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BBC's *Thought for the Day* 'review' retains ban on non-religious voices

Following a "review" last month the BBC's Head of Religion and Ethics, Aaqil Ahmed, decreed that *Thought for the Day*, part of the *Today* programme on Radio 4, will remain a "no-go" zone for those with non-religious viewpoints.

His decision reinforces the BBC's determination to continue what the National Secular Society has described as "the exclusive and discriminatory nature" of the morning "God-slot".

The NSS has been at odds with the BBC over *TFTD* for decades. It believes that the BBC devotes too much of its resources to the provision of religious propaganda, funded by the licence payer.

On its website, the NSS states "we argue that the amount of religious broadcasting is excessive" and points out that research has shown very few people either listen to or watch programmes with religious content.

It added: "We have long campaigned for Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* slot on Radio 4 to either be scrapped or be opened up to non-religious viewpoints. Contributors to *Thought for the Day* often make contentious remarks and claims, and even use it for lobbying during the passage of bills through Parliament.

"Only on this programme are such controversial views allowed to pass unchallenged. We argue that this contradicts everything that the BBC is supposed the stand for: fairness, balance, a voice for everyone in the country and for a wide range of views to be made available to all."

Following a meeting with the BBC Trust in early 2009 the NSS launched the latest in a series of formal complaints that date back to 1962. It hoped that its 2009 complaint, bolstered by "the many hundreds of complaints from our supporters and the general public may have finally convinced the BBC that this issue needed a rethink".

Unfortunately this wasn't to be the case. In November 2009 the BBC Trust rejected the NSS's complaint against *TFTD*.

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph* of September 9, Ahmed concluded that *TFTD* is intended to provide a "religious" perspec-



Aaqil Ahmed

tive on the news and should not be opened up to non-believers. He was quoted as saying: "We should always analyse whether we should continue with something and in the last year or two we've had some very detailed thoughts about this and we've decided to continue as was. People have complained, as they have the right to, and I have taken a view that, at this moment in time as far as I'm concerned, we stay as we do."

He added: "It is a specific slot within the *Today* programme which is a reflection from a religious perspective on stories of importance in the news."

Recent contributors to *TFTD* have included the Bishop of Norwich, the Rt Rev Graham James, discussing the Prime Minister's ministerial reshuffle.

Other religious leaders who have been on *TFTD* include the Rev Giles Fraser, the former canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, Akhandadhi Das, a Hindu theologian, and Prof Mona Siddiqui, a Muslim academic.

The *Telegraph* pointed out that, as *TFTD* is classed as a religious feature, it falls within Ahmed's remit even though it is part of the *Today* programme. Ahmed, the BBC's first Muslim head of religion, said it was "natural" that Christians should make up the majority of speakers on *TFTD*. "The state religion is still Christianity and the vast majority of people in this country come from a Christian background. I don't think it's unreasonable to suggest that in percentage terms you are probably going to have more Christians than you're going to have Jews or Hindus. I think that makes a lot of sense."

Ahmed, who was appointed to run the BBC's Religion and Ethics department three years ago having been religion commissioner at Channel 4, later took part in a discussion with other media executives called *Rethinking the God Slot*.

There he made it clear that he wants the corporation's religious programmes to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, including atheists. While he will retain traditional religious programmes such

(Continued on p4)

The struggle continues

BEING RESIGNED IS A RELIGIOUS, NOT A SECULAR VIRTUE, SAYS **OPHELIA BENSON**

There's been a lot of discussion – not to say wrangling – over issues of equality, especially between women and men, among atheists and freethinkers lately. One point of contention is the idea that there is and must be a forced choice between feminism as reform of habits and beliefs, and feminism as getting women to be strong and tough and indifferent to sexist insults.

The proponents of feminism-as-personal-toughness consider the more systematic branch of feminism a way of treating women as victims, and likely to ensure they will never rise above being victims. It's the old "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" idea translated into gender terms. It's reminiscent of what parents tell quarrelsome jealous children: "never mind what Alice/Jimmy is doing, you just focus on what *you're* doing." Never mind what the cul-



ture is telling you and everyone else about women, you just buckle down and work harder. It's usually good advice for children, but for adults dealing with stereotypes and roadblocks, it isn't.

One flaw in the notion is that it treats the two as mutually exclusive when they aren't. There's no need to force a choice between them. It's entirely possible to do both: to work like a demon, to overcome difficulties, to be tough and determined, and still pay attention to systemic social and cultural obstacles.

A more crucial point, though, is that personal muscle flexing is never enough to fix social problems. How could it be? If employers simply throw out all applications by women, it does no good for individuals to toughen up. Making the solution personal also functions to treat the status quo as a given instead of something we can choose to alter.

The potential for victimhood works both ways. It's not just a matter of noticing systemic problems and thus deciding you're a "victim." If you're convinced that your personal effort is all that's required and then social obstacles hold you back, you'll probably conclude that it's your own fault that you didn't do better. That's not a great way to build anyone's sense of agency and strength, any more than being too quick to assume the opposite.

And then there's the "I'm all right, Jack" aspect. If you decide that the social and the personal are completely at odds and one can't do both, then you turn ruthless selfishness into a principle. That's one way to go, but it's not a very attractive or admirable one.

It's one of the rewards of being human, engaging with the world and making it a little better in some way. It's true that cultivating personal strength and resilience is one

way to do that, but some self-cultivation is compatible with rabble-rousing, so let's by all means do both. Resignation is a religious virtue, after all, not a secular or freethinking one. The way things are is just the way they are at a particular moment, not for all time. No one is in charge of the way things are, so we all get to try to improve on it.

Still, there's no denying that the desire to make things better brings with it the possibility – the likelihood – of disappointment and frustration. It can be very tempting to decide to stop struggling, to give up impossible hopes and just be content with what's available. Desiring is what makes us suffer, the Buddha said; give up attachment and be tranquil. The Stoics urged the wisdom of recognizing what is external to us and out of our power, and concentrating on our own minds, which we *can* control.

It's the political vs the psychological, the effort to repair the world vs trying to adjust our attitude to it. I'm arguing that it's possible to combine the two, but that's not to say it's possible to get all the benefits of each. The more political you are, the more fretted you are by the gap between what could be and what is. The more psychological your focus is, the more you risk callous self-absorption.

It's easy to get just plain sick of being political, of battling human folly and bad temper. The hell with us, one often thinks, we deserve each other, I'm going back to poetry or cooking or – in the favourite trope of disgraced politicians – "more time with my family."

Fine. That's one option. It's not, however, a self-evidently *better* option than continuing the struggle. *La lutte continue*, as the old movement slogan has it. Our word "idiot" derives from a Greek word meaning "private" in the sense of non-political. To be non-political is idiotic, because it means putting up with things. If we don't engage with politics, others will do it instead. I'd rather continue to struggle.



OPHELIA BENSON

Picking fights with God

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Council of Ex-Muslims calls for support of Channel 4 over Islam documentary

THE Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain last month issued a statement in support of Tom Holland's controversial Channel 4 documentary *Islam: The Untold Story*. The statement read: "We are indignant to learn that due to threats made on Holland, Channel 4 has cancelled a repeat screening of the historical inquiry into the origins of Islam similar to the kind of inquiry that has been applied to other religions and histories in Britain for many years.

"The threats and concerted attempt to stigmatise the documentary and its producers by attacking its credibility and even legitimacy as a field of inquiry is nothing less than an attempt to impose a blasphemy taboo by stealth and coercion against programming that scrutinises Islam."

The statement added: "Caving in to the coercive pressure of Islamists will have catastrophic effects on free inquiry and expression where it pertains to Islam. It would not only further silence academic, historical and theological scrutiny of Islam but would also have the chilling effect of exerting added pressure on Muslims and ex-Muslims who wish to dissent from and question Islam."

CEMB spokesperson Maryam Namazie said: "Here's my question to Channel 4: what about the threats on our lives for being apostates, ex-Muslims, atheists, freethinkers, secularists, 21st century human beings? What part of our thoughts, lives, and bodies do you recommend we cancel to appease the Islamists?"

She added: "You may accept censorship and cowardly silence in the face of Islamist threats and intimidation but we cannot afford to do so. And we never will."

The CEMB urged the public to view the documentary, available on the Internet at (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dm8xKh8cQqU>) and write to Channel 4 and Ofcom calling for a repeat screening.

Islam, the Untold Story, which aired on Channel 4 in August, came close to suggesting that Mohammed may have been a mythical character.

Reviewing the programme for the *Telegraph*, James Walton wrote: "Presenter Tom Holland took the brave step of applying the West's own (admittedly more recent) traditions of scholarship and scepticism to Islam's origins. What he found was rather surprising. In the seventh century, the Arabs did indeed roar out of their desert peninsula and conquer half the world. But in those days



Historian Tom Holland and a depiction of Mohammed

were they Muslims at all? And if so, why didn't they, or anybody they conquered, mention the fact?"

He added: "Clearly these are uncomfortable questions – and for a while Holland kept asking them without providing an answer. Eventually, though, he forced himself to come clean. No, those world-conquering Arabs probably weren't Muslims. Only later did Islam appear, and possibly as a neat variation on the Roman use of religion to demonstrate God's approval of their empire. Moreover, Prophet Mohammed's life is a historical blank and for decades after his death, Mecca was a place of no special significance. Holland – who by now seemed to be involved in a game of How Far Can You Go? – did stop short of questioning whether Mohammed ever actually existed. But only just."

He added: "Throughout the programme, he [Holland] allowed an American Professor of Islamic Studies to champion the oral tradition against the arrogance of the Western 'intellectual elite'. Nonetheless, there was no doubting that in its quiet, somewhat earnest way, this was explosive stuff – and, for Channel 4, a welcome return to the fearlessness of its glory days.

The documentary triggered nearly 550 complaints to both the television regulator Ofcom and Channel 4 itself, and presenter Tom Holland, a historian with a double first from Cambridge, was subjected to a torrent

of abusive and physical threats.

He was accused of distorting the history of Islam by claiming the Koran makes little or no reference to the religious city of Mecca.

One Twitter user accused Holland of trying to destroy Islamic history while another called him a "fool" for suggesting Islam is a "made-up religion".

The Islamic Education and Research Academy published a lengthy paper denouncing the programme, but historians rallied to Holland's defence.

The Islamic Education and Research claimed that the programme's assertion that there are no historical records detailing the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad is flawed, saying: "Holland appears to have turned a blind eye to rich Islamic historical tradition."

Ofcom, which has received 150 complaints about the programme's alleged bias, inaccuracy and offence caused to Muslims, was said last month to be considering an investigation.

Holland said: "The origins of Islam are a legitimate subject of historical inquiry and this film is wholly in keeping with other series and programmes on Channel 4.

"We were of course aware that we were touching deeply-held sensitivities and went to every effort to ensure that the moral and civilisational power of Islam was acknowledged."



justplaincrazy

DOCTOR STRUCK OFF

A SYDNEY doctor, who is a member of the Exclusive Brethren Christian sect, has been banned from practising as a GP after he prescribed chemical castration to a young man who sought a “cure” for homosexuality.

Mark Christopher James Craddock, 75, wrote the 18-year-old patient a script for the anti-androgen therapy cyproterone acetate (Cyprostat) during a ten-minute consultation in his home in February 2008.

The patient, who cannot be named for legal reasons, was at the time a member of the Exclusive Brethren church.

In a letter of complaint to the Health Care Complaints Commission, the patient said when, at the age of 18 he came out as gay, a church leader told him: “There’s medication you can go on.” The New Zealand man added: “He recommended that I speak to Dr Craddock on the matter with a view to my being placed on medication to help me with my ‘problem’.

UNHOLY SMOKE

A PAKISTANI man, one of approximately 10,000 people participating in an anti-US rally organised in protest of the “blasphemous” film, *Innocence of the Muslims*, which ignited violent protests across the Middle East, died after inhaling smoke from flaming US flags.

Abdullah Ismail was taken to hospital after complaining that he felt unwell from the smoke, then snuffed it.

RACIST REPUBLICAN

REPUBLICAN Arthur Brouhard Robinson, campaigning to represent Oregon’s 4th Congressional District in Congress, is a Christian fundamentalist who wants young Americans to read all the works of 19th century British author, G A Henty. Henty’s books, according to one biographer, “are notable for their hearty imperialism, undisguised racism, and jingoistic patriotism”

Robinson owns a company that prints and sells hardcover editions of all 99 G A Henty’s novels.

In *By Sheer Pluck, a Tale of the Ashanti War*, Henty wrote: “The intelligence of an average negro is about equal to that of a European child of ten years old. A few, a very few, go beyond this, but these are exceptions ... They are absolutely without originality, absolutely without inventive power ... Left alone to their own devices they retrograde into a state little above their native savagery.”

Australian atheists applaud PM for withdrawing from a Christian Conference

SHOCK spread through Australia’s atheist community earlier this year when it was announced that Prime Minister Julia Gillard, a *non-believer*, was to be the keynote speaker at a convention later this year organised by the Australian Christian Lobby.

But, following homophobic remarks by Jim Wallace, head of the ACL, Gillard declared that she was pulling out of the convention, and in doing so earned praise from Atheist Foundation of Australia.

Wallace, in a speech that was reported worldwide, said smoking was healthier than the lifestyle that would be promoted by same-sex marriage. He made the claim in a debate on marriage equality with Greens leader Christine Milne at the University of Tasmania. Answering a question from a student, he said health statistics among the gay community were worse than those for smokers. “I think we’re going to owe smokers a big apology when the homosexual community’s own statistics for its health – which it presents when it wants more money for health – are that it has higher rates of drug-taking, of suicide, it has the life of a male reduced by up to 20 years.”

He added that legalising same-sex marriage in other countries had not reduced risk factors for gay people. “Where gay marriage has been introduced, or civil unions, it hasn’t changed the level of suicide.”

Senator Milne responded: “What I know is that the mental health issues for young gay people particularly are certainly increased when discrimination occurs, and Milne accused the ACL of homophobia, saying Christians should be more concerned with poverty than homosexuality.

She said with bills before the federal parliament and Tasmania’s lower house passing a same-sex marriage bill, change was inevitable. Wallace, on the other hand, accused the Greens of demonising churches with “hate language” and caring more for trees than children. He described gay activism as “bullying” and said a climate had been created for “legislation by fatigue”.



Jim Wallace

Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group spokesman Rodney Croome said in a statement: “Yes, there are health problems in parts of the gay and lesbian community, but they are caused by the prejudice of people like Mr Wallace and the discriminatory laws he defends. Mr Wallace’s offensive remarks show how desperate he has become, and

they effectively deal the Australian Christian Lobby out of the marriage equality debate.”

Mr Croome pointed out that ACL representatives had previously linked gay equality to Nazis, paedophiles and the stolen generations. “The quoting of irrelevant and biased studies to stigmatise gay Australians is a low and desperate tactic that diminishes Mr Wallace and his cause.”

In announcing her withdrawal from the convention, Gillard said: “To compare the health effects of smoking cigarettes with the many struggles gay and lesbian Australians endure in contemporary society is heartless and wrong.”

David Nicholls, President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia said: “The leader of our nation should not be supporting the American-style bigotry that emanates *ad nauseam* from Jim Wallace’s words, but instead, should be condemning them. The ‘smoking’ incident is but the tip of the iceberg regarding copious amounts of inanity and bigotry emanating from the ACL.”

He went on to say that “if it is good enough for the Christian Barack Obama to endorse same-sex marriage in the religiously bamboozled country of the USA then Ms Gillard, leading a more progressive and secular society, must now follow suit if she wishes to regain credibility. Fixing mistakes is far preferable than letting them unnecessarily fester.”

The AFA felt guardedly confident that this move by Gillard would result in greater recognition of the harm created by Church and State not being totally separated.

• **As we were going to press, the Australian Government voted to reject same-sex marriage.**

US Catholic Bishop convicted over child pornography cover-up

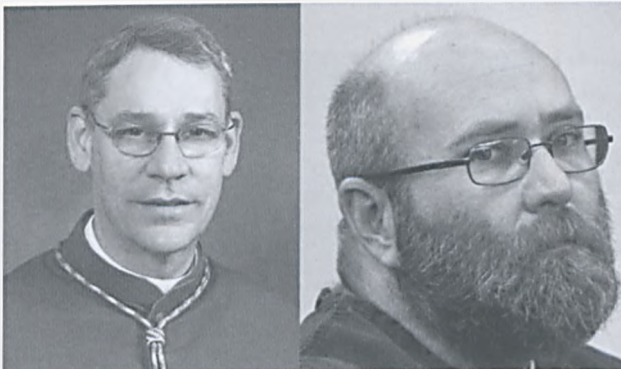
ROBERT FINN, 59, the Catholic Bishop who leads a large Kansas City diocese, was found guilty last month of failing to alert authorities to a hoard of child pornography found on a priest's computer. Finn

is the highest-ranking US clergyman to have been convicted in the Roman Catholic Church's seemingly endless child sex abuse scandal.

Finn was found guilty of one misdemeanor charge of failing to report Father Shawn Ratigan to authorities. Ratigan had earlier pleaded guilty to federal child pornography charges and admitted to taking lewd photographs of many young girls.

In handing Finn two years of probation and a suspended a sentence that could have amounted to one year in prison plus a \$1,000 fine, Jackson County Circuit Court Judge John Torrence said: "I hope this begins a new chapter in the book in this community and other communities and that, truly, children will no longer be subjected to this kind of treatment."

But a support group for victims of clergy abuse expressed anger at the "preferential treatment" they said was given to Finn. Barbara Dorris, outreach director for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) said: "Only jail time would have made a real difference here and deterred



Bishop Robert Finn, left, and Shawn Ratigan

future horrific cover-ups, anything less will not produce any meaningful reform."

The case was among a series of prosecutions and investigations of Catholic leaders around the country in the wake of the child sexual abuse scandal that has rocked the church in recent years. In July, Monsignor William Lynn was sentenced to up to six years in prison for covering up child sex abuse by priests in Philadelphia.

Finn and several other officials within the diocese became aware of the lewd photos taken by Ratigan in December 2010 when they were discovered on the priest's laptop computer as it was being repaired.

But even though Ratigan tried to commit suicide and in a suicide note he wrote of his regret for actions with children, Finn did not notify law enforcement, said Jackson

County Prosecutor Jean Peters Baker.

Instead, Finn sent Ratigan for a mental evaluation and then assigned him to an area mission house, ordering him to stay away from children.

But Ratigan ignored Finn's orders and continued to stalk children and create child pornography. Another diocese official finally reported the situation to police in May 2011.

Following Ratigan's arrest Finn made a statement to a meeting with other priests saying he had "wanted to save Ratigan's priesthood."

Further outrage was expressed in the US after Father Benedict Groeschel, a New York Catholic priest, blamed child victims of paedophile priests for their rapes

Groeschel made the controversial comment in an interview with the *National Catholic Register*. He said: "Suppose you have a man having a nervous breakdown, and a youngster comes after him. A lot of the cases, the youngster – 14, 16, 18 – is the seducer." He later issued the following apology: "I apologise for my comments. I did not intend to blame the victim. A priest (or anyone else) who abuses a minor is always wrong and is always responsible. My mind and my way of expressing myself are not as clear as they used to be. I have spent my life trying to help others the best that I could. I deeply regret any harm I have caused to anyone."

TFTD remains a 'no-go' zone for non-believers

as *Songs of Praise*, he will increasingly commission shows that deal with faith in broader contexts, such as *Dead Good Job*, an observance series about the work of undertakers across different religious communities and people with no faith. He told the *Telegraph*: "When we say 'rethinking the God slot', it is to say there's probably a lot more religion on TV than people realise." But it's no longer presented in an old-fashioned, full-on religious manner. Rather, "now you don't have to know that you're watching a specific programme about religion".

Ahmed, whose appointment in 2009 was criticised by some commentators because he is a Muslim, pledged earlier this year that *Songs of Praise* would remain a Christian

(Continued from p1)

programme and would not become a multi-faith affair.

Despite the disproportionate amount of broadcasting time Christianity gets in the UK, the day before the *TFTD* report was published, the *Telegraph* carried a column by Jenny McCartney who insisted that "British Christians must find a louder voice".

She observed that while Christians aren't actually being "persecuted" as so many – including her own newspaper – claim, "there is something curious and faintly unpleasant happening in Britain: Christianity seems tacitly understood to be the one faith that can safely be ridiculed or denied expression

in the workplace". She said: "The complexity of that situation has been highlighted by the four British Christians who last week took their cases to the European Court of Human Rights on the grounds that they have been discriminated against at work because of their religion."

She added: "The fabric that knits Christian beliefs into British institutions is fraying and weakening, something that has a fracturing effect on the believers' relationship with society. In some cases, the faith is being treated with the institutional contempt afforded a declining power."

And she concluded: "If Christianity doesn't learn to speak up, it will be slowly steamrollered."

Nun censured for supporting

PAUL KARAFFA examines a controversy that erupted over *Just Love*

On June 4, 2012, after months of feminist accusations from the Vatican about the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States, the Vatican proved that it is indeed possible to eat one's own face by taking another swipe at American nuns, condemning Sister Margaret A Farley, a former professor at Yale Divinity School, for her 2006 book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*.

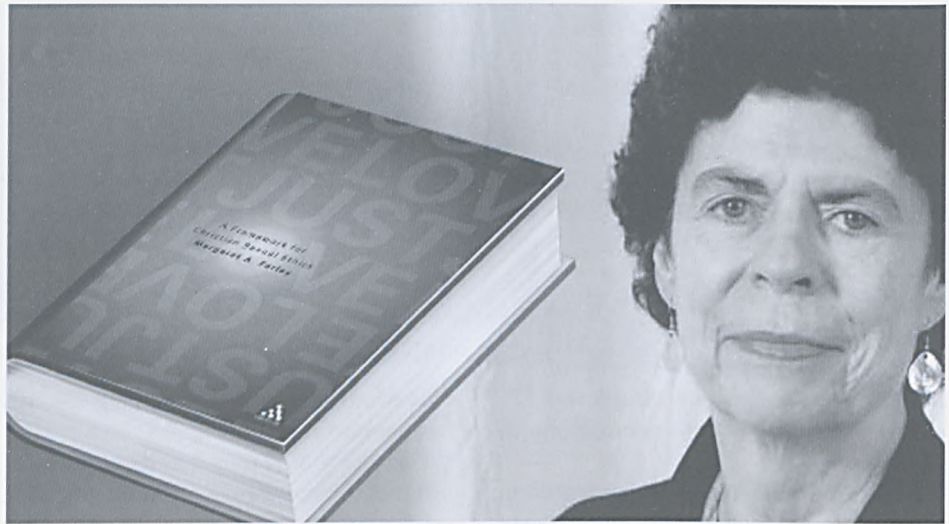
In response to the Vatican condemnation, Farley explained "the book offers 'contemporary interpretations' of justice and fairness in human sexual relations, moving away from a 'taboo morality' and drawing on 'present-day scientific, philosophical, theological, and biblical resources.'"

One must consider whether she was reprimanded for her ideas or for having the audacity to contradict Christian male superiority; as a Vatican panel plainly stated, "while 'investigation and questioning' by theologians are 'justified and even necessary' the final word on the 'authentic interpretation' of the Catholic faith ultimately belongs to bishops."

Still, *Just Love*, largely a liberal interpretation of sexuality, contradicts several key positions of the Catholic Church concerning masturbation, homosexuality, and divorce. Farley received praise for her book and won the Grawemeyer Award for Religion from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 2008.

The contemporary atheist, or at least humanist, would applaud the emphasis Farley places on scientific and philosophical resources, clearly weighting them greater than those of the theological or even biblical persuasion. Her interpretations are, then, not so religious.

The Vatican has proposed taking complete control of the LCWR that represents most of the 57,000 nuns in the United States. In early August 2012, the LCWR met to craft a formal response to the Vatican. Sister Pat Farrell, a 65-year old nun, who has spent the majority of her life aiding the poor in Latin America, leads the organization. Farrell spent several years in Chile under the dictator Augusto Pinochet, and later in El Salvador during their Civil War in the 1980s advocating civil rights, organizing people, and uniting "Salvadorians who were loyal to



Sister Margaret A Farley, and the book that so upset the Vatican

the many factions within the rebel movement". As a social justice advocate, she was asked to lead the LCWR in 2008.

The Vatican, trying to reign in those who would take a more secular approach to church teachings, does not approve of the their organizational goals, claiming they are focused too much on social justice causes, leaving one to question why "social justice causes" are not a decent focus for these individuals.

The Catholic Church, though contrary to a large portion of the Western world, is staying honest to what it believes and preaches by combating both of these women; and it raises a big question: Why would anyone align with a religion so contrary to his or her own moral compass? Or, simply put: Why are Farley and Farrell Christian's in the first place?

The contradiction between personal belief and doctrine is widespread in religion; and the mental gymnastics believers are willing to go through to justify their actions with religious doctrine can be quite remarkable. For many, personal differences are considered minor when it comes to heavy drinking, tattoos, and contraception; but for others, personal differences are not so minor.

In 2000, the *Journal of Human Sexuality* published the article "Today's Alternative Marriage Styles: The Case of Swingers", which took a critical look at religious couples that were voluntarily participating in extramarital sexual activities, frequently with individuals of the same sex. Their find-

ings concluded what many previous studies had assumed: swingers were evenly split politically and were "the white, middle-class, middle-aged, church-going segment of the population". Christian swingers justify it biblically by referencing King David who had a number of wives and several concubines, which was never claimed sinful.

The Gay Christian Network (yes, you read it correctly), along with many other similar organizations, promotes the idea that the Bible does, and Christianity should, promote and support homosexuality. They justify this interpretation by claiming homosexuality, as referred to in the Bible, is a misinterpretation from antiquity.

Though supporting homosexuality and swingers may be favorable for these interest groups, the fact that these individuals would rather reinterpret doctrine than cleave themselves from it is quite disturbing.

One might wonder why another would choose to maintain the mangled non-functional religious characteristics of their existence. Young children and teenagers tend to emulate their parents, capturing the traits and opinions their parents claim are the most essential for their continued existence. Emulation often continues for the rest of their lives.

For many, to break with religion is to betray how they have traditionally perceived themselves as well as to cleave the position they have established within their community; that link starts young, and is often very strong. Dr. Richard Dawkins discusses

ing women and homosexuals

st Love, a book written by US Catholic nun, Sister Margaret A Farley

this link in his book *The God Delusion*: “At Christmas-time one year my daily newspaper, the *Independent*, was looking for a seasonal image and found a heart-warming ecumenical one at a school nativity play. The Three Wise Men were played by, as the caption glowingly said, Shadbreet (a Sikh), Musharaff (a Muslim) and Adele (a Christian), all aged four. Charming? Heart-warming? No, it is not, it is neither; it is grotesque. How could any decent person think it right to label four-year-old children with the cosmic and theological opinions of their parents?”

Establishing that link young has been the mission and duty of Christian parents for centuries, and it has been the catalyst for irreparable damage causing numerous cases of psychological destructiveness, such as depression and suicide; and has necessitated organizations such as Recovering from Religion to help ex-Christians rebuild their lives.

Turning one's back on their traditional



Sister Pat Farrell

identity could be the most difficult event of one's life. It would be accurate to assume that establishing a new role model could alleviate stressors. Imagine if Mother Teresa had found the courage to voice her disbelief

— how might her actions have influenced the masses? Farley and Farrell, then, are in a great position to influence future generations of believers and non-believers by rejecting, or at least combating, Christian doctrine, more specifically Catholic doctrine, which seems poised to smother the voices of women and homosexuals everywhere, and to destroy the act of free inquiry outside the forum of the clergy.

By speaking up and making a change in their personal lives, Farley and Farrell have the opportunity to make a real difference not just with their words but also with their actions. Will they now seize the moment, gathering support for women's rights, gay rights, and prehensile rights, or will they follow the strings of the puppet master? Hopefully, they will take the road less traveled with a ruler in hand; and give others the courage, to remove the torture device staring down at them condemningly during their bedroom sexcapades.

Muslims riot over 'blasphemous' American film

FOLLOWING days of violent protests last month over a film about the Prophet Mohammed, Saudi Arabia's highest religious authority denounced attacks on diplomats and embassies across the Middle East as “un-Islamic”.

The US Ambassador to Libya and three other embassy staff were killed by protesters angry about the “blasphemous” US film, entitled *The Innocence of the Muslims*.

Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al al-Sheikh, the Saudi grand mufti, condemned the attacks while urging governments and international bodies to criminalise insults against prophets.

He described the short film as “miserable” and “criminal” but said attacks on diplomats and other innocent people were “a distortion of the Islamic religion and are not accepted by God.”

Fifty-two-year-old Chris Stevens, the US Ambassador in Libya, died of smoke inhalation while trying to evacuate staff from the US consulate in Benghazi after protesters stormed the compound and killed Sean Smith, a foreign service information man-

agement officer.

US President Barack Obama condemned the attack, ordering increased security at US diplomatic posts around the world.

The assault followed a protest in neighbouring Egypt where around 2,000 demonstrators scaled the walls of the US embassy before ripping down and burning the American flag and replacing it with a banner associated with ultra-conservative Islam.

The attacks were in protest at the release of a 14-minute long trailer for the film that ridicules Mohammed, and depicts him as a fraudulent womaniser who demanded massacres. It was made by 56-year-old filmmaker Sam Bacille, who identifies himself as an Israeli Jew. In an interview he said: “Islam is a cancer, period”.

Bacille is now reported to be in hiding, fearing for his life.

What began in Cairo as a small protest against the film mushroomed into a full-scale international crisis, with anti-Western violence spreading to countries such as Sudan, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Malaysia.

Many mainstream Muslim organisations

worldwide have condemned the violence, saying that while the film was unacceptable, the response might ultimately do more harm to Islam.

Al-Qaida, in contrast, went public with an attempt to commandeer the outpouring of anger over the film, calling on its followers to stage more attacks that would expel American embassies from Muslim soil.

A statement posted on a website used by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula called on Muslims to “follow the example of Omar al-Mukhtar's descendants [Libyans], who killed the American ambassador”.

“Let the step of kicking out the embassies be a step towards liberating Muslim countries from the American hegemony,” the Yemen-based group said.

Al-Qaida went on to encourage Muslims living in the West to be involved in the struggle, saying that they had an extra duty to be involved in attacks because of their access to Western targets.

“They are more capable of doing harm and reaching the enemy is easier for them,” the group said in a statement.

The Imperviousness of the Religious

RALPH JONES examines the irrational manner in which Christians react to tragedy

Exactly what would it take in order to instill doubt into the devout? The bemusing paradox we observe on a regular basis is that, in the wake of horrific tragedies, rather than God's presence being questioned, it is customary for believers to feel their faith not only affirmed but strengthened.

The recent "Batman shootings" in Aurora, Colorado, provided a glimpse into this unfortunate phenomenon. Several survivors, including those who were seriously injured, invoked God when relating their survival stories.

Said one: "Why would you think such a tragedy would make me question the goodness of God? If anything, both of my girls said it made Him a much more real presence to them". Read that again: a heartless massacre in a cinema, in which 12 people were killed and 58 injured, caused God to become a much more real presence in the survivor's life.

The mother goes on to say that she and her daughters were "praising God and resting in His Goodness" and that "God is always good". What does all of this even mean? What would this survivor say to the relatives of those who were actually killed? In order to be consistent she would need to believe that God had chosen to spare one life but sacrifice another; she could not argue that it was out of his omnipotent control.

Paradoxically she would, presumably, also need to assume that the Heaven to which some of the dead would have gone is a better place than the world we currently inhabit. Which person then has God chosen to "spare"?

A more consistent ideology would be one that said that, because Heaven is supposed to be so much more glorious than the real world, God was merciful for allowing victims to die, rather than live. This then begs all sorts of questions, none of which the believer is capable of answering.

The religious cannot have it both ways, and yet so frequently believe that they can. What we are looking at here is blind faith; the refusal to ask

mature questions and the blissful contentment of the ignorant.

Passing over to another Aurora survivor, we saw that her recovery – after being shot in the head and three times in the arm – was described by her pastor as "nothing short of a miracle"; in other words, a miracle. This claim raises more questions than it answers: why did God, in mercifully deciding to spare the girl's life, decide to inflict upon her horrific pain and probable health implications later in life?

If God can be invoked as capable of preventing an injury altogether, what was he doing in this case? Did he change his mind? Did he heed the prayers of the faithful? If so, how were those prayers any different to the equally fervent prayers of other believers? If the girl had died, one can rest assured that the faithful would have interpreted this as proof that God put an end to the suffering by allowing her life to end.

For the religious, God comes up trumps in all of these situations – in other words, there is absolutely no conceivable way in which faith like this could attribute blame to God, or call into question the existence of God. If an evil individual had been shot in Aurora this would have been pounced upon as being God's way of ensuring the individual was swiftly sent to Hell; if the wicked individual had survived we would be told that God "works in mysterious ways" and that he has a plan for all of us.

What could possibly call this "plan" into question more seriously? How is light ever supposed to penetrate this darkness?

Of course, the Aurora shootings were no different to any other serious tragedy in that they permitted us a glimpse into the deranged minds of America's Christian community, members of whom crawled out of the woodwork to have their say: Jerry Newcombe, spokesman for an evangelical group called Truth In Action, proclaimed that the Christian victims would be going to Heaven, and those who rejected Jesus Christ to "a terrible place"; Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee blamed the massacre on America having "ordered God out of our schools, and communities".

It ought to be plain for all to see that this is opportunism in its most abject form: associating with religion a tragedy that had no religious link whatsoever, in order to conscript and frighten more of the naïve. It ought to be equally plain to infer that religious authority figures would happily attribute a particularly positive news story to the goodness of God, choosing in that case to believe that in fact we haven't entirely ordered God out of our lives.

There seems never to have been an appropriately mature response to this idea of suffering; never have the religious risen above the "God works in mysterious ways" riposte. Often Christian apologists will simply dismiss the argument as if it has already been confidently trounced by theologians centuries ago. It has not. The problem of suffering – the idea that God is perfectly able to create a blissful, suffering-free world after we die but certainly not while we live – is an issue that needs to continue to seriously worry the religious.

As Richard Dawkins writes, believers seem to seriously misunderstand what it means to "explain" something. You have explained absolutely nothing if, when the existence of your deity is called into question because of painfully obvious flaws in his "plan", you simply affirm the existence of this deity. Then you claim that – contrary to the numerous biblical examples



A victim of the Aurora cinema shooting



James Holmes, 24, accused of the Aurora shoots, pictured during a court appearance. Early in August defence lawyers claimed that he was mentally ill. His lawyers argued that they need more time and information from prosecutors to fully assess Holmes' condition.

in which his will was very obvious for humans to understand – now he is being obtuse, teasing us with ambiguous signals that may be causing spectacular levels of distress but that will probably level out fine in the end.

To be convinced by an argument like this is to be convinced by the babblings of a childish conspiracy founded on nothing other than wishful thinking. Never would we be convinced by this level of argument in any other discipline; there is no reason to treat religion any differently.

As Christopher Hitchens said, “The eschatological element is inseparable from Christianity”: if you do not sincerely believe that there is going to come a time when the deserving are lifted skywards and rewarded with eternal life in the hereafter, you are not really a Christian. The entire foundation of the Christian faith rests on the idea that the gruesome suffering of one man was necessary for the redemption of the human species.

Would you be able to take seriously a mother who said that she wished her innocent children to have perished during a terrible tragedy? This, surely, is what a Christian mother must believe if she wholeheartedly accepts the doctrine of Heaven: in order for the snatching of an innocent child's life to have any justification, the reward must significantly outweigh the punishment. If this were so, why are mothers so happy upon being learning that their child is alive, or upon discovering them in the rubble of say the aftermath

of an earthquake? Should they not be distraught that God has in one sense rejected them from his eternal kingdom? Should they not be worried that, the longer their child lives, the higher the likelihood that they will depart from God's path and be sent to Hell?

Once again, religion raises an obscene number of unresolved – and unresolvable – questions that need absolutely no answer when one is mature enough to appreciate just how mercilessly indifferent the natural world is. Religion often gives one the impression of existing only in order to be a rather strenuous mental workout, forcing its adherents to grapple with an infinite series of pointless questions.

The problem the religious lay upon themselves in times of great tragedy is a riddle that needs no solving. A tiny child dies as the result of a horrific tsunami: this child can have done no serious wrong, so God must have allowed her life to be ended because he has a far greater reward in store. A tiny child does not die as the result of a horrific tsunami: ah, now God is merciful; and though the reward of a glorious Heaven would have been worth the agony of death, he thinks her time would be better served on this Earth as a survivor (however extensive her injuries may have been).

This, it should be plain for all to see, is an argument lacking in any sort of basic logic. By contrast, the atheistic world-view is brutally simple: nature is indifferent to who survives and who dies as a result of terrible disasters, and thus we see no pat-

tern concerning the numbers of innocent dead and guilty dead. There is no arbitrator, no referee, and there doesn't need to be one as soon as you have come to terms with two realisations: one, that we live on a planet susceptible to constant changes, adaptation and evolution; and two, that there will always be deranged individuals who indiscriminately kill groups of people.

The Jesus narrative is so warmly embraced by Christians because to them it does indeed make sense of the suffering we endure in our lifetime, the message being ‘Because Christ suffered, we must too’.

What then of the suffering endured before Christ's lifetime? How do the religious explain that? Just as they would struggle to explain how society functioned well enough before the introduction of the Ten Commandments, this is an issue that cannot be dealt with convincingly from a religious perspective. The spiral, as you will plainly see, continues *ad infinitum*.

A human sacrifice – even if we take Christians on their word and assume that this was Christ's function on earth – changes absolutely nothing about the ever-present concept of human suffering. The biblical example of Job illustrates that God is apparently perfectly able to inflict suffering even on a pious believer with absolutely no justification whatsoever; once granted this, it is easy to see why the religious do not really consider the idea of suffering as inflicting direct damage upon their belief. They have already proved themselves capable of believing things that would simply be inconceivable to an atheist.

C S Lewis called suffering God's “megaphone”. I would argue that it can often be a microscope and, indeed, perhaps a megaphone; but not, of course, of God's making. A microscope because it can provide a valuable glimpse into the details of a problem that may have been hitherto misunderstood or neglected; a megaphone because of the ability for news of the suffering to rapidly spread and for others to come running.

In no sense, however, is it God's megaphone. It illustrates perfectly his absence, the extent to which there is neither rhyme nor reason to the universe. Do good people die for absolutely no reason, the way in which we would expect them to in a godless universe? Yes.

Do bad people live full and happy lives, the way we would expect them to in a godless universe? Yes. Suffering merely illustrates that down here we are alone, and that we need to grow up and find solutions entirely by our selves. Religion insists we do no such thing, and should therefore be pushed aside and recognised for what it is: dangerous nonsense.

In defence of Pontius Pilate

JAMES P McBride argues that the Roman governor deserves a better place in history

Little is known of Pontius Pilate, much maligned fifth governor of Judea who ordered the crucifixion of Jesus. A stone discovered at Caesarea in 1961 bears his name as “prefect” ie governor, during the years 26-36 CE, under Emperor Tiberius. Of the Equestrian rank, he was likely born in the Abruzzi region of Italy. On the other hand, an unsubstantiated rumor maintains he was born in Fortingall, Scotland. According to Apocryphal accounts, he died, in political disfavor, by suicide circa 38 CE.

A good case can be made from the Gospel accounts that he masterminded a hoax crucifixion. Whereas the chief priests and the council clamored for Jesus’ death, Pilate resisted. As magistrate, he found no evidence against Jesus to justify punishment, execution or otherwise. Moreover, his wife described Jesus as a “righteous man”; she beseeched her husband not to harm him. Clearly Pilate favored Jesus’ side of the case. Ultimately, after a momentous three days, Jesus emerged to walk away from Jerusalem under his own power. What happened? Here is how it could have went down.

Pilate must have been a talented political operative to win the assignment to govern Judea, a particularly unfriendly tributary nation located a great distance from Rome. Others probably vied for the position. Deals were cut, promises exchanged, family connections exploited, perhaps even financial negotiations transacted. Those were the every day *realpolitik* forces in operation within Roman imperial government. As a result Pilate wound up governor of Judea. We can be pretty sure Pilate, a man of consequence, knew how to play the political game. He could hold his own in the corridors of power.

The chief priests and the Council sought to eliminate the uniquely charismatic Jesus, yet their case against him was not clearly articulated: “Now the chief priests and the whole council sought testimony against Jesus to put him to death; but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, and their witness did not agree” – Mark 14:55-56, Revised Standard Version.

The chief priests may have considered him a threat to institutional authority. Or an imposter rabbi. Or, perhaps they preferred a fighting messiah to mobilize Jews to go to war against Rome, but Jesus was a man of peace. Their obscure agenda does not re-



ally matter here. What is important for this discussion is how Pilate very well may have outmaneuvered them.

Pilate’s wife demanded that Pilate spare Jesus: “Besides, while he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, have nothing to do with that righteous man, for I have suffered much over him today in a dream” – Matt 27:19.

Pilate likewise determined Jesus innocent of any crime or other reason to be punished.

Pilate said to them, “Then what shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ? They all said, ‘Let him be crucified. And he said, Why, what evil has he done? But they shouted all the more, ‘Let him be crucified’” – Matt 27:22-24.

Strident denunciation of Jesus from the high priests was not lightly to be brushed aside. On the other hand, neither was Pilate’s fair-minded “not guilty” judgment at the hearing, nor his wife’s heartfelt entreaty that Jesus be left strictly alone. There were issues of potential public disorder, as well as usurpation of Pilate’s sole execution authority. To break the impasse, Pilate may have put into practice his skill as a practical decision-maker.

Pilate went through the motions of crucifixion but quietly arranged behind the scenes with Joseph of Arimathea, and perhaps also with the centurion, to save Jesus from death on the cross. We know from history that public crucifixion caused a slow, suffering death. The shocking cruelty deterred crime, of course, but also manifested the inexorable power of the rulers. But the process could be interrupted.

The cross had a slanted step for the heels of the victim’s feet. A man could support his body on the step so his weight would not hang suspended from nails in his hands. There is no evidence in the Gospels that Jesus’ feet were nailed to the cross. If they had

been, he would not have been walking three days later. History records that sometimes victims’ legs were fastened to the cross with rope. Evidently ropes was used on all three of the Golgotha condemned. Even with ropes around their ankles, however, the steps would have been of no avail after their legs were broken. The legs of the men on either side of Jesus were broken, but not his.

Matthew described Jesus’ supposed death in conclusionary abstract language, “yield up his spirit” (Matt 27:50). Did Jesus stop breathing? There is no factual report of it. Did his bladder void? Again, no report. Did his heels slip off the step? Evidently not. A soldier jabbed Jesus in the side with a lance to see if he was still alive. “At once there came out blood and water.” (John 19:34). Generally blood does not flow from a body after the heart has stopped beating. Jesus was probably unconscious, but not dead.

Jesus’ co-religionist Joseph of Arimathea, went to Pilate ostensibly for permission to remove Jesus’ body. Matthew is the only Gospel writer to report that Pilate first confirmed Jesus’ death with a report from a centurion, supposedly a perceptive witness. One wonders how Matthew, the only writer to mention it, was privy to a private conversation between the centurion and Pilate about Jesus’ condition. Without corroboration, one is inclined to reject the conversation as a fabrication, or perhaps even view it as additional evidence of the hoax. The centurion could just as well have reported compliance with Pilate’s directions that Jesus not be killed. Joseph of Arimathea would have been in on the scheme from the beginning.

Matthew reports that Pilate allowed the high priests to post a guard at the tomb to make sure Jesus’ followers did not steal the body and spread a false story he had risen (Matt 27:63-66). The problem with that report is that the high priests would have had no concern about the disposition of Jesus’ lifeless body. His preaching had come to an end. Jesus’ adherents could say whatever they wished about resurrection. Without a live Jesus, resurrection would have been nothing more than an unfounded rumor of no significance. The Gospel account of a guard detail against removal of the body appears to have been invented after Jesus was long gone.

The high priests and council would have been well enough satisfied if Jesus left Jerusalem, never to return, and abandon his identity as the self-described “Christ”,

namely, God's anointed one (Mark 15:61-62). Those developments would have resolved their concerns. If they later learned Pilate had scammed them, what could they do about it? Nothing. Their prosecution of Jesus turned out to be a success, notwithstanding his survival.

Pilate placated all persons concerned with a slick smoke and mirrors show worthy of a Cicero or Caesar. What is perhaps most important on a personal level, as married men will understand, Pilate remained in good standing with his wife who had been dreaming about Jesus.

Jesus got the message. After three days' of the best treatment devoted followers could provide, he recovered sufficiently from the trauma on the cross and walked on his own

away from Jerusalem. Along the way he visited with persons who may not have recognized him in a debilitated condition. He insisted they touch him to prove he was very much alive.

"But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have'" (Luke 24:37-39).

Nothing more appears in the annals of history of the man who was the starting point of Western Civilization and remains even today a guiding light for many of the world's people, whether they know it or not.

In summary, it is clear from the Gospel ac-

counts while those on the scene may have been amazed that Jesus rose from death, in fact, he never died in the first place, thanks to Pilate's win-win scheme. Jesus' core teaching went on ultimately to become the cornerstone of Western civilization and remains valid today. In fact, the power of his teaching may be enhanced by disconnecting it from the scientifically dubious resurrection tale.

Pontius Pilate, a savvy Roman governor, deserves a better place in the eyes of history. He probably saved Jesus. He was not a wishy-washy weak bureaucrat. Rather, he was tough-minded enough to concoct and pull off a complicated scheme to appease the conflicting interests.

Congratulations to you, Governor Pontius Pilate!

Soul Man: De la Mettrie's great step forward and how we betrayed it

For the non-believer, these are heady times: public debates, best selling books, and a dizzying growth in both numbers and public presence all seem to suggest that history is swinging in a generally anti-clerical direction. It is astounding, but remember we've been in this position before. In the middle of the 18th century religion was on the run. A thin, perpetually ailing notary's son named Voltaire was, pamphlet by pamphlet, making bishops tremble, and his words found their way into the ears of the era's greatest monarchs and statesmen.

One hundred years later, it was all gone, replaced by a religious reordering of society and public life so pervasive that we are still battling with its ideals today. What happened and, more importantly, is there a way to prevent it happening again? I can think of no better way to investigate the mystery than to start with the career and ideas of Julien Offray de la Mettrie (1709-1751), a French doctor and author whose arguments against the existence of the soul have been all but forgotten, wiped out in the great 19th century religious revival and the adjustment of tactics by the philosophical community that followed.

La Mettrie, to those who know him at all, is remembered largely as a clownish figure at Frederick the Great's court whom neither Frederick nor Voltaire took seriously and who ended up dying early at the hands of bad paté. This is decidedly unjust. His early contributions to the so-called Doctor's Pamphlet War, in which he argued passionately for anatomical experience and accurate case

by Dale DeBakcsy



Julien Offray de la Mettrie

studies over Galenic metaphysical speculation, were important in the advancement of French medicine in the 18th century. More than that, his 1748 work *Man, A Machine*, in the unflinching boldness with which it approached the most sacred of topics, man's possession of an immaterial soul, is possibly even more breath-taking today than it was in his own time.

La Mettrie's line of reasoning stemmed from his strict training in Hippocratic medical observation under the 18th century's most renowned physician, Herman Boerhaave. Against the reigning Cartesian soul-body dualism, which relied on thought experiments and logical extrapolations, La Mettrie compiled case studies and personal observations of his time as a physician to note the wide range of effects that purely physical ailments had on behavior and memory, two aspects of humans under the

supposed purview of the soul. Injury, disease, an alteration of diet, fatigue, intoxication — introduce any one of these severely enough, and the flavor of one's character starts inevitably to change. But if memory, behavior, and character are all so tied to the physical, what does that leave for a soul to actually do? La Mettrie concluded: "The soul is therefore but an empty word, of which no one has any idea, and which an enlightened man should only use to signify the part in us that thinks".

It took some time for La Mettrie's initial charge forward to be joined by the philosophic community, but within two decades after his death a united front had been formed. In 1764 Voltaire declared in his *Philosophical Dictionary* that the nature of the soul was not now, nor could it ever be, known. Baron d'Holbach followed suit in *The System of Nature* (1770) that "Man is a being purely physical: the moral man is nothing more than this physical being considered under a certain point of view." That same year Denis Diderot pulled himself away from the publishing of the *Encyclopedia* for long enough to write the essay *On Matter and Movement*, which furthered the materialist program by examining how matter could have force in and of itself, without being guided by outside spirits.

Interesting ideas all, but what the devil happened to them? The story of the snuffing of the French Revolution, and with it the fevered return to that odd amalgam of Mysticism and Normalcy that would have

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Gay champions of secularism

DIESEL BALAAM, Treasure of the Pink Triangle Trust, chronicles more than 30 years of organised gay humanist activity in the UK

I was surprised to note that the *Freethinker* hasn't marked the passing, effectively, of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA), at least in its current form, which has been such a power-house in the British atheist and secular humanist movements for over 30 years. Earlier this year, after consulting the membership, its steering committee took the decision to incorporate the organisation within the BHA, in order to benefit from the BHA's administrative resources.

Originally set up in 1979 as the Gay Humanist Group, partly in response to Mary Whitehouse's successful prosecution of *Gay News* for publishing Richard Kirkup's "blasphemous" poem *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name*, the group became a real powerhouse, not just for the advancement of gay equality (a very distant dream in 1979, which became even more distant during the Thatcher era), but also for a much broader secular and humanist agenda.

It was also a conduit for bringing many people into the movement, myself included, and it warmly welcomed heterosexual supporters too.

An exceptionally fertile seedbed for atheism, it has steadily provided leaders and foot soldiers for the NSS and BHA, magazine editors and contributors, campaigners and freethought radicals, all of whom have invigorated the wider secular movement.

Changing its name to the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA) in 1985, in an attempt to appeal to more women, the group became a major force in the gay rights battle in the UK and was a prominent and tenacious player in what proved to be a long, but ultimately successful, end game, most of it fought in the teeth of religious opposition.

For many, in its 1980s and 1990s heyday, GALHA provided as much camaraderie as it did political focus. For those of us who joined, young and fresh-faced, it played a crucial role in shaping our outlook and in educating us about wider secular concerns. I was in total awe of the redoubtable atheists and humanists I met then and I remain so to this day. Enduring friendships were forged. Even the occasional romance, or enmity, blossomed.

The social side of GALHA was always one of its biggest attractions. The convivial

weekend gatherings, held once a year in various towns and cities – alternating between north and south – had an educative role (we would occasionally hold seminars, or visit local places of interest to secular humanists, or conduct the business of the AGM while we were there), but more importantly, they were a chance to gossip, socialise and party. As you can imagine, a gathering of two or three dozen gay men – and occasionally, gay women, too – could be quite eventful, and at times, hilarious.

GALHA was always present at Gay Pride events and its programme of talks and debates in the Conway Hall library, by guest-speaker historians, film-makers, politicians and so on, were always informative and worth attending. The annual dinners or lunches featured guest speakers as varied as Claire Rayner, David Starkey and Stephen Fry. There were lighter moments too. The memory of former NSS president, Dan O'Hara, in full drag and seated at the piano playing *Don't Put Your Daughter On The Stage Mrs Worthington* will stay with me forever.

So many contributed to GALHA's success, but, in particular, mention must be made of George Broadhead and his partner, Roy Saich, two of the group's five "founding fathers" who worked tirelessly, with huge reserves of charm and diplomacy, to co-ordinate such a full and varied programme of events.

I am so glad that they have been able to "tie the knot" in a civil partnership, something for which they had played a small but significant part in making possible.

George also edited the group's magazine for many years, before Andy Armitage took over, steering the magazine to new heights.

In 1992, the Pink Triangle Trust was set up by GALHA as its independent charitable arm. Its charity status provided certain fund-raising advantages, in line with Charity Commission rules, which, at that time, disallowed organisations with a focus on political campaigning, but could accommodate groups with an educational purpose.

In so doing, the PTT was able to fund specific GALHA projects and it also took on responsibility for publishing its magazine, the *Gay & Lesbian Humanist*. This arrangement worked well for more than ten years.

But times change and we must change with them. The last decade saw most of

GALHA's domestic gay agenda fulfilled, while tensions between freethinker members and a more recent influx of those with extraneous political and career agendas led to a loss of united purpose and direction.

When *Gay & Lesbian Humanist* magazine robustly criticised aspects of Islam and immigration policy in the October 2005 issue, a concerted campaign by left-wing committee members and their allies in Ken Livingstone's mayoral administration led to a panicked decision to meekly acquiesce and close it down (several of us quit GALHA in protest at this point).

Andy Armitage was summarily dismissed in November and a short-lived, politically correct replacement eventually folded after half a dozen issues.

Emboldened by their closure of the *Gay & Lesbian Humanist*, the same faction then persuaded the committee to try and take direct control of the funds held by GALHA's charitable arm, the PTT. This was ill-advised, a legal and constitutional non-starter, partly because the PTT had been set up as a separate and wholly independent entity, and partly because Charity Commission rules require the assent of the trustees who can only release funds for specific educative purposes, or hand over its funds to another charity with a similar remit. GALHA duly went on to seek charitable status, as a prelude to the hoped for acquisition of funds held by the PTT.

Things came to a head in 2009, when the moderators of GALHA's online discussion forum allowed factually incorrect and defamatory insinuations about the PTT charity's trustees to be posted, then remain on the forum, for almost three months after their removal had been formally requested.

Only when a barrister confirmed the posting was defamatory and legal action threatened, were the comments removed. This diversion, regrettably, led to further unpleasantness, and friendships, sometimes of 30 years' standing, were ruptured as a result. The PTT and GALHA parted company and went their separate ways.

In recent years, GALHA also struggled to fill its full quota of committee members, not helped by several high profile resignations and the ongoing fall-out from the defamation issue, while its attempt to achieve charity status was finally turned down by the

Charity Commission in early 2012. Having run out of steam and seemingly unable to administer its own affairs, it was decided its future lay in absorption into the BHA.

The Pink Triangle Trust, meanwhile, continues as a fully independent gay humanist charity, which, in addition to funding educational initiatives like LGBT history month and helping to fund humanist schools in Africa, now publishes a lively on-line magazine called *The Pink Humanist*, available at www.thepinkhumanist.com. We are indebted to *Freethinker* editor, Barry Duke, for recently taking on the role of editor.

This means that three of the five origi-

nal “founding fathers” of the Gay Humanist Group are now involved in some way with the Pink Triangle Trust. So too, is Andy Armitage.

The PTT remains true to its educational remit, as well as the uncompromising free-thought ideals of the original Gay Humanist Group, and – in recognition of what has been achieved in terms of gay equality in the UK – is now largely focused on the international gay rights agenda, with close links to campaigners like Leo Igwe in Nigeria and Nikolai Alekseev in Russia.

It also markets its magazine as an LGBT magazine for all atheists, humanists, sciep-

tics and freethinkers (AHSF), rather than an AHSF magazine aimed purely at the gay community.

So, GALHA will continue as part of the wider humanist “establishment” and the PTT will continue as Britain’s only gay humanist charity, committed to its original educational remit and closely allied to the wider movement. Thanks to GHG/GALHA, we have all come a long way since 1979, and – after several years of difficulty, now hopefully behind us – gay humanists and freethinkers once more have a solid base on which to rise to the new challenges and ambitions that lie ahead.

its half-century under the sun as Victorianism and its regional offshoots, is a common enough one. The Revolution had touted its Enlightenment bona fides so vigorously that the fall of Robespierre could not but bring the fall of the philosophical school held to be responsible for his rise. Skepticism of the La Mettriean mould was dropped because it was guilty by association, not because of a fundamental incompatibility with the coming Romanticism. You don’t need to look farther than the late works of Beethoven to see what Might Have Been had the fusion of Enlightenment and Romanticism not been weighed down by the specter of the guillotine.

There is hope in this for us, because it means that as long as we can resist the urge to go about beheading monarchs and invading Austria, I think we’ll be okay when it comes to forming meaningful connections with whatever neo-irrationalism might rise in the coming years.

What has me more worried, honestly, is us. The real reason that La Mettrie and the other courageous innovators of his time were buried was not because he was incompatible with what succeeded him, but rather because of how the skeptical community adjusted to its waning popularity. We panicked, and to some extent, we still are. In the face of a rising tide of opposition, we saw that, to survive, an alteration of tactics was necessary.

Three roads lead out from the Enlightenment, two of which terminated in dead-ends, and one of which we continue to follow today. To oversimplify a bit, these were the paths of Nostalgia, Engagement, and Caution.

Those that took the Path of Nostalgia recognized the advances of the Enlightenment, but felt the need to dilute them through a return to previous eras of thought. Thus Ludwig Feuerbach, certainly not one to flinch in the face of religion, wrote *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830) to debunk the existence of an afterlife, but involved himself in ever more improbable metaphysical calisthenics to keep the immaterial soul. Similarly, in 1844, in the *Supplement to the Fourth Book*

De la Mettrie

of his World as Will and Representation, Arthur Schopenhauer made the very La Mettriean claim that humans are animals, and that all of our individuality is wrapped up in our particular material body, but feels compelled to add that, underneath all of that mere individuality there is a basic force that operates on the species level that survives us and perpetuates everything important about us.

HE was merry, a good devil, a good doctor, and a very bad author. By not reading his books, one can be very content.

– Frederick the Great, witing of De La Mettrie in a confidential letter to the Markgräfin von Bayreuth

Schopenhauer’s point is actually interesting, because he is always *just* on the cusp of anticipating Darwin and even Dawkins with their focus on species and genetic level survival pressures, but inevitably pulls back again into the snugly embrace of Kantian metaphysics. Though interesting from an intellectual history point of view, the metaphysical strands were not convincing to the skeptics, and the skeptical strands scared those with memories of the Revolution, and the effort crumbled under the weight of its own improbability.

Those opting for engagement, meanwhile, such as Max Stirner or Mikhail Bakunin, were largely isolated individuals of the mid-19th century who were genuine materialists, but whose adoption of radical political creeds brought their pure philosophical speculations into disrepute. By harnessing their thoughts about the soul to credos of anarchism or extreme individualism, they

made sure that those thoughts did not survive the heyday of those credos, so all of their very real boldness went for naught, and few today point to them as their philosophical ancestors.

This leaves us with The Cautious, whose descendents we all are. Rather than attempting to continue the fight on multiple fronts, as the skeptics of the Enlightenment had done, these men decided to pare the war down to the battles we could win, and for which there existed some degree of public sympathy. The battle against the political abuses and moral turpitude of the established Church could stay, but that against the soul had to go.

It is as if somehow we all tacitly agreed that, since people seem to really like the idea of having a soul, we would leave that alone in order to carry on the struggle to liberate people from the greater evils that stem from belief in a monotheistic god or organized church. After all, it’s a victimless belief, we convinced ourselves, like Santa Claus or the Chicago Cubs. Except that, when you believe that you have something immaterial that directs you, it is only natural to believe that that essence can continue without your body, and from there it is but a short step to talking yourself into a divine curator of your immaterial essence, and once you believe that, the game is largely up.

It is not a popular line of argument – it’s far more practical to just keep doing what we’ve been doing, from Nietzsche to Ingersoll to Hitchens, and talk about Popes and Scopes, slave morality and birth control, but that is to attack the branches and not the root. The philosophes were braver men than us in many respects, but their united efforts were weakened by the politicization of their beliefs and the pragmatism of their philosophical descendents. We learned from their experience strategies that will allow Enlightenment 2.0 a greater longevity than our first go at it those centuries ago, but we have to make sure that, in our caution and our keen sense of history, we do not leave behind more than we carry forward.

points of view...



A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS LETTERS TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.
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CHURCH OF ENGLAND'S PURSUIT OF MONEY

THE Church of England is determined to pursue many mainly elderly people, whose houses are sited near historic churches, into bankruptcy and homelessness (*Freethinker* September).

The Rev Michelle Massey, some of whose parishioners are victims, described the scheme to force these people to pay for the upkeep of a church as "vicious". When a local vicar is so damning of the actions of her own church and says so publicly some notable iniquity must be happening. And this

scheme, in the wealthy Church's pursuit of money, is beyond contempt.

Mainly elderly people, regardless of whether or not they are Christians, are threatened and their lives are already being made miserable by anxiety. It is a heartless piece of work, devoid of principle, morality and, that lauded Christian virtue, charity. But where could they look for those who might influence the negating of this archaic law? There are some who could offer support and help.

The Queen is not just a Christian but Head of the Church of England. As head of her Church she could make her views

strongly known about her concern for those victims? We hear from her admirers about her great service to the nation. Here is an opportunity to demonstrate concern at least a small way in this most deserving of causes.

What about the bishops? They have much to say about issues such as assisted dying, women bishops, gay lifestyles and same sex marriages. And 26 of these bishops are unelected members of the House of Lords and with opinions and legislative influence on subjects which are none of their business.

This issue is very much their business. So much so that as the leaders of the C. of E they are complicit in these plans to persecute these elderly people.

As they sit in their palaces, fill in their House of Lords expenses claims and pontificate to the rest of us can they spare some time to help these despairing victims of their Church?

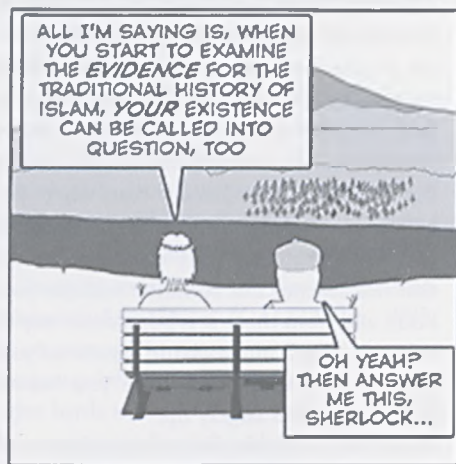
We have the Prime Minister, another Christian, and devout members of his government. They are ready enough to support faith schools and oversee tax privileges for the C of E. Should they not be taking action to prevent this abomination which may lead to "swathes of village bankruptcies or repossessions"?

And what about the soon to depart Archbishop of Canterbury who has been widely praised as a good man? What does he intend to do? Or is the Rev Michelle Massey, a local vicar, the only one within the ranks with the courage to protest?

Perhaps the Queen with her many homes, the bishops in their palaces and the government ministers in their chauffeured limousines are too cosseted and too out of touch to imagine the agony of worry which is now being visited on these elderly people. Or could it be that for all their claimed faith and concern they really just don't care?

Denis Watkins
Wales

Jesus & Mo



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SPIRITUALITY

AFTER comprehensively trashing “spirituality” in August’s *Freethinker*, in the September issue Barry Duke, its esteemed editor, surprisingly employed it, unquoted, when reporting (on page 4) the launch in the US of Secular Women by referring to “surveys that typically characterise women as more spiritual than men”.

The difficulty of defining spirituality – Professor Radford’s *Point of View* (September) listed six meanings – reflects that of defining religion itself. More profound than simply a comforting belief system, the most credible explanation, in my opinion, for this universal psychological phenomena is by Julian Jaynes in his remarkable book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*.

It seems that religiosity could be an expression of the linguistic left hemisphere of the brain attributing mystical feelings and yearning for transcendence to a supernatural heaven, a numinous magisteria, and communication with a god that the speechless right hemisphere instinctively senses should be accessible, but frustratingly isn’t.

According to Jaynes, in the past this sky-high *mysterium tremendum* was accessed by trance-inducing – personally with big-eyed idols or collectively in god-houses.

Modern religions, with their ornate buildings for collective god-worship, colourful statuary, and prayer rituals, are clearly vestiges of this ancient mentality from which peoples and cultures are still evolving.

Arguably the less people believe in religion, or the less “spiritual”, the more neurologically advanced they are. (Stats show they are also the better educated and more intelligent.)

Interestingly, comparative rates of progress, country to country, are reported in September’s issue on page 5: “The world has more atheists – and the numbers are increasing”. Whoopee! for that.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

CIRCUMCISION

AFTER reading John Hein’s letter (*Points of View*, September), I immediately set out to test the veracity of his statement 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”.

Interestingly, it was on the *Freethinker* website that I found that there is no evidence whatsoever for Hein’s assertion, and that this “sand under the foreskin” story is pure myth – and one that stretches back decades.

The *Freethinker* report (August 6, 2012)

pointed out that during and after World War Two, a very common reason for circumcising in Australia and New Zealand was: “He might have to fight in the desert. He could get an infection under his foreskin and have to be circumcised then. Better to do it now.”

The *Freethinker* post added: “Some pro-circumcisionists have gone so far as to claim that men of the Germans’ Afrika Korps were circumcised for the same reason.

“Not many members survive, but one living person is in a good position to know: Manfred Rommel, 84, the son of Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel, ‘the Desert Fox’.

“He was 14 in October 1944 when his father was forced to take poison for plotting against Hitler. The retired German politician has been in touch with his father’s former troops throughout his life, and in 2002 wrote from his home in Stuttgart: ‘I have never heard that soldiers of the Africa Corps were circumcised. The veterans I could contact have not either.’”

And in an article entitled *The Riddle of the Sands: Circumcision, History, and Myth* published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* in July, 2005, Robert Darby wrote: “None of the ancient cultures which practised circumcision have traditionally claimed that the ritual was introduced as a sanitary measure. African tribes, Arabs, Jews, Moslems, and Australian Aboriginals explain it different ways, but divine command, tribal identification, social role, family obligation, respect for ancestors, and promotion of self control figure prominently.”

He added: “Jewish authorities make no mention of hygiene, let alone sand, but place stress on the religious significance of circumcision: it is an outward sign of the Covenant between God and his people. The Kaguru of central Tanzania explain circumcision (practised at puberty on both boys and girls) in terms of enhancing gender differentiation and social control. They consider the uncircumcised penis unclean because its moistness makes men resemble women, whose wet and regularly bleeding genitals are considered polluting.”

Vince Adams
Kent

JOHN Hein (*Points of View*, September) is right that being uncircumcised is a health hazard for men so brainwashed by sex-hating religion that they refuse to wash their penises. That is no justification for the civilized world to allow person A to impose non-consensual child mutilation on person B.

In the same issue, Philippe Hans asks whether all atheists support abortion, same-sex marriage and euthanasia. That is a misleading question. What atheists do support is every individual’s right to choose whether to conform to other people’s beliefs on such

issues.

Finally, your article in the September issue, “The world has more atheists”, is ambiguous. It reads: “23 percent think of themselves as not religious and 13 percent think of themselves as convinced atheists.”

That could be interpreted to mean that the 13 percent are part of the 23 percent. It should have been worded, “13 percent think of themselves as convinced atheists, and a further 23 percent think of themselves as not religious, in conformity with Ronald Aronson’s *Living Without God*, finding that 36 percent of Americans are non-theists, while an additional 32 percent oppose state enforcement of a religion.

William Harwood
Canada

DEATH WITH DIGNITY

AS passionate believer in free choice, particularly with regard to end-of-life decisions, I would like to draw readers’ attention to the launch in Europe this summer of *In Search of Gentle Death: The Fight for Your Right to Die With Dignity*, written by By Richard N Côté.

The book’s launch took place at the 2012 Congress of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies in Zürich in June. The Federation is the international coordinating group for 37 death-with-dignity organisations in 23 countries.

This is the first time that Côté’s book has become available in Europe. In it, Côté describes how the international death-with-dignity movement evolved so rapidly and why its views are now embraced by 75 percent of well-educated adults who live in countries not ruled by political, military, or religious dictators.

The author visited four continents to gather first-hand information about this powerful and controversial subject. The book is based on over 100 interviews with physicians, nurses, scholars, death-with-dignity activists, and numerous people who themselves were facing terminally illness or enduring unspeakable, untreatable pain. It focuses on empowering the dying – and those who care for them – through education about advance medical directives to ensure that their medical preferences for treatment – or the refusal of treatment – are honoured.

Côté is doing excellent work in the battle to get legislation passed that will help people in many countries to achieve dignified deaths, and I heartily recommend his book, published by Corinthian Books and available from Amazon for \$29.95.

Phil Smith
Valencia
Spain

Israelis push for an end to military service or ultra-Orthodox Jews

Because so many religious scholars perished in the Holocaust, Israel decided in 1948 that students at *yeshivas* (religious colleges), should be exempt from military service in order to revive this fundamental part of Jewish culture. Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, waived military service for 400 students. By 2011, this number had escalated to estimated 37,000 ultra-Orthodox men *yeshivas* and are not taking part in military service.



Fleeing their responsibilities: Young ultra Orthodox Jews in Israel are bitterly opposed to military conscription, which they regard as interfering with their religious studies.

This, according to a BBC Radio 4 programme last month, has led to growing resentment among mainstream Jews, who are demanding that these students be forced to share the military burden. demands from other Israelis for them to share the military burden, and earlier this year Israel's Supreme Court ruled that exemptions on the basis of religious study were unconstitutional.

The *Crossing Continents* programme revealed that the Haredim, as the ultra-Orthodox are often known in Israel, are Israel's fastest growing Jewish population and currently account for about ten percent of the country's population. Large families with eight to ten children are not uncommon – and by the 2030s, demographers believe one in five Israelis will be Haredi.

The programme interviewed one young yeshiva student, identified only as Ron, who said that he had asked for an exemption from military service, “but the army rejected that, and no-one is telling me why”.

He added: “I just never thought of the army as an option, and I've always concentrated on my studies in the yeshiva. Many people say the military is going to have to come into people's homes and force people to go into the army. Or maybe some kind of civil war is going to start, because they are not going to agree to it.”

Crossing Continents interviewed another student at a *yeshiva* in the west Jerusalem suburb of Bayit VeGan, who said: “We are continuing the way of the Bible. The Jewish way, to be Jewish – this isn't just about genes or a nation, it's a religion. And the reason we are in Israel is because of the Jewish religion. Our right to live in Israel is because we are

felt. Thousands have attended demonstrations organised by an organisation called Common Ground. Its Chairman Boaz Nof says every Israeli citizen should serve the country, whether in military or civil service.

Ofri Hod is not ultra-Orthodox. She has just turned 18 and is about to start her military service – and she is angry, insisting that these “refuseniks” are “doing nothing for the state.”

She told the programme: “We agree that those who are the future rabbis of the ultra-Orthodox community – perhaps 1,000 or 1,500 – can get an exemption. But the majority must serve.”

She includes Israeli Arabs, and ultra-Orthodox women too. “Why not? Secular women serve. You need to decide if you are part of this game and part of what's going on in this country. The Supreme Court ruled the exemptions are not equal and not constitutional, and that there should be no discrimination between my blood and someone else's.”

“Me and my friends are going to the army and we're risking our lives. We could die. You see ultra-Orthodox people saying they're not joining the army because they are protecting Israel through prayer. It's very frustrating.”

This sense of unfairness is raising questions about what it means to be an Israeli.

“I don't see those ultra-Orthodox as Israeli as me, because they are doing nothing for the state,” Ofri Hod said.

But retired Brigadier General Meir Elran of the Institute for National Security Studies, sees obstacles to integrating all ultra-Orthodox recruits in the army if the exemptions end – not least because of strict religious rules about the separation of men and women.

For example, ultra-Orthodox men would not be able to listen across the communications system if a woman radio operator was speaking. Also, their education is not standard. “Regular Israelis learn maths, English ... universal skills.

“The guys who come from the ultra-Orthodox community don't. They have very specific skills, not necessarily in line with military needs.”

Jews. So what secular people should respect, and understand, is that what we are doing when we study in the *yeshiva* is giving us all a right to be here.”

In other words, learning and piety are as essential to Israel as knowing how to handle a gun, the programme emphasised – and Yitzhak Pindrus, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, agrees. He represents the ultra-Orthodox community, about a third of the city's population.

Although Pindrus did military service himself, he is vehemently opposed to the compulsory draft being extended to ultra-Orthodox Jews. He says those who want to force the community into the army are trying to undermine their position in Israel.

Currently the political wind is behind the deputy mayor, a member of United Torah Judaism, one of the ultra-Orthodox parties that make up Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

But Israeli politics, the programme pointed out, “is a complicated coalition dance. In July the centrist Kadima Party walked out of the government after the Prime Minister refused to support a proposal to limit the number of *yeshiva* students exempted from military service to 1,500 a year.”

Now Netanyahu needs to keep his other political partners on side, and so far he has succeeded by making no firm policy in response to the Supreme Court decision.

But this is not an issue that will go away. The Israelis campaigning for an end to what they see as special treatment for ultra-Orthodox Jews are making their presence