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The 'Talibanisation' of Israel: tensions grow between secular and religion Jews



Israelis pictured protesting last year against gender segregation and violence toward women by ultra Orthodox Jewish extremists in the town of Beit Shemesh, near Jerusalem

A report last month from Israel that special spectacles were being made available to ultra-Orthodox Jewish men to prevent them from seeing women clearly was greeted by the world media with the utmost scorn and derision. This bizarre news item, which reported that the specially coated glasses had been invented to blur out “immodestly” attired women, served to throw into sharp focus a serious problem in Israel: a rapid growth of religious intolerance directed mainly at women.

The first signs of real trouble occurred last year in Beit Shemesh when thousands of Israelis rallied against an ultra-Orthodox group whose harassment was brought to light by a shy eight-year-old schoolgirl who found herself on the front line of Israel’s mounting religious war.

Naama Margolese had been spat upon and labelled “a whore” for dressing “immodestly”, and she lived in fear of walking to her school.

The new girls’ school that Naama attends in Beit Shemesh, to the west of Jerusalem, is on the border between an ultra-Orthodox neighborhood and a community of modern Orthodox Jewish residents, many of them American immigrants.

The ultra-Orthodox population saw the school as an encroachment on their territory, and dozens of black-hatted men jeered and physically accosted the girls almost daily, claiming their very presence was a provocation.

The televised images of Naama sobbing as she walked to school shocked many Israelis, elicited statements of outrage from the country’s leadership, sparked a Facebook page with nearly 10,000 followers dedicated to “protecting little Naama” and a demonstration was held to support her. When journalists descended on the town to report on the case, religious extremists heckled and threw eggs and rocks at them.

The blurry specs report in August coincided with details of another victim of intolerance, Nili Philipp, who was hit by a rock as she was cycling along a road in an ultra-Orthodox neighbourhood. Luckily she was wearing a helmet as the rock struck the side of her head. This was not the first time Philipp was targeted. A few years earlier, she was spat on as she jogged along a road in the area. Men

(Continued on p4)

Can you call your husband 'Lord'?

OPHELIA BENSON MEETS A WOMAN WHO INSISTS: 'DON'T BE SUBMISSIVE, BE HAPPY'

Kathryn Joyce begins her book about the Christian patriarchy movement in the US, *Quiverfull*, with Doug Phillips giving a talk on wifely submission at a Christian Homeschool Convention.

I've watched my wife counsel a lot of young ladies who are considering marriage, and she always asks them the question, 'Are you willing to call your husband "Lord"?' There will be dead silence in the room.

Phillips mimics a girlish voice to deliver their outraged response, then continues in his own manly voice.

We're not talking about Lord as in the Creator, but your earthly head. And one that you have to follow, even when he makes bad judgments. Are you ready to do the most vulnerable thing that a woman ever can do and submit yourself to a man, who you are going to have to fol-

low in his faith, who is incredibly imperfect and is going to make mistakes? Can you do that? Can you call your husband 'Lord'? If the answer is no, you shouldn't get married.

What extraordinary questions those are – extraordinary and terrible. Even when he's wrong? Even when he makes bad judgments?

Notice what's being said there. Notice the principle. It is obedience for its own sake. It's subordination, hierarchy, inequality, *on principle*, regardless of the substance or the outcome.

This principle of absolute authority and unconditional submission is dangerous. The command to obey even bad decisions is indistinguishable from the code of criminal gangs or terrorist armies. What if the judgment of her "Lord" is so bad that it mandates beating the children to death, or denying them medical treatment, or raping them? Such things are not unknown. Phillips's talk to the homeschoolers is a profoundly anti-moral instruction. Morality *depends* on judgment, and on knowing when to refuse an order.

But for patriarchal fundamentalists the arbitrary and absolute authority is the whole point, it's what God is. The idea that we can and should and must evaluate moral claims on their merits is a secular idea, in fact the core secular idea, and it's where the opposition between secular and theocratic thinking is most apparent and most consequential.

A couple of weeks ago I met a woman who has personal experience of theocratic thinking and its effects on people in real life. Vyckie Garrison created and runs the website *No Longer Quivering*, which began as a blog to record her own thoughts and experiences on leaving a Quiverfull marriage, and broadened into a site for the stories of other women who escape and a place for them to talk to each other.

Vyckie lives in Nebraska, and came to the dangerously coastal and cosmopolitan Seattle for a visit. (She loved every second of it, doing a Facebook update a couple of days after we met about driving around town with an ex-Quiverfull friend with the devilish music cranked up loud.)

Ironically, her family's move to patriarchy was her idea, not her husband's. (Self-

undermining from the beginning, then – a joke by no means lost on Vyckie.) They threw themselves into it, they worked very hard at it, they ratcheted up the strictness all the time ... and it never worked.

Vyckie gives a compelling picture of how frustrating it was, to be trying so hard and getting such bad results. It was terrible for the children, she says: they were like little robots, but not happy robots. It's only now that they're out that they've been able to develop as individual people.

Vyckie says she never knew them in their old life; she was too exhausted and they were too cowed. They were all miserable: the children and Vyckie. It was even terrible for her husband; it turned him into a petty demanding tyrant who got frantic about trivial things. (Now, when the children visit him, if he starts to get bossy they just tell him "Chill, Dad," and he does.) The patriarchal way of life wasn't good for any of them.

Still, it could have been worse. For some people it *is* worse. The Associated Press is currently reporting an even grimmer form of child-rearing in Russia's Tatarstan province.

A self-proclaimed prophet had a vision from God: He would build an Islamic caliphate under the earth.

The digging began about a decade ago, and 70 followers moved into an eight-level subterranean honeycomb of cramped cells with no light, heat or ventilation.

Children were born. They, too, lived in the cold underground cells for many years -- until authorities raided the compound last week and freed 27 sons and daughters of the sect.

Ages 1 to 17, the children rarely saw the light of day and had never left the property, attended school or been seen by a doctor, officials said last month.

The children of "Quiverfull" are comparatively fortunate, in being allowed to live above ground.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

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justplaincrazy

GOD DOES NOT LIE

THE Pacific Institute in America publishes books with titles like *Earth's Final Hours* and *Wonderful New Revelations About God*. It also claims on its website: "Since it is impossible for God to lie, and contradictions are lies, there can be no contradictions anywhere in the Bible. Therefore, the correct way to interpret the Bible is so that there are no contradictions in the entire Bible. When we interpret the Bible so that there are no contradictions anywhere, we know we have it right. This is the method God has given us whereby we might know when we have the Bible interpreted correctly."

Scores of Bible contradictions can be found at www.evilbible.com/BiblicalContradictions.htm

BREASTS SILENCE PREACHER

A PHILADELPHIA street evangelist was served with a police citation and told to stop bellowing preaching after an annoyed member of the public bared her breasts at him.

Mike Stockwell of Cross Country Evangelism last month expressed shock over the action of a policeman who issued him with the citation for disorderly conduct.

Officer Thomas Ohm said that Stockwell had provoked the response from the young woman He told the noisy preacher: "You're drawing a crowd, and that young lady exposing herself, that ended it. Once you cross that boundary of freedom of speech in drawing a malicious or out-of-order crowd, that's when we have to stop it."

ARK ACTRESS INJURED

EX-*Baywatch* star and former *Playboy* Playmate Donna D'Errico was injured on Mount Ararat in Turkey last month while on a mission to find Noah's Ark.

Her "major fall", according to media reports, occurred on an "extremely dangerous part" of the mountain in Turkey (where the Book of Genesis alleges the Ark came to rest).

She had left her two children in the US to "fulfill her dream" and reportedly plans to return to Turkey for another attempt this month at discovering the Ark.

The 44-year-old product of a Catholic education revealed that she has a longstanding fascination with discovering the Ark, telling *AOL News* last year that she's been "fascinated" by the boat "since I was 9 or 10."

Belief in miracles is tantamount to torture for terminally-ill children

RELIGIOUS parents who believe that "divine intervention" will save their terminally ill children are subjecting them to torture by putting them through aggressive but futile treatments.

That's the view of two leading UK doctors from Great Ormond Street Hospital. In an article published in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* they warned that families with deeply held hopes for a "miraculous" recovery were increasingly being allowed to "stonewall" medical opinion.

A report in the *Telegraph* last month revealed that the doctors had called for an overhaul of the legal system to reduce the weight given to parents' religious beliefs in such cases.

The article was jointly written by specialist doctors from the neonatal intensive care unit at the London children's hospital – Dr Joe Brierley and Dr Andy Petros – and the hospital's main chaplain, the Rev Jim Linthicum.

They warned: "While it is vital to support families in such difficult times, we are increasingly concerned that deeply held belief in religion can lead to children being potentially subjected to burdensome care in expectation of 'miraculous' intervention.

"In many cases, the children about whom the decisions are being made are too young to subscribe to the religious beliefs held by their parents, yet we continue to respect the parents' beliefs."

Critics have accused the authors of attempting to "impose" secular values on society, irrespective of religious affiliations.

Their article follows a review of 203 cases at the unit in which parents were advised that life support systems should be switched off. In 17 cases, the parents insisted on continuing treatment even after lengthy discussions about the probability that it would be unsuccessful.

In 11 of these, religion was the main factor

influencing their decision. Some of the cases were eventually resolved after religious leaders persuaded the parents to allow the child to die, and one case went to the High Court.

In the remaining cases, no agreement could be reached because the parents were awaiting a "miracle", the authors said.

Citing examples of the treatments involved, they argued that subjecting children to suffering with no scientific hope of a cure could breach article three of the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits torture.

Spending a lifetime attached to a mechanical ventilator having every bodily function supervised and sanitised by a carer or relative, leaving no dignity or privacy to the child or adult has been argued as inhumane.

Instead they want the process of doctors seeking court permission to withdraw treatment to be sped up and for the law to make clear that parents' beliefs should not be a "determining factor" in such decisions.

Although the cases included Muslim, Jewish and Roman Catholic families, the biggest obstacle the authors said they faced were less established, "fundamentalist" evangelical Christian groups with roots in the African community.

Keith Porteous Wood, the executive director of the National Secular Society, said:

This is probably the most terrible situation for any parent, but the experience and advice of doctors must not be held ransom to religious beliefs, however strongly held.

But in an accompanying commentary, Charles Foster, an Oxford University legal expert, argued that there was a place for religion in life and death decisions.

"They seem to think that because we are becoming an increasingly 'secular society' there is some sort of democratically ordained mandate to impose secular values on everyone."



Secular Woman launched in the US

THIS summer saw the launch in the US of the country's first national organisation for atheist women. Secular Woman, Inc made its debut in July "to advance the interests of atheist, humanist and other non-religious women". The organisation's stated vision is: "A future in which women without supernatural beliefs have the opportunities and resources they need to participate openly and confidently as respected voices of leadership in the secular community and every aspect of American society."

Secular identity organisations, it declared in a press release, often struggle to attract and retain female members, lending weight to surveys that typically characterise women as more spiritual than men.

"Secular Woman will offer its members conference travel grants, profiles of secular women, achievement awards and other programming designed to add gender diversity to secular events and bring more non-believing women out of the closet and into roles of leadership."

Secular Woman is headed by life-long atheist Kim Rippere. She is a founder member of SW and the organisation's first President. She was raised in a "loose" Catholic environment and attended parochial school for three years but she never "got" religion.

Kim has a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy from California State University, Northridge. She is a member of American Atheists



Kim Rippere, left, and Bridget Gaudette

and Center for Inquiry.

Said Rippere: "Through strategic partnerships, Secular Woman will also advocate for equal pay, reproductive choice, and marriage equality, addressing political trends the group sees as ideologically-motivated threats to its members' freedom of conscience. 'The 'War on Women' dovetailing with the rise of secular activism showed us the time had come for secular women to form our own distinct organisation to support our vision of the future.'"

Bridget Gaudette, SW's Vice President of Outreach, said: "With this organisation we plan to focus on promoting the secular female voice, but anyone who supports our mission can join. All are vital to the success of Secular Woman and to the overall secular

movement."

Secular Woman's first major success was to secure an exclusive interview with Carli Richards, 22, a survivor of the July cinema shooting that claimed a dozen lives in Colorado. She spoke her experiences during and after the attack and offered encouragement to other atheist women: "Be proud of who you are. Self respect is something that has been a very important part of my own personal growth and development, as well as overcoming many big obstacles ... Stand your ground, be assertive, treat others as you would want to be treated, and be gracious."

Richards was one of 70 wounded when James Eagan Holmes opened fire in the cinema on July 20. She attributed her survival to the "immediate rush of adrenaline" that propelled her out of the building when she smelled tear gas and to the skills and attention of the medical professionals who treated her 20 gunshot wounds. Caring, competent doctors, nurses, and emergency medical staff made prayer unnecessary, Carli told Secular Woman. When, after the shooting, she blogged that no higher power had saved her, she was made an object of hate by Christians offended by her non-religious interpretation of events.

In her Secular Woman interview she recounted her reaction not only the onslaught of criticism she received but also the many gestures of support that followed.

Religious extremism on the increase in Israel

(Continued from p1)

called her names: *shikseh*, the derogatory term for a Gentile woman, and *prutzah*, a whore. According to Lebanon's *Daily Star*, Philipp is an observant, modern Orthodox Jew, but "has become enraged, even radicalised, by the behaviour of her neighbors".

In an interview with the paper, Philipp described a recent incident in which a woman with an infant was pelted with stones while shopping. "We all see ourselves as vulnerable, and we're all scared."

The paper said that, "in a chilling parallel to the escalating fundamentalist tendencies within Islam, the ultra-Orthodox, or Haredim, have adopted a version of Judaism that requires strict separation between men and women. The more they fear assimilation, the more extreme their practices have become. And, as their numbers mount, they have stepped up demands that society accommodate their religious needs."

Ultra-Orthodox Jews make up ten per-

cent of Israel's population and are its fastest growing sector because of a high birth rate. In the past, they have generally confined their strict lifestyle to their own neighborhoods. But they have become increasingly aggressive in trying to impose their ways on others, as their population has grown and spread to new areas.

"It is clear that Israeli society is faced with a challenge that I am not sure it can handle," said Menachem Friedman, a professor emeritus at Bar Ilan University and expert on the ultra-Orthodox, "a challenge that is no less and no more than an existential challenge."

After the blurry glasses report went viral on the Internet, an orthodox Jewish commentator in the US berated the media and bloggers over the scornful manner in which they treated the story. Writing for the *Huffington Post*, Elad Nehorai asked: "Why

is the fact that men are so aware of their fallibility that they have gone out of their way to respect women suddenly seen as a bad thing? Here in New York City, women are constantly subjected to cat calls, whistles and much much worse by men who have no such qualms. And now, in Jerusalem there are a group of men who have chosen to disable themselves so that they would never do that to a woman."

He threw in another question: "So, all you promoters of tolerance, you left-leaning, love-loving, heart-bleeding, folks, can you answer this? Why is it OK to hate these people because they lead a different life than yours? And what is it that you find quite so objectionable and worthy of hate, mocking and anger? Until anyone can answer these questions without resorting to dirty attacks of an entire people, I can only assume that hatred against ultra-Orthodox Jews has become mainstream."

Ancient law could hit thousands with massive church repair bills

A LAND Registry letter, sent earlier this year to residents of the parish of St Eadburgha in Gloucestershire, came as a bombshell. It notified the mainly elderly folk that, because of the land on which their houses were built, they were potentially liable to pay tens of thousands of pounds to repair churches in the area – whether they were Christians or not.

At the end of July, the *Telegraph* explained that, because of the way land was carved after the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, the owners of many houses sited near historic churches have a legal obligation to contribute to repairs. People living in more than 5,000 parishes in England are subject to these historic “chancel repair liabilities”.

Most take out a form of insurance against the liability but many so-called “lay rectors” are entirely unaware of the obligation as it is rarely enforced.

But now, after an attempt by the last Government to tidy up the law in the wake of a high profile court case, parishes have been ordered to trawl through land records dating back hundreds of years to clarify exactly who is liable.

The issue reached a head in the 12th-century Cotswolds parish of St Eadburgha where 30 villagers received the Land Registry letter, which gave them just two weeks to lodge a legal objection.

The local vicar, the Rev Michelle Massey, described the letter as “vicious” and said it imposed an “unChristian” burden on local people.

According to the local MP, Peter Luff, pictured right, the row is likely to be just the first act in a drama set to affect villages across England. “I think this is the tip of an iceberg,” said Mr Luff, the Tory MP for Mid Worcestershire. “How big the iceberg is we will find out over time but I am aware that there are other parishes in Worcestershire who are already moving in a similar direction. This could be replicated across the country, that’s an awful lot of people whose lives are about to be blighted and their homes made unsaleable.”

The issue follows the case of Aston Cantlow Church which billed Andrew and Gail Wallbank at Glebe Farm, Warwickshire, for almost £100,000 in repairs. The case dragged through the courts for years wracking up costs. It ended in failure for the couple in 2009. They finally had to settle a bill

of £350,000 and had to sell their house to do so. As a result the previous Government ordered parishes to register all houses liable for the ancient charge by late 2013.

The Charity Commission has warned that they if they do not, individual members of the Parochial Church Council could be liable for the repairs or even found in breach of their legal duties as trustees.

The Church of England said that English Heritage has also made clear that it would not provide grants for repairs to historic churches if parishioners’ had a legal duty that was not imposed.

“It is just vicious, it is horrible,” said Rev



The world has more atheists – and the numbers are increasing

ACCORDING to the latest global poll released by Red C Opinion Poll, part of WIN-Gallup International, a world-wide network of leading opinion pollsters, the number of self-declared atheists in the world has risen by nine percent since a measure was last taken in 2005.

The massive poll, conducted in 57 countries among 51,000 people asked a single question “Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist?”

It shows that on average 59 percent of the world said that they think of themselves as religious, whereas 23 percent think of themselves as not religious and 13 percent think of themselves as convinced atheists. There are enormous variations from country to country. The countries with most self-described atheists are China (47 percent); Japan (31 percent), Czech Republic (30 percent), France (29 percent), South Korea (15 percent), Germany (15 percent), Netherlands

Massey. This is affecting individual householders who don’t have the money, it is just not fair. There must be a simpler way of doing this.”

She added: “We have to ensure that householders who have worked hard for an honest living aren’t going to end up throwing it away on church repairs – If I got the letter I would be unbelievably upset.”

Keith Porteous Wood, executive director of the National Secular Society, commented: “The liability will always hit villages much harder than towns where the liability for repairs to a church will be spread over very many more dwellings. If Mr Luff’s fears are realised and result in swathes of village bankruptcies or repossessions, the Government may be forced to reconsider and make these ancient liabilities unenforceable against landowners.

“If it does so it will then have to decide whether this new source of income for the Church is to be curtailed, or whether to compensate them from public funds. But, particularly in these times of austerity, the level of hardship would have to be very high for the Government to feel forced to act.”

(14 percent), Austria (10 percent), Iceland (10 percent), Australia (10 percent) and Ireland (10 percent).

The most religious countries are: Ghana (where 96 percent of people define themselves as religious), Nigeria (93 percent), Armenia (92 percent), Fiji (92 percent), Macedonia (90 percent), Romania (89 percent), Iraq (88 percent), Kenya (88 percent), Peru (86 percent) and Brazil (85 percent).

One of the most dramatic reductions in the proportion of the population considering themselves religious occurred in Ireland: from 69 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2012, placing Ireland on the index of religious belief at position 43 out of 57 countries.

The poll also showed that the poorer people were, the more likely they were to be religious.

One anomaly that the pollsters have themselves questioned is in Turkey, where those who say they are religious is only 23 percent while those defining themselves as non-religious is 73 percent.

The NZ atheist bus campaign

RICHARD SILVERWOOD meets KENT STEVENS

In late 2009, a group of atheists in New Zealand calling themselves the NZ Atheist Bus Campaign announced that they had managed to raise a whopping \$20,000 dollars in less than a week to fund a series of advertisements on buses reading: "There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

This slogan was inspired by a similar campaign in the UK, aimed at counteracting the religious propaganda that appeared on advertising billboards in London. It was both praised and condemned in equal measure, with atheists, humanists and even many free-speech-loving Christians singing its praises and religious zealots calling upon God to condemn the people behind it to the fiery lakes of hell.

In the end the Christian fundamentalists won out because the NZ Bus Company refused to run the advert, claiming that it was "divisive". The NZ Bus Campaign is currently taking its case to the Human Rights Commission, citing discrimination on the grounds of ethical belief.

I caught up with Kent Stevens, who was one of the founding members of the group, to get the low-down on their struggle to spread their message to the masses.

RS: What is your background as an atheist and when did you first come to the conclusion that there was no God?

KS: I have been an atheist since I was about eight years old. I have always had a fascination with science and mythology. My



Kent Stevens

investigation of science and religion has not uncovered any convincing evidence for any particular religion being true. When I became older, I joined the Humanist Society of New Zealand and then later on I became a council member of the NZ Bus Campaign.

RS: How did you first get involved with the campaign and what was the inspiration behind it?

KS: A large number of people in New Zealand saw overseas atheist bus campaigns being discussed in the media. It was then natural to think that if these campaigns could be done in Australia, UK and America then they should also be possible here in New Zealand. Many individuals contacted me at the Humanist Society and suggested

that our organisation should create an atheist bus campaign. A group of interested people then had a meeting and set up the NZ Atheist Bus Campaign. I was one of the original members who helped to set up this informal group that has worked with the Humanist Society of New Zealand.

RS: Can you say a little bit about your court case against NZ Bus?

KS: We have always wanted them to see that they should allow us to advertise on their buses. However because they have refused to negotiate with us, we have been forced to go through legal channels so that we are not unjustly discriminated against. We have been fortunate in that we have managed to get a government agency to represent us in court. The organisation that is representing us is the Office of Human Rights Proceedings.

RS: You have placed a number of adverts on billboards whilst awaiting the outcome of your case. What was the motivation behind this?

KS: We needed to show to the people that had donated that we would promote atheist advertising on the media that we were allowed to use. NZ Bus had effectively taken away our ability to advertise on buses in the main cities of New Zealand. The only other similar alternative to buses was billboards. Our successful billboard campaign has shown that it is possible to run an atheist advertising campaign on New Zealand buses in a safe manner.

RS: What has the response to your campaign been like from other atheists?

KS: We have had overwhelming and fantastic support from them, as well as from the wider community. The amount of money donated to the NZ Atheist Bus Campaign exceeded all of our initial expectations. Almost all of the written and spoken feedback that we have received has also been amazingly positive.

RS: What about Christians and members of other religious groups?

KS: The response has mostly been supportive of our right to freedom of religion. We certainly have had people disagreeing strongly with what we were saying. That is to be expected in a society with many different viewpoints on religion. However religious groups have not disagreed with our freedom of religion or the ability for our group to express our outlook on life. Reli-



Sign: free speech under attack

REVIEWS of the New Zealand Atheist Bus Campaign

gious groups realise that they rely on having freedom of religion in order to exist.

RS: Is the NZ Atheist Bus Campaign aimed more towards converting people to atheism or removing the stigma associated with it?

KS: We have run a positive atheist campaign on similar grounds to the campaign in the United Kingdom. As such, we have not been trying to convert people. We just want to have the freedom to express our belief that there probably is no god. We would like everyone to have the freedom to say what they personally believe in. We are encouraging people to be able to say, 'This is who I am and this is what I believe' without there being any fear of unjustified stigmatisation. Democracy relies on healthy debate about many different issues and there also needs to be debate encouraged about religion in society.

RS: Archbishop John Drew of the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference has criticised the phrasing that you have used on your adverts, arguing that by saying that there is 'probably no god' you are suggesting that you are uncertain on the issue. He also

says that you are implying that Christians don't enjoy their lives, when in his opinion they do. What is your take on this?

KS: The use of the word 'probably' is signalling that this is what we believe, though we realise that there are a range of different viewpoints about the existence of god. We are not attempting to be offensive but are stating what many people within New Zealand believe. People in general do enjoy life. However Christianity has traditionally scared individuals into believing in dogma with threats of hell and brimstone.

RS: Some Christians have also claimed that the adverts will encourage more people to 'seek God'. Do you think that there is any truth in this?

KS: We would expect that the adverts will get people thinking and debating about religion. Consequently this should mostly encourage people to state their lack of belief in a supernatural god if this is what applies to them.

RS: How can people get involved and support the cause?

KS: Our current campaign for funding for

the Atheist Bus Campaign has closed. However there are a number of ways that people can show their support, which are discussed at our website www.nogod.org.nz. One simple way to show that you endorse the campaign is to tell others that you support it. If someone wants to support the official organisation behind this and other freethinker campaigns then they can join or donate to the Humanist Society of New Zealand by going to our website at www.humanist.org.nz.

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

KS: Our organisation and New Zealanders in general will persevere with getting NZ Bus to see sense on this issue and to allow us to advertise with them. Advertising on buses has happened in many different countries, including Australia, UK and America. New Zealand should also be able to have a peaceful viewpoint expressed on its buses. Since NZ Bus is refusing to negotiate with our organisation, we will continue with legal proceedings until we get justice on this issue for all New Zealanders.

Christian historian comes unstuck over Jefferson

CHRISTIAN publishing house Thomas Nelson has scrapped a book written by "evangelical historian" David Barton. *The Jefferson Lies: Exposing the Myths You've Always Believed About Thomas Jefferson*, was penned by Barton in a bid to prove that Thomas Jefferson was a true Christian, rather than the anti-Christian secularist portrayed in history books.

Barton is now said to be "confused" by Nelson's decision to cease publication of the book after it was met with widespread criticism from a diverse group of scholars, as well as the threat of a boycott by Cincinnati pastors and church leaders.

Casey Francis Harrell, spokesperson for the company said that Nelson had received several complaints about the book and ultimately confirmed the existence of enough errors to cancel it.

Barton, who was named one of *Time* magazine's top-25 evangelicals in 2005, is a popular Christian history writer and a favourite guest on Glenn Beck's show. Beck, a

right-wing radio host also wrote the book's introduction.

In his latest tome, Barton claims to debunk myths, perpetuated by left-wingers, about Thomas Jefferson and the founding of the US. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson is generally regarded as a champion of the separation of Church and State, as well as an empiricist scholar. Barton, however, claimed Jefferson was actually part of the religious establishment, and a vocal supporter of Christianity.

In an early press release for the book, Barton was depicted as a historian's version of David, battling against the Goliath forces of secularising liberal revisionists. The release said: "History books routinely teach that Jefferson was an anti-Christian secularist, rewriting the Bible to his liking, fathering a child with one of his slaves, and little more than another racist, bigoted colonist, but none of those claims are actually true."

But, as it turned out, many of Barton's claims were hard to verify, and in July the

book was voted "the least credible history book in print," by readers of the History News Network.

Glenn Moots of Northwood University wrote that Barton is so eager to portray Jefferson as sympathetic to Christianity that he misses or omits obvious signs that Jefferson stood outside "orthodox, confessional Christianity." Glenn Sunshine of Central Connecticut State University, said that Barton's characterisation of Jefferson's religious views was "unsupportable."

Meanwhile, Barton has also drawn fire from a group of Cincinnati pastors and church leaders, who held a press conference on August 1 to announce a boycott of the book. The evangelical pastors were especially angry with the way Barton portrayed Jefferson's slave ownership. They said Barton falsely claimed that Jefferson was unable to free his slaves. In fact, Jefferson was allowed to free his slaves under Virginia law, but failed to do it. *The Jefferson Lies ...* minimises Jefferson's racist views.

Karma chameleon: the many voices of Alom Shaha

ALEX GABRIEL, co-founder of The Heresy Club, meets the ex-Muslim author of *The Young Atheist's Handbook*

Alom Shaha is everywhere. His *The Young Atheist's Handbook* has been heralded with a great deal of press attention, TV interviews and talks – as he puts it – “for every Skeptics in the Pub group in the country”. When we meet in the café at the National Theatre, he’s just spoken at the Wrexham Science Festival and had “quite a weird interview” on the radio. Intrigued, I spend our first few minutes letting him vent.

“The interviewer hadn’t read the book,” he tells me, “and was doing that whole BBC ‘balance’ thing. He said to me, ‘I’m going to try and attack you, just so that it doesn’t look like we’re favouring you’. He had no clue what the book was about or what I was saying, and he was just clutching at random things that might annoy an atheist.”

To be fair, I understand the impulse to provoke. This man is an up-and-coming writer who’s making waves, a professional physics teacher and a public speaker; he’s telegenic, the star of various science videos on YouTube, and worked previously in politics as well as production at the BBC. In his spare time, he’s a magician (a *good* one, I’m told.) This background suggests a scripted, media-savvy performer, the kind about whom more can be revealed with a bit of sparring. I’ve considered an opener like “So, Alom – your book’s a vehicle, isn’t it?”

The moment we meet, I know this would be wrong. Alom is quiet, unassuming and – not to say shy – self-deprecative, not an inch the urbane smooth talker I’d expected. This isn’t a bad thing, since people who are calm and winning on TV can appear smug in real life, and his diffidence gives him an air of approachability. “I’m not sure I’m as articulate or eloquent as I ought to be for some things I do”, he says, though he concedes “I can be very good [on] things I know about.”

That certainly explains why he’s most at home in the classroom. In a chapter about science called “Let There Be Light”,

he states “I have never felt so good about myself as I do when I am teaching.” Laconically though, it also shows why the best parts of the book are biographical: “I’m not going out there pretending I’m an expert on [religious] matters”, he tells me, “but what I am an expert on is my

most when it’s personal, and Lewis doesn’t labour his point about God. When Alom agrees, I suggest the same could be said of his own book.

Most chapters start with experiences from his youth, and shift half way through into abstract discussions. His section on religion and morality, for example,

begins by telling us how he was beaten brutally for shoplifting: “As soon as I came in the door, my father grabbed me by the hair and started whipping me with his belt. He continued to thrash me as I lay on the floor, in the foetal position, trying to protect myself”. The kind and patient Bangladeshi man then staying with his family, who had brought him home, was the one Alom would name as an ethical role model. “Ironically, he was the only one who wasn’t Muslim.”

When later in the chapter, he briefly tackles theodicy (reference is made to the Ten Commandments and the problem of evil), it feels academic in more than one sense. The point’s been made, implicitly and powerfully, that religion on its own won’t make you moral, and my sense is that the average reader won’t need much more persuading.

This doesn’t stop the *Handbook*

being readable, of course; if it suffers structurally in places, the author’s prose is fluent and engaging. I’m struck, in fact, that Alom writes more elegantly than he realises.

“One of the difficulties writing the book”, he says, “was dreading having written a book that I myself wouldn’t like to have read. I read the book now and see sentences and paragraphs I would rewrite.” It’s true that many artists are their own worst enemies, but Alom’s writing style shows far more confidence than his attitude to it. “With my favourite writers, I feel that the way they use words is really sophisticated and powerful. I haven’t even begun to scratch the surface of that – there’s a lot more work for me to do for every word and every sentence in my book



Alom Shaha

personal journey.”

I’m an English student and a science fan, and Alom’s a physics teacher with a love of books – “They have shaped me and they have saved me”, reads the third chapter of the *Handbook* – so inevitably, our discussion turns literary. That chapter, “Escape to Narnia”, relates his childhood love of C. S. Lewis and his later recognition of the Narnia series as Christian allegory. “I didn’t particularly like Aslan”, it tellingly reads.

I’ve often thought those books are best when they zoom in on human characters, abandoning grand metaphor – when they tell us how the Pevensies know not to shut themselves in wardrobes, or that the best way to fall asleep is to stop trying, rather than religion. I engage with Narnia

to count, and I don't think I've begun to get there yet."

I don't agree. Perhaps he holds himself to such high standards because of his affinity for reading? It appears to be his greatest love. ("I'll be honest", he tells me. "If you asked me to choose between science and literature, I would pick literature.") So when his self-doubt leads him to drop a certain bombshell, I can't say I'm surprised.

Alom continues: "I secretly always wanted to write a book, because it would be an amazing thing to do, but I never actively pursued it because I didn't feel I could. There was a fear that if I attempted it I'd fail, realise it was rubbish and realise I wasn't capable of writing a book. I feel that I've cheated: I haven't used my imagination at all. I've written about myself. I haven't created a character [or] a world. I haven't done that thing I secretly wanted to do, which is to write a novel." The fog of his soul-searching lifts, and suddenly he's self-aware. "Fuck," he says. "I've just confessed to you that I want to write a novel."

We've discussed our mutual appreciation of Phillip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, and I'd certainly like atheist fiction to become a genre. The *Handbook* also deals at length with the idea of Bangladeshi atheists as "coconut[s]: brown on the outside, but white on the inside". For a writer so concerned with unbelief and ethnic identity, his novel-writing ambition seems appropriate, since atheists in the Harlem Renaissance movement often criticised the black church through fiction. And anyway, I think he's wrong about having cheated.

Creative non-fiction, I say, is a recognised category, and some of the very best memoirs read like novels. In telling us about his upbringing, Alom has created a world of characters: his brother Shalim, whose fragile mental health meant he believed himself a superhero, prepared to battle his caring relatives in hospital visits; the teenage colleague who first dared him to eat bacon, and was taken aback when he did; caring Mr Grimmett, the headteacher young Alom was loath to disappoint. The versions of these people the *Handbook* introduces are likely semi-fictional – based on an adult's memory decades later, and simplified from their real-world selves to fit within 200 pages. This isn't a bad thing, because it lends the *Handbook* a compelling narrative, at times a deeply moving one.

This isn't to say the book is flawless. Far from it. Certain chapters feel comparatively spare and risk falling into vagueness, particularly those about love and science, and the direct commentary on the world's religions tends to paint them with a carelessly broad brush. (We're told for example that "Islam is inflexible in its claim that the

Qur'an is of divine origin", and that "only a tiny minority of theists would claim to have direct contact with a god", both questionable assertions at best.) The final chapter, "Kafir", admits this weakness, saying that if we've noticed "confusion, contradictions, flawed logic, or misinterpreted ideas, well, they're there because I am a flawed individual", but this doesn't mean the lack of nuance isn't an issue. These are minor quibbles, though: the biggest problem with the *Handbook* is it doesn't quite seem to know what it wants to be.

When Alom shifts from relating his own story to discussing abstract concepts, his implied reader seems to change abruptly; the straightforward storytelling which is the book's best feature puts me at ease, but with sentences like "This is known as the Euthyphro dilemma", it's as if he's addressing a class in their mid-teens. Where this teacherish tone creeps in, it's hard not to feel at least slightly patronised. There are moments, too, when the writer's voice turns polemic – for example when he says "I sincerely believe that, for billions of people around the world, superstition and religion are shackles, things that prevent them from being all they can be". There's nothing wrong with this, and he does it well, but it might well be more at home in the *Guardian's* comment section than here.

Alom agrees with this assessment when I put it to him: "You've hit the nail on the head, and that's what I think is almost problematic about the book." From a review-writing perspective, it certainly makes it difficult to rate. On what terms do you judge a book with such clear multiple personalities? As a personal memoir, it gets five stars effortlessly; as a secular polemic, three and a half; as a pedagogic guide to atheism and religion, rather fewer. But this is one book rather than three, so as enjoyable as it is, the question of how far it achieves its aims is hard to answer.

My feeling is that each of Alom's voices has its place, and if he separated them more – into narrative book writing, public commenting and science communication – they'd be stronger for it. This doesn't mean his versatility is a flaw, of course. On the contrary, and as I tell him in our discussion, he strikes me as a patchwork man by nature.

Alom's accent, to be heard on innumerable podcasts and videos, is in parts Bangladeshi, estuarine and public school. (Alley's, where he gained an assisted place for seven years, plays a prominent part in his story.) He's the child from an estate who grew up with the rich. He's the rationalist who, in memory of his mother, kisses books if he steps over them; the physics teacher who'd give up science for novels

if he had to; the confident, stylish writer who thinks his own sentences poorly chosen; the camera-friendly media pro who's quiet on first meeting an interviewer.

Even his atheistic rhetoric is chameleon-like. In his introduction, Alom states his admission to eating pork "may be the most controversial thing I write in this book". He later goes on to say: "It's one thing to be complicit in the unnecessary suffering of animals; it's another thing entirely to suffer from sexual repression because you've been brought up to believe that God disapproves of masturbation, or to live as a second-class citizen because you're a woman, or to live in fear for your life because you're a homosexual. Yet this is the reality that is imposed on millions, if not billions, of people around the world because they live in communities or countries that base their morality and laws on religious beliefs founded ancient books and stories." A few pages later, he states: "I wouldn't necessarily agree that religion is morally wrong."

One moment it's a firebrand we're reading; the next, a diplomat. This division's artificial, of course, but the question stands – why the inconsistency? It's sometimes better, Alom tells me, to appear harmless before moments of secular rage. I'm only semi-appeased, but he submits "My opinion's always changing and evolving. I hope that I'll be better able to express some of my ideas a few years down the line, and I suspect I will have changed my mind about a few things."

In the final analysis, it seems to me that the *Handbook's* precise contents – its shifting intentions and tone, and the precise ideas its author advances – are less important than the person we meet reading it. Rather than memoir, polemic or informative guide, it might be best read as an introduction to Alom, an atheist of many colours who, at present, hasn't found his niche. The public voices he presents are various, but each is confident and wishes to be heard.

Despite its faults, I'll recommend friends read his book – not just because it's a compelling read, but because whatever he does next is going to make waves, and they likely ought to know about him.

Though I don't regret withholding it, I think my sparring opener might have been right: *The Young Atheist's Handbook* is a vehicle for Alom Shaha, a relevant new heretic who wants to be heard. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with that.

• *The Young Atheist's Handbook* was published in the UK earlier this year by Biteback Publishing and is available from Amazon and other good book sellers. A Turkish language edition will be published in Turkey later this year.

An architect of Miracles

A factually-based tale penned by **NICOLAOS S TZANNES**

It was early spring, and Dimitri and I were enjoying a light lunch at the Ifigenia restaurant in Kato Kastritsi, outside of Patras, in Greece. Dimitri, an old friend and classmate from the local high school was now a successful architect, and I was teaching Electrical Engineering at the University of Patras.

The lunch was over and we were engaged in every Greek's favorite pastime – sipping coffee and discussing politics. The view from the hillside restaurant was truly spectacular. The Rion-Antirion channel was in front of us and the mainland mountains were clearly visible across the sea. Their tops were still full of snow that glittered brightly in the strong noontime sun.

Behind us was the Panahaikos Mountain and the narrow valley in front was green and fresh from the recent rains. The ferry-boats going back and forth to the mainland provided some sense of activity in the otherwise calm scene below. If there is a better spot on earth, I'd surely like to know.

"How about playing some tennis this afternoon?" I asked Dimitri. "I mean outside, at the University courts in Magoula. The air is great this time of year."

"Sorry, I can't. I've got this urgent church project to complete and I am condemned to return to the office and breathe the stale, smoky air inside. I am a little behind and the Bishop is a very scary customer. He could excommunicate me or something, if I don't deliver the plans on time."

"A church project? The Bishop?" My curiosity was instantly pricked. "Do you mind giving me some details?"

"Not at all," he replied. "It's my first assignment for a church in the island of Zakynthos, recently commissioned by Bishop of the Ionian Islands Prefecture. It pays really well and the architectural design is already finished. But there is a minor complication with the Static Study. That's why I got to get back and finish it."

"The Static Study? What is that?"

"It's the analysis of the size of reinforced concrete beams and columns needed to ensure that the structure will withstand an earthquake, up to the specific Richter value set by the building code."

"Oh, yes, I heard about that – though I didn't know that it was called the Static Study. But why is there a complication in

this case? I thought Greece adopted the California construction code and the University of California has made the formulas quite easy – a cookbook."

He pulled his chair up a little closer, put his hand over his mouth and leaned over toward my ear.

"I can't talk about it," he whispered, "I've been sworn to complete secrecy."

I was stunned for a few seconds – unable to formulate and utter a single sentence.

"Complete secrecy, you say?" My curiosity was really pricked now. "How so? What is the Bishop building inside this church? Is it some alcove for sexual orgies, accessible only by a secret passage? Or some impregnable torture chamber for captured infidels?"

Dimitri started to laugh "It's nothing like that, I knew you'd come up with some crazy notion – everyone knows that you are a non-believer, always looking for some excuse to trash organised religion. It's got nothing to do with secret alcoves or torture chambers; the secret is about the Static Study of the whole structure. But I can't talk about it to anyone—I've given my word of honour."

"Really? A secret Static Study? Why?" I demanded. "Dimitri, in the name of our 30-year friendship, I plead with you to tell me in confidence. I swear that my lips will be sealed forever and that the secret will be buried with me in my grave."

"Yeah, sure your lips will be sealed, but how about your ... pen? You could write an article and expose the whole thing even while your lips ..."

"Look here," I interrupted, sensing a slight kink in his desire to maintain secrecy. "Even if I write something, I promise you it will not be an article. It will be a short story and all the names will be changed to protect the ... guilty." The phrase he used – "expose the whole thing" – put me in such frenzy, I was finding difficult to keep from poking him in the ribs.

He paused for a while, and then he looked at the calm sea in the horizon and the snow-capped mountains across the channel. Then he picked up his coffee cup and started fidgeting with it, as if to ensure that it was totally empty. I could see that he was going through some kind of foreplay, getting ready to spill the beans.

"OK," he said, "You know, of course, that Zakynthos is highly susceptible to deadly

earthquakes, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," I replied. "I was a Boy Scout in 1953 when the Great One hit the island and we went over there on a boat to deliver some tents to the homeless. There was utter devastation, with hundreds of dead and wounded – the worst earthquake ever recorded in the Ionian Sea, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes, it was, it registered a 7.3 on the Richter scale. Every building on the Island was destroyed except three: The St. Dionysios Cathedral, the National Bank building, and the Church of St Nicholas of the Quay. The

Bank was ignored and the religious hierarchy spread the notion that this happenstance was a miracle – that the Churches were spared because they are the ... domicile of God."

He paused for a while, frowning and twisting his face, trying to recall all the events in the aftermath of the ruination.

"Not unexpectedly, these two churches prospered after the ... miracle. The faithful flocked to them like ants and their priests and the Bishop were swimming in piety and money. But do you know what happened in the neighborhoods and villages where hundreds of other churches were totally destroyed by the earthquake?"

"What happened? I left for the United States a year later and didn't keep up with the developments," I said meekly.

"Since God did not save them, questions were raised about the priests and their suspected sinful behavior. Accusations were surfacing daily and in some cases women (and some men) came forward to confess sexual liaisons with the priests, fornications and betrayals. Some of the priests were defrocked. Some others used fiery sermons to deflect the blame on the congregation – painting their villages as modern day Sodom and Gomorrah and preaching that the destruction was well deserved. I tell you the moral aftershocks are still being felt today."

"But how is all that related to the secret of the Static Study?"

"I am coming to that in a moment. In the aftermath of that experience, the church hierarchy pledged that all new churches would be built so that the ... miracle is guaranteed, no matter what the magnitude of the earthquake is on the Richter scale. When they



A scene of devastation after the Zakyntos earthquake of 1953

came to me, the demanded that the Static Study be made for strength 12, even though no earthquake has ever been recorded higher than 9.5 and the maximum strength on the Richter scale is 10."

"Can you actually to do that?" I asked with astonishment.

"Certainly, I can, for strength 10, but it's complicated – not the usual cookbook exercise. I can make a church that is a solid fortress, an interconnected mesh of steel and concrete, immune even to a bunker buster bomb," he added with pride.

"But what about the cost? Isn't it going to be prohibitive?"

"The total cost will certainly be very high and my own fee will also be exorbitant," he replied, smilingly. "But who can actually put a price on the fabrication of a failsafe ... miracle? Besides, from what I gathered, the

church elders consider the expense to be a good investment. As soon as the next earthquake strikes – and strike it will – the faithful will flock to the churches and their coffers will be instantly replenished."

"But don't you feel guilty contributing to the fabrication of fake miracles? Don't you find it morally repugnant?" I demanded to know.

"Well, yes, a little. Let me just say that I am not altogether proud of it. I use the classic excuses, you know, if I didn't do it someone else will, etc, to ease my conscience. Besides, all I am doing is making a Static Study for a structure that stands up to a powerful earthquake.

"I am not the one calling anything a miracle. And I can't certainly reject the church officials as my clients just because they are scamming the faithful, any more than a doctor can refuse to save the life of a known

murderer. We, as architects have our own unwritten version of the Hippocratic Oath, you know."

"I suppose you do." I replied quietly.

"But do you know what I do find offensive, even disgusting, in this whole scam of an affair?"

"Pray tell me, immediately"

"There are fake miracles, of course, that are totally benign – a blind man sees again, or a paralytic one walks anew. But this miracle is vicious. It needs utter devastation for

its realisation – it requires a complete catastrophe. The earthquake must be so strong that nothing is left standing except the church. This miracle draws its strength from the blood of the hundreds, perhaps thousands of dead and wounded. It is downright evil."

He paused a little and then continued. "Do you want to know why the Bishop is pushing me to get the project finished ahead of schedule? They don't want to miss the next earthquake season – this upcoming summer. They are actually praying for a Big One. They turn my stomach, every time I meet with them."

Dr Nicolaos S Tzannes, PhD Johns Hopkins, 1966, is an educator and author of many books in English, Greek and Portuguese. His subjects span many fields, from

electrical engineering to backgammon and, most recently, human behaviour and philosophy. In 2002 his *Life Without God: A Guide to Fulfillment Without Religion* was published.

Dr Tzannes lives in Orlando, Florida. He has recently retired from the Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering of the University of Central Florida where he taught courses in Communications and Radar Systems and chaired the Department from 1986 to 1994. His short story was written exclusively for the *Freethinker*.



**'Never mind the quality,
feel the oppression'**



The winner of our July caption contest is David Anderson, a subscriber in Spain who wins a copy of Alom Shaha's The Young Atheist's Handbook for his entry "Never mind the quality, feel the oppression". The runner-up prize of a year's free subscription to the Freethinker goes to Elaine Ansell, a member of the Brighton & Hove Humanist Society for her "Madam, this tent sleeps one. It comes with three tent poles and pegs. Note the ventilation feature; you can see out but no one can see in."

Ida Craddock: sexual radical

TERRY LIDDLE, of the Freethought History Research Group, looks back on the

Ida Craddock was born in 1857 in Philadelphia. Her father died when she was four months old. Her mother who was a strict Quaker, home schooled her.

In her youth, Ida was recommended by its faculty for admission to the University of Philadelphia as its first female undergraduate. However, the Board of Trustees blocked this in 1882. She went on to write a stenography textbook, and taught it to women at Girard College.

Having been drawn into the mystical web of Theosophy in the 1880s (this was exposed as a fraud by Joseph McCabe) she became secretary of the Philadelphia chapter of the American Secular Union in 1889. The ASU, which demanded total separation of church and state, was very similar to the National Secular Society in Britain. One of its early presidents was Robert Ingersoll who was elected at the 1885 Convention. He de-



Ida Craddock and Anthony Comstock

scribed himself as an agnostic.

Among the nine aims of the ASU was that churches should no longer be exempt from taxation. It demanded that the employment of chaplains in the military, prisons and asylums be abolished and that religious services maintained by public money be ended. It further demanded that public funding for religious schools and charities be abolished.

It called for the appointment of religious festivals by the US President to cease.

While stating its support for the strictest uprightness of conduct, it called for the prohibition of religious teaching and the Bible in schools. It demanded the abolition of the religious oath in the courts and its replacement by simple affirmation. It wanted the repeal of laws enforcing religious observance of the Sabbath. All laws, it said, shall be conformed to the requirements of natural morality, equal rights and impartial justice. It demanded that the political system be conducted and administered on a purely secular basis.

Ida moved to Chicago where, on Dearborn Street, she opened an office offering sexual advice for married couples. She also wrote what nowadays would be called sex manuals, some of which she sent through the post.

She never married and claimed to have sexual relations with an angel called Soph. Their lovemaking was so noisy, she said, that the neighbours complained. Subsequent research has revealed that she had at least two human lovers. One, a younger man, was very conventional in his love making. The other, an older ex-clergyman, was a master of protracted intercourse without ejaculation which Ida enjoyed tremendously. He was a leading figure in the National Liberal League founded in 1876. The NLL was the forerunner of the American Secular Union. The NLL gained at least 50,000 signatures on a petition calling for a repeal of the notorious Comstock censorship laws. Ingersoll said that Comstock should look at the Bible which "contains hundreds of grossly obscene passages".

Jesus & Mo



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cal and a martyr for freedom

back on the life of a secular revolutionary who was eventually driven to suicide

Having served in the Union Army in the Civil War, Anthony Comstock became a leading member of the YMCA. Through it he organised in 1873 The New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Through diligent lobbying, he got Congress to pass a law banning the transportation through the mail of obscene, lewd and lascivious material. This included information on contraception and sexually transmitted diseases. He became a United States Postal Inspector. This included the right to carry arms.

Comstock clashed with many of the leading radicals of the day including Victoria Woodhull, a former member of the First International and a contributor to the *Agnostic Journal*. He called the playwright and socialist George Bernard Shaw “an Irish smut peddler”. Emma Goldman, an anarchist, described Comstock as a eunuch.

He also clashed with the birth control advocate Margaret Sanger. Sanger had published sex education articles in the Socialist paper *The Call*. She also published a paper *The Woman Rebel* with the slogan “No gods, no masters”.

He railroaded D M Bennett, the 60-year-old publisher of *The Truth Seeker*, into prison for 13 months of hard labour.

Comstock claimed he was responsible for 4,000 arrests and 14 suicides. He was funded by J P Morgan and Samuel Colgate. One of those interested in his work was J Edgar Hoover who became head of the FBI and a notorious red-baiter.

Ida had first come to Comstock’s notice when she defended a belly dancer, Little Egypt. Ida had toured the country lecturing on a variety of subjects, including the negative impact of Christianity on marital relationships.

In Chicago Ida faced a federal indictment for sending her publication *Right Marital Living* through the post. She pleaded guilty and received a suspended sentence. She remained out of prison because Clarence Darrow, famous for his defence role in the Scopes “monkey trial”, posted her bond.

In 1894 Ida’s mother attempted to have her interned in a mental hospital, promising if she succeeded she would destroy all of Ida’s papers. This prompted Ida to send them to the British journalist W C Stead. He had been imprisoned for buying a 13-year-old girl as part of his campaign against child

prostitution. He drowned in the Titanic disaster in 1912.

She then moved to New York. There she faced another indictment in 1902 for sending her book *The Wedding Night* through the post. Refusing to plead insanity, she served three months in harsh conditions in Blackwell Island’s workhouse. On release she was rearrested and tried again. The jury was never even allowed to see her publication. This time she got five years which she regarded as a life sentence. She committed suicide by slashing her wrists and inhaling natural gas

from the fire in her flat.

In a last letter addressed to the public she wrote: “I am taking my life because the judge, at the instigation of Anthony Comstock, has declared me guilty of a crime I did not commit – the circulation of obscene literature – and has announced his intention of confining me to prison for a long time.”

To her mother she wrote: “I maintain my right to die as I have lived, a free woman, not cowed into silence by another human being.” Ida Craddock was a martyr for freedom and for freethought.

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More manure from the McGrath stable

WILLIAM HARWOOD swings an axe at *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith*

Try to imagine a hardcore Flat-Earther being taken into low orbit aboard a space shuttle and forced to look at the observably spherical earth revolving on its axis – and then returning to earth and writing a book in which he ignores what he has seen and reiterates that the earth is flat. Anyone who does not see such a scenario as credible has not encountered Alister McGrath.

McGrath is a braindead, unteachable ignoramus with as much capacity for logical human thought as Joseph Ratzinger, Osama bin Laden, Tom Cruise, and Mel Gibson, and as much rationality as a great white shark with rabies. No matter how many times his mindless drivel is blown out of the water, he keeps coming up with further repetitions of the same “A = not-A” doublethink that

he has no ability to recognize as falsified beyond any sane dispute. He does not even grasp that the subtitle of his latest piece of kindergarten gibberish could be more accurately worded, “How to help persons who have recovered their mental health to regain their mind-cancer.” Other than that, there is nothing wrong with the author of *Mere Apologetics* that a brain transplant could not cure.

McGrath is a self-confessed apologist. He writes: “Apologetics aims to convert believers into thinkers, and thinkers into believers.” Is he serious? Is he unaware that thinkers and believers are polar opposites, comparable with black and white? Education can convert believers into thinkers, as happened when I took my first ancient history course on the subject of mystery reli-

gions in the early Roman Empire. But only emotional blackmail such as Pascal’s wager can transform a thinker into a believer, and when such transformation takes place he ceases to be a thinker.

In one sense, McGrath is not unteachable. Almost as soon as his attempted rebuttal of Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* was published, he was forced to recognize that he had revealed his intellectual bankruptcy in glorious Technicolor. He never again attempted to respond to scholarly arguments falsifying his dogma, since even moderate theists recognized him as an embarrassment to their cause.

Instead, in this latest piece of doubletalk, he sets up straw men and refutes arguments no scholar ever made. He devotes four pages to refuting historical fiction by Dan Brown and Philip Pullman, implying that unlearned speculation by imaginative non-scholars represents the best evidence non-theists can offer. And he dismisses the evidence presented by Dawkins in the words “This is merely an assertion.”

Given his previous failure to refute Dawkins, he wisely makes no detailed attempt to do so again. And in quoting legitimate arguments against religion, he makes a point of attributing them to Sigmund Freud, a thoroughly discredited clown whom only other psychoquacks continue to take seriously.

I strongly recommend that Alister McGrath be examined by the CIA/FBI. They have previously reported that intensive investigation has shown that the use of torture and other conscienceless conditioning techniques to inflict on a prisoner an inflexible mindset that was the basis of a popular novel do not work and will never work.

But if McGrath is not a Manchurian Candidate, conditioned to accept, believe and act on an imposed contrary-to-fact reality, then any alternative explanation for his ability to shut out all information that contravenes his programming must be something that can only be detected by an autopsy. Why publishers continue to provide a forum for his pathetic rationalizations is best attributed to their awareness that no one ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of incurable god addicts.

Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers & Skeptics Find Faith, Alister E McGrath, 2012, Baker Books, PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287, ISBN 978-0-8010-1416-1, 200 pp, ppb, \$16.99.

The passing of a giant

ONCE people get hung up on theology, they've lost sanity forever. More people have been killed in the name of Jesus Christ than any other name in the history of the world.

– Gore Vidal, 1925-2012.

One of the world’s greatest writers and social commentators, Gore Vidal, died at the age of 86 at his Hollywood Hills Home on July. Renowned for his towering intellect and his utter disdain for religion, Vidal was Honorary President of the American Humanist Association.

Vidal was a giant of American intellectual life in the second half of the 20th century. The acclaimed author wrote 25 novels, including scandalous best-sellers like *Myra Breckinridge* and scholarly, historical works such as *Burr* and *Lincoln*. Vidal also wrote more than 200 essays, seven plays and numerous TV and movie scripts, including an uncredited rewrite on the 1959 classic *Ben-Hur*.

Always a strong and vocal critic of the Religious Right, Vidal succeeded Kurt Vonnegut as the American Humanist Association’s honorary president in 2009.

Vidal will also be remembered for his position in history as an unflinching voice for homosexuality. He left mainstream critics reeling with his novel *The City and The Pillar* in 1948, which centred on a young man coming to terms with his homosexuality. His portrayal of a gay protagonist who was well adjusted and not presented as the

typical symbolic warning about the defiance of social norms, was a boundary-breaking statement. The book caused a scandal, as critics railed against Vidal’s decision to present a balanced view of a lifestyle viewed as immoral and unnatural during the period.

Instead of shrinking from the critical venom, Vidal thrived on it, claiming that he aimed to shock. Nonetheless, for the best part of the next decade he was forced to write under pseudonyms, as he found himself blacklisted by publishers.

Eventually his popularity saw him writing under his own name again. He also wrote screenplays, including *Last Summer, Is Paris Burning* and *Suddenly*.

But throughout his career, Vidal sought to incorporate gay themes, but always rejected the terms of “homosexual” and “heterosexual” as inherently false, claiming that the vast majority of individuals had the potential to be pansexual. He revealed, while being interviewed as part of the documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, that he worked a gay subtext into the theatrically masculine screenplay for *Ben-Hur*, starring the icon of traditional masculinity, Charlton Heston.

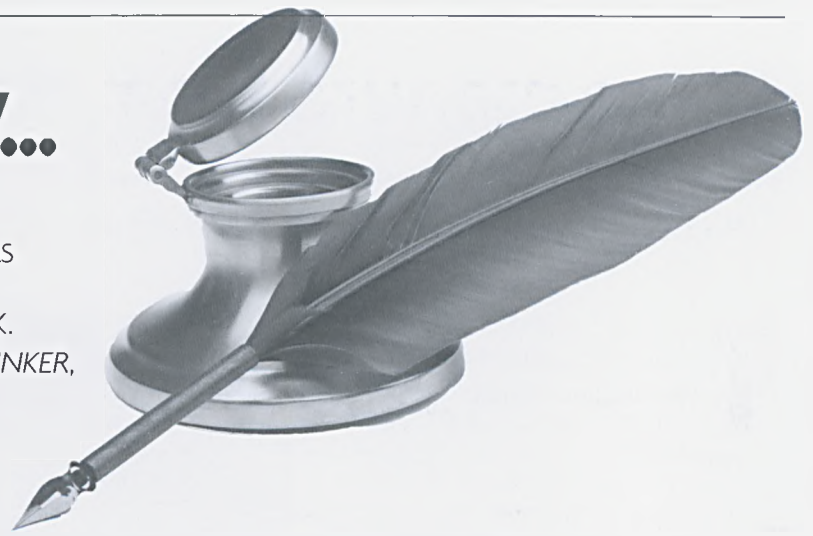
In 1969, he said: “Homosexuality is as natural as heterosexuality. Notice I use the word natural, not normal.”

Vidal described his style as “knowing who you are, what you want to say, and not giving a damn.”

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS LETTERS TO [BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK](mailto:barry@freethinker.co.uk).
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SPIRITUALITY

OUR esteemed editor's hackles rise at the word "spirituality". Perhaps my hackles are below par, but they only twitch a bit.

Of course the word is used to cover all sorts of nonsensical moonshine. But not always. A study of 1,600 American professors in the natural and social sciences found that over two thirds thought of themselves as "spiritual", while other research shows that far fewer academics than this say they are "religious".

Two surveys have found that of (American) people stating they were atheists, 20 to 25 percent also said they were spiritual. Paul Kurtz, for one, has long argued that moral and other virtues, and "spiritual" qualities, have nothing intrinsically to do with religion.

The fact is that like so many words describing human behaviour, "spiritual" is used with several different meanings. One is "religious" in a technical sense, as in Lords Spiritual and Temporal. A second is "not materialistic", concerned with things of higher value in some sense. A third refers to various sorts of ecstatic or transcendent experience, which may or may not be religious. A fourth is belief in, or felt awareness of, some kind of "super-reality" which is something most religions claim. A fifth is a conviction of the existence of a self or spirit or soul that can exist without a material body.

As far as I know there is no evidence to support the last two, but I think it is possible to believe in either without necessarily being religious in any specific sense, but this is arguable. And a sixth meaning is indeed the hotchpotch of vaguely mystical ideas and practices that raise the hackles of the more rational.

It seems to me that "spiritual" is one of those words and concepts that have been hijacked by the religious. "Moral" is another. It should mean simply the distinction between right and wrong, but is often taken as adherence to a religious dogma, particularly in respect of sex. And even "atheism" itself. Religious writers quite often claim that atheism is "a kind of religion".

It was a certain Reverend Rowland Hill who asked why the Devil should have all the good tunes. We might ask why God should have all the good words. "Spiritual" doesn't have to equate to nonsense.

For anyone interested, I have tried to take this discussion further in the *Transpersonal Psychology Review* ("Religion, spirituality and virtue", 2009, Vol 13 (2), 50-57).

John Radford
London

THE KINDEST CUT

AS I was circumcised in infancy, I have no memory of the minor procedure which was carried out under anaesthetic (unfortunately not using alcohol as in the traditional Jewish ceremony).

Not being forced to wait until I was an adult before having the operation, I thus avoided considerable pain and inconvenience – something over which friends who have been circumcised for medical or cosmetic reasons later in life have often expressed jealousy!

Whereas I am largely guided by the aesthetic in my championship of the circumcised penis, there is one practical consideration surely relevant to a seaside loving nation like the British: sand.

As a pacifist, it concerns me not that in recent conflicts in the Middle East, the largest number of non combat related hospital admissions of Western troops has been due to sand in the foreskin.

Parents will always control aspects of their children's lives and not always with the best outcomes. The compulsory consumption of certain types of vegetables can lead to a life time aversion to same – and I'll warrant that brassica related allergic reactions kill as many children (*pro rata*) as do the very few complications from infant male circumcision. But that's permissible parenting for you.

Of all the things for which I thank my parents, the greatest is my circumcised organ.

John Hein
Edinburgh

ATHEISM AND THEISM

OPHELIA Benson's "In Custody" (*Freethinker* August) is an example of why atheism remains just as debatable as theism.

Although neither the atheistic nor the theistic notion can be proved, Benson's column illustrates how the consequences of both are used for comparison.

Then there are the inconsistencies: atheists confuse theism with organised religion. Theists confuse atheism with humanism. Atheists and theists should agree on universal definitions prior to debating the merits of either conviction.

Living as an atheist or as a theist both have equally serious consequences. Some of these may be different, but some are identical. An atheist's virtues may be indistinguishable from those of a theist.

We both live in the same material world subject to the same undeniable facts. It is our interpretation of these facts that differs. Some theists reject religious dogma as an insult against God. Some theists' imagery is so unadulterated, they are almost atheistic. Some atheists are so ardent, they're almost religious.

Benson implies that theists believe in revelation. Many theists reject revelation as absurd, at best, and would describe a communicating deity as anthropomorphically compromised, or worse.

Benson appears to imply that the rejection of abortion, same-sex marriage or euthanasia is theistic in nature. That's a bit too convenient, isn't it? Do all atheists support abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia?

In the end it is about what liberties (from nature) we claim for ourselves, how divine we dare to become, as it were. But let's be careful: promiscuity demands responsibility, that is, the "ability to respond".

In other words, sooner or later, all of us have to deal with the inevitable consequences of our acts, either way.

Philippe A Hans
Lake Forest, Illinois
USA

Virgin gets wood ... and an audience

PAUL KARAFFA reflects on yet another outbreak of pareidolia lunacy

Let me paint a picture for you. A middle-aged mother takes a video of her young daughter playing an instrument for a school talent show. She sits in her seat, staring up at her child proudly. For the remainder of the audience, the sharp and minor accidentals tweak their ears, causing them to grimace with every mistaken note. This picture is common – a parent seemingly immune to the imperfections of their child. The parent registers the mistakes but only hears (or sees) what they want.

In early July, a tree caught the attention of some passers-by in West New York, NJ, who thought a section of the tree trunk resembled the Virgin Mary. Soon after, the tree had hundreds of people flocking to it. Many said they felt a mystical energy, others claimed they felt the Holy Spirit, and one individual said their fingers went completely numb.

Much like a parent observing a child, when religion is put into the mix nearly anything, even a knot in a piece of wood, becomes something other than the obvious. How else do you explain the holy grilled cheese sandwich and the Jesus imprinted pancake that sold for \$28,000 and \$15,000 on eBay, respectively? Hopefully religionists would agree that if God did exist, he would have better things to do than carpentry and indulging in the culinary arts.

The Catholic Church often comments on miracles and visions. In a statement, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of Newark said: "What has happened to this tree appears to be a natural phenomenon, rather than a miracle." Even with the Church seemingly putting this blasphemous tree in its place, the crowds have not stopped, and the alleged miraculous happenings have continued.

Other freakish images are less frequently reported, but it does happen – a parent sees the image of their dead child, or a lover an image of their beloved. The unifying aspect of all of these experiences is the acknowledgment of a supernatural power as the cause. Would the same credence be given to an image of Christopher Hitchens on a bar of soap or Frederick Nietzsche in a stain?

Arguing authenticity often supersedes all other arguments when discussing supposed miracles such as this, but the logical fallacy of linking a supposed miracle with God or, even more troubling, a specific god is seldom discussed.

Let's suppose a tree grew and displayed a perfect image of the Pope – perfection that



The NY Virgin Mary tree, festooned with floral tributes and tacky paraphernalia

can only have been achieved by a master carver. Let's suppose the image on the tree is legitimate. What logical reason does one have to link the image with God or the supernatural? If it grew on a tree then the cause of the image was, in fact, the tree.

With any cause and effect operation, there must be a relationship of necessity. Meaning, to show proof of a cause, there must be reason to rule out any other cause. If you were to place your foot on the gas pedal in your car, the vehicle would move. You would attribute the movement of the car to your foot on the pedal. One could rule out other possibilities easily (ie you are the only person in the car). However, a knot in a tree or a supposed image on a tree could have been caused by any number of reasons, the most likely of which is just an old branch that has previously fallen off.

But people see what they want to see.

For nearly 500 years the Catholic Church used the incorruptibility of a human body as reason to canonize a person into sainthood. In several instances bodies exhumed from the ground were found to have decomposed at a lesser rate. The bodies have been lathered with wax paint, covered in gaudy garments, and placed on display for tourist seasons. All of them sit in boxes specifically meant to preserve the bodies. But these bodies are far from incorruptible. Indeed, the word incorruptible means "to be without flaw" and, in this case, without decomposition. Unfortunately for the faithful, decomposition at a lesser rate does not mean the bodies are not decomposing; and

I wonder how the faithful would react if the Catholic Church was more forward about its embalming and preservation methods it performs to keep the supposed incorruptible bodies incorruptible.

The Church has since removed incorruptibility as a necessity for sainthood, as several not-so-saintly individuals have been found well preserved after death as well. It could also be assumed that the Church took notice of other remarkable bodily preservations recently discovered of people that were most certainly not Christian, such as the Tollund Man, a 2,000-year-old prehistoric man who was hanged in Denmark and later discovered, incredibly well preserved, in 1950.

Whatever the reasons, the faithful have continued to believe regardless of the fact that incorruptibility is no more than, as Karl Marx would have said, "the opium of the people" as they continue to believe what they want to believe.

It could be argued that holy grilled cheese, Jesus imprinted pancakes, saintly trees, decomposing bodies and other supposed miracles are harmless, and not worth arguing about; but people forget the power that lies in the use of symbols, images, and monuments. People of blind acceptance, who sees and hear what they think God wants, are easily swayed to do things they would otherwise never do. Think of all the atrocities that have followed this line of thinking.

If God is really bent on scratching messages into wood and other stuff, perhaps he should now consider going paperless like the rest of the progressive world.