGE**

IT IS a strange, sad reality that many companies and corporations seem to find it impossible to react to incidents of public tragedy without religious or spiritual references.

When Bolton Wanderers midfielder Fabrice Muamba suffered his now well-documented cardiac arrest in March, there was a depressing sense of inevitability to calls for the Almighty to intervene. Arsenal FC, the player's former club, abandoned any pretence of operating as a secular business, and sent their "thoughts and prayers" to Muamba in an official club statement.

In the aftermath of the incident, Bolton club doctor Jonathan Tobin said Muamba was effectively dead for 78 minutes, as paramedics tried to revive him on the pitch, performing mouth-to-mouth and giving him a number of shocks with a defibrillator. As players from both teams stood around their unconscious comrade,

the seriousness of the situation gradually impressed itself on all those present, and eventually referee Howard Webb abandoned the match.

Professional footballers were understandably keen to show their support, but it was not exactly heart-warming to see how they chose to relay their sentiments. Aside from the Real Madrid players – sporting "Get well Muamba" messages on their shirts – and in a few other cases, shirts emblazoned with "Pray for Muamba" on the front were by far the most common.

It should be said, as if it needs to be, that there can be no doubting the sincerity of people's convictions in hoping for an improvement in Muamba's condition. But seizing on this understandable concern, and turning it into a campaign that circulated around the world and involved a variety of competing beliefs to "pray him better", was nothing short of sickening.

Clearly many groups have a vested interest in promoting vague ideas of communal prayer, and "Pray for Muamba" was an ex-

charity with no strings attached

ding member of a non-religious American philanthropic group

month after month. This includes whole families. We've also been very successful at our second goal and priority, which is to show by example that the idea that atheists can't do good moral things because they don't believe in God is very, very false. A great many Christians have let us know that they approve of our work and want us to keep it up. They've also reassured us that they don't believe the rumour that atheists can't have morals. The rumour persists but we seem to be slowly changing minds.

RS: *What type of a response have you had from the American public?*

JZ: The general public has been very happy with our work when they've heard about it or seen it. Even under the bridge, while we do our giveaways, we get people from other help groups telling us they like what we do.

RS: *What can people do to help your cause?*

JZ: Folks can check out our website at www.atheistshelpingthelhomeless.org and learn all about us there. They can also send us donations through the US Mail. There's

info about that on the website. If they live in or near Austin, Texas, USA, we'd love to meet them at a giveaway. They can bring donations directly there too.

We need more atheist volunteers and of course, volunteers need not be atheists to help us help the homeless. Folks who can't give a donation right now can help by sharing this information as far and wide as possible.

RS: *How important do you think it is that people know that you are atheists?*

JZ: At the giveaways, we wear t-shirts that say the name of our group and we have a sign we post nearby that has the name of our group, URL and logo on it. Roughly every twelfth person in line might hear us casually mention that we're non-religious. Usually that's as much as we promote ourselves.

Online advertising is different. There it's all-important to let folks know that we are atheists. Some folks don't want to donate to any atheist group and I don't want their donation if that is the case. Some atheists are

looking for atheist groups to donate to and are having trouble finding any. Some people say that atheists can't do this kind of good work. For those reasons and more, we put our atheism right up front when we're online.

RS: *Finally what can we expect from your group throughout the years to come?*

JZ: We will probably grow a little in the years to come and we're working on some non-giveaway events, like a fundraiser. We could do a lot more if we had a lot more volunteers and for many people, it's just a matter of finding the right group. An atheist charity is a needle in a haystack.

There are lots of charity groups but this is the first one with 'atheists' in the title of the group. There are others now but we're still quite rare. We're hoping to change that.

• Next month Richard Silverwood interviews Richard Coughlan, a stand-up atheist comedian whose YouTube videos have gained an international following.

'Muamba' was near-tragedy turned to sickening farce

ample of the flagrant emotional blackmail we always see from the religious in the wake of major disasters or tragedies. Such calls to prayer suggest those who don't go along with them is tantamount to some kind of moral failure.

To the thousands of people who claimed to be united in prayer for the stricken Bolton midfielder I would ask: Where are your organised supernatural outreach programmes for all the non-celebrities who suffer cardiac arrests in Britain (or the rest of the world for



that matter) each year?

The reality is that public reaction to tragedy is characterised by regressive tendencies, probably due to a combination of trauma and fear, and in this context religion arrogantly presumes it has the right to trespass in the wake of each event.

It is not selflessness driving this impulse to pray, but selfishness; through prayer, people can make it all about *themselves*, offering themselves personal consolation by way of a kind of glorified philanthropic placebo.

When it was revealed Muamba's condition was improving, some people evidently believed their prayers had "got through" and acted upon. What arrogance. What insensitivity.

And it is the institutionalisation of this selfishness, the unquestioning stupidity of it all, that most damages society. Companies like Arsenal FC, widely respected and upholding a generally solid public image, are putting in the heads of impressionable people the downright manipulative idea that their prayers can have an active impact in

another person's recovery.

With so many people continuing to believe in an intervening God, this is certainly not a harmless idea, and to describe this as cynical opportunism would be a ludicrous understatement.

What we saw last month was credit being taken away from the medical professionals who worked heroically to save a life hanging by a thread.

Muamba's collapse was shocking for everyone who saw it happen. Far more than just a tragic incident within the football community, it touched the community at large. It is always a shock to be reminded of the fragility of life, to see someone so young, at the peak of their fitness, collapse suddenly without warning.

For religion to attempt to hijack the emotions common to these situations, namely sadness, love, hope and empathy, is simply not acceptable.

• Guy Kerridge is a freelance writer based in Australia

Who's afraid of Charles Darwin?

PROF IAN COWAN poses the question in this abridged version of a talk he delivered at a meeting of the Canberra Chapter of the Independent Scholars Association of Australia on July 9, 2009

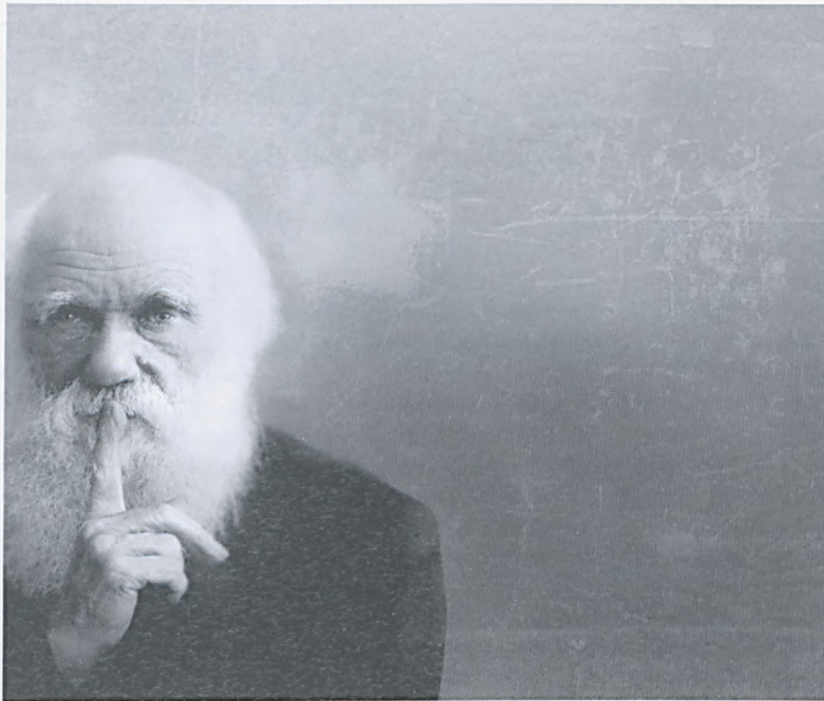
Who was, or is afraid of Darwinism? The contenders are numerous. There are some who suffered a visceral revulsion, such as the wife of the Bishop of Worcester. When told of Thomas Huxley's statement about our simian ancestry she responded, "Descended from the apes! Let us hope it is not true, but if it is, let us pray that it will not become generally known." And today there are those, best represented by the Discovery Institute in the USA, who pay homage to their "deity" by distorting and misrepresenting scientific evidence for the truth of Darwinism. They seek a "God of the gaps", but the gaps are of their own making.

But the first person who springs to mind is Darwin himself. "It is like confessing a murder," he said when, in 1844, he first revealed his theory of natural selection to his friend, the botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker. Of what or of whom one might ask: His own respectability or the human soul? It was probably both. At the time of his letter to Hooker, and even later when he published *On the Origin of Species*, he still felt "compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analagous to that of man". Nevertheless, his faith was crumbling. As he wrote in his autobiography, "disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete. The rate was so slow that I felt no distress."

I'm not quite sure about the lack of distress. Certainly, if there were distress, it was considerably less than that of Fitzroy, captain of the Beagle, who had slit his throat, primarily as some have argued, because he had been disabused of his faith by his passenger's theory.

Why should Darwinism have such an impact on religious belief, you may ask?

If we disregard revealed religion – and like it or not I shall – there is, in my view,



This image of Darwin was used in the Natural History Museum's Big Idea Exhibition in London from November 2008 to April 2009

only one appealing argument for the involvement of a deity in human affairs. It is the teleological argument – the argument from design. The apprehension that our world, our universe, or at least parts of it, are constructed in a way that bespeaks an intelligent designer is not in any way new. Indeed one might well suppose that it entered the mind of *Homo sapiens* as soon as it had become sapient. St Paul proclaimed that "His invisible attributes, that is his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason in the things he has made." In relation to the making of *Homo sapiens*, the conclusion was nicely expressed by the naturalist John Ray in 1691:

It seems to me impossible that Matter divided into as minute and subtle Parts as you will or can imagine, and those moved according to what Catholick laws soever can be devised, should without the Presidency and Direction of some intelligent Agent, by the mere agitation of a gentle heat, run itself into such a curious Machine, as the Body of Man is.

Despite a compelling rebuttal by David Hume, the argument survived. William Paley, remembered best for his analogy between the human eye and a watch, made

a case for Presidency and Direction in 1794 that would impress the 20-year old Charles Darwin when he was at Cambridge.

But Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection thoroughly undermined the argument from design. It suggested that the complexity of present life has emerged from the interaction of variation, selection and heredity. It has, with some slight modifications, stood the test of subsequent enquiry astonishingly well.

Of course the apprehension that the behaviour of man is intrinsically selfish had long preceded Darwin. For example, Adam Smith wrote, "It is not from the benevolence

of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest." And in 1836 John Stuart Mill gave his "arbitrary definition of man", labelled by others *Homo economicus*, "as a being who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest amount of necessities, conveniences, and luxuries, with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained." As to organic life in general we have the famous lines by Tennyson, written ten years (it is worth noting) before the *On the Origin of Species*:

*Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law—
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed— 10*

It was the truth of such empirical observations that Darwin's theory supported.

While disbelief was creeping over Darwin, disbelief was assailing authority in England. *Origin* contributed to it and benefited from it. Although there had been questioning of religious authority, doubts about religious dogma, and increasing secularisation of government during the enlightenment, it was generally thought impossible that a thinking person could be an out-and-out atheist. And the revolu-

tions in America and France, and activities of expatriates such as Thomas Paine had made the British establishment wary of tendencies towards atheism. David Hume had been careful to place his most overtly heretical thoughts in the mouth of the fictitious Philo. But in the 19th century the godless began to raise their voices. Notable was Percy Bysshe Shelley, who, in 1811, had been sent down from Oxford for his pamphlet, owing much to Hume, called *The Necessity of Atheism*. His words were extraordinarily prescient in view of what was to come:

*If ignorance of nature gave birth to gods,
knowledge of nature is made for their destruction.*

For the most part, however, the godless who spoke out in Victorian England were not academics or even academics who had been banished from academia. They were associated with industrial society. There were the Owenites, working class disciples of Robert Owen, whose Association of all Classes of all Nations, founded in 1835 had, at one time or another in the years 1837-1866, some 60 branches. Owen's own views on religion had been made clear as early as 1817. Speaking at the City of London Tavern he told those assembled:

You have been prevented from even knowing what happiness really is, solely in consequence of the errors – gross errors – that have been combined with the fundamental notions of every religion that has been hitherto taught to men. And, in consequence, they have made man the most inconsistent, and the most miserable being in existence. By the errors of these systems he has been made a weak, imbecile animal; a furious bigot and fanatic; or a miserable hypocrite; and should these qualities be carried, not only into the projected villages but into Paradise itself, a Paradise would no longer be found!

There were many other secularist and free-thought societies operating in the first half of the 19th century. While it was not until 1880 that the education of children was made compulsory, and then only for children from 5-10, the desire for education was intense. By the middle of the century, more than 700 Mechanics Institutes had been established in towns and cities across the UK and overseas, some of which formed the early roots of colleges and universities.

Several papers promoted free thought, some of them overtly atheistic. *The Oracle of Reason: Or Philosophy Vindicated* pronounced, on the title page, "Faith's Empire is the World; its Monarch God; its Ministers, the Priests; its Slaves, the People". Its editor wrote:

The Oracle is the only exclusively atheistical print that has appeared in any age or

country – and in offering a First Volume to the public, its Editor feels the most lively and triumphant satisfaction.

Expressions of that kind were not without danger. In 1841 Edward Moxon was found guilty of blasphemy for publishing Shelley's poetry. And George Southwell, editor of *The Oracle*, was jailed for a year for blasphemous libel. His successor in the editorial office, George Holyoake, was jailed for six months the following year. He had been unwise enough to suggest that, in view of the recession, the Deity should be put on half-pay. (There is precedence, you see, for shareholders demanding reduction in the emoluments of chief executive officers). The third editor of *The Oracle*, Thomas Patterson was jailed for his account of the trial of Holyoake. Not surprisingly publication of the paper then ceased. However, the activities of its progenitors did not. Another radical publication, *The Reasoner*, edited by Holyoake, ran from 1846 to 1861.

Publication of short-lived secular magazines continued until, in 1881, *The Freethinker* was established and survives the fragile tradition of its genre until the present day. Its founder and first editor, George William Foote, quickly established his credentials by undergoing a year of imprisonment with hard labour in 1882.

The trembling of theological foundations had been exacerbated by the publication, in 1844, of the *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. It has been described as a "Victorian Sensation". Brilliantly written, it was one of the first attempts to present the science of the natural world to the intelligent layman. Beginning with the nebular hypothesis, the generation of stars and planets, it concluded with an account of the "purpose and general condition of the animated creation" including, in particular, man. In between it presents the development of the "vegetable and animal kingdom" as one of common descent, an evolutionary progression – each stage, each form having developed from an antecedent form. The cause of development? An initial inbuilt propensity for the most primitive organisms to change and continue to change in a way appropriate to the prevailing circumstances.

Vestiges was not irreligious; at least, not if one accepts deism as an insipid form of religion. But in its time, promulgating evolutionary development of the world without any "hands-on" activity from above was a dangerous heresy. The author was careful to remain anonymous. Speculation as to his or her identity ranged from Prince Albert to Ada Lovelace, daughter of Lord Byron. It was in fact Robert Chambers, founder with his brother William of the publishing

house in their name in Edinburgh.

Scientifically, parts of *Vestiges* were excellent. But, unlike the curate, reviewers were inclined to concentrate on the bad. How did Darwin react, one may ask? He had, in the very same year *Vestiges* appeared, written an essay, not to be published during his lifetime, of 189 pages on the descent of species from common stock and the means by which it had come about. But now he remained, crouched warily in the wings so to speak, too timorous to make an entrance. He was titillated and frightened by the vigorous attacks on *Vestiges* made by two friends: his early mentor, the religious Woodwardian Professor of Geology at Cambridge, Adam Sedgwick, and his recently acquired acolyte, the newly appointed, Professor of Natural History at the Royal School of Mines, the anti-clerical Thomas Huxley.

Vestiges, despite sustained criticism by churchmen and many scientists, was a best-seller, running into 12 editions, the last published posthumously in 1884, before copyright had run out.

Let me remark here that I would not suggest that the trend of increasing disbelief, or perhaps I should say evident disbelief, in the teachings of the church in the 19th century was entirely due to the doubts raised by such as Hume, Shelley, Chambers and Darwin. Perhaps part of it was due to the theologically intractable problem of evil – a problem all too evident in the slums created by the industrial revolution. Nevertheless, it is plain from articles and letters published in the *Oracle* and other papers of the same kind that a reservoir of radical intellectual ability resided in the "lower classes" at that time. Darwin's thesis would have been widely understood. It has been pointed out that readers of *Origin* today may find the discussion of breeding in pigeons tedious. Not so in Victorian England. Pigeon breeding was a hobby of consuming interest to many working men.

Having started my brief account to do with religious perceptions in the 19th century with poetry, I'll finish it in the same vein, with lines written soon after the close of the century by a fervent admirer of Shelley:

*And, tricked by our own early dream,
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed.*

*Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,
Uncompromising rude reality
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank, and now ceased to be ...*

And how much satisfaction did this bring to all those early 19th century free-

(Continued on p10)

thinking radicals whose desire was to see progress, social progress? To some, at least, very little, for, according to Darwinian theory, the future was now a bleak unforgiving prospect. The Creator had been vanquished but it seemed that (to make use of Shelley once again):

Round the decay

*Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Darwin had provided the explanation of the empirically-based conclusions of Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill and Alfred Tennyson. It is true that he expressed the belief, "that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he now is." But as to how this would come about, he replied to a question in the last year of his life,

Remember what risk the nations of Europe ran, not so many centuries ago, of being overwhelmed by the Turks, and how ridiculous such an idea now is! The more civilized so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world.

And he identified one lower race uncomfortably close to home in *The Descent of Man*:

*The careless, squalid, unambitious Irishman multiplies like rabbits: the frugal, forseeing, self-respecting, ambitious Scot, stern in his morality, spiritual in his faith, sagacious and disciplined in his intelligence, passes his best years in struggle and celibacy, marries late and leaves few behind him. (Greg, quoted in *Descent*.)*

Thus the weak members of civilized societies propagate their kind. No-one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man.

As you can see, Darwinism lent itself to an indelicate treatment of the so-called "Irish Question".

Darwin was a humane man. He loathed slavery, and cruelty both to people and to animals. He was the epitome of a benevolent country squire. Also, unlike his German disciple Ernst Haeckel, he argued that the human races belong to one species only. Nevertheless, there is no doubt Darwin unwittingly gave sustenance to those who seek intellectual justification for racist policies – and even to those associated with such dark matters as racial hygiene and ethnic cleansing. While it would have found some support amongst the privileged, the landed, the beneficiaries of the industrial revolutions, and colonial administrators, Darwinism certainly did not promote a concept of progress appealing to the Owenites, secularists, freethinkers, and students at mechanics

Who's afraid of Charles Darwin?

(Continued from p9)

institutes.

I'll take, as an example, of reaction to Darwinism amongst the intelligent working classes, that of my hero, Alfred Russel Wallace, the man whose theory of evolution by natural selection had stimulated Darwin, at long last to publish his own. Aged 46, after his years of self-employed labour as a naturalist first in the Amazon and then in Indonesia he published *The Malay Archipelago*:



Alfred Russel Wallace (1823 – 1913)

The land of the orang-utan, and the bird of paradise. Dedicated to Darwin, it is one of the greatest travel books ever written.

It is as much about the people of the Malay Archipelago as about the geography and natural history of the region. In the final chapter, "Races of Man in the Malay Archipelago", Wallace reveals something of his over-riding interest: reform and progress in human affairs. "Before bidding my readers farewell," he writes, "I wish to make a few observations on a subject of yet higher interest and deeper importance." He goes on:

Most of us believe that we, the higher races, have progressed and are progressing. If so, there must be some ... ideally perfect social state towards which mankind ever has been, and still is tending.

Now it is very remarkable that among peo-

ple in a very low stage of civilization we find some approach to such a perfect social state.

He supports this conclusion on the basis of his observations of peoples in the Amazon and in the East. He then comments on modern civilisation:

Although we have progressed vastly beyond the savage state in intellectual achievements ... it is not too much to say, that the mass of our populations have not at all advanced beyond the savage code of morals, and have in many cases sunk below it. A deficient morality is the great blot of modern civilization, and the greatest hindrance to true progress.

How, then, does he find hope of progress in the Darwinian notion of struggle, and survival of the fittest? He doesn't. What he does is to abandon, to Darwin's consternation, their theory as far as the "higher" mental attributes of man are concerned.

"Natural selection," Wallace later wrote, "could only have endowed the savage with a brain a little superior to that of an ape, whereas he actually possesses one but very little inferior to that of the average members of our learned societies." And he concluded:

Let us not shut our eyes to the evidence that an Overruling Intelligence has watched over the action of those laws, so directing variations and so determining their accumulation, as finally to produce an organization sufficiently perfect to admit of, and even to aid in, the indefinite advancement of our mental and moral nature.

Secularism and science versus his hope of human progress. Something had to give way. It was secularism and science.

Wallace is by no means alone in attempting to marry Darwinism with some form of theism. A modern example is Kenneth Miller, Professor of Biology at Brown University, and a highly respected teacher of biology.

In his book *Finding Darwin's God* he puts forward an idea that, as those who espouse intelligent design are entitled to point out, is essentially one of Intelligent Design. The key is quantum indeterminacy. God (contrary to Einstein) does play dice, and, moreover, plays with loaded dice. As Miller puts it:

The indeterminate nature of quantum events would allow a clever and subtle God to influence events in ways that are profound, but scientifically undetectable to us. Those events could include the appearance of mutations, the activation of individual neurons in the brain, and even the survival of individual cells and organisms affected by the chance processes of radioactive decay. Chaos theory emphasizes the fact that enormous changes in physical systems can be brought about by unimaginably small changes in initial conditions, and this, too, could serve as an undetectable amplifier of

divine action.

So here at last, for those who cling to theism, is an unshrinkable gap fit for a god of their choice. How much does he involve himself in the affairs of man? Following Epicurus, we may reasonably ask, is he wrathful and uncaring, or benign and incompetent?

Miller's God is rather odd. He manages affairs in a restrained way, Miller posits, so that we should think we are free, "allowing us to reap the rewards and consequences of our own free will." It brings new significance to the famous rejoinder of Isaac Bashevis Singer, "We must believe in free will, we have no choice."

So much for Darwinism. Darwinian evolution is slow. Even if it were capable of engendering the kind of progress Wallace yearned for, we might be gone before it had time to do so. What about social evolution? Is that not sufficiently independent of Darwinian evolution to provide hope of real progress? Well let us turn to the writings of a neo-neo-Darwinist, Richard Dawkins. "Most of what is unusual in man can be summed up in one word 'culture'", he argues in *The Selfish Gene*. And he suggests:

We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism – something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.

Elsewhere he issues a warning:

... if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then have at least the chance to upset their designs, something that no other species has ever aspired to.

Well, of course we all wish for a society in which individuals (at least other individuals) cooperate generously and unselfishly. And that includes, for obvious reasons, those of us who are not themselves generous and unselfish. It is perhaps the one hope for progress. It will never be an ideal society of course. There will be those who cheat in various ways. The meek will not inherit the earth. Indeed it will remain necessary that the majority punish those who transgress too far.

Theoretical economists and sociologists use games theory to calculate the balance of choice in a society in which various behavioural strategies are available to each individual. There are "suckers", "grudgers", and "cheats" in an example mentioned by Dawkins. And perhaps Dawkins is right; un-

derstanding our evolutionary inheritance may help in achieving progress.

Certainly retaining faith in an indefinable authority is unlikely to be helpful. Yet the desire to do so is strong. What do people think about Darwinism and religion today? The theological "think tank" in England, Theos, does its best to pry into hidden regions of the human psyche.

It turns out that only about 18 percent of people in Britain are Darwinists – that is to say they believe the Darwinian theory explains the descent of man without the presence of any guiding intelligence. (I don't know about Australia, because here, we have not been asked the same questions). About the same percentage (call them Wallaceists) believe in evolution, but that a deity had a hand in it, and 19 percent (the creationists) believe a deity managed the whole thing in one way or another. You may notice the percentages do not add up to 100. That is because almost half the population suffered from what the surveyors euphemistically call cognitive dissonance.

I myself would reserve the phrase "cognitive dissonance" for Wallaceists, including Wallace himself and Kenneth Miller, and others, such as Pope John Paul II who believed, or believe that Darwinism is "more than a hypothesis" but is compatible with the existence of an influential and benign god.

Why are so many people afflicted by what Dawkins calls "the God Delusion"? I think that at least one reason can be explained in Darwinian terms. It is to do with the concept of purpose, and the acceptance of authority. The human child, far more than the young of any other species, lives in a world of intelligent design – clothing, fires, utensils etc – and language. He or she needs to discover, through exploration and revelation, the usefulness of the constructs, both material and linguistic, that surround him. He is helped in this, is indeed fitter, if he has instinctual concepts of meaning, purpose, and authority. The instinct tends to outlive the childhood environment. The Jesuit boasts, "Give me the child for his first seven years, and I'll give you the man." What a mean, sad triumph!

But of course, not everyone will conform and accept authority. There will be those – popes, bishops, witch doctors, ayatollahs, for example, who pretend to secret knowledge, to privileged information – and use it to their own advantage. That thesis is, I think, pretty much consonant with the ideas of Richard Dawkins. Where Dawkins fails is in not realising that the same two characteristics, acceptance of authority and conformity with the crowd may not only support the "God Delusion", but can sustain secular tyrants equally well.

I'll leave last words on this to Shelley (Nietzsche would be a good alternative):

*... and obedience,
Bane of all genius, virtue, freedom, truth,
Makes slaves of men, and, of the human frame,
A mechanised automaton.*

What would Charles Darwin have thought of all this? He would be astonished at the advance of science and technology, gratified by the esteem in which he is held for his own contribution, and comforted, perhaps, that the "grand questions" of meaning and purpose remain as controversial and unanswered as ever. Had he been asked to comment on, say, Miller's god of uncertainty he would probably give the answer he gave to his contemporaries on the subject of religion. He would voice a gentle skepticism, and then, reluctant infidel as he was, qualify it:

But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?

There is in this the hint of a philosophical problem that I would choose to exploit were I in the business of undermining Darwinism as far as the human mind is concerned. Is it valid to use one's mental faculties to establish a theory and, at one and the same time, use that theory to account for those faculties? To do so I suspect involves one in what philosophers call self-referential incoherence.

But let us avoid the "inconvenience which attends all abstruse reasoning" identified by David Hume. "When we leave our closet," he wrote, "and engage in the common affairs of life, its conclusions seem to vanish, like the phantoms of the night on the appearance of morning."

The problem is that the only authority for the authority of the mind of man is the mind of man. Some may be inclined to see faith in a higher authority as the way out of that predicament, and there is no ethical reason why not (provided the inclination is not taken as a badge of virtue). But it should hardly be necessary to point out that, by doing so, they simply encumber that authority with the problem from which they attempt to escape.

For there is no escape. Man stands on his own 13 billion feet. He judges the value of his own performance. He directs the play and supplies the applause. And laughs (and weeps) at his own jokes.

• Ian Cowan is Emeritus Professor of the Australian National University, Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, and a member of the Independent Scholars Association and of Canberra Skeptics Organisation.

The unabridged version of his talk (including all references which we could not include due to lack of space) will be posted on the *Freethinker* website later this month.

Religion for atheists

JOHN RADFORD, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London, finds fatal flaws in one of the most over-hyped books of 2012

Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* has an intriguing title. It is not an attempt at conversion, nor about non-theistic religions, but an argument that while religions are not true, they contain many good ideas. It begins boldly:

The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is true – in terms of being handed down from heaven to the sound of trumpets and supernaturally governed by prophets and supernatural beings.

This is a strange version of truth. Even for the religious, revelation and truth are not synonymous. Buddhism does not claim to be handed down from heaven, rather to have been worked out by a human being. The fundamental truth for Christians is the Resurrection, which is not a revelation but a supposed historical fact. Many traditional religions, I suggest, see “heaven” and supernatural beings as simply part of what exists. “Religion”, if they even use such a term, is not handed down but is our practices of worshipping, placating and appealing to such beings. Many religions have gods that are not above falsehoods. I am left not knowing what de Botton means by “true”.

I find unsupported generalisations to be a consistent failing throughout the book. There are numerous assertions about what “we” do. For example:

Modern marriages are a test case of the problems created by an absence of a moral atmosphere. We start off with the best of intentions and a maximal degree of communal support ... But soon enough ... We grow thoughtless and mendacious towards each other. We surprise ourselves with our rudeness. We become deceitful and vindictive.

Who are “we”? It is strange to use the word without including oneself, so presumably this is de Botton's own experience. But how many others? And how does he know? No evidence whatever is presented. Doubtless some marriages are like this, but that does not justify a general statement. Nor does it prove that such failings are caused by absence of a “moral atmosphere” (explained elsewhere as one in which people can point out their own faults to each other), nor indeed that such a thing ever existed. Repeatedly, religions, specifically or in total, are said to do this or understand that. Well, religions

neither do nor understand things. It is religious people who do things, and they do extremely different things even within the same religion. Some Anglicans are pacifists, others join the armed forces; many Roman Catholics practice birth control methods condemned by their Church. Those two have formal governing bodies prescribing doctrine, but most religions do not. Religions “understand that to belong to a community is both very desirable and not very easy”. Which religions – or which religious people?

In this respect they are greatly more sophisticated than those secular political theorists who write lyrically about the loss of a sense of community, while refusing to acknowledge the inherently dark aspects of social life.

No references are given (there are none in the book), so one does not know who these theorists are or what they say. Similarly with “libertarians”:

Looking back upon centuries of religious self-assurance, libertarians stand transfixed by the dangers of conviction. An abhorrence of crude moralism has banished talk of morality from the public sphere.

And so on. I suppose Bertrand Russell was a libertarian. He was pretty vocal, and very public, about questions of morality, and he is not alone. Who are de Botton's anonymous libertarians, and how does he know they are transfixed?

Such sweeping unsupported generalisations, to my mind, fatally weaken the book's argument. That argument is, however, of interest. Most of the book consists of examples of how religion provides ways of dealing with human problems and traumata, when, it is asserted, a non-religious society fails to do so. These are grouped under the chapter headings of community, kindness, education, tenderness, pessimism, perspective, art, architecture and institutions. Thus, “*The doctrine of Original Sin encourages us to inch towards moral improvement by understanding that the faults we despise in ourselves are inevitable features of the species*”. Surely if they were inevitable and species-wide we could not improve. A better understanding might be that we are born with varied potentialities for both good and ill, that everyone has a different endowment, and that how we turn out is due to complex factors over which we can have some control. That is a generalisa-

tion based on evidence. The idea that we are all inherently wicked, peculiar to Christianity though foreshadowed in the Old Testament, seems to me both harmful, and not true in the sense I use “true”, that is, consistent with the facts. De Botton is on firmer ground when he points to the social aspects of religions. Belonging to a community is certainly very important to most people, and religions provide such communities. He is also right when he says that this can be difficult in modern societies (as he might have pointed out, over half the world's population now live in cities). An individual can be isolated in many ways yet belong to a church, synagogue, temple or mosque. Or, of course, to a golf club, Rotary, profession and so on. Is one sort of community better than another, if so why? He bewails the decline of religious pilgrimages to provide emotional fulfilment and comfort in distress. Modern holiday travel lacks purpose, he claims:

Having arrived at our destination, we [again] seldom know what to do with ourselves. We wander around in search of a centre ... we usually end up listlessly touring a museum, ashamed of ourselves for the strength of our desire to go back to our hotel and lie down.

One is sorry if this is his experience. Observation suggests that most people know quite well what they want and arrange to get it, whether it is spiritual, aesthetic, adventurous, or simply hedonistic. Whether these are better or worse than worshipping a saint is a matter of opinion.

De Botton further argues that there ought to be secular equivalents to religious provision. For example, a secular shrine “*to the energy of a capital city, another to the purifying calmness of the deserted tundra*”, and so on. There should be “Agape Restaurants” to emulate religious sharing of a meal, as in Judaism, and symbolized in the Roman Mass. For a modest entrance fee, people would be seated next to strangers with whom to converse. There are many other examples. But many secular occasions do provide opportunities to meet strangers, usually when there is a common interest, such as a party, club or music performance. De Botton does not mention music, which can come close to an ecstatic religious event, or sport, often the occasion of passionate group involvement. He spends some time on the failed scheme of Auguste Comte to create a secular reli-

gion. He omits the attempts, which were enforced but ultimately fell apart, to replace religion following the French and Russian revolutions. It would appear that many people want the mystery and authority of some higher power in addition to any civil procedures. One gets the impression that de Botton himself hankers after a religion, a rather dark pessimistic version:

... to be human is, above all else, to partake in a common vulnerability to misfortune, disease and violence ... [the Christian] message is clear: even if we do not bleed to death on a cross, simply by virtue of being human we will each of us suffer our share of agony and indignity ...

But de Botton has assured us that religion is not true, so why should we believe this core Christian doctrine?

If, as de Botton maintains, religion is not true, why do its practices work, as he also claims? Richard Coles, a parish priest, reviewing de Botton's book in the *Observer*, January 22, 2012, put his finger on it: religion does not work without faith. Sick people (not his example) do not go to Lourdes without a belief that they may be cured. At the simplest, religion is like a placebo, it can have an effect if you think it will. Actually,



Alain de Botton

there is recent evidence that placebos can work even when the patient knows they are inert. This could be true of religion. It is often difficult to disentangle religious and non-religious effects, for example when moved by a beautiful old church or religious music. Nevertheless there is a difference. Unsupported faith is always vulnerable to scientific enquiry. Success rates at Lourdes provide no support for miraculous cures. That will not stop pilgrims, as hope springs

eternal (and for some, it may be a last resort). But medical science is better.

Of course religions have many practices that are valuable in their own right, but they have many others that I for one would reject, such as indoctrination, circumcision, censorship etc. And religions provide no criterion to distinguish the good and the bad. They are all part of the package. De Botton does not suggest such a criterion. He simply asserts that we have various needs that religions can satisfy. If so, it seems to me, it is sometimes deliberate, for example religiously inspired charities that genuinely help others. But more often, it is either a fortuitous side effect, for example church fetes are social occasions that can be shared by all; or, perhaps mainly, the development of practices that have proved to be effective, for example the extremely precise and regular Islamic rituals of prayer, which must strongly reinforce conformity, or confession, which is likely to foster emotional commitment.

Why exactly these work, and whether they can do so without their framework of dogma, are matters for investigation. De Botton ignores all such issues, and overall I find the book a trivial and lazy treatment of an important topic.

Children are born-believers, says author of new book

A BOOK that sets out to destroy the "myth" that children come into the world untainted by any form of religious belief has just been published by Professor Justin L Barrett. *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* argues that children aren't blank slates upon which we inscribe our religious or irreligious convictions. Rather, they arrive in the world with a strong, cognitively driven propensity for religious belief "preinstalled".

Jesse Singal, reviewing the book for the online *Daily Beast*, writes: "At first glance, it seems like the sort of books atheists and secularists everywhere would want to commit to memory. After all, Barrett, a psychologist at Fuller Theological Seminary who has dedicated his career to untangling the cognitive underpinnings of religious belief (his earlier book, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*, is an excellent primer on the subject), argues forcefully and convincingly that when it comes to kids' brains, the deck is stacked against atheism. Children come into this world predisposed toward believing in supernatural entities – their 'minds are naturally tuned up to believe in gods generally, and perhaps God in particular'."

Singal then points out that, "drawing from a wide array of studies and experi-

ments, including his own, Barrett shows that kids don't need to be indoctrinated into religion, because their hardwiring all but guarantees that they will be believers, of a sort, whether or not their parents want them to be.

Singal says that Barrett, "despite taking what is very much a rigorous, science-driven approach to his subject, finds himself at intellectual loggerheads with Richard

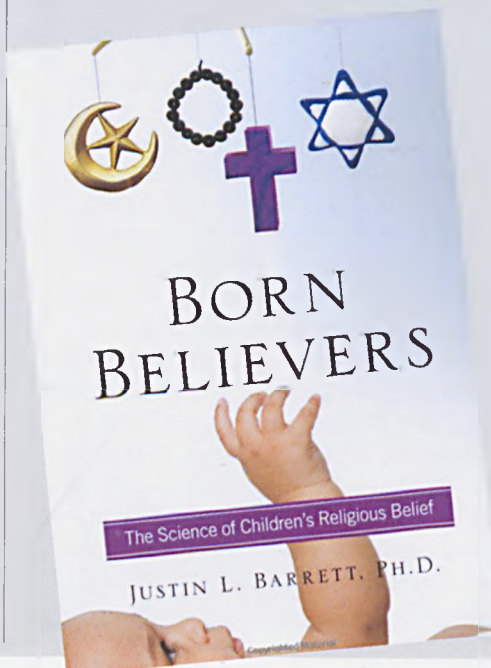
Dawkins and many other atheists. That, and because he himself is a believer".

Singal's article focuses strongly on Barrett's belief that scientists such as Dawkins "haven't done their homework". He writes that a good chunk of *Born Believers* debunks the indoctrination hypothesis, the idea that "children believe because their parents (and other trusted adults) act as if they believe, and talk as if they believe".

Dawkins, Singal points out, "is one of the staunchest purveyors of this view (or, rather, 'evolved gullibility', a close cousin of it), and he takes things a step further by arguing that it's abusive to expose children to organised religion.

Barratt accuses Dawkins of extending his political agenda into a research area with which he is unfamiliar, and is quoted in the article as saying: "I think that he is relatively unaware of the relevant research, especially the development research. I don't get the impression that he is up on his psychology of religion. Why might that be? Well, I suspect that he just has other things to do."

Barratt adds: "He's a biologist, a very good biologist from all accounts, who has this other life as a promoter of science and an opponent of religion. That maybe doesn't give him enough time to really get to intimately know the relevant research in psychology."



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.



ISLAMOPHOBIA: THE DEBATE RUMBLES ON

ISLAMOPHOBIA is nothing to be proud of (*Points of View*, March 2012). There is no evidence, for instance, that Islam is uniform or monolithic across the world. (If you want to know more about what Islamophobia means, Google “Islamophobia” and look at the sites which come up in the search.)

Moderate, progressive or liberal Islam – call it what you like – is not confined to assimilating Muslims in the West. There are millions of non-fundamentalist Muslims across the world.

Islamophobia – better described as Muslim-baiting – is not legitimate criticism of Islam and sharia law. To quote from the front page of the March *Freethinker*, “the right to criticise religion ... is a fundamental right

that is crucial to many, including Muslims”. However, the problem with Muslim-baiting is that there is insufficient respect for the evidence. Whether this is due to ignorance or deliberate distortion by Muslim-baiters is hard to say. Both factors probably play a part.

But I should quote Wittgenstein’s tag, “whereof we do not know, we cannot speak”: that is to say, do not write about what you do not understand, or about what you do not know. Religion is a diverse and complex phenomena; all religions are, and require effort to achieve a competent understanding.

It is a well-known fact that the far right use Muslim-baiting, as they have used and still use Jew-baiting (anti-Semitism) as part

of their campaigning. I have alluded to Andrew Roxburgh’s book in a previous *Point of View*. There is, I am confident, ample literature linking attacks on religion with racism and with the far right.

Graham Newbery, in his latest *Point of View*, used sharia law to beat the anti-immigration drum, rather than consider what form of sharia law, or what aspects of sharia were actually proposed to be implemented. Need I say more? Except to add that when Islam is criticised on anti-racist grounds, to claim that this criticism conflates religion and race is disingenuous in the extreme.

Colin Mills
Amersham

Your donations help keep the *Freethinker* going

WE WOULD like to thank the following subscribers who have contributed generously to the *Freethinker* Fund over the past few months:

Damian Edwardson, J N Currid, W D Eaton, F J Harrison, M E Hart, Nigel Meek, Ross W Sargent, E S Violet, Chris Copsey, G P Chapman, Mr & Mrs J & J Dodds, W Donovan, Asad Abbas, R Fennell, Robert Grandidge, Richard Hall, H Hinchcliffe, J A Hood, John Hopkins, S Kapur, Elaine Kilshaw, C J Baxter, R Lewis, A Adler, D M Bennett, David Bickley, Ruth Blewitt, L E West, Richard Winter, D Branch, Ian Caldwell, P H Albrecht, J Cass, N L Child, S C Chumbley, J Ancliffe, Tim Cooper, G Coupland, F J Davies, Derbyshire Secularists, N Gibbard, C Govan, A E Ball, M E Hart, J I Hayward, V Hennessy, E Hillman, Matthew and Olive Hinks, M Irwin, R E Ison, B Jordan, A Beeson, K Bell, R J Bollans, Ken Versluys, Alan Gibbon, Greta Farian, K Dixon, E S Durbridge, R M Atkinson, R C Harrison, I Kirkland, D A Langdown, T Beard, R A Oakley, L Sage, D H Still and W J Summersgill.

Your donations and bequests help us keep the magazine going in the face of ever-increasing costs, in particular distribution costs. You will be aware that postage, which was hiked again last month, puts a sizeable dent in our budget, but your generosity has helped us keep the subscription rate as low as possible.

VEILED MUSLIMS

I HESITATE to intervene in what appears to be a predominantly male disputation on the matter of female Islamic apparel. Why this preoccupation with women wearing what is effectively medieval garb?

Within our society one can observe many male historic garments such as military uniform, judicial gowns and wigs, and parliamentary or academia apparel. And I need hardly mention the variety of religious garb all looking equally ridiculous and without real purpose.

Islamic men with their medieval robes and baggy trousers are a source of humour especially when coupled with woollen socks and sandals, they are just as ludicrous as the British male with his shorts and socks.

In Tunisia I discussed with some women the purpose of the burqa. They explained that it helped to keep their clothes clean when the wind blew the dust around, and they also told me jocularly to reflect on the fact that if even your husband cannot tell who is underneath what a boon it is for the odd liaison.

I am not suggesting that to be the general usage, but it did make me think.

Personally, I would prefer that these men question their purpose in wanting to deny these women wearing what is after all just an exaggerated form of modest clothing not dissimilar to Victorian times when women wore veiled hats, long skirts etc very similar to present day nuns. Surely there must be something of more import to turn your attention. Perhaps it curiosity of what lurks beneath the burqa that fuels this debate!

Maggie Atkins
???

LIBERTARIANISM

I SUGGEST that Diesel Balaam and Terry Liddle (*Points of View*, April) remember the words of the great humanist Voltaire: "I disapprove of what you say but will defend to the death your right to say it"; and the great atheist Ayn Rand, high priestess of capitalism and opponent of both anti-discrimination laws and racism: "the lowest form of collectivism."

Her hero in *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark recognised his duties towards his fellow citizens "to respect their rights and take no part in a slave society".

Libertarians, for Diesel's information, do not approve of slavery. To me, apartheid was socialist and there is no justification for anti-gay laws. I also believe that people should be free to put up "No Whites" and "no straights" signs.

The law should not discriminate but has no more right telling people who they can have as employees, customers or tenants than it would have telling them who they could have as lovers – I speak as a victim of discrimination.

I do – for my former friend Terry Liddle's information – know what it's like to be abused. I have never got over being bullied at school and have been harassed by jobs, libelled on the Internet, and had people trying to incite violence against me with vicious lies. There are indeed parts of my private life which, although perfectly legal, I would not want to see in the tabloids.

I do not want to close Britain's borders but favour far more restrictive immigration laws. We had a lot more room in Paine's day. Lax immigration laws have led to the importing to Britain of people who not only disagree with but would happily destroy our liberal and secular values.

People should not be hounded from their jobs solely for their political views – including Communists and their equivalents on the right. Were any National Front campaigns to have left-wing teachers sacked successful? I wouldn't use the word "worried" about opposition to BNP members

having jobs in the civil service – "paranoid" would be more accurate. Is there any evidence of their having actually used information to people's detriment?

People should be penalised for what they have done, not for what they might do. Someone's private life is none of their colleagues' or bosses' business.

Oh, and people who sell soft drugs like cannabis to people who want to buy them are not "cynical criminals" but providers of a service.

Mark Taha
London

I UNDERSTAND why Mark Taha is miffed by "the patronising Diesel Balaam" (*Points of View*, March. I am still trying to live down his patronising reference to me as "perfectly sweet" (*Points of View*, July 2010)). He appears to have no respect for a person's reputation.

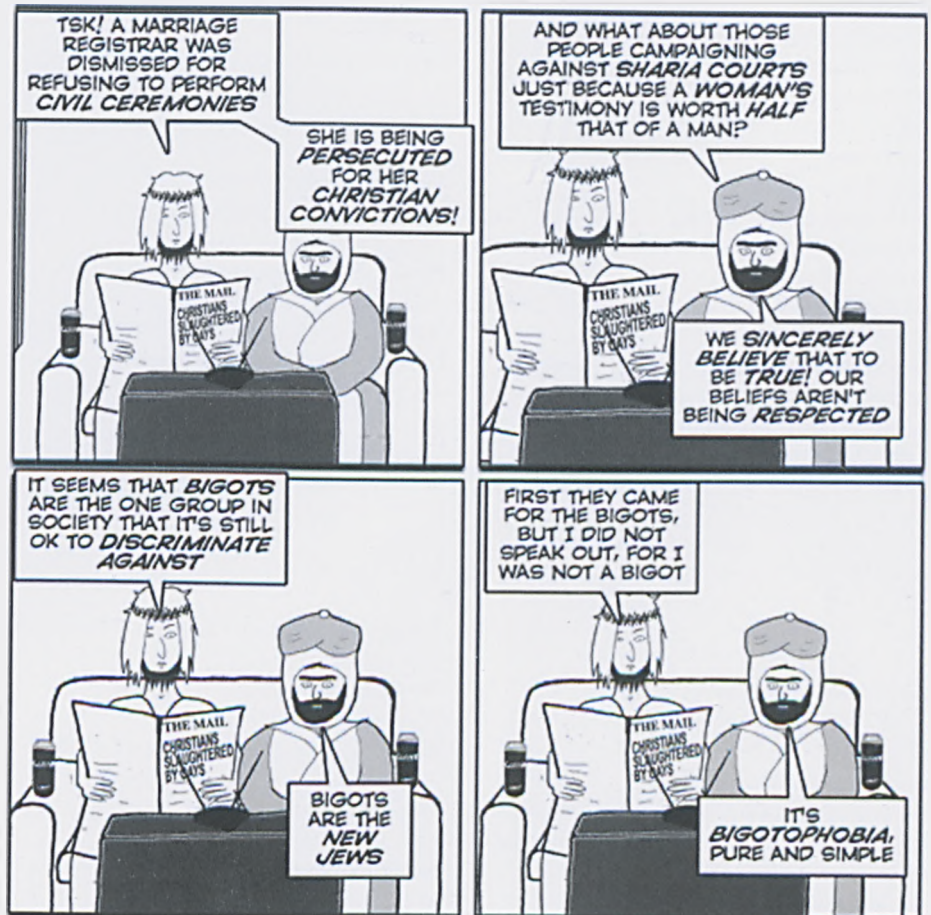
Mr Taha enquires if your correspondent's name is really Diesel Balaam. Probably not. It is highly unlikely that his dear and doting parents inflicted such an embarrassment on their little cherub.

Bill McIlroy
Hove

MONKEY GOD?

GENESIS (1.26) says: "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

Science says: Humanity has ninety-nine



© Jesusandmo.net

per cent of genes in common with chimpanzees.

This would seem to make a monkey out of "God". Can this be true!?

W K Harper
Stoke-on-Trent

NEW CONTRIBUTORS

RICHARD White, author of "an exposé of the dubious scientific methods used to demonise the use of tobacco", is one of several new contributors to the *Freethinker*. Would David Hockney be another?

Alan Gore
Middlesex

INTERNET V RELIGION

IT APPEARS to me that nowadays no religious leader can make a pronouncement without his or her words being instantly and publicly seized upon by rationalists, and vigorously challenged.

What makes this possible, of course, is the Internet, which I suggest has strong parallels with the discovery of Penicillin.

Antibiotics saw off many forms of dangerous bacteria, and I believe that the Internet will eventually do the same with regard to poisonous belief systems.

Adam McBain
Sussex

Jesus & Mo

