



Dome Xtians:
Stephen King's
Under the Dome
tears into
Christian
fundamentalists



Lunatic fringe:
Andrea Williams
plays the
'persecuted
Christians' card
- again!



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Silly savior:
George
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Catholic Church steps up its attacks on euthanasia

In its latest attack on euthanasia, the Catholic Church last month claimed that supporters of mercy killing use the same arguments that were once put forward by the Nazis to promote their eugenics programme of mass extermination

On its front page on May 5 the Vatican's semi-official newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, featured a report by Lucetta Scaraffia, an Italian historian who is a frequent contributor to the Vatican paper. In it she argued that the Nazi mentality can still be seen in the "writings of many contemporary bioethicists, and of many politicians who support legislative proposals of a euthanasic type".

Scaraffia's article came in the wake of an Italian translation of a 1920 book by two German scholars, Karl Binding and Alfred Hoche, which is said to have established the ideological foundations for the Nazi programme of extermination of disabled and incurably sick people.

The authors of the book – *Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Living* – proposed that the lives of the chronically ill or of the mentally and physically disabled were "unworthy of being lived" and should be given a "charitable death".

The historian said the book is "sinisterly" relevant to contemporary debates, and should "strongly embarrass those who champion euthanasia in the belief that it has nothing to do with Nazism".

"Contempt for imperfect human life, over estimation of the abilities of science" are "still firmly present in our time," she concludes, and this shows that "eugenics is still alive and has not been wiped out together with the Nazi past."

In 1980, the Church's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith – previously known as the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition – proclaimed in its *Declaration on Euthanasia* that "intentionally causing one's own death, or suicide, is ... equally as wrong as murder" and that "no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a foetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person, or one suffering from an incurable disease, or a person who is dying. Furthermore, no one is permitted to ask for

this act of killing, either for himself or herself or for another person entrusted to his or her care, nor can he or she consent to it, either explicitly or implicitly. Nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action."

Yet St Thomas More, who was canonised by Pope Pius XI in 1935, claimed in *Utopia*, published in 1516, that euthanasia for the terminally ill was a central factor needed in the ideal society.

"When any is taken with a torturing and lingering pain, so that there is no hope, either of recovery or ease, the priests and magistrates come and exhort them, that since they are now unable to go on with the business of life, and become a burden to themselves and to all about them, so that they have really outlived themselves, they would no longer nourish such a rooted distemper, but would choose rather to die, since they cannot live, but in much misery; being assured, that if they either deliver themselves from their prison and torture, or are willing that others should do it they shall be happy after their deaths ... Such as are wrought on by these persuasions, do either starve themselves of their own accord, or they take opium, and so they die without pain. But no man is forced on this way of ending his life; and if they cannot be persuaded to it, they do not for that fail in their attendance and care of them."

Writing on the Priests for Life website, the organisation's National Director, Fr Frank A

Pavone, declared: "We do not have a 'right to die.' Many people now speak of such a thing, but without the proper understanding of the terminology they use.

"A 'right' is a moral claim. We do not have a claim on death. Rather, death has a claim on us! We do not decide when our life will end, any more than we decided when it began. Much less does someone else – a relative, a doctor, or a legislator – decide when our life will end. None of us is master over life and death."

He added: "There are groups in our country pushing for the 'right' to use lethal injections on the seriously ill, or to remove their food and water. We must oppose such moral nonsense with all our strength. And the time to oppose it is now, before it becomes solidified in law."



Lucetta Scaraffia

UNDER THE DUVET WITH *UNDER THE DOME*

STEPHEN KING REVIVES MEMORIES OF SA'S FASCIST PAST FOR BARRY DUKE

For years now, I have been in the habit of reading myself to sleep each night. No matter how tired I am, I will turn on my cherished Sony E-reader and absorb a few pages until the words start swimming on the screen, and my eyes refuse to stay open.

This routine was working sublimely well until I started in on Stephen King's epic novel *Under the Dome* last month. Rather than ease a path to blessed unconsciousness, this 1,000-plus-page 2009 novel – which tells of how a small American community is detached from the rest of the US by an impenetrable alien dome that envelops it without warning – had the effect of electrifying me into a state of alertness that no-one should ever experience late at night.

Worse, it resuscitated feelings of naked hatred that I had not felt since my years in the 1960s in South Africa, where I was besieged by some of the most loathsome sub-humans on the planet: fundamentalist Afrikaners.

In this novel – the most aggressive attack on Christian zealotry King has ever penned

– he creates a villain who is the embodiment of the ghastly Calvinist boers who populated my teenage world, making it a misery.

"Big Jim" Rennie is the corrupt, manipulative, small-town politician who never allows anyone in Chester's Mill to forget that he is a devout born-again Christian, and reacts strongly against potty-mouths.

When aroused he utters words like "bull-pucky" rather than bullshit; and "bitch" is "rhymes-with-witch", a term he uses to describe the female editor of the local rag, *The Democrat*. President Barack Obama is dismissed as a "pro-abortion son-of-a-buck".

This combination of prudishness and piety serve to mask his hypocrisy and criminality. "Big Jim" arms thugs, enables rapists, flogs crystal meth to raise cash to evangelise "our little brown brothers", and even commit murder, because, of course, it is all part of God's Great Plan.

While not always comfortable with this gluttonous and venal head hog's methods, the townsfolk, including The Holy Redeemer Church's porn-addicted, self-flagellating lunatic pastor, jump at his command because they believe a man with deeply-held religious convictions can do no wrong.

King's novel rudely projected me back to a distant past, where, as a junior reporter, I got to meet horrors pretty much like Rennie – in particular Mayor Terblanche, whose mother's milk must have contained frighteningly high levels of Vitamin Stupid.

Terblanche, as far as I know, was not a killer or a drug dealer, but he was an 24-carat imbecile who worshipped Hitler, hated Blacks, Jews, Marxists, liberals and atheists – and had a talent to invoke the names of God and Jesus at least 30 times in every rambling, soporific speech he ever gave.

Once, though, he succeeded in rousing me from a glazed-eyed stupor at a town hall function when, in singing the praises of a man who had won a some sort of civic award for his entrepreneurial activities, loudly declared: "And I can honestly say that Mr van der Merwe had had his fingers in every tart in town!"

What redoubled my mirth was the "What? WHAT?" expression on his face when laughter erupted in the hall.

Now here's the odd thing: While reviews I have read of *Under the Dome* in papers like the *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *The New York Times* had nothing but praise for the novel, not one mentioned its over-arching anti-

religious tone.

Lewis Jones, writing in the *Telegraph*, identifies Rennie as "a sanctimonious fascist", and correctly observes that the book is "a cold-eyed assessment of the Bush regime".

The Book Forum website was the only source I could find that identified Rennie as "an evangelical Christian", and it said that *Under the Dome* "ought to be read as a work of very broad, very black social satire".

Gary D Robinson, of *TheFish.com* said King "often veers off a biblical understanding of life and humanity. This is certainly true of *Under the Dome* where King's publically affirmed aversion to "organized religion" (read: the church) is hard to miss".

King himself says he was motivated to write *Under the Dome* by "anger over incompetency". On his website he wrote: "Obviously I'm on the left of center. I didn't believe there was justification for going into the war in Iraq. And it just seemed at the time, that in the wake of 9/11, the Bush Administration was like this angry kid walking down the street who couldn't find whoever sucker punched him, and so turned around and punched the first likely suspect. Sometimes the sublimely wrong people can be in power at a time when you really need the right people. I put a lot of that into the book."

"When I started I said, 'I want to use the Bush-Cheney dynamic for the people who are the leaders of this town'. I enjoyed taking the Bush-Cheney dynamic and shrinking it to the small-town level. The last administration interested me because of the aura of fundamentalist religion that surrounded it and the rather amazing incompetency of those two top guys. I thought there was something blackly humorous in it. So in a sense, *Under the Dome* is an apocalyptic version of the Peter Principle."

Much as I enjoyed reading *Under the Dome*, hell will freeze over before I take something of the same unsettling genre to bed. This old hack needs his sleep, not a midnight adrenalin rush!

But before I turn in, let me leave you with my favourite King quote:

The beauty of religious mania is that it has the power to explain everything. Once God (or Satan) is accepted as the first cause of everything which happens in the mortal world, nothing is left to chance ... logic can be happily tossed out the window.



BARRY DUKE
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justplaincrazy

GREAT BALLS OF FIRE!

TWO Nottingham men got naked and started a fire indoors to rid the premises of negative vibes. Mohammed Aftab Mughal, 21, and Terence Williams, 51 had to be bundled naked out of Williams's house in Blair Court, The Meadows by firemen. They were later charged with arson.

In April, Nottingham Crown Court heard that the pair had been burning white sage leaves and a candle as they meditated. But when Mughal said there was a "negative vibe in the air", they decided to burn it away with lit newspaper.

Williams said he and Mughal were conducting a Wiccan ceremony, involving burning items to cleanse their souls.

Recorder Jason MacAdam, convicting them of arson, told them: "This fire was caused through stupidity rather than malice." Both men pleaded guilty to arson and were sentenced to 12 months of community service.

NAUGHTY NUNS CHASTISED

A LEADING American organisation of Catholic nuns – the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) – has been severely rapped following a Vatican investigation which found that it was spending too much time on issues such as poverty and social justice and not enough on raising campaigning over gay marriage and abortion.

The LCWR, which has around 1,500 members in the US, said that that it was left stunned by the findings of Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF, formerly the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition).

TEEN ZEALOT SUSPENDED

A DEVOUT student at Forest Heights Community School in Chester Basin, Nova Scotia, was suspended after refusing to stop wearing a T-shirt that declared: "Life is wasted without Jesus".

William Swinimer was suspended for five days last month. Reports of the incident revealed that the teen had been harassing fellow students by preaching at them and making them feel uncomfortable. Student Riley Gibb-Smith said: "He's told kids they'll burn in hell if they don't confess themselves to Jesus."

The pest donned the T-shirt every day for several weeks, even after the principal told him repeatedly to stop wearing it.

Council prayers: a 'sad' picture emerges

IN THE wake of a *Sunday Telegraph* survey last month that revealed that 40 councils have recently decided to drop, or "water down" the practice of saying prayers, with more considering doing so, Andrea Minichiello Williams, CEO of Christian Concern and a Director of the Christian Legal Centre reacted with predictable outrage.

"These changes highlight the rise of a totalitarian and bitter kind of secularism that seeks to

remove all traces of Christianity from public discourse. The claim that secularism is the more neutral option is a myth" she trumpeted.

She ranted on: "Secularists are determined to uproot our Christian foundations whilst simultaneously advocating the false notion that atheism provides the correct principles upon which society – and its values – should be based.

"Atheism is by no means neutral. It is deeply rooted in the rejection of God and the objective standards of morality that He lays for the benefit of all mankind.

"As a nation we need to be determined not to forego the values based on the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, which have shaped our country for centuries and made it the thriving and flourishing nation that it is today.

"I urge all other councils not to give in to the pressure to conform, but to be vocal and visible for the Lord Jesus by continuing to keep prayers on their agenda."

According to a report on the National Secular Society website, "one council in Gloucestershire, unable to completely let go of its ritual has removed all references to 'God' and 'Jesus Christ' from a prayer traditionally read out at its meetings."

Speaking to the Christian Institute, Rev Ross Moughtin, a former chaplain to West Lancashire council where prayers will no longer be included in the formal business, said: "The national picture is sad. I would support prayers in council meetings. It helps people to recognise that council meetings



Andrea Minichiello Williams

are more than simply business meetings – that they have a spiritual dimension."

The NSS Campaigns Manager Stephen Evans said: "If individual councillors wish to seek spiritual guidance before meetings their freedom to do so remains intact. Removing prayers from the formal business simply means prayers are no longer imposed on unwilling participants.

"However much the Government wants to

believe it, this is not a Christian country. There is therefore simply no justification for Christians, or any other religious group, to assert their supremacy over other religious groups or over non-religious people by making prayers an integral part of the formal civic business.

"The absence of prayers doesn't impose atheism on anyone; it simply creates a neutral space and removes an unnecessary barrier to local democracy being equally welcoming to all sections of society."

Responding to Williams, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood said: "She is blatantly and deliberately misrepresenting secularism for her own evangelical ends. The Bideford court order remains in force and she and others are shamelessly inciting councils to break the law.

"The courts have similarly seen through these unprincipled religious tactics – that is why we won the court case and why they have ultimately lost every employment case they have brought."

Quotable quote

I WOULD defend the liberty of consenting adult creationists to practice whatever intellectual perversions they like in the privacy of their own homes; but it is also necessary to protect the young and innocent.

– Arthur C Clarke

Faith trumps political independence in the US

IN EARLY 2012, the Roman Catholic Church became vocal about the Obama administration's US healthcare plan, which requires religious institutions to provide contraceptive health services to their female employees. After putting together a committee of bishops, the Church demanded Catholics speak out by contacting their government representatives, framing the issue as a threat to American religious liberty; and claimed it is the duty of every Catholic to defend the position of the Church.

In March, the US non-profit organization Catholics Called to Witness (CC2W) launched a popular YouTube video *Test of Fire: Election 2012* stirred by the Church's fervent opposition to the new contraceptive health requirements. The three-minute long video encourages American Catholics to vote in this year's Presidential election according to Church doctrine, and draws parallels to other issues, specifically the Right to Life (anti-abortion), Sanctity of Marriage (anti-gay marriage), and Parental Rights (including anti-contraception).

The video's epic soundtrack plays behind a gritty blacksmith forging metal words that spell out marriage, life, and freedom; and concludes with a chilling message: "Your vote will affect the future, and be recorded in eternity. Will you vote the values?"

Ironically, 98 percent of Catholic women have used contraception according to the Guttmacher Institute and, though the Church may have a predominantly male voice, the female voice, at least in practice, paints a very different story. Critics state the report could also be interpreted to be 89 percent of Catholic women. Nevertheless, the statistic is an overwhelming majority.

By protesting, the Church seems to be soliciting the US government to force Catholics to live according to the Church's teaching on sexual misconduct by repealing contraceptive health services. But this is not the government's responsibility.

If the Church offered the controversial health services and no one used it, what would be the harm? The Church, then, is primarily concerned with individuals that work for them and choose to disobey dogmatic laws. Of course, contraception is commonly used for non-sexual medical

REPORT BY PAUL KARAFFA

reasons, such as to manage an irregular menstrual cycle. But the Church won't have it.

With the 2012 election upon the American people, the Church and Catholic advocacy groups have resorted to threatening eternal damnation for those who do not uphold a pro-Catholic position in the upcoming election. The Church is most undoubtedly positioning itself to influence the 2012 election, making it quite clear that voting can be a grave sin if it is for a candidate that supports immoral activities as defined by the Church, and references the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2284) to stake that claim.

Fr Stephen F Torracco on his webpage "A Guide to Catholic Teaching and Voting" clarifies these Catechistic words by writing the following:



"If a political candidate supported abortion, or any other moral evil, such as assisted suicide and euthanasia, for that matter, it would not be morally permissible for you to vote for that person. This is because, in voting for such a person, you would become an accomplice in the moral evil at issue. For this reason, moral evils such as abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are examples of a 'disqualifying issue.' A disqualifying issue is one of such enormity that by itself renders a candidate for office unacceptable regardless of his position on other matters."

The Church commands citizens to abstain from supporting and voting for a candidate that does not meet specific Catholic criteria, regardless of the importance other criteria may have on the individual.

In a country where religious organizations have been given a golden spoon to slurp government benefits away from religious

and non-religious people alike (licensing requirements; civil rights hiring practices; and nearly 200 special arrangements, protections, or exemptions over the past 20 years), it should come as no surprise that the Church is intent on blurring the lines between church and state for their benefit.

In the US, the separation of church and state is considered one of the greatest achievements of the government establishment; and indeed Americans demand that their politicians hold true to those fundamentals. The American individual, then, must have some level of personal separation of church and state when entering the voting booth, as those that are elected will predominantly hold and exercise the values and ethics of the individuals who vote them into office.

A committee of U.S. bishops, writing to American Catholics about the implications of the healthcare law, stated:

"It is a sobering thing to contemplate our government enacting an unjust law. An unjust law cannot be obeyed. If we face today the prospect of unjust laws, then Catholics in America, in solidarity with our fellow citizens, must have the courage not to obey them. No American desires this. No Catholic welcomes it. But if it should fall upon us, we must discharge it as a duty of citizenship and an obligation of faith."

The Church has advocated illegal activity; and has gone a step further by stating that it not only approves of illegal action but that it is the obligation of all Catholics to do so according to their faith.

The Church has had thousands of years to draw a line in the sand on what is acceptable and what is not, and after all this time, after the Inquisition, holy wars, Nazi support, and most recently the shocking revelations about paedophile priests, the line that has been drawn is between women and the basic health services they depend upon.

Perhaps this sordid example of chauvinism will chip away the cold doctrine of faith and open Catholic women to the possibility that no one should have a claim over their body. Then again, perhaps American Catholics will choose celibacy and heavenly promises over sex and damnatory plights.

But with a 98 percent contraception rate and a "Catholic School Girl" outfit at every sex shop from DC to Honolulu, I highly doubt it.

Mohammed Merah: yet another monster created by 'backward' Islam

FOLLOWING the death in a shootout earlier this year of Mohammed Merah, a 23-year-old Muslim "martyr" who slaughtered a rabbi and three Jewish children at a school in Toulouse after killing three paratroopers in Montauban, the French newspaper *Le Monde* carried an article entitled "Merah, a monster created by Islam's illness".

The gist of the article by Abdennour Bidar, a French Muslim philosopher, was translated into English by Samir Khalil Samir, for the online *Asia News*.

In his article, Bidar posed the question: "On the whole, can the religion of Islam be declared alien to this type of radical action? Or is this gesture the extreme expression of an illness within Islam itself?"

Bidar then identified the "ills which afflict Islam: ritualism, formalism, dogmatism, sexism, anti-Semitism, intolerance, and religious illiteracy".

Bidar argued that the problem was rooted in the fact that, for "several centuries", Islam has been stuck in its certainties. It does not dare to question itself. It is content to affirm and reaffirm its "truth". The more it states this with force, the more it reveals its internal weakness. Before a world which contests it, it responds with violence, because it dare not face the outside world, except to declare it evil and corrupt. It "is incapable of self-criticism", said Bidar.

Islam's illness, he said, was this: "Considering with paranoia that any calling into question of its dogmas is a sacrilege. The Koran, the Prophet, Ramadan, halal, etc ... even among educated people, cultured, ready for dialogue in many areas, the slightest attempt to call into question these totems of Islam, meets with a final refusal.

In their majority, Muslims deny anyone to be able to call into question their traditions, their rituals, their customs and habits. They have walled themselves in to their own world, which they worship, declare absolute and sacred. "Most Muslim consciences refuse and even to refuse anyone else the right to discuss what tradition established as untouchably sacred thousands of years ago: rituals, principles, customs, which, however no longer meet all the spiritual needs of the present time."

They have remained deeply attached to these traditions, set in the seventh century, in a Bedouin context and "do not realise that ever more frequently even they themselves and their demands have changed in nature".



Mohammed Merah

Bidar added: "Is it no wonder that in this general climate of frozen and schizophrenic civilization, some ill spirit would transform and radicalise this collective closure into murderous fanaticism?"

Merah was said to be a member of the Islamic Salafi sect. For the Salafists, Bidar said, the model of Islam remains fixed to the past. This model goes backward and not forward.

"Forward" is seen as capitulation to Western culture, which is branded as corrupt and depraved.

The average Muslim reacts by saying that these Salafis are the exception, they do not represent true Islam and that fanaticism is specific only to an individual and is "the tree that hides the forest of a peaceful Islam".

Bidar then raised the question: "What is the real state of the forest in which trees like this take root? Could a healthy culture and a true spiritual education create such monsters?"

Bidar concludes that Islam "has to re-invent itself a spiritual culture. This it cannot do by itself and for itself: today it would serve no purpose to establish an 'Islamic humanism' next to a 'Western humanism' or 'Buddhist humanism.' If the tomorrow of the twenty-first century is spiritual, this will not occur in separate modalities between the different religions and worldviews, but on the basis of a common faith in man".

Atheist group pickets Baptist bully's church

MASH, the Military Atheists & Secular Humanist group at Fort Bragg last month rallied supporters to show its disapproval of an "awful" North Carolina Baptist preacher who recently advocated violence against kids thought to be gay.

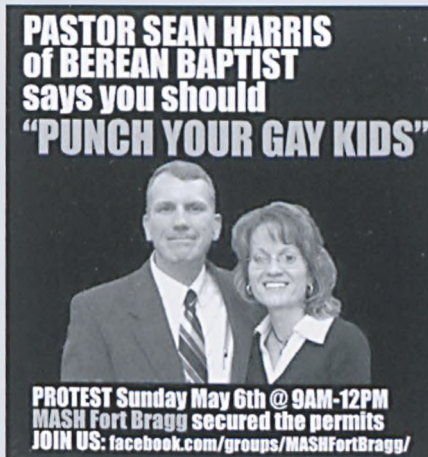
MASH's leader secured a permit for members to protest outside Pastor Sean Harris's Berean Baptist Church. The poster on the right was produced to attract supporters to the demo.

The sadistic pastor told his congregation in Fayetteville that violence should be used against boys showing signs of limp-wristedness.

Addressing the issue of kids who may be homosexual, pastor Sean Harris said: "Dads, the second you see your son dropping the limp wrist, you crack that wrist." He also suggested "a good punch"

Grilled on TV about his choice of words, Harris said: "If I had to do it again, would I say it differently, yes I would."

But he defended himself by saying that Jesus often used hyperbole. For example,



"If your eye causes you sin, pluck it out." The pastor insisted he was employing the same technique.

"Everyone in the congregation that morning understood that there was no intent in any way, shape or form to break a wrist," he said, but added: "The Bible makes no compromise on effeminate behaviour. God created you a male, God created you a female. If you were created a male, you are to act like a man."

Speaking to MASH's Justin Griffith at the protest, Harris said he wouldn't advocate using a rod on a child but "we may use some instrument of discipline in a careful and appropriate way. Depending on the age of the child, depending on the weight of the child..."

Richard Coughlan and the expansion

RICHARD SILVERWOOD meets a comedian who passionately b

The evangelists have a long tradition of brainwashing the masses by broadcasting religious spiel over the airwaves and making themselves a millions in the process. Until recently they have had a monopoly on delivering their brand of propaganda. But luckily the emergence of fast-loading Internet videos has changed all this. Nowadays anybody can upload a video onto YouTube and reach an audience of thousands.

The atheist movement has benefited tremendously from these advances in technology, with the most popular video bloggers amassing a following to rival that of Christian preachers. Atheist stand up comedian Richard Coughlan has managed to gain an impressive 6.7 million views for his videos. His mix of sarcasm, observational humour and insightful social commentary has made him a cult figure within the online atheist community. I caught up with Richard to find out the secret of his success.

RS: *What was your inspiration for your "vlogs" (video blogs) about atheism and why are you so passionate about the topic?*

RC: I never intended to make videos when I opened my first YouTube account. I only used it to watch news clips and illegally upload episodes of *Top Gear*. Then, after a year, I started watching vlogs made by other atheists. After six months of watching all the debates and arguments, I decided to give it a go and uploaded my first video on July 4, 2008. It took me a while to get used to it but once I was comfortable and confident with my videos, I threw myself into it.

I've always loved arguing, particularly about religion and politics, and there are so many people online with the craziest ideas so I was happier than a pig in shit. My subscriber base grew rather quickly and once I had that audience, I felt I had to stick at it. I've been doing stand up comedy since 2001 so I liked the idea of developing a loyal online audience.

RS: *Why do you think humour is such a powerful tool in the fight against religion?*

RC: I think humour is the best weapon in any battle of ideas. At the end of the day, nobody likes being laughed at. Nobody wants to have their deeply held beliefs made to look ridiculous – and it's even better when



Richard Coughlan

those beliefs can be made to look silly without altering what they are. If everyone had laughed at Hitler when he stood up and said what he thought of the Jews and racial purity then he would have walked away embarrassed and ashamed of himself. People always say "Oh it's so easy to mock and attack religion" and they're right. It is. If I held beliefs that were easy to laugh at I would consider why that was and maybe change my mind.

RS: *When did you first start incorporating atheist beliefs into your stand up and what type of response does this material get from the audience?*

RC: To be honest there is nothing original or new about lampooning religion in stand up comedy. People have been doing that since George Carlin and Lenny Bruce in the 1950s. People who go to comedy shows tend to be very open-minded and understand the nature of jokes. Mocking religion simply isn't a taboo or dangerous subject in comedy anymore and that's actually a good thing 'cause it shows that society has progressed to the point where religion is no longer treated with undue respect.

RS: *How would you respond to critics who claim that it is immoral to make fun of religion?*

RC: I would make fun of them – simple as that!

RS: *As well as achieving cult status for your vlogs, you also wrote a poem about atheism that ended up as the fourth-highest rated video of all*

time and the eighth-most-favoured video of all time on YouTube. Can you say a little bit about this?

RC: A Christian YouTuber known as "TogetherForPeace" made a video entitled "Atheism Offers Nothing" in which he said that atheism was an empty and meaningless idea, as it has nothing to it other than a lack of belief. Lots of people responded to him so I decided to do something different and write a poem explaining what atheism is to me. It took me less than thirty minutes to write and ended up getting over a quarter of a million views on my original channel. Since then it's had several people rework it and translate it into six different languages. The message of the poem is that the fact that atheism offers nothing in itself doesn't make it irrelevant or empty, much like not having a disease is better than having one.

RS: *Do you ever feel under threat from Christians and other religious groups because of your views?*

RC: No. Maybe if I lived in certain parts of America I would but not in the UK. We have a state religion in this country but ironically religion is very subdued and docile. I've actually been threatened more for my political positions than my religious ones. I've had right-wingers and nationalist groups send me death threats, phone me up at home and post my personal details online in the hope I get attacked but my attitude towards these threats is "Whatever will be will be" and I refuse to let anyone scare me into silence. In fact it motivates me to do more because if they have to threaten me then I must be a threat to them.

RS: *You have spoken out against the right-wing nature of Christians in America. Do you think that Christians in the UK are any better?*

RC: I think UK Christians are very passive. That's not to say we have no nutters; there is one organisation called Christian Voice that is run by a vile little man called Stephen Green. He actually supports far-right extremist groups and, a while back, was exposed for abusing his wife and kids.

In politics however we have very little religious presence. The last politician to invoke God in the House of Commons was Mrs Thatcher in 1982 and the press crucified her for it. Even Tony Blair avoided mention-

Expanding world of atheist vlogging

Ultimately believes humour is the best weapon in any battle of ideas

ing religion until he was no longer Prime Minister. When asked why he never talked about his beliefs he replied, "I didn't want to come across as some sort of nutter". The Church of England is as close as you can get to atheism whilst still believing in God. Nobody actually cares about it but they still call themselves "Christians".

RS: *You have also criticised popular atheist vlogger Pat Condell for his right-wing political views. Can you say a little bit about this?*

RC: I've been criticising Pat Condell for several years now. I must have made between 12 and 15 videos either directed at him or about him. People think it's a big deal because we're both atheists but at the end of the day, not believing in God is all Pat and I have in common. Politically we are complete opposites and I have always found his political views and opinions to be highly objectionable. He is a reactionary right-wing populist and I'm a namby-pamby PC liberal. My first video to him was about his support of UKIP, who claim to be "libertarian" but in fact are quite the opposite. Aside from being very anti-science, they want to abolish the Human Rights Act and give more power and control to the monarchy and Church of England.

Considering Condell is a secularist, you'd think he would be against increasing the power of the church. I could go on all day about my problems with Condell but I won't do that here. When I first criticised Condell, the backlash I got included three death threats and having my personal information released online – sound familiar? But now people have come to appreciate the fact that there is someone out there countering and critiquing him.

RS: *As well as incorporating atheism into your stand up and vlogging, you have also developed your own range of atheist t-shirts, emblazoned with the slogan 'May God B(e)less'. What was your inspiration for this and how popular have they been so far?*

RC: The phrase "May God B(e)Less" has been my sign off phrase since I've been on YouTube. When I did stand up gigs, I would always end them by saying "That's it from me. Goodnight and God bless" to the audience. Then it struck me that saying that after I've just spent an hour taking the Mickey out of religion was silly so I tried to think of a more appropriate phrase and I just came up with "God be less". People seemed to like it and even started using it so I figured it

was a good idea.

RS: *What do you think is the most ridiculous thing about religion?*

RC: I find it interesting that the craziest religions are actually the most recent ones. Christian and Muslim beliefs are certainly weird but they're almost the picture of reason when compared to the claims of Scientology, which is only 60 years old. I think religion is a by-product of human nature. Not everyone wants to accept the fact that everything in the universe exists without any real point or purpose. I find that idea liberating but to many people it is a scary and uncomfortable idea.

The three big questions in life have always been, "Where did we come from?", "Why are we here?" and "What happens when we die?" All of these questions are answered by religion and it has the advantage that if you don't like certain bits of it then you can just ignore them or change them.

Once those three questions have been answered it allows us to get on with the everyday crap in our lives like paying bills and

going to work.

The problem I have with God is simply the fact that his followers make him sound like a really great guy who loves you but then I look at all the suffering and misery in the world and realise that, to quote Dr House, "God either doesn't exist or he is unimaginably cruel". I'd like to think that if there is a God, he's a good and well meaning bloke but also completely incompetent and incapable of controlling the universe, kind of like David Brent from *The Office*: nice guy but totally useless.

RS: *Finally what can we expect from you in the years to come?*

RC: To be honest I'm happy to carry on as I have been doing. As long as I have a voice and a camera, I'll always be making videos and performing stand-up comedy across the country. Being an attention-seeking show-off and a smart-arse git are the only things I'm really any good at in life so I might as well stick with that until the bitter end... either that or I'll get bored and become a Mormon for a laugh.

Spanish study finds that those who see auras are simply wired up funny

NEW research conducted in Spain suggests that people who say they are able to see auras – a supposed energy field of luminous radiation surrounding a person as a halo – may have a brain condition called synesthesia.

Synesthesia, according to the website Science 2.0 is believed to be the result of cross-wiring in the brain. Synesthetes have more synaptic connections than ordinary people and some are interconnected in ways others are not, including across brain regions.

Since the brain regions responsible for the processing of each type of sensory stimuli are intensely interconnected, synesthetes "see or taste a sound, feel a taste, or associate people with a particular colour".

Of those who "see" the auras of others, some who claim healing powers say they can modify or "clean" grubby auras, thus making people feel better.

Consciousness and Cognition, the first scientific investigation of this nature, has been carried out by the University of Granada Department of Experimental Psychology researchers Óscar Iborra, Luis Pastor and Emilio Gómez Milán. Their report states: "Not all healers are synesthetes, but there is a higher prevalence of this phenomenon among them. The same occurs among painters and artists, for example."

For the paper, the researchers interviewed synesthetes like Esteban Sánchez Casas, known as "El Santón de Baza", who is said to be able to see and heal people's auras.

Some attribute paranormal powers to El Santón, including his ability to see auras, "but, in fact, it is a clear case of synesthesia", the researchers explain.

In light of the results obtained, the researchers noted the significant "placebo effect" that healers have on people, "though some healers really have the ability to see people's auras and feel the pain in others due to synesthesia". Some healers "have abilities and attitudes that make them believe in their ability to heal other people, but it is actually a case of self-deception, as synesthesia is not an extrasensory power," the researchers concluded.

The godlier, the nicer?

EDWIN SALTER examines *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, published by Simon & Schuster, which recently won the American Political Science Association's Wilson Award.

There is substantial evidence that, in the USA, religious people are more agreeable, civic and generally more helpful than the irreligious. As Robert D Putnam and David E Campbell put it in their well-argued book *American Grace*, "religious people seem nicer neighbors" and they supply much evidence toward this conclusion.

This is surely uncomfortable and damaging for the godless: none of us will want ourselves or our philosophy to be easily dismissed as nasty. It seems to confirm the religious denunciation of atheism as an evil fault, a sin against deity. My purpose in this article is to examine and, if possible, weaken the case made. Wider arguments, including natural social and evolutionary reasons why human beings in general are kindly and helpful, will probably be familiar already.

Defiantly, we might point out that being right is quite different from niceness. Many individuals, from philosophers to artists, have formulated deep truths but have been personally unpleasant. We might also suggest the effect is temporary. Those who challenge established views, however wisely, are likely to be more uncomfortably assertive in their principles than the easy-going majority that does not rock the boat. Many historical issues (refusing religious oaths, votes for women, homosexuality) show how the tough-mindedness of early leaders fades into wide assent. Those advocating change are likely to feel alienated from the majority culture and some may withdraw from social engagement either as a matter of principle or because they have suffered psychosocial damage.

Equally being nice is certainly not the same as being good. We even have traditional sayings to remind us of this: 'be cruel to be kind', "do good by stealth". Niceness can be the minor virtue of a narrow or complacent perspective – localised, unaware, uncritical and perhaps ineffective (rather like "well-meaning but"). Combatively, was Jesus reported as easy-going, and how much missionary work claimed good has been nice to the unfortunate recipients?

The evidence for the coupling of godly with nice comes from a meta-analysis of large and diverse surveys, and the authors appear well aware of the precautions needed in interpreting such data.

The measures they consider include: generosity (time volunteering, money donations); civic activity (community organisations, local involvements); trust (of and by others); empathy and altruism. There is much of specific interest in this data, but the principal result is that all these merits increase with religiosity.

The irreligious do better only on the measure of tolerance: "religious Americans are less stout defenders of civic liberties than secular Americans". In fundamentalism there is a "stern God" factor and notable resistance to atheists. However even this favourable measure is not unalloyed. It appears the main factor may be respect for authority rather than religion itself; and (though P&C don't say so) it could be argued that a minority is bound in self-interest to declare for tolerance.

The authors of *American Grace* draw a very important and distinctive insight from their analysis. It is that the factor most contributing to this social niceness is not theological (this creed, this divine blessing), not purely about belief. It is the social participation in religious groups that carries the effect: "it is belonging that matters, not believing" and "church attendance itself seems to contain the secret ingredient in explaining why religious people are better, more trusting friends and neighbors". We are given a clearly natural explanation, not a divine one. God gets no direct credit.

Partly this religious character can be explained in simple terms of learning, behaviour and opportunity. Church groups give practice (as mentioned by P&C) in social activity, providing skills, confidence, contacts and resources. Church people also engage with many non-religious associations, and we might suggest this often has some undeclared element of religious purpose (feeling that school governors should include Christian views, maintaining an historical church connection with local life), and this network is effective and commonly unnoticed or acceded to by secular groups ("council prayers" in Britain for example).

What arguments might further erode the overall finding of specifically religious niceness? We could begin by noting a kind of self-selecting bias due to personal characteristics, whether temporary or persistent. Agreeable people naturally like to find

social situations, and what could be easier than homing in on the long established and ample possibilities eagerly offered by local churches to foster mutually supportive and therefore enduring congregations?

Solitary people will of course be apart. There is an interesting question as to whether solitariness in itself extends to living without a deity, especially of the personalised "Jesus God" kind. Possibly too, the irreligious tend to a general factor of scepticism that also doubts the worthwhileness of joining or donating to some causes. But if this leads simply to overall withdrawal and meanness or, worse still, to supposing most other people to be unworthy, then it is itself a socially unattractive feature.

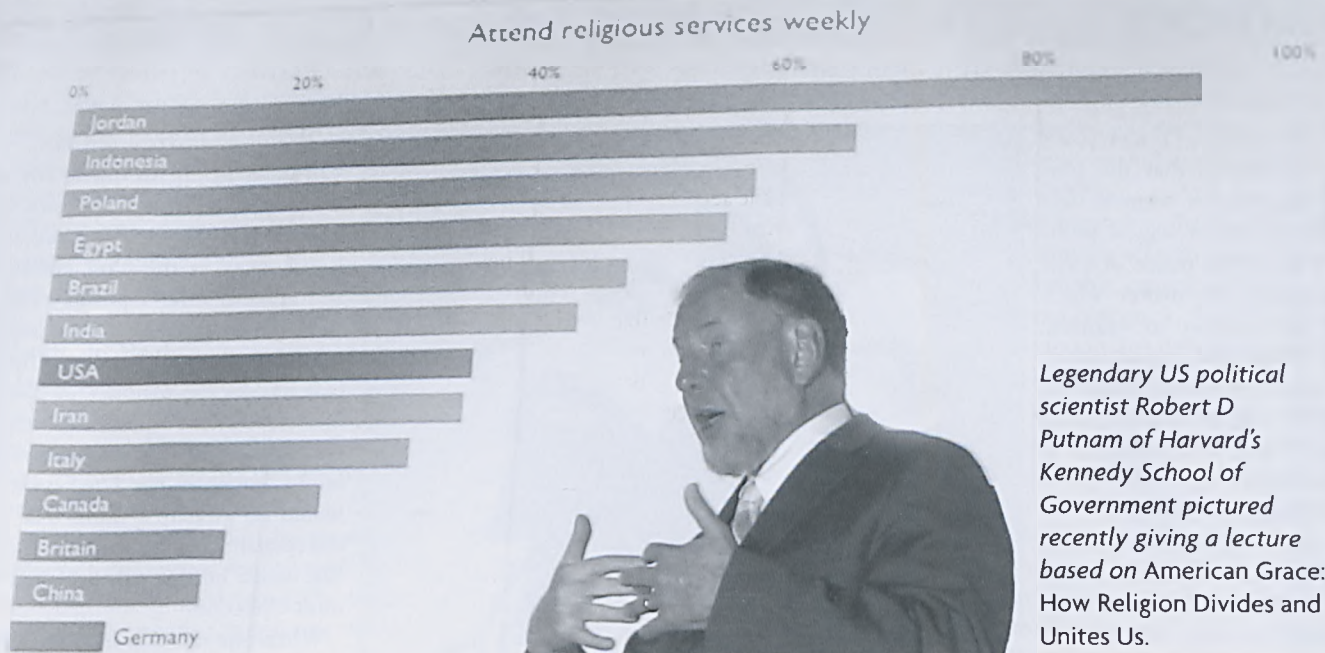
Such lines of thought depend on the distinction (which P&C recognise) between correlation and cause. We can give this a further twist. One of the questions often asked of atheists who reject divine law (and its heavenly promise) is why they bother with morality at all. This suggests that those who are aware of kindly inclinations may declare for religion because it explains what otherwise is an apparent dissonance between their good behaviour and self-interest, why it is they aren't merely selfish. Religion endlessly asserts and urges a god-derived rightness, as both true and good, and natural human care may seem to prove that belonging within faith is appropriate (though it is well known that actual moral violations are no less common among the religious).

Equally, of course, individuals who are aware of being labelled bad or unwanted, for whatever reason, may adopt a hostile rejection of religion as part of their identity as rejected outsiders.

So the "non-religious" category is likely to include not only the specifically godless but also solitary, alienated, disturbed (psycho/socio-pathic) and marginalised people who avoid or have been rejected by religious groups: most of these will score poorly for neighbourliness.

As noted in *American Grace*, there are clear contemporary changes in religious characteristics and much can be learned by studying those who shift into or out of faith. Also, the USA is a unique state in many ways, not least its fervent religious history and the righteousness with which it has pursued its own interests around

COMPARED TO OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS, THE U.S. HAS A HIGH RATE OF WEEKLY ATTENDANCE AT RELIGIOUS SERVICES



Legendary US political scientist Robert D Putnam of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government pictured recently giving a lecture based on *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*.

the world. Other cultures and other religions are unlikely to show the same effects. Above all, to be irreligious in the emphatically Christian USA is to begin from a difficult and isolated position and there is a naivety in disregarding this.

Further, it may fairly be complained that there is an underlying assumption that gregariousness itself is a merit, with the amiable extravert as its prototype American. This is not universal and elsewhere introversion and rationality are better fits. Sober and scientifically based contributions to society may outweigh interpersonal pleasantries (in Sweden for example a valuing of personal independence is balanced by a good systematic social provision). Too much emphasis on caring as solely a personal merit or on affability as a social conformity can leave many disadvantaged out in the cold.

It would be particularly helpful to compare the outcomes of 'belonging' across a wide range of groups that present varying degrees of community but are indifferent to or oppose religion – political parties, theatre companies, humanist groups, 'green' associations, sports clubs and so forth. Only thereby can the consequences of togetherness be properly distinguished from religious belief and its collective practices.

I hope it is not true that, as often asserted anecdotally, the typical atheist is merely a disagreeable old bloke. There have also been negative findings in recent psychological research ("trolleyology"). But there are certainly many examples of

splendid sceptics from Epicurus to Mill to numerous contemporaries. No doubt time will tell. Meanwhile, and in a spirit of generosity and altruistic concern, I cheerfully offer these brief comments with nice

greetings to all humanity.

1. In the *Freethinker* by Edwin Salter: *Nasty Freethinkers or Daft Trolleyology*, (December, 2011); and *Morality, Magisteria and the Manner of Science* (July 2007).

Atheists 'more compassionate than the religious'

RESEARCH due to be published soon in the US says that while atheists and agnostics are far less trusted than those who profess faith, overall non-believers are more compassionate and may actually be more inclined to help their fellow citizens than more religious people.

The study, due to be published in the July 2012 issue of the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* claims that compassion appears to drive religious people's charitable feelings less than other groups.

The study's co-author and University of California, Berkeley social psychologist Robb Willer was quoted last month in the *Huffington Post* as saying: "Overall, we find that for less religious people, the strength of their emotional connection to another person is critical to whether they will help that person or not. The more religious, on the other hand, may

ground their generosity less in emotion, and more in other factors such as doctrine, a communal identity, or reputational concerns.

Willer's co-author Laura Saslow, now a postdoctoral scholar at the University of California, San Francisco, became interested in the question of what motivates charity after a non-religious friend lamented that he donated money to earthquake recovery in Haiti only after seeing a heart-touching video of a woman being pulled from rubble, not because of a logical understanding that help was needed.

"I was interested to find that this experience – an atheist being strongly influenced by his emotions to show generosity to strangers – was replicated in three large, systematic studies," Saslow said in a statement.

In the first of the three studies, Saslow and her colleagues analysed data from a national survey of more than 1,300 American adults taken in 2004. They found that compassionate attitudes were linked with how many generous behaviors a person was likely to report. This link was strongest in people who were atheists or only slightly religious, compared with people who were more strongly religious.

The Silliness of the Saviour

NATHAN GEORGE homes in on one of the most cock-eyed aspects of core Christian doctrine

As a *Freethinker* reader, you'll understand that the philosophies of religion have some major logical problems. And the word "major" is a vast understatement. No matter which religion one chooses to examine, one will always find logical inconsistencies and downright absurdities. After all, if religion actually made any sense, it wouldn't be religion. It would belong to one of the several legitimate branches of science.

Many writers, philosophers, scientists, and armchair intellectuals have already taken much time, and many more words, to explain why most of the many aspects of religion are incomprehensible to the logical mind. So I will not re-examine religious philosophies that have already been shown to be utterly ridiculous and quite literally impossible.

I will not speak specifically about omnipotent gods who do not have the power to create rocks that are impossible for them to lift, nor will I bring up omnibenevolent gods who allow starvation and diseases to decimate entire countries. I won't even comment about the oddity of an omniscient god who would knowingly create a being who would disbelieve in him, therefore condemning him to the fiery pits of Hell. And I will not talk about the glaringly obvious absurdity of an entity who is three separate, distinct beings that are each, in and of themselves and all at the same time, 100 percent that same being. Instead, I will accept that absurdity and pretend that it is possible. Why? Because it will help me to point out another absurdity in the Christian religion that I believe has not been tackled in too much detail by other writers and philosophers. This topic is what I like to call "The Silliness of the Saviour".

There are many different Christian denominations. No doubt, there are, and have been, probably more Christian denominations than there are ways to make potato salad. There are few ideas that these differing creeds agree upon. Some wish you to confess to a priest, while others declare that your requests for absolution can be sent straight to The Man Upstairs. Some faiths claim that homosexuality is a sin punishable by death, while others say that gay people should sim-



ply be allowed to love one another and get married along with the rest of society. To say that there is confusion among the followers of Christianity as to what the "Good Book" teaches when it comes to different life issues is putting it rather lightly.

However, there is one aspect of the many different Christian denominations that the majority of them, if not all, agree upon. This is the belief that Jesus is the son of God, came to earth in the form of a man about 2,000 years ago, was crucified for our sins, died, and was then miraculously resurrected.

Some details and steps in this process may differ from religion to religion, but this is about how the story seems to run. Again, my concern is not the fact that Jesus being 100 percent fully the Son of God but also 100 percent fully God at the exact same time is ridiculous. I am willing to accept that absurdity simply to prove what I believe is a more important chink in Christianity's armour. To that end, I will be focusing on one aspect of this story that is accepted by Christians across the globe as the greatest love story of all time. The one part of the story I will focus on is the part that says "Jesus was

crucified (or died) for our sins".

In order to discuss this in any serious capacity, I must first establish what is meant by the above sentence. I will speak in the most common and general terms I possibly can. I am doing so because, in this way, I can focus on the fundamental belief that bridges the majority of Christian doctrines. A few sects might not agree with the root meaning of the sentence, but I believe that would be a rarity. I think that my interpretation of the sentence is one that would be generally accepted by most Christians.

When one says that Jesus was crucified, it is generally taken to mean that Jesus, who was the Son of God, chose to come to Earth to be killed. From this point on, we must assume that since Jesus is God's son and also God, he willingly chose whatever path his life as a human took. So when one says that Jesus was crucified, one means that he *chose* to be crucified. He offered himself up as a sacrifice. Most Christians would certainly have no problem with any-

thing I have said thus far. Now, why did Jesus sacrifice himself? In the sentence above, it states that Jesus sacrificed himself for "our sins". By "our", one means the entirety of the human race. Lower animals are not included. It is a "humans only" zone. By "sins" one means all the bad that humans do, think about doing, have done, or are simply born with. Let's not forget that pesky, *pesky* original sin. Even babies who have never had a nasty thought cross their mind are sinners destined for Hell.

Destined for Hell they are... unless... *unless*, they are forgiven. This is where our good pal Jesus comes in. God wanted, no *needed*, to forgive humanity for the wrong they had done ever since Eve decided she wanted to take a bite from the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (how strange that knowledge could ever be seen as something negative or sinful). So God devised a plan. He would send himself in the form of a man, Jesus, to suffer and die at the hands of humans. In doing so, he would take on all the sins of man and then, and only then, God would be able to forgive humankind.

And therein lies the problem for the

Christian religion. It relies on a saviour to take on the responsibility of the sinners. This is why the Christian religion is one of the least likely to be true. Its fundamental precept makes even less sense than a god who shoots lightning bolts from the clouds or one who commands that all women cover their entire bodies in extremely oversized scarves. The Christian religion would have us believe that in order for God to forgive us our sins, he had to send himself disguised as Jesus to earth to suffer and die for them. Allow me to break down this logical problem one piece at a time.

First, God is supposed to be omnipotent. This means that God can do whatever he wishes to do. He didn't have any constraints on his actions. This means that he chose to come as Jesus to die for our sins. He didn't have to do that. He could have just as easily simply forgiven us our sins directly, with out recreating himself as a go-between. Generally speaking, when I judge that someone is worthy of forgiveness, I forgive them. What does it take for me to do this? The first requirement that must be met is that the person must actually be *sorry* for what he or she did. I must believe that the person actually feels bad for the wrong he or she committed against me. The person must also attempt to right the wrong. Perhaps a friend gets angry at me and, in his rage, knocks over and breaks my television. Provided that he feels bad about his actions he may attempt to right his wrong by offering to pay me for the TV. Or, perhaps he is not in a position to do so, so he offers to mow my lawn every weekend for three months to make up for the cost of my broken TV. If I deem this an appropriate form of compensation and he agrees to better regulate his temper in my home, then I would most likely forgive him. I understand that we all lose our temper at times, he is a close friend of mine, and he made up for his mistake. There is no reason for me to not forgive him. It was within my power to do so, and I chose to do so, so I forgive him.

We are led to believe by the Christian religion that it was within God's power to forgive humans for the wrongs that they had done, but he did not do so. Instead, he decided that he must first send his son, Jesus – who is also himself – to Earth in order to be sacrificed. Only after this is done, can God forgive us our sins.

This is where the doctrine runs into a brick wall. God wants to forgive humans for their sins, but he cannot do so until he makes a sacrifice of himself. He cannot do so until he pays the price with his own suffering. This makes no sense at all. According to Christianity, sinning is an offense against God. In this way, it has already caused God some suffering. Therefore, God has already

suffered through human sinning. What sense would it make for God to need to suffer more in order to forgive humans?

That would be like me saying that I would forgive the friend who broke my TV only after he also smashed my laptop and my lamp. How does me suffering more harm at my friend's hands allow me to better forgive him?

That Jesus came to earth in order that we could be forgiven is completely nonsensical. I forgave my friend because he seemed genuinely sorry for his actions, promised to try very hard to avoid doing something similar in the future, and attempted to make up for the financial loss he caused by mowing my lawn for three months. If I were like God with his Jesus plan, that would be like me telling my friend that I could not forgive him unless *he* allowed *me* to mow his lawn for three months! Would that make any sense at all? Of course not. And it makes just as little sense in the Christian scenario with God sending Jesus to die for human sins.

If God wanted to forgive people, he could simply do so. He wouldn't need an elaborate plan where he goes out and mows the lawns of every human being in order to feel like he can forgive them. He could simply see if they were sorry, see if they made up for their transgressions, and then see if they attempted to avoid such transgressions in the future. The overly elaborate Christian tradition of imposing suffering on oneself in order to forgive another being is counter-

intuitive at best.

Of course, some will be tempted to say that God works in mysterious ways, and his plan may not seem to make sense simply because God is impossible to understand. To that I would say that when things don't make sense, it typically is not because they are mysterious – it is because they are nonsense. Words are easy to string together in an overly-complicated nonsensical way that will mesmerize and entice the credulous of any generation.

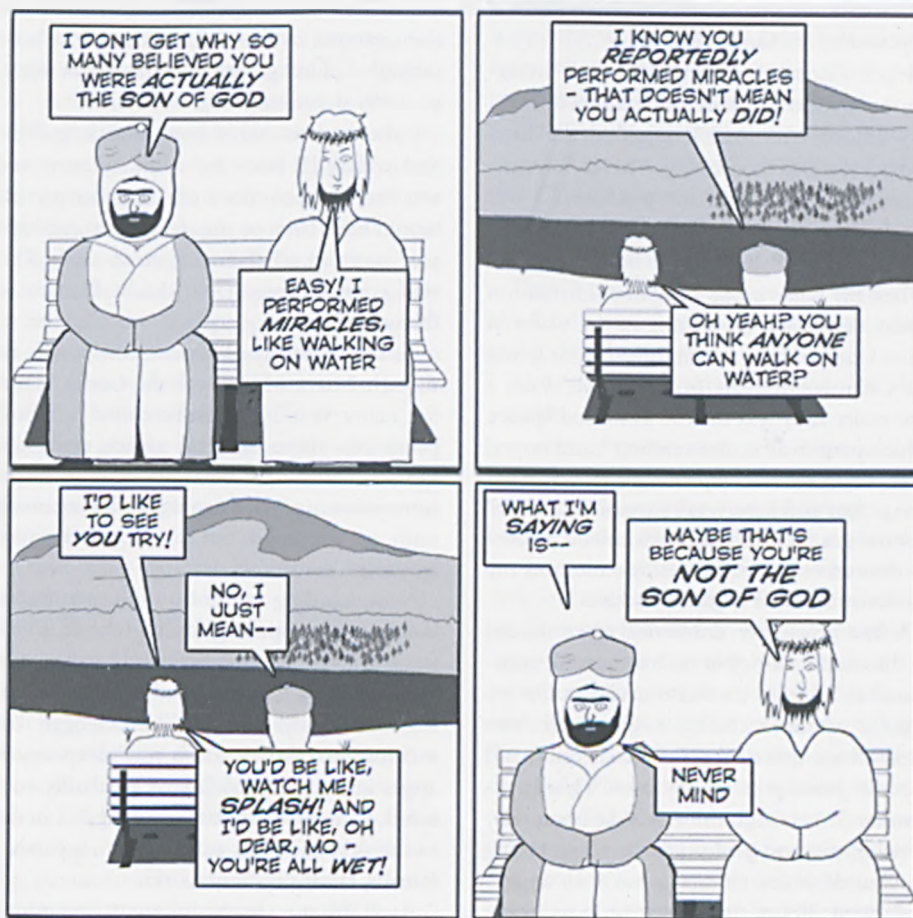
What's tough is to make words make sense and to simplify meaning into chunks of information that can clarify how the world works, not obscure it. The Christian notion of redemption isn't difficult to understand, it is simply nonsensical.

If you don't believe me, next time someone squeezes by you in a crowded room and accidentally (or on purpose) steps on your foot and apologises, try saying, "Well, I would love to forgive you, but in order to do so, you must stomp on my foot one more time and then let me wash your car."

If that is unpalatable, then so should be the core doctrine of the Christian faith.

• Nathan George is a freelance writer who lives in Rochester, New York. He teaches high school literature and encourages critical thinking among his students.

Jesus & Mo



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A farewell letter to religion

JOE SANDERS finds the 'peace that passeth all understanding' – in atheism!

Subscribing to the *Freethinker* was a Christmas present to myself last year. I wanted to find out more about atheism and feel part of something, rather than just excluded from religion. I devour each issue on day one. This puts me onto other reading (and YouTubeing) which keeps me thinking.

I have been leaning ever closer to atheism for many years now, at first reading Gnostic Gospels, Rudolf Steiner and the entertaining but bogus *Holy Blood and Holy Grail* literature, searching vainly for a version of Christianity that made sense.

In recent years I reread both Dawkins' *The God Delusion* and Hitchens' *God is not Great* (do read his *Missionary Position* by the way). I am currently enjoying Sam Harris' apocalyptic *End of Faith*, having finished Jennifer Michael Hecht's panoramic *Doubt, a history* which surveys 3,000 years of free thought. Encountering all this, and Tom Paine and Lucretius too, has been revelatory, but there's one particular aspect I'd like to share: it is a delicious inner silence and I'd like to know if anyone else has found the same.

I got Christianity early. Although an agnostic, my mother sent us children to Sunday school, after which I joined the local cathedral choir as a treble. After a few unmemorable talks with the precentor, I was baptised at the age of ten because to become a full chorister you had to be a Christian. When my voice broke I began confirmation classes and was soon joining in the wafer 'n wine ritual of holy communion, even going on Christian retreats from school. What I was really after was the oft-promised "peace which passeth all understanding", and hoped that prayer would help me get it. But what was prayer and how was I supposed to do it? I could get no satisfying answer. The peace I so desired continued to escape me, and my Christianity soon began to unravel.

A few years after university, where I sang in the chapel choir but no longer took communion, I began meditation classes. To my relief, I was at last being taught an effective method for quieting my agitated mind and I could practice it on my own. This I recommend. Although the resulting tranquility is delightful and profoundly healing, taking control of inner chatter is no easy matter and many hours of meditation pass either asleep or gossiping endlessly with oneself: it

I contend that we are both atheists.
I just believe in one fewer god than you do.
When you understand why
you dismiss all the other possible gods,
you will understand
why I dismiss yours.

— Stephen Roberts

turns out we're all addicted to mental gossip, so it's a long battle.

Recent months of reflection and doubt have finally sealed my conviction that everything religions say about gods and life after death simply isn't true. We live, we die, nothing else: no Jesus, no God, no Higher Self, no bodhisattvas, no saints, no heaven, no hell, no churches or priests, no miracles and no life after death. At first this felt like an emotional vacuum. Bereft of the fabulous paraphernalia of religion, living suddenly felt bleak, cold and empty. Without any belief in Benevolent Providence, what then is the meaning of life? I found my final leave taking of all imaginary intermediaries unexpectedly depressing.

I also had to admit how foolish, gullible and wrong I'd been for so many years and was forced to confront the fact that my life would have been so much sweeter and happier without all that poisonous trash. This was a terrible regret, no doubt familiar to many readers.

To return to my old interest in prayer, although I have not recited the Lord's Prayer for many years, I now recognise just how poisonous those horrible words really are. Deep down, I have been kneeling in stupid submission, vainly begging and bargaining with my supposed, but in fact utterly non-existent Creator.

Now, standing upright on my own feet at last, I see the appalling futility of it all. There is no outside Ethical Standard, no internal Higher Self by which to judge myself wanting. Mercifully, having acknowledged the viciousness of such ideals, my deep seated anger and self reproach have gradually subsided. I am left with just me wrapped in the limitless buzz of life, with my loving partner, friends, family and my work.

As all this was slowly sinking in, something I didn't expect began to happen: it was the

return (of its own accord) of that delicious, healing internal silence I had worked so hard for in meditation. It went quiet inside. I hadn't expected that atheism would be quite so relaxing. Finally ending my obsequious conversations with God-Buddha-Higher Self about how I fall short of their ideals, I have found there is far less to talk to myself about. On fully realising that those endless internal soliloquies were in fact dialogues with imaginary judges, they stopped, taking their horrible noise with them. They've left behind a wonderfully uncluttered, quiet space to live, love and eventually die in.

Incidentally, I remember reading in Ayya Khema's *Being Nobody Going Nowhere* (what a brilliant title) that in meditation "tranquility is the means and insight the goal". My emptying experience of atheism seems to suggest it can work the other way too.

At first the silence was scary, but I'm getting used to it, and now have far more important things to talk to myself about, although the study of freethinking has necessarily confronted me anew with the horrors of human life but without the anaesthetic of God.

At first I found it overwhelming to revisit the agony of my fellow beings both now and over millennia without the ear plugs of religion to muffle their cries. I could hardly bear the devastating knowledge John Alenbillah Azumah presents in his careful history of Arab-Islamic slavery over 14 centuries, for example. Hence I am extremely grateful to the sweet balm of godless peace which has given me new strength to face these terrible things.

I used to believe that atheists were anti-religious extremists, damaged nihilists perpetually raging from beyond the perimeter fences of human life. It turns out that nothing could be further from the truth. When we make the final leap from faith and drop religion altogether, we are handed a one-way ticket on a wonderfully relaxing holiday away from the deafening inner chatter of the religious mind. How peaceful it is on the wide open beaches of freethinking! I understand that recharging my batteries on this kind of holiday is my only chance to stay sane in this mad-bad world.

May the atheist's peace which passeth all understanding be with you all!

The devils at the door

NEAL STARKMAN finds strength to resist a message of salvation he received from a pair of doorstep missionaries

As soon as I opened the door and saw the two men standing there, each with a backpack, one holding a book and the other a magazine, I knew I should have ignored the knock. But it was a slow afternoon, so I thought I'd play along.

Of course, based on their age, their clothing, and their general demeanor, I could tell immediately who they were. Who else but scientists would be in their 60s, wear lab coats on a beautiful spring day, and crack nary a smile? I slightly raised my eyebrows, letting them know I was open to their pitch but warning them that my patience was limited.

"Good afternoon, sir," said one of the men, without smiling. "We'd like to talk to you about something that's important to all of us — especially these days."

"And what might that be?" I said, not moving from the doorway.

"The value of science, of rationality, and of the pursuit of truth. The absolutely essential quality of asking questions wherever the answers might lead. And the resistance to supernatural dogma."

"I see," I said. "And why is this important to me?"

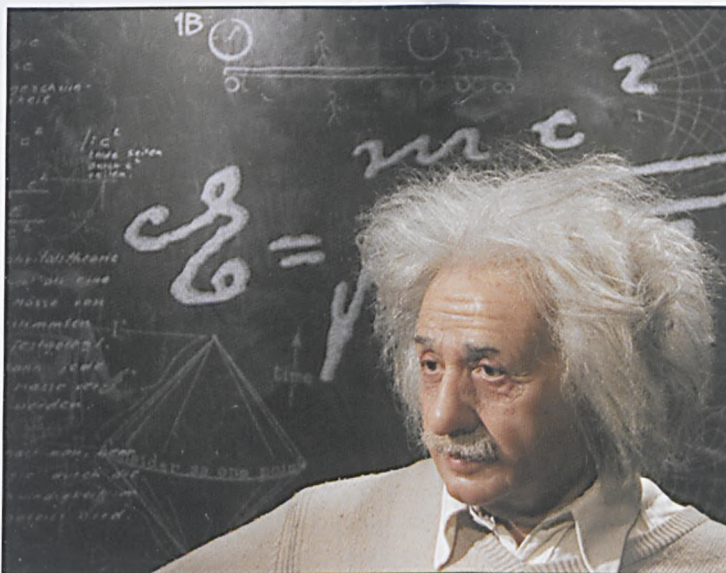
The other one spoke up. He was younger, maybe 61 or 62; perhaps he was just starting out on his door-to-door mission, because he seemed more energised, not yet tainted by the lethargy of homeowners like myself.

"Sir, it's all around us: the fear of a deity, the belief in nonsensical theories that fly in the face of science, the absurd attitudes and behaviours foisted on the public based on only authoritarian dictates that didn't even make sense when they were propounded a thousand years ago!

"Sir, commit your life to reason, to facts! Sir, commit your life to data!"

I could tell by his tics that the man's partner was getting a trifle unnerved by this burst of fervour, but I wanted to see where this was going, so I continued my mock-querulous stance.

"How would I do that?" I asked. "Do I have to buy anything? Do I have to do something?"



Hide under the sofa if devils of his ilk come a-knocking at your front door

"On the contrary!" said the exuberant one, who undoubtedly thought that this was a grand opening. He showed me the magazine: "It's *The Skeptical Inquirer*, sir — a sample issue, free. Its mother organisation is the Center For Inquiry, and it focuses on truth, sir. Not fake truth as written in some old book or told by some mercenary preacher, but real, observable truth. It's truth that's predictive, that's the basis of how we live and how we ought to live. It's all about using our brains, sir, and about using science, mathematics, and, yes, psychology to help us become the best people we can be. It's all about being moral and ethical because it makes sense to be kind and fair and tolerant. We're all better off that way."

He was getting out of breath, and I didn't want to encourage him any more. That's all I needed, a scientist having a coronary on my doorstep.

"And what do you have?" I asked the older man.

"It's *God Is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens," he said, showing me the paperback version. "We're selling it at a discount."

"I see," I said. "And if I subscribe to the magazine or buy the book, what then? Am I hooked into some sort of academic cult, where I'll be bombarded with emails about physicists' conferences and videos debunking paranormal activities and press releases about the latest Carl Sagan tribute?"

The older man frowned. "No. You just get

the magazine and the book. We don't even take your email address."

"I see," I said, nodding, wondering where the hook was, where they might try to reel me in to their oh-so-rationalist view. And then it came to me. It was so diabolical, I almost missed it.

I smiled. "I think I understand," I said, looking them over now in a new light. "I read some of this stuff, I get attracted to 'thinking instead of feeling'. I start questioning my friends' attitudes. Maybe I even start questioning political candidates' positions. Who knows, I could start reading up on science. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" The older man shrugged.

"Well, yes, we would."

"Well, it's not going to work!" I yelled triumphantly. "You can try to foist your science on me, but this is one guy who's happy the way things are! I don't need your facts when I have faith, and I don't need your reason when I have reverence!"

Wow, I was getting alliterative without even trying. I ended with an appropriate climax: "And I certainly don't need your reading material when I only watch TV!" And I slammed the door on their scientific faces.

They'll think again before they mess with me, I told myself as I sat down with a beer and today's horoscope.

And just to be sure, I prayed that they would.

Neal Starkman, another new contributor to the *Freethinker*, has published books, stories, films, articles, educational programmes, academic papers, newsletters, and political essays. Virtually all of his work has focused on making complex issues clear and engaging in an attempt to improve the human condition. Starkman, who holds a PhD in social psychology "but rarely brandishes it", is the owner of a company, Flashpoint Development, whose motto is "It's not who you know; it's whom you know." He lives in Seattle with his wife and son. His humorous novel, *Poison*, is available at Amazon.com and Barnesandnoble.com.

points of view..

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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JUSTIFICATION FOR ISLAMOPHOBIA

APPARENTLY contemptuous of atheists and the scientific method, Colin Mills (*Points of View*, May) woefully misrepresents my January *Points of View* arguments with such pro-Islam, pro-religion sentiments that I'm prompted to suspect his secularism. I readily acknowledge my Islamophobia, and will try to justify it.

First I'd like to emphasise that, as an atheist, my views primarily aim to expose the emotionalised inanities of all religious beliefs and to speculate on the origin and psychology of its hold on the minds of believers that is independent of ethnicity: religious beliefs and doctrine are of nurture, not nature. For example, of its neurology M D Faber proposes that religion triggers in susceptible teenagers and adults a subconscious trace memory of their baby-infant brain circuitry formed pre-consciously by parental nurturing, hence their ready addiction to a wholly imagined authoritative loving/protecting/providing Father- (lately Mother-) God. This infantilisation is exploited by all religions.

Of the major world faiths, since 9/11 Islam unsurprisingly is the most disturbing to secular Westerners. To argue that Islam is harmless ignores the reality of Islam's lethal sectarianism or the damage Islamic fanaticism wreaks. The news regularly feature its atrocities: bombings, beheadings, assassination, honour killings (daily updates are at www.thereligionofpeace.com). And political Islam is increasing its control by, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood exploiting the "Arab Spring", or al-Qaeda taking the opportunity to re-group (the *Independent*, 02/5/12), or by petrodollars streaming into Europe to fund Islam's expansion. The ongoing unrest in Pakistan and Afghanistan, let alone events in the Middle East, speaks volumes for Islam's inability at peaceful governance of diverse Muslim beliefs. The threats

of Islam, then, are real and growing.

For reactions to it, and for evidence that my Islamophobic views are widely shared, the news media is a ready source. Here are some relevant items from the *Telegraph* online: 01/5/12: Locals complain about a huge Islamic mausoleum to be built in farming country near Cardiff (I wonder what *We'll keep a welcome in the hillside* will sound like in Arabic!); 12/4/12: Prime Minister David Cameron, in Indonesia, courageously says Muslims must embrace democracy and respect the rights of Christians; 05/6/11: David Cameron declares multiculturalism has failed and that UK Muslims must embrace British values; 28/4/11: MPs and peers complain that university campuses are hotbeds of Islamic extremism; 06/6/11: Home Secretary Theresa May warns that universities are complacent over Islamic radicals; 04/11/11: Minister Jim Fitzpatrick claims Islamic radicals had infiltrated the Labour party and that the Islamic Forum of Europe wants to turn Britain into an Islamic state.

Such are the public opinions of a few politicians – shared, I'll wager, by many officials in the corridors of power and by millions of British citizens concerned that immigration, and the spread of Islam, is irretrievably changing the landscape of Britain and damaging social cohesion. Yes, the majority of UK Muslims are peaceful, and yes, they're making half-efforts to assimilate, but stubbornly maintaining alien practices could be construed as an insult to the host culture. Why not integrate like other immigrants? Loosen-up, share a joke. Is laughter un-Islamic? And is criticising other Muslims un-Islamic?

The evidence of how Islam's influence has had a negative affect on society is exemplified by the Orwellian policing methods needed to guard against Islamic terror-

ists and extremists like the neo-Nazis. If the government has the resources to monitor private communications – and to militarise London for the Olympics – why then does it allow sharia courts to undermine British law, permit Islamic schools to force-indoctrinate children (*Channel 4 Dispatches*), let Islamists preach hatred and hassle non-Muslims, or continue the costly fiasco of the non-deportation of Abu Qatada?

Something's awry in this overcrowded island. To ignore the current reality and pretend that mass immigration hasn't caused serious problems, or that Islam is inherently benign and all who submit to Allah – or God – are sweetness and light is, for those in authority, in my opinion a derogation of their democratic responsibility.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

WHILE I agree with Colin Mills' assertion (*Points of View*, May) that Islam is a many faceted religion, the fact is that the version with the highest profile among Muslims living in Western Europe is derived from the militant, fundamentalist Wahhabism espoused by Al Qaida and patronised by the House of Saud.

This is a right-wing ideology, sometimes described, not inappropriately as Islamo-fascist, and opposition to it should be seen, not as right wing as Mills implies, but as left wing and liberal in the same sense that opposition to, for example, Opus Dei is left and liberal.

Nor is it racist, since it does not extend to the beliefs of Hindus or Sikhs who are racially indistinguishable from south Asian Muslims.

It is not difficult to justify militant fundamentalism by references to the Koran. If moderate, progressive and liberal Muslims are to convince us infidels that such interpretations are contrary to the real meaning of the book and are adhered to by only a small mi-

nority of the faithful, they will have to shout a lot louder.

Jack Hastie
Renfrewshire

LIBERTARIANISM

IT IS often said that the man who stands in the middle of the road gets hit by the traffic travelling in both directions. So it has proved with my stance on libertarianism, as while I call myself a libertarian, I can't quite go along with Mark Taha's refusal to differentiate between private prejudices (which we all have the right to hold and express), and public obligations, which we all have a duty to uphold to make society function properly, as well as make it fairer and more bearable.

Mark's stance comes close to endorsing Margaret Thatcher's foolish "There's no such thing as society!" remark – which even she thought better of and later retracted.

On the other hand, Terry Liddle, who admits to a communist past, goes too far in his calls for more collectivism and intervention (including a written constitution). Written constitutions are always products of their times, with unforeseen consequences, hence the "right to bear arms" millstone around the necks of our American cousins, which makes gun-control well nigh impossible. We would do well to avoid this obvious pitfall and maintain the flexibility and perpetual change our unwritten constitution offers, including, of course, the potential separation of church and state.

Terry's participation in the ideologically-driven strike to oust BNP member Malcolm Skeggs from the Hither Green DSS office, is nothing to be proud of. As Mark Taha rightly says, no one should be bullied out of employment merely for holding unpopular political views, be they communists or nationalists.

If Skeggs abused his position for political purposes, then he would be dismissed by his employers. It really isn't acceptable for high-handed trade union bullies to dictate who may, or may not, be employed when they have done nothing wrong. To this extent, Mark Taha is absolutely correct, though, ironically, this story also illumines my central point, that people like Skeggs have a right to their private political views, but not necessarily the right to exercise them, publicly, if to do so imperils the security and freedom of others. In my view, libertarianism has to be tempered by responsibility and consideration for others, as well as a somewhat sceptical view of human nature.

As for Bill McIlroy, I am at a loss to explain the purpose, or motivation, of his latest bile-spitting letter, aimed, as usual, in my direction. As a lifetime of rather sterile atheism seems to have left him mired in bitterness,

I suspect he is gearing up for a full-blown deathbed conversion and is making peace with the Almighty by attacking the secularists around him.

I suppose I should be flattered that the "Victor Meldrew of secularism" should regard me worthy of such personal attacks, after all, he is well known for going out of his way to offend and insult leading lights of the NSS and BHA, whose luminosity far outshines my meagre candle. I guess this means I have finally made it to the top flight of secular superstardom!

Diesel Balaam
London

BORN BELIEVERS

I THINK freethinkers should be quite receptive to the ideas of Justin Barrett (*Born believers*, May *Freethinker*) for two reasons. They avoid the temptation to think of most people as credulous fools. And they are based on actual research.

Dan Dennett and others have drawn attention to the "over-active agency detector" we inherit from our pre-human ancestors. This is one mechanism that predisposes people to believe in invisible spirits but I believe that Barrett and other scholars have found others.

Let's be clear what this does NOT imply. We do not inherit a "religion-shaped hole", if only because different religions have different shapes. We do inherit tendencies to see agency and purpose where there is only random action, to resent and deny the death of loved ones, to respond to ceremonies and to feel entitled to help in adversity. Religions arise from these tendencies and exploit them. Religions would not be so popular if they were unable to draw on powerful drives.

And it does not imply that religion must win the battle for hearts and minds. Right across the developed world – yea, even in the USA – freethought is on the rise. Science, engineering and medicine all testify to the power of reason and improving social conditions enable people to make up their own minds without much risk. And as they do they abandon the follies of the faith they were raised in. Many stop there, professing a faith but ignoring its traditional rules. They are Catholics who use contraceptives and Jews who have milk and meat at the same meal. Some, and more in subsequent generations, cease even to profess a faith.

David Flint
Redhill

THE BURQA DEBATE

PROFESSOR Radford is correct when he says that there are other garments that are oppressive; however, two wrongs don't make a

right. I also think that he is correct to find oppression (and discrimination) objectionable, but what is the point of holding that principled position if he is not willing to object when that oppression is put into practise?

Where I strongly disagree with Professor Radford is when he suggests that there is little evidence of the burqa being forced within faith schools. Please can he research schools like the Madani Girls' School in East London, Jamea Al Kauthar in Lancaster and the Jameah Girls' Academy in Leicester, to name but a few. And it is on the increase. What damage is being done to those young minds?

I also disagree with the notion that the burqa is part of a woman's "Islamic identity" as this completely ignores the multitude of Islamic women's voices who are against the burqa; cultural relativism should never excuse immorality.

And I was shocked to read that he gives credence to the notion that the burqa "offers protection". This misconception should not be condoned nor should a woman's insecurities be used to justify patriarchal discrimination.

I know that if I had said to a feminist in the 1980s that a woman should cover herself in a blanket if she is worried about how men behave, I would have lost my testicles! Why have we stopped moving towards becoming an egalitarian nation?

I concur with Professor Radford that there is a line to be drawn over what is acceptable. I draw that line at discrimination.

Richard Francis
North London

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