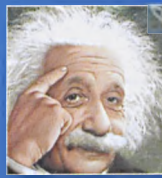




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National Trust bows to pressure and removes creationist propaganda from Giants' Causeway exhibition

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The Northern Ireland evangelical umbrella group, the Caleb Foundation, that succeeded in persuading the National Trust to include creationist propaganda in an exhibit at the new £18.5million Giant's Causeway Visitor Centre, has tried to put a positive spin on the NT's decision to revise the information provided at the exhibit.

The National Trust, as we reported in August, was roundly condemned for the inclusion of the creationists' view that the world is a mere 6,000 years old, and it was subsequently forced to review that part of the exhibit.

In a statement issued last month, the NT said: "Upon opening, one small piece of interpretation section evoked a wide and mixed response. As a result, on July 18, the conservation charity committed to undertake a review of this particular section, and it announced last month: "Having taken on board a wide range of feedback, and commissioned interpretive specialists to develop a suitable reflective piece, the National Trust has now amended the existing exhibit.

"A new piece of audio, approximately 20 seconds in length, replaces the previous recording and makes the Trust's views completely clear."

Graham Thompson, Project Director for the Giant's Causeway, said: "This change will help clear up any misunderstanding there may have been.

"The National Trust only endorses the scientific explanation of the origins of the stones yet recognises that others have alternative

beliefs. The National Trust is content that this review is complete and thank all for their feedback on the matter."

The Caleb Foundation responded with a statement of its own, saying "When the new Visitor Centre at the Giant's Causeway was opened in July 2012, Caleb congratulated the National Trust on the inclusion of an audio exhibit which acknowledged both the legitimacy of the creationist position on the origins of the unique Causeway stones and the ongoing debate around this.

"We were disappointed when the Trust decided to review the previously agreed wording in that exhibit as a result of pressure. We are also disappointed that the outcome of the review has led to a revision of the wording, but we are very pleased that the exhibit has not been removed, as demanded by some.

"Although we do not accept that all the scientific evidence points to a 60 million year time span, we note that the revised exhibit still retains an acknowledgement of the existence of an alternative viewpoint. The National Trust has therefore set a precedent for others to follow".

The reworded exhibit now states: "All the scientific evidence points to a volcanic origin for the columns of the Giant's Causeway, around 60 million years ago. However, not everyone agrees with the scientific view. There are some people who believe – often for religious reasons – that the earth was formed more recently: thousands

(Continued on p4)

Giles Fraser and the 'liberal mindset'

OPHELIA BENSON IDENTIFIES YET ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF COCK-EYED RELIGIOUS THINKING

It was in the news a few days ago that Germany is preparing a new law to protect the "right" of parents to circumcise their male infants. This is in response to a judge's ruling in Cologne in June that the child's right to bodily integrity is violated by non-medical circumcision.

The wording of the reports on the new law emphasised the putative right of parents to circumcise while the infant's right not to be circumcised was relegated to the final paragraph. *The National Post* (Canada), for instance, put it this way:

The Justice Ministry has now issued the outlines of the new legislation that will protect a family's right to circumcise their child, provided they have been fully informed about the procedure and use the "most effective pain relief possible".

Completion and approval of the new law, which gives any family the right to have their child circumcised, regardless of

religion, may be just weeks away. Some lawmakers are pressing for a vote of conscience freed from party discipline.

The opposing right was not mentioned until the end of the article.

Granted, the whole question is complicated by issues around immigration, xenophobia and especially the Holocaust, but even so, one would think – especially once the issue had been decisively raised by the judge's ruling – that the infant's right to remain physically intact would get more attention.

Of course the judge's ruling in June was greeted with outrage by religious conservatives and what the *Guardian* predictably called "Jewish and Muslim leaders" and "representatives of the two religious communities". Less of course, at least I would have thought, was the startlingly callous reaction of the Anglican priest and former canon chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, Giles Fraser. In his "Loose Canon" column in the *Guardian*, he wrote that:

The circumcision of babies cuts against one of the basic assumptions of the liberal mindset. Informed consent lies at the heart of choice and choice lies at the heart of the liberal society. Without informed consent, circumcision is regarded as a form of violence and a violation of the fundamental rights of the child. Which is why I regard the liberal mindset as a diminished form of the moral imagination. There is more to right and wrong than mere choice.

I'm reliably and perhaps stupidly surprised when Fraser writes things like that, I suppose, because I expect a former lecturer in philosophy at Oxford to have a liberal mindset himself, or at least to be fair to the point of view he's criticising.

Of course there's more to right and wrong than mere choice, but who thinks otherwise? Fraser implies with that rather crudely written paragraph that "the liberal mindset" does, but that's absurd. Thinking that informed consent and choice are important doesn't entail thinking they're all that's important.

He is at any rate clearly disagreeing with the idea that circumcision of infants is a form of violence and a violation of the fundamental rights of the child, but without spelling out exactly why. Instead he says

the liberal mindset is inadequate, but that's a different claim. It's very difficult to figure out exactly how infant circumcision could help being a form of violence and a violation of the fundamental rights of the child. There's no need to make a fetish of choice to think that. It's a permanent alteration of a part of the body – a highly valued part, at that – for a religious or ritual or "community" reason, done in infancy when informed consent is impossible.

Fraser makes no attempt to explain why circumcision must be done to infants instead of leaving it until they are old enough to decide for themselves. Perhaps it's because he thinks they shouldn't be able to make the choice. If so he should have had the courage and honesty to say so explicitly.

What he does instead is tell a story about himself and his son and circumcision, starting with the fact that he himself was circumcised and that his father was Jewish and his mother was not.

Years later, when my wife objected to the circumcision of our new son on the grounds that it was cruel and unnecessary, I reluctantly gave way. Intellectually, I knew that there was little left of "being Jewish" to protect. After all, my wife was not Jewish and I had become a Christian priest. Halachically, it made no sense.

It's pretty chilling if he's representing his own thinking accurately. His wife objected to the cruelty and he gave way reluctantly? So he was reluctant to spare his infant son the pain of circumcision? He explains that it seemed like an abandonment of Jewish identity and giving Hitler a posthumous victory, which is comprehensible, but he doesn't explain if or why or how that trumps the concern about cruelty, much less why it was his right to choose for his son rather than his son's right to choose for himself.

It's a familiar but depressing example of religious thinking simply failing to address the real, secular, human-based issues.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

the freethinker

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Seller of Einstein's atheism letter hopes it will prompt a critical examination of religion in US politics

LAST month a letter written in 1954 by Albert Einstein was sold on eBay for a staggering \$3,000,100.00. Einstein hand wrote the letter in German to Jewish philosopher Eric B Gutkind on January 3, 1954 as a response to Gutkind's book *Choose Life: The Biblical Call to Revolt* (1952, H. Schuman; 1st edition). In the letter the theoretical physicist who developed the general theory of relativity, made it clear to the recipient that he was an atheist.

For example, he wrote: "For me the Jewish religion like all other religions is an incarnation of the most childish superstitions."

When the letter was first put up for auction on eBay, Eric Gazin, President of Auction Cause, the agency managing the sale, told Hannah Gal, of the *Huffington Post*: "The current owner was amazed to find out in 2008 that this letter, known only to Einstein scholars, had been purchased a year after Einstein's death, and had been vaulted away from public consciousness for well over a half century.

"During this US Presidential election year, the current owner wishes to promote an open discussion on the role organised religion continues to exert in modern politics and its promulgation of tribalism on societies around the world."

This was the second time the letter has been auctioned in four years. When it was offered by Bloomsbury Auctions in 2008 it had an estimate of just £8,000. But a bidding frenzy resulted in one anonymous person eventually paying £170,000.

Among the unsuccessful bidders then was Professor Richard Dawkins, who told Hannah Gal that Throughout his life Einstein freely used the term 'god' but it was more of a 'poetic metaphor' ... he was fond of quoting 'god' ... in rather irresponsible fashion, although to be fair in turn to Einstein, he couldn't have anticipated the extent of today's dishonest quote-mining ... The letter confirms that Einstein was an atheist."

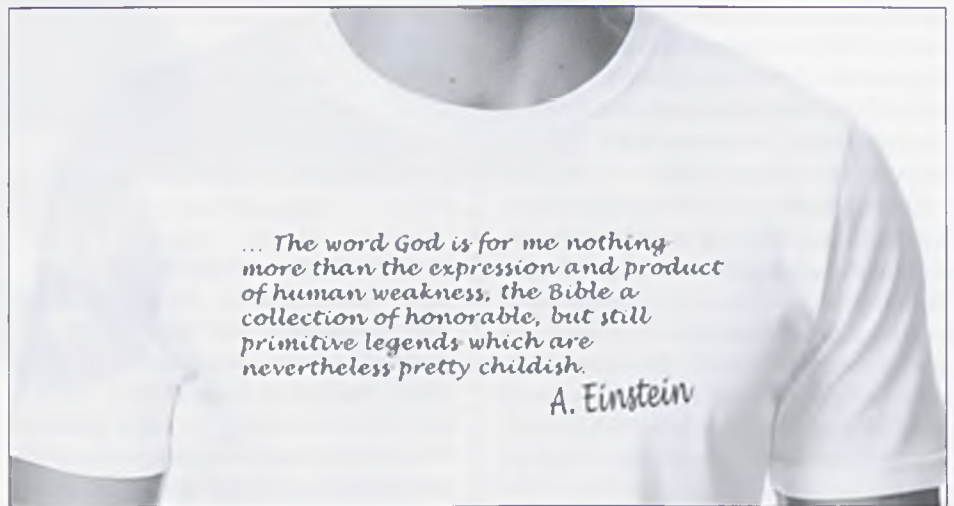
In her article, Hannah Gal wrote: "I am astounded at this great man's ability to impact the 2012 US elections; unlike the UK, US election candidates' religious beliefs are a deal breaker for many voters. Even with the freshly reported significant rise in the number of openly declared US atheists, this

remains a burning issue on the US political agenda.

"It remains to be seen to what extent the current letter owner's wish for 'an open discussion on the role organised religion continues to exert in modern politics' will come true", and concluded: "Science doesn't have all the answers but it brings balance, tried and tested knowledge and beauty to life. Let this be the God letter's legacy."

Meanwhile, an enterprising eBay trader seized on the "God letter" to bring Einstein's atheism to a wider world with a T-shirt bearing an extract from the letter, which reads:

"The word of God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weakness, the Bible is a collection of honorable but still primitive legends which are nevertheless pretty childish."



OIC drops its demand for an international blasphemy law

THE SECRETARY General of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation announced last month that the OIC had abandoned plans to introduce a global blasphemy law through the United Nations.

Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu said his 57-nation body would not try again for UN support to ban insults to religion. Western opposition – particularly from the USA and Europe – made the prospect of success very remote, he said.

"We could not convince them," said the Turkish head of the organisation that had tried from 1998 until 2011 to get a UN-backed ban on blasphemy. "The European countries don't vote with us, the United States doesn't vote with us," he said.

Western countries see the publication of such images and materials regrettable but a matter of free speech. The campaign for a worldwide ban on "religious defamation" was revived after the posting of the *Innocence of Muslims* video on YouTube.

Twenty-five people have been killed during protests over the video.

Ihsanoglu told a conference in Istanbul that the OIC had failed to win a ban at the United Nations and would not revive its long diplomatic campaign for one.

The OIC respects freedom of expression but sees anti-Islam videos and cartoons as an abuse of this freedom.

Ihsanoglu thinks that Western countries should introduce sanctions through their own blasphemy or hate crime laws.



justplaincrazy

'SLAP REBELLIOUS WOMEN'

FURIOUS over the fact that a woman had objected to the distribution of a political pamphlet being distributed at the Burlington, Ohio, City Church, a preacher there said last month that he'd "like to slap her" and that her husband should rise up and "correct her".

Rev Steve Youngblood added: "What makes me madder is that this person's husband won't correct them. I don't like rebellious women. I don't like rebellious men, either. They're even worse."

The pamphlet called for the removal of a Supreme Court judge, David Wiggins, for voting to legalise same-sex marriage.

VIDEO 'TERRORISES' MUSLIMS

A UK-based sheikh joined the ranks of *Innocence of Muslims* protesters when he declared last month: "Terrorism is not just people who kill human bodies, but who kill human feelings as well. The makers of this film have terrorised 1.6 billion people."

Sheikh Faiz Al-Aqtab Siddiqui was addressing an estimated crowd of 10,000 Muslims in London who gathered outside Google's British headquarters calling upon the search engine giant to remove the video which was posted to YouTube by a Californian movie producer this summer. It depicts Mohammed as being a paedophile and womaniser. Google responded by stating that it has no plans to ban the video.

COMPLETELY QUACKERS

WRITING to a local newspaper in opposition to same-sex marriage, a 14-year-old home-schooled teen, Jasmin Harrison, warned that "if homosexuality spreads, it can cause human evolution to come to a standstill".

She added in her letter to *Northern Outlook*: "It could even threaten the human position on the evolutionary ladder, and say, ducks could take over the world. We will be in danger of all being equal, with ducks more equal than us. I don't want my children to have to compete with ducks. I want them to evolve further than I have."

She concluded: "None of this really bears any weight for me, because I do not believe in evolution. However, the powers-that-be believe in evolution, and have made many decisions based on it. They should be consistent: If you believe in evolution, you can't be in favour of homosexuality, or the ducks will get you in the end."

A pineapple called Mo sparks a campus row

FREEDOM of expression suffered yet another blow on a UK university campus last month when students from Reading University's Atheist, Humanist, and Secularist Society (RAHS) were forced to leave a Freshers' Fayre after they included a pineapple named "Mohammed" on their stall.

According to the Student Rights website, established to "tackling extremism on campuses", staff from the Reading University Student Union (RUSU)

as well as a number of Muslim students, objected to the pineapple and asked the society to remove it. RAHS revealed that they were told: "Either the pineapple goes, or you do".

Student Rights said: "Considering that the pineapple was labeled in this way 'to celebrate the fact that we live in a country in which free speech is protected

and where it is lawful to call a pineapple by whatever name one chooses' it is deeply concerning that RUSU acted in this way."

In a statement given to Student Rights, RUSU said that "the Atheist, Humanist & Secularist society were asked to leave the Freshers' Fayre after receiving complaints from individual students about a display they had on their stall. They were initially asked to remove the display and after refusal were asked to leave.

"Our Freshers' Fayre is an inclusive event for all students. As the society's actions were causing upset and distress to a number of individual students and other societies attending we took the decision to ask them to leave".

SIR responded by saying: "Here at Student Rights we feel that freedom of expression is not absolute, and that the extremes of free speech should be limited to ensure that they do not become hate speech.

"However, students do not have the right to impose their religious sensibilities on others, and they must accept that they may be offended by those who do not share their convictions.

"Whilst this action by the RAHS may have been provocative, they should have every right to do it and not be censored. In-

stead of closing down debate RUSU should be encouraging students to interact with one another rather than pandering to the hurt feelings of the devout."

The society displayed the "Moapple" on their stall, to "encourage discussion about blasphemy, religion, and liberty".

On the afternoon of the Fayre, the group was told they had to leave. The reason given was several complaints had made, although RAHS members insist they were not made aware of any such protests.

Society members refused to remove the fruit due to their "commitment to freedom of expression".

A struggle ensued, and the pineapple was seized, but shortly afterwards it was returned to the owners, who renamed it "Jesus".

According to the RAHS, a small group of students then gathered around the table and forcefully removed the pineapple's nametag. The society was then "forced to leave the venue", accompanied by security staff.



Anti-creationist p

(Continued from page 1)

of years ago rather than billions.

"The National Trust supports the scientific view of the formation of the Giant's Causeway. We are proud to be the guardians of such a special place – one that has played an important role in our understanding of the world around us."

The National Secular Society was one of many organisations that drew public attention to the previous exhibit after being contacted by members in Northern Ireland. The NSS also supported a Facebook campaign set up by an NSS member calling for the removal of the display.

Stephen Evans, Campaigns Manager at the NSS said: "We welcome the outcome of the National Trust's review. Whilst still referencing creationist views, the exhibit

UK treatment for schoolgirl injured in Taliban shooting

A 14-YEAR-OLD Pakistani girl shot in the head last month after being accused by Taliban extremists of “promoting secularism” is now in the UK undergoing medical treatment.

Malala Yousafzai – a well-known campaigner for education for girls who won an International Children’s Peace Prize last year – was ambushed on October 9 as she was returning home from school in Mingora in the northwestern Swat province.

Malala was brought to the UK on board an air ambulance provided by the United Arab Emirates, accompanied by a full medical team.

She was expected to need treatment to repair or replace damaged bones in her skull and to undergo neurological treatment. She was taken to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham.

The UK’s Foreign Secretary William Hague said the attack on Malala and her friends “shocked Pakistan and the world” and that her bravery was “an example to us all. Malala will now receive specialist medical care in an NHS hospital. Our thoughts remain with Malala and her family at this difficult time.”



Malala Yousafzai

He added: “The public revulsion and condemnation of this cowardly attack shows that the people of Pakistan will not be beaten by terrorists. The UK stands shoulder to shoulder with Pakistan in its fight against terrorism.”

Two armed men, on foot, stopped a van packed with about a dozen schoolgirls in a congested area of the town.

One of them got into the van and asked which of the girls was Malala Yousafzai be-

fore he fired three shots, hitting Malala in the head and injuring two others.

The Taliban has warned they will target Malala Yousafzai again.

The BBC’s Aleem Maqbool in Islamabad said that Malala had been kept sedated and on a ventilator since she was taken to hospital, with tight security around her.

Maqbool added that the brutal attack on the child had shocked people in Pakistan and around the world.

Four people have been arrested in connection with the attack. They were among about 100 people rounded up this week, most of who were later released on bail.

The Pakistani government has identified the militant believed to have carried out the shooting as Ataullah, and has offered over \$100,000 for his capture.

Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who is now the UN’s Special Envoy for Global Education, said he was launching a petition in Malala’s name “in support of what Malala fought for”.

He said: “Today, sadly, 32 million girls are not going to school and it is time to fight harder for Malala’s dream to come true.”

Creationist pressure forces National Trust to its senses

at least now makes clear that the scientific evidence, supported by the National Trust, completely contradicts the creationists’ belief that the earth was created around 6,000 years ago. It still remains to be explained however, how and why the National Trust allowed itself to get into the position of being used as a vehicle for creationist propaganda in the first place.”

Meanwhile, the Caleb Foundation has switched its attention to another issue – abortion – and has issued a statement condemning the opening of the Marie Stopes clinic in Belfast, which it describes as “as a blight on our capital city”.

The statement, published on October 12, said: “Despite all the honeyed words and carefully choreographed statements emanating from those behind the new Marie Stopes

clinic, we should be under no illusions.

“Far from offering ‘non-judgemental’ advice, as Dawn Purvis, the centre’s programme director, repeatedly tells us it will do, it is highly likely that this clinic will do all in its power to push the boundaries of the current law on abortion in Northern Ireland and, by so doing, will offer encouragement to others who share that sinister agenda.

“Ms Purvis herself has so far displayed very little evidence of a non-judgemental attitude in her criticism of those who have dared to challenge her views or the need for the new clinic.

“We fully recognise that the issues surrounding abortion are highly sensitive and that pregnant women, in certain circumstances, can find themselves under immense

psychological and emotional pressure. That aspect cannot be ignored, but the current legislative arrangements in Northern Ireland recognise and address those pressures while also, vitally, recognising the rights of the unborn child.

“The majority in Northern Ireland, from across the community divide, are opposed to abortion on demand and this is reflected in the attitudes of our MLAs. There is no demand for a change in the law. It is therefore imperative that all of us who value the sanctity of life now act as a voice for the unborn.

“This new clinic is neither wanted nor needed. It will be a blight on our capital city. We hope that it will not be open for long and, meanwhile, we urge the law enforcement agencies to keep a very close eye on its activities”.

Freethought for the day: Hell

JAMES MERRYWEATHER INSISTS THAT CHRISTIANS

This morning at breakfast, coincidentally when my October *Freethinker* with its “Thought for the Day” cover feature dropped onto the doormat, up piped Rev Giles Fraser telling the nation that he doesn’t believe in Hell – well, not in any literal sense you understand.

Hell is a concept that’s more ghastly than anything you could ever imagine (even more so). Hell is hot; so hot and unforgiving that you burn, but are never combusted. Hell is inescapable, until and beyond the end of time. Hell is a place of excruciating pain, punishment for a trivial misdemeanour committed in a fictitious place by other people who didn’t exist. Death spent in Hell is eternal.

Not only that, Jesus, who I understand is still leader of the Christian movement in spite of being 2,000 years dead, paid Hell a brief visit, just after he died horribly and shortly before his implausible resurrection. Well, that’s what some Christians say, whilst others would prefer to overlook or “not literally believe in” the location of Christ’s alleged harrowing. Clergymen proclaim Hell from the pulpit in varying degrees of scariness according to their particular sect’s tradition (you want evidence?) and congregations mutter about it in their creed of incredible beliefs, whilst others inconsistently declare, it’s not real at all, just a figure of speech. Baffled, we ask, “Who really knows?”

The church has been spitting hellfire at people for centuries. What about all those millions who were terrified by the prospect of Hell, because they were told by their betters that it is completely real, horrible and a place where they were bound go unless they pulled up their spiritual socks? They will have suffered the Hell experience here in life and then? Well, as we contend, (probably) nothing at the end, not even disappointment though that could constitute some sort of relief. If only they could have known that when the end comes we’ll all get let off because there will be no judgement after all – just nothing.

Maybe Hell’s on a trajectory similar to that of Limbo, dreamt up by popes and summarily cancelled by popes, according to pontifical revelation, a mere mind game or whim with devastating consequences for real people. How many Tesses of the D’Urbevilles suffered hell on earth because of the capri-



cious decisions of remote, over-glorified denizens of the Vatican? [While we’re there, may I observe that I’m puzzled that decades, perhaps centuries, of appalling child abuse gets overlooked by Roman Catholic hierarchy, response deftly postponed, whilst one butler’s misdemeanour immediately invokes the full might of Vatican law and whistleblower persecution?]

In modern times, my erstwhile correspondent, the fundamentalist Rev William Macleod of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), routinely sermonises his flock about the perils of Hell in terms of fire, torture and eternal agony. Indeed he and his fellow Wee Free ministers are unequivocal in their conviction that there is no escape from their medieval version of Hell for most of us, thanks to sins (“original”) committed by imaginary ancestors in an imaginary garden at the beginning of the universe, which they guess and believe (contradicting informed knowledge) was six to ten thousand years ago.

Now, after centuries of clergy mediated hell-fear mongering, a revered expert on Christianity comes onto public radio and blithely tells us that Hell is not really real after all, but it is perhaps an earthly condi-

tion of people, or perhaps even merely metaphorical. He was not precise on the matter, but who could be about an imaginary place about which opinion varies wildly, according to the taste, sensitivities and sadistic motives of the imaginer?

Christians can’t have Hell all ways they choose, though that’s what they do. Anybody who bothers to think will find Christian notions of Hell perplexingly inter- and intracontradictory. They certainly believe in an afterlife and that the righteous, when they die, will sort of live on and go somewhere much nicer than here. That, of course, is Heaven, which – although there is nothing evidence-wise to tell us so – they definitely believe exists, even while some of them decide they’ll drop the notion of Hell for the time being. If they don’t believe all that – if they don’t simply believe – what’s the point of them being Christians?

What will happen to the unrighteous, the rest of us? That too is laid down strictly in their rulebook, though only loosely – possibly not at all – in their holy book. Some say that sinners, that is pretty well all of us, will get fast-tracked to Hell which, if the many assorted ghastly descriptions logged by Hy-

Hell might not be a real place

CHRISTIANS CAN'T HAVE HELL ALL WAYS THEY CHOOSE

patia Bradlaugh Bonner – one of the great early freethinkers – are to be believed, is not at all pleasant. [Enjoy her excellent *The Christian Hell from the First to the Twentieth Century*, 1913.]

Fraser can't just choose to believe there is no real Hell when, as his Bible says (or doesn't, depending on capricious translation and subjective interpretation) his Lord and Master actually visited the place (or didn't),

while his less wishy-washy counterparts belonging to opposing Christian sects say (knowing it to be true) that Hell is as real as St Paul's Cathedral.

Forgive me for resorting to exasperated paradox and irony. Information, intellect and common sense are inadequate tools in the analysis of Christian thought. Since this is such a silly topic, I ask readers not to take me seriously. Let us all lay aside any expectation

that TFTD will enlighten our early mornings and mischievously accept the morale boost it can provide.

It is said, Percy, that civilised man seeks out good and intelligent company so that through learned discourse he may rise above the savage and closer to God. Personally, however, I like to start the day with a total dickhead to remind me I'm best.

– Edmund Blackadder II

Catholic bigwigs accused by Australian police of attempting to impede abuse investigation

A SCATHING attack on the Catholic Church by police in Victoria received global coverage last month after they accused Church leaders of deliberately impeding their investigations into child abuse.

A submission to a Parliamentary inquiry into the abuse of children by predominantly Catholic clergy, signed by Chief Commissioner Ken Lay, lists a number of ways in which the Church has hindered the criminal justice process, including dissuading victims of sexual crimes from reporting them to police, failing to engage with police and alerting suspects of allegations against them, "which may have resulted in loss of evidence".

It said the Church moved or protected known or suspected sexual offenders. While the submission notes the Church had recently improved co-operation with police, in some cases it has been reluctant to provide information even when a warrant was issued.

Police also said the typical delay in reports of sex offences within the Church means more reports of alleged offences from the 1990s and early 2000s are expected in coming years.

Victims' advocate Bryan Keon-Cohen QC believes that it is the first time Victoria police have issued such a detailed public condemnation of the Church's conduct. "The Church has systematically considered its own interests first – the protection of offending priests, the reputation of offending priests and the protection of its property ahead of all other interests of the victim," he said.

The enquiry into the handling of abuse by religious and other organisations was established in April after years of campaigning by victims, advocates and media, and particularly after a series of articles in *The Age* revealing the extent of abuse within the Church and the mishandling of allegations by Church-appointed officials.

Confidential police reports detail the suicides of at least 40 people sexually abused by Catholic clergy in Victoria and say it appeared the Church knew about this shockingly high rate of suicides and premature deaths but had "chosen to remain silent".

The Age also reported earlier in October that a senior police investigator had told victims of a suspected Catholic paedophile of his "grave" concerns that his investigation into their alleged abuser was being derailed and that "pro-Church police members" might have interfered in his enquiry.

The Catholic Church rejected police allegations that it protected suspected paedophile priests by moving them to different parishes. Catholic Church spokesman Father Shane MacKinlay said that if suspects were moved, it was only in an attempt to solve the problem and not to protect them from police. "I don't accept the police description of that. We certainly accept wrong decisions were made, but they were made because of a lack of appreciation of the significance of sexual abuse and its impact on people, on victims and their families."

Meanwhile, it was reported last month that Australia's highest ranking Catholic, Cardinal George Pell may be called to give

evidence at the inquiry regarding the rape of schoolboy in 1969 by the Christian Brother principal of St Alipius school in Ballarat.

Cardinal Pell was present when the victim described the assault to another priest.

Solicitor Dr Vivian Waller, who has represented hundreds of sexual assault victims alleging abuse by clergy, outlined the details involving Cardinal Pell in her submission to the Parliamentary enquiry.

Waller said that, after the victim was raped by principal and teacher Christian Brother Robert Charles Best, he reported the assault to his teacher, Christian Brother Fitzgerald, since deceased.

The teacher responded by forcefully and repeatedly striking the boy until he retracted his accusation.

The victim then went to the St Alipius presbytery and asked to speak to George Pell.

Waller, in her submission, wrote: "I am instructed that George Pell refused to speak with him, but that George Pell was present when the victim described to another priest what had happened to him.

"As far as I can ascertain, the Christian Brothers did not refer matters to the police, nor did they conduct an internal investigation," she revealed.

Last year Best was convicted of 27 offences against 11 schoolboys including two rapes, and jailed for 14 years and nine months. His victims were from St Alipius, where he was principal, and two schools he later taught at, St Leo's in Box Hill and St Joseph's in Geelong.

Stumbling forward: a brisk romp through the life of Mohammed

DALE DEBAKCSY looks back on the life of a man many regarded as 'Evil Incarnate'

It has happened to perhaps every atheist: you start to talk about your problems with religion, when somebody says, "Well, yes, certain of the beliefs are flawed and the practitioners misguided, but the founders of these religions are still moral examples to be studied, followed, and revered."

This is the "Believe In Christianity Because Jesus Was a Great Guy" brand of religion, and it is a tenacious fellow. We realized a while ago that the slavery-loving, baby-killing ways of Moses aren't quite the stuff of moral legend (take a gander at Numbers 31 for something truly heinous), and are coming around to the idea that Jesus, with his tendency for throwing people into realms of eternal torment for the crime of disagreeing with him, isn't so hot either. But we seem to be rather stuck on Mohammed.

For centuries during the Middle Ages, he was Evil Incarnate, and with the recent meteoric rise of Islamic radicalism that unbalanced conception has been revived, most notably in the works of Robert Spencer. As against this trend, those who have attempted a measure of objectivity, like Karen Armstrong and Yahiya Emerick, have let their anger at Spencerian exaggerations get the better of their scholarship, and the Mohammed that has emerged from their portraits is several shades too good. Somehow he becomes the prophet of peace even when planning unprovoked war, the brilliant politician even when forced to resort to Revelation to explain away his most recent failed ventures. What is wanting in all of this is the less dramatic truth that in Mohammed we have a man with initially good ideas slowly but entirely corrupted by his belief in the divinity of his message.

It is fair to say that, for the first 50 or so years of his life, Mohammed was as decent a human as could be expected in his surroundings. At a time when you could be killed with impunity, your life literally worthless, so long as you weren't under the protection of a clan, Mohammed made a case that it was the duty of all to care for

the community's downtrodden. His goal was to make people reflect on the consequences of the new cult of wealth that had sprung up in Mecca when the Quraysh people made the transition from nomads to merchants, and this was a good and noble thing.

Such ideas naturally attracted people on the fringes of society – sons of the major clans who were kicking their heels waiting for their turn at power, and prominent members of the lesser clans who were facing extinction at the hands of the great merchants, not to mention scores of servants and slaves with nothing to lose. So many people dedicated so thoroughly to the undermining of the material and traditional structure of Mecca naturally brought a good deal of pressure down on Mohammed, whose (eventual) steadfast refusal to rescind any of his beliefs got him drummed out of Mecca, a death sentence on his head if he should return. Had he died at this point in life, we would find little to object to and less to remember about him.

It is with his retreat to Medina that Mohammed was taken over by something more than zeal to profess his religion, something that made him act in ways that are questionable not only by our lofty modern standards, but even by those of his own day.

His position in Mecca seemed hopeless until a collection of Arab and Jewish settlements based around Medina offered protection for him and his followers if he would agree to be an impartial judge of their disputes. The offer came at a hefty personal risk to them, as they had to cancel many of their old alliances in order to extend their protection to the wanted man. But they took the chance, and Mohammed, rescued from sure destruction, joined their community.

And immediately did everything he could to bring disaster on their heads.

Within a year of his pilgrimage, he began ordering raids against the Meccan caravans, knowing full well that this would direct the wrath of the most powerful force in

the region, the Quraysh, against his protectors. Mohammed's apologists point out that caravan raiding was a normal part of life for the Bedouin tribes but, having failed several times to pull off a successful raid, the prophet concocted plans that went far beyond anything that had been done before. In one instance, he had his operatives disguise themselves as pilgrims, join the Meccan caravans, and kill the guards in a surprise attack. What's worse, this was timed to coincide with the Arab holy months, when violence was forbidden so as to allow pilgrims safe passage to their places of worship. When many of his followers reacted with horror to these new tactics, he had a convenient revelation which said, in effect, "Yes, killing during the holy month is bad, but they were really mean to us a few years ago, so Al'lah is entirely fine with it." The poet Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf dared to compose lyrics against these increasingly erratic policies, and was assassinated at the prophet's command. So did the notion of the limited raid evolve into that of the *ji'had*, a war in which any violence done was justifiable so long as the victim was in some way related to someone who once said something bad about Mohammed.

From 623 to 632, Medina saw itself thrown again and again into entirely unnecessary conflict with Mecca at the hands of Mohammed's need to humble his former antagonists. During that decade, the solution to every problem was to strike at Mecca, no matter who died in the process, no matter what the consequences might be to the people who had housed him and his followers, no matter what violence he had to do to the purity of his original revelations to keep his people towing the line. Alternate solutions, whether engaging in trade with their Abyssinian connections, engaging in agriculture on the readily available arable land, reverting to a traditional nomadic form of life, swallowing their pride and letting their hosts continue to provide for them as they had been, or even carrying out raids against non-Meccan caravans, were simply not considered.



An early depiction of Mohammed

One by one, the Jewish tribes of Medina found themselves disagreeing with their new leader's path, and just as quickly being expelled from their own homes that the prophet might continue his antagonistic policy of tactical revenge. The culmination came with the mass beheading of all 700 male members of the Qurayzah tribe after Mohammed won the Battle of the Trench (two guesses as to how he won it – if your guess is “by digging a trench” you're on the right track!). At the same time as his *Qu'ran* revelations stressed the importance of gratitude for the things of the earth, Mohammed's consistent ingratitude and indifference to the suffering that his vendettas visited upon people who had given him a home when he had nothing must strike the moral sense of any age as reprehensible.

Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there. Having expelled or slaughtered everybody in Medina who was a threat to his status as prophet, and puffed up by the success of his ditch strategy in holding off a Meccan siege, he thought himself an unstoppable force and declared that he was taking his followers on a pilgrimage to Mecca, sure that the Meccans couldn't possibly resist him after his mighty victory. As it turned out, they did, and he and his followers were stuck outside of the city. To save face, Mohammed grasped at a peace treaty that ended the war and allowed him to try the pilgrimage again in a year. His vision and sense of invincibility having been brought up so glaringly short, he returned to Medina, mumbling along the way yet another opportune revelation that said, in effect, “That's totally what God meant me to do.”

This degradation of his revelations from statements of religious purpose to covering

devices used in times of failure is, interestingly, something that Mohammed shares with Mormon prophet Joseph Smith. Both men started off with a body of revelation that was almost entirely devoted to laying out overall principles of the nature of God and life and, as the pressures of leadership fell upon their shoulders, increasingly employed their gifts simply to Get Things Done. When Smith needed a hotel built in 1841, he received a revelation from God not only telling the faithful to build it, but laying out the precise compensatory stock options plan that the Almighty would prefer. Similarly, Mohammed's messages of God moved from the really rather beautiful:

*We showered the water in showers,
Then fissured the earth in fissures,
And cause to grow in it grain,
And grapes and clover,
And olives and palms,
And orchards dense,
And fruits and pastures.*

of Sura 80 (among the earliest chronologically) to the rather more pragmatic revelations granting him dispensation for marrying Zaynab bint Jahsh against common practice, for clearing his favorite wife of public accusations of loose morality, and for getting the prophet's party guests to leave in a timely manner. When you are using revelations from God to tell people to go home, you really have to question how much of it is divinity speaking through you and how much is just wanting to go to bed.

Returning to the timeline, the treaty that brought his first pilgrimage to an end called for a cessation of violence and raiding and, inevitably, as soon as he was back in Medina, Mohammed sent one of his

more unbalanced followers, Abu Basir, out to form a private raiding gang and resume hostilities against Mecca. His plan was simple – to strangle the economy of Mecca to the point that they would have no choice but to take him as their leader if they wanted to survive economically, while at the same time expanding his sphere of influence to the borders of the Byzantine Empire.

He failed spectacularly at the latter when he attempted it with an army of 3,000 men, but was entirely successful in the former. In 630, he returned to Mecca and assumed control, sending his men out to the local shrines to smash the idols that his ancestors had worshipped. Of course, this provoked a desperate last attempt by the Meccans to protect their old way of life. The Hawazin tribe rallied to the defense of the al-Lat shrine, and was cut down. The Muslims prevailed, with 70 Hawazin dying and six thousand women and children taken prisoner as the cost of Mohammed's impatience to impose the full extent of his new power immediately upon grasping it.

“I have spent so long in the revenge business, now that it's over, I don't know what to do.”

The rest comes as something of an anti-climax, with Mohammed returning to Medina and living out the last few years of his life in increasing ill health, his spiritual role filled by others. He had spent a decade bending his own life and those of everyone around him to the end of humbling his detractors, and finally met his own end in 632, while his head rested in the lap of his young wife Aisha, the girl who would come to be a force all to herself in shaping Islam over the next century.

Jesus had it easy. He never had to be a leader, to provide for a horde of followers in the midst of a harsh and unforgiving climate. Mohammed did, and many of the unquestionably awful things that he did from 622 to 632 stemmed at least partly from the unique necessities of Arabian leadership. But those necessities don't explain everything away. There was a seed of vengefulness in Mohammed after his Meccan exile that over-rode all matters of pragmatism and obligation to those who had protected and believed in him. He was a man looking for a fight, poking the Quraysh dragon until he got one, and turning back savagely on any of his own people who had the audacity to suggest that he had somehow lost his way.

Anything was permitted against anyone in the name of this one great goal, and time and again it nearly cost him everything. Only the supreme lack of cohesion

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The Divine Ultimatum

WILL BORDELL says the West must resist demands to treat Islam with greater respect

THOUGH all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously, by licensing and prohibiting, to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?

John Milton, *Areopagitica*

Submit, or die. That was effectively the message dished out to the West by the tens of thousands who protested recently against *Innocence of Muslims*, the crude film trailer that depicts the “prophet” Mohammed. This message is not facetious, nor is it half-hearted. It forms what can only be termed a divine ultimatum to free speech. And most of us are submitting without a fight.

Enough is enough. Let them riot, let them murder, let them spew hatred from all the streets of the world. On their heads be it. But don't – if it's the last thing you do – don't let them fool you into believing that freedom of speech and thought are things on which we can compromise.

Reflect, for just a moment, on what is being demanded here: Muslims from Afghanistan to Australia – not all Muslims, but a large and vociferous number – are commanding that the whole world bend the knee to the word of the Koran. And courtesy doesn't seem to be their style.

In Iraq, Ayatollah Hassan Sane'i boosted the bounty on Salman Rushdie's head by \$500,000 (refreshing the fatwa he received

over two decades ago for writing *The Satanic Verses*), despite Rushdie's open criticism of the trailer. In Pakistan, 19 people died and many more were injured in expressions of displeasure nationwide. In the midst of this fury, a Pakistani Government minister, Ghulam Ahmed Bilour, offered \$100,000 as a reward for the death of the film's creator.

Our moral confidence in the West is at a low ebb, though. Rather than condemn the aggression and the violence and the hatred, we prefer to distance ourselves from the film – just as we shamefully and shamelessly shrank away from supporting the Mohammed cartoonists in 2005, and Rushdie himself in 1989. Where have our priorities gone? We've fallen into a rut, but there's no better time than now to get out of it.

Indeed, we would do well to heed Barack Obama's words to the UN General Assembly last month. The President stated that “there is no speech that justifies mindless violence” – even speech we find offensive or disturbing. “There are no words,” he went on, “that excuse the killing of innocents. There is no video that justifies an attack on an Embassy. There is no slander that provides an excuse for people to burn a restaurant in Lebanon, or destroy a school in Tunis, or cause death and destruction in Pakistan”.

Extremist Muslims may not believe in depicting their prophet, and no one is suggesting that that belief be inhibited. Where

we should draw the line, with honesty and integrity, is when they start telling us what to do. I don't believe that there is a God, let alone that he spoke to an Arabian businessman called Mohammed 1,500 years ago. So why should I, and everyone else who thinks like me, be forced to bow to the constipated and fearful laws of fundamentalist Islam?

Raja Pervaiz Ashraf believes we should do just that. The Pakistani Prime Minister was quoted in *The Times* campaigning for “Islamophobia” to be made illegal: “If denying the Holocaust is a crime,” he reasoned, “then is it not fair and legitimate for a Muslim to demand that denigrating and demeaning Islam's holiest personality is no less than a crime?”

There can only be one answer: no. No to the ban on Holocaust denial; no to the prohibition of criticism of Islam; no to any restriction whatsoever on what our fellow human beings are allowed to think, to draw, or to say. For a religion that makes such extraordinary claims for itself on the basis of not even a smidgen of evidence, to demand that those claims not to be questioned or challenged, but held sacred even by non-believers, is offensive. If Islam truly wishes to be taken seriously, it had better take the values on which it seeks to trample seriously too.

The outrage over *The Innocence of Muslims* is, of course, not the the first expression of Muslim fury. Let's take just two examples

Mohammed

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and initiative in his enemy and the steadfast devotion born of desperation in his followers allowed him to survive each disaster long enough to throw his resources into the creation of the next near-disaster. The reformer of such initial promise became twisted by his visions of revenge, and as much as we ought to give credit to the benevolent impulses that drove that young man to argue against even the most powerful of his society, we can't let those efforts, or our distaste for the venomous and vulgar caricatures offered up by his later detractors, prevent us from saying quite plainly, “Muhammad was not, in the final analysis, a good man, and if his goodness is in any way decisive for your faith in his message, you have quite some thinking to do.”



Bangladeshi Muslims burn a US flag and a coffin of President Barack Obama during a protest against *Innocence of Muslims* in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in September.

(AP Photo/A.M. Ahad) Source: AP

from recent history: a Dutch film director and a British teacher, condemned by the laws of a religion that was not their own.

In 2004, Theo van Gogh was shot eight times by Mohammed Bouyeri, who also tried to decapitate him for the “crime” of producing a hauntingly powerful film – entitled *Submission* – which attacked the misogyny of Islam.

In 2007, Gillian Gibbons was convicted of insulting religion in Sudan for letting her class name a teddy bear “Mohammed”. Fortunately, she was released before her sentence could be carried out. Van Gogh, and countless others like him, haven’t been so lucky.

When we don’t stand up for free speech and thought, the perfidy is twofold. For one thing, as Richard Dawkins explains, by giving in to the pressure that religious extremism puts us under, we “assume that Muslims are incapable of civilised behaviour”. We need to get over the idea that abstaining from criticism of what can only be termed bigotry is a form of respect. At best, it’s infantilisation. Abiding the atrocities that are taking place even as I write out of some warped view of “tolerance” is pitted firmly against the liberal values upon which the West is founded. Being an apologist for a direct and vicious affront to the freedoms we should consider as precious is simply not good enough.

This is where the first betrayal links into

the second. If we choose not to speak up against this virulent and destructive strain of Islam, we put our own freedoms on the rack. Who will you let determine what you can and can’t say? If Muslim imams, why not anyone? If they’re allowed to prevent us from mocking their preposterous claims, where does it stop? Which other religions will be able to restrict our freedoms just because we don’t want to play with their imaginary friend? What books will you not be allowed to read? What opinions of yours will no longer be acceptable? And most dangerous of all, what thoughts will you be forbidden to think?

It goes beyond Orwell’s wildest nightmares. It’s why John Milton in his glorious and much-revered anti-censorship polemic, *Areopagitica*, writes: “Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties”. For it’s our ability to think and to believe what we like – without apology – that makes us fully human. The Islamist is free to hold his prophet to be sacred for as long as I’m allowed to consider that view as delusional.

The problem we face is that religion and, in particular, missionary religion has never and will never be content with convincing its own. In the present, it’s Islam; in the past, it was Christianity; in the future, it could be Mormonism for all we know. As Christopher Hitchens wrote so astutely in *God is Not Great*, religion “must seek to interfere

with the lives of non-believers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one”.

That interference ought not to be tolerated by any self-respecting free society – not when it wants to behead its opponents, both mortal and conceptual. Don’t let yourself be deceived: the blame, in this kind of debacle (which, regrettably, is bound to happen all over again), lies squarely with those who are savagely baying for blood and revenge and censorship. Anything that holds the grip on the world that Islam does (with almost two billion adherents) that won’t let itself be mocked or criticised or satirised, is either concealing its falsehood or else is a totalitarian despotism of the highest order – or maybe both.



Will Bordell is an 18-year-old student journalist about to take up an undergraduate place at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, to read English Literature. This young atheist has been writing

polemics and interviews for a number of years for his school newspaper, *The Dependent*, which he also co-founded. He now has own website: www.willbordell.co.uk.

Exclusive interview: Greta Christina, ‘an ambassador for the angry’, speaks to Alex Gabriel



SINCE last December, I’ve been writing regularly about atheism. It’s taught me a lot, introduced me to some wonderful people and brought me a modest amount of attention – when I was first approached by the *Freethinker* it was due to my blog.

I started for several reasons: I was living in Berlin without much to do, I wanted to stay active in the movement once I’d stopped running a student group, and I admired lots of existing atheist bloggers. But what prompted me in particular was an online video, entitled “Why Are You Atheists So Angry?”

The video, now with over a 100,000 hits on YouTube, showed a talk at the US gathering Skepticon by a speaker whose name was Greta Christina. At its core was an extended list of grievances about religion. “I get angry”, she said, “when believers treat any criticism of their religion as insulting and bigoted. ... I get angry that I have to know more about their damn religion than they do. ... Most of all, I get so angry – sputtering, inarticulately, pulse-racingly angry – when believers chide atheists for being so angry.”

That talk led me and many others to Gre-

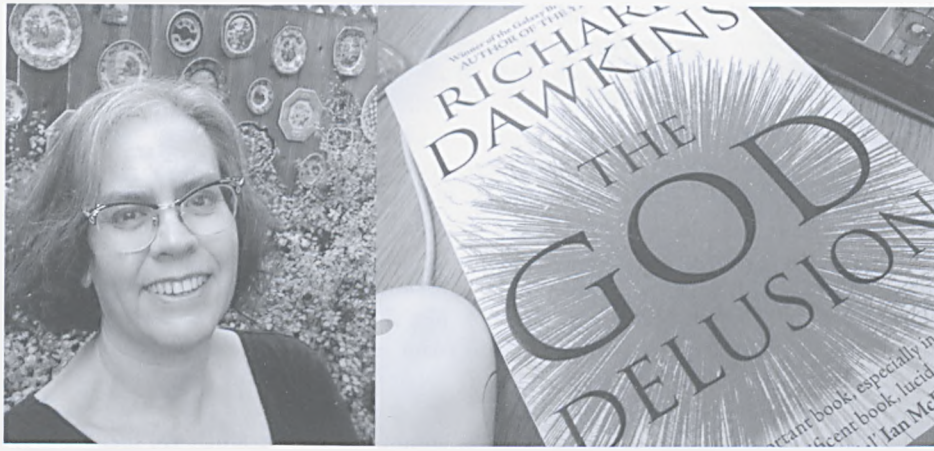
ta’s blog – “Thinking out loud since 2005”, according to its masthead, on “atheism, sex, politics, dreams, and whatever.”

It led, in part, to her becoming a hero of mine. And now that it’s the basis of a fast-selling book and eBook, *Why Are You Atheists So Angry? 99 Things That Piss Off the Godless*, it led me speak with her via the Internet.

Since reading her was part of what spurred me to write, I’m interested to know how her blog started out.

“I was writing primarily about sexuality, sexual politics, LGBT issues and so on. That

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was the main writing I did for many years. I had a novella in a collection: it was erotic fiction – porn, not to put too fine a point on it – and the editor, Susie Bright, said, ‘If you want to promote this, you should start a blog.’ I didn’t even identify as an atheist at the time. I kind of identified as a lukewarm agnostic, or as a skeptic to some extent, but I was still going through my process about this stuff, and in fact it was while I was writing the blog that I read *The God Delusion*. That’s the book that flipped the switch for me, and changed my mind from being a lukewarm, vague, agnostic skeptic to wanting to make this the centre of my writing career.

“Skeptical Inquirer was very influential – that’s what got me questioning my spiritual and religious ideas in the first place. The performer Julia Sweeney had a lot of influence on me in terms of the power of a personal story. She’s so willing to laugh at religion, but she also has such compassion for it and such understanding of it. She gets that it’s ridiculous, but she doesn’t ridicule the people.

“The atheist blogosphere had a lot to do with that as well: I was reading the Daylight Atheism blog, FriendlyAtheist.com and Pharyngula. Some others. They really had an effect on me, and in particular, I’d always [thought] ‘I don’t believe in God, but there’s no way to prove anything about religion. Why should you get into that argument?’ And these blogs just convinced me that religion is a proposition about the world and we can argue about it just like any other proposition. This idea should not be off the table in public discourse.

“I had this tremendous admiration for these bloggers. Their writing was really clear, and their writing was really funny, and their writing was really engaging. They were good at this back and forth with commenters. And I was like, oh, I want to be part of this.”

Now, seven years down the line, Greta’s self-published eBook is selling globally, getting five star customer reviews on Amazon and being picked up for print deals by existing companies. “I pieced the book together”,

she tells me, “from a certain amount of material I’d already written on the blog, from the talk I gave at Skepticon and elsewhere, and also a fair amount of new material.” Its first chapter consists of her much-lauded “litany of rage” (the “99 things” referred to in the title), but remaining chapters address arguments against her, including defences of “moderate and progressive religion”, “New Age religion”, “spiritual but not religious” outlooks and “ecumenicalism and interfaith” practices, and set out Greta’s personal aims as an activist. Chief among them, specifically, is persuading the world out of religion.

The book’s thorough pursuit of its arguments to their logical conclusions marks it out as a product of 21st century blogging culture. Where previously atheist academics like Daniel Dennett have published one book, garnered criticism and responded with another, objections to Greta’s stance are faced down immediately and at length in the same volume. She comments, “The reason I know what kind of questions people are going to ask is, I’ve been on the Internet for a long time. I’ve changed my mind about things because of what commenters wrote on my blog, I’ve written on entire topics because commenters suggested them and I’m very familiar with that back and forth – with the kinds of arguments that people will make.”

In structural terms, this means the book stands out from prior atheist bestsellers; the time devoted to countering responses like “All religion isn’t like that! It’s just a few bad apples” and “That’s not the true faith!” is distinctly uncommercial, and will make it obvious to the uninformed that *Why Are You Atheist So Angry?* was initially self-published. Its tone is consistently chattier than scholarly, filled more with pith than surface-level gloss. This isn’t to call Greta a bad writer; quite the opposite. If you’re looking for an ivory towered secular salvo to be found ashelf in Blackwells or quoted on Radio 4, though, this probably isn’t it.

For my purposes, that’s not a bad thing. In fact, this book shot right to the top of my “recommended atheist reading” list pre-

cisely because it’s personal and personable. The author’s voice is stronger because she doesn’t have a doctorate or a column in *The Times*; her case sounds like it could be made in line at the bus stop or across the garden fence, and it convinces.

“I’ve always had a certain amount of impostor syndrome as a writer, and especially as an atheist writer. There’s so many people who are academics. They’re scientists, they’re historians, they’re psychologists or sociologists. I have a BA in religion from however many decades ago, but I’m not really an expert in the field of religious history like that, and I always just said to myself, ‘Why does anybody want to hear what I have to say? I’m just a smart, thoughtful person who can write.’ And it’s beginning to dawn on me that that’s actually something of a rarity. It’s one of the things I like about the blogosphere that you don’t have to be an academic in order to be successful, you just have to make a good argument.

“I do think the degree to which we’re an online community had a tremendous impact on how quickly we’ve grown, gone from 0 to 60 and become this amazing political powerhouse. I sometimes think about where the LGBT movement would be now if we’d had the Internet in 1970.”

What about blog wars, though? Greta, I suggest, is known not to shy away from internal disputes. Another popular talk, “Why arguing religion is not a waste of time”, is about why a less religious world is as valid a goal as a secular state or ending pro-religious bigotry; she’s been a prominent feminist within skepticism too, rarely afraid to criticise well known atheists, and she proudly calls herself a firebrand rather than a diplomat.

“I’m usually willing”, she replies when I point this out, “to wade into arguments to say things that other people don’t want to say or hear. I kind of built my writing career on it, even before I was an atheist – I was always drawn to controversial topics, or topics other people didn’t want to write about.

“I will say that the last year has made me (on occasion) shy away from stepping into another goddamn blog war, just because it is somewhat exhausting. I think what it comes down to for me is, I’m really happy to get into arguments with people, to a great extent because arguments are often how I change my own mind or sharpen my own ideas. I have changed my mind or refined my ideas, altered them and sometimes changed them entirely because of arguments I’ve gotten into on the Internet. I think that’s really valuable. I think my thinking has become much more clear.

“It’s one of the things I like about atheism that we don’t treat our leaders, our icons and our heroes as if they’re infallible. We don’t

have to pretend that Richard Dawkins or PZ Myers – or me, for that matter – is infallible, and if we disagree with them we say so. If we think they're being a jackass, we say so, and we recognise that these are flawed human beings with some good ideas and some bad ideas. I find that really valuable, as long as the criticism is 'I disagree with your idea, and here's why' as opposed to 'You stupid cunt, you should get raped'. I came onto the Internet for an argument; I didn't want abuse."

I'm interested to know where she draws the line herself, and whether as an ambassador for the angry, she ever worries about being overly combative with believers. "I try to strike a balance, being mocking and angry toward ideas while still having compassion for the people who hold them. It's one of the things that make anger about religion complicated: the perpetrators of the harm are also its victims, and *vice versa*."

"A good example of that is [homophobic evangelist and client of male escorts] Ted Haggard. I'm hugely angry at him. He did tremendous damage to a lot of people when he perpetuated these terrible, horrifying, fundamentalist ideas about religion, but at the same time I have tremendous compas-

sion for him, because it's very clear that he's tremendously ashamed of his sexual identity or his sexual feelings. It can't be good to be him. It can't be fun to be him. So I do try to temper the anger with a certain amount of compassion."

And finally, what about those who say she needs to let go of her anger, to live and let live with religious believers?

"We get told there's something wrong with us for being angry. We get told, 'You're angry because you're bitter', 'You're angry because you're self-absorbed', 'You're whining', 'You have a God-shaped hole in your heart', whatever. I think that a lot of people have been buying into that, and saying 'Hmm, maybe there is something wrong with me.'"

It's very empowering to hear somebody say we're not angry because there's something wrong with us, we're angry because there's something right with us.

"Anger is an entirely legitimate, valid response to there being terrible things happening in the world. And I think people feel very empowered to hear somebody say 'If you're not angry, what's wrong with you?' Because children are getting their clitorises cut off. Children are dying because their

parents believe in faith healing. Women are getting beaten by their husbands and their preachers are telling them to suck it up, because God says you have to stay in the marriage. Works of art that are hundreds of years old are being destroyed. Gay children are being kicked out of their houses by their families. I could go on and on. I do in the book.

"If you're not angry about this, what's wrong with you? The opposite of anger when you're faced with these kinds of situations isn't peace, or calm. It's complacency.

"There's a degree to which I can live and let live with the Unitarians or the Reform Jews on the corner, even though I still think they're mistaken. But I can't live and let live with people who kick their gay kids out of their house. I can't live and let live with people who let their children die because they think that taking their kids to the doctor will anger their god. I can't live and let live with people who cut their little girls' clitorises off. They may not be doing harm to me, but they're doing harm to other people, and they're doing it because of the bad idea of religious faith. I'm therefore very engaged in trying to persuade people out of that idea, and that is my ultimate goal as an atheist activist."

World's biggest crime syndicate is the Roman Catholic Church

WILLIAM HARWOOD EXAMINES THE AGGRESSIVE PUSH FOR 'VATICAN SHARIA'

A MINORITY of Muslims, predominantly those in the United States, view terrorists such as Osama bin Laden as violators of the true spirit of Islam. The overwhelming majority, taught from birth that right and wrong are whatever the Koran says they are, regard bin Laden as the epitome of Islam.

More than a half-billion Muslims accept as a sacred duty the instruction to "Slay the pagans (ie, Christians) wherever you find them. Make war on the unbelievers (ie, non-Muslims) and the hypocrites (ie, Muslims of the wrong sect) and deal rigorously with them. When you encounter the unbelievers strike off their heads."¹

That teaching makes Islam one of the most evil religion that has ever existed. Its only competitor that we know of, other than the now-extinct Thuggs and Assassins, is Judaism.

Torah passages still regarded as sacred scripture by Jews but no longer by Chris-

tians include, "When Yahweh your god has settled you in the land you're about to occupy, and driven out many infidels before you . . . you're to cut them down and exterminate them. You're to make no compromise with them or show them any mercy . . . You're going to exterminate them in a massive genocide until they're eliminated."²

Christianity's rejection of the obligation to murder infidels and heretics, regardless of the invalid reason for such rejection, makes it intrinsically less evil than Judaism. A fanatical minority of Christians regard themselves bound by selected portions of the Torah (which they call the Old Testament), and commit murders and other atrocities against, for example, doctors who provide women with health care services that the fanatics deem forbidden (but not against people who eat pork or lobster that the Torah also forbids).³

But while acceptance by Muslims and

Jews of books that can only be described as paeans to evil makes the religions themselves more evil than any form of Christianity, neither religion is organized to the point of having a Head Jew or a Head Muslim. They may be conglomerations of potential criminals, but are not crime syndicates.

It is Catholicism's organization into a single cult led by a dictator who must be obeyed that makes it an organized syndicate. And it is the Catholic Pope's enforcement of criminally evil decrees that makes his church a crime syndicate. With as many as 0.7 billion mindslaves,⁴ that makes the RC church the world's largest organized crime syndicate.

Osama bin Laden murdered less than 5,000 human beings, including 3,000 Americans in a single day. Adolf Hitler

(Continued on p14)

The Roman Catholic crime syndicate

caused the deaths of over 50 million human beings, counting fatalities on both sides in World War Two.⁵

Joseph Ratzinger, first as his predecessor's Grand Inquisitor and then as Pope Benedict XVI, capriciously banned sane population control and sane disease control, making him morally culpable for 60 million homicides, by starvation, malnutrition, and past and future AIDS deaths. Humanitarians, including Richard Dawkins, have demanded that Ratzinger be arrested and tried by the World Court for crimes against humanity. But because of the Catholic Church's political power, no Western government dares do so.

But the continued enforcement of indefensible taboos, for the sole purpose of preventing the RC Church from looking foolish by changing its dogma,⁶ is not the Church's only unspeakable crime.

From the Pope down to regional bishops, the Catholic hierarchy has been engaging in the cover-up of priestly pedophilia for decades. And when an insider exposed the

Vatican bank's money laundering for the Sicilian Mafia,⁷ the Church's Führer ordered the whistleblower's prosecution for placing the public's best interests ahead of the best interests of the Catholic Church. And those are only the Church's most recent criminal activities.

Historians have established beyond a reasonable doubt that Hitler's perpetration of the atrocity known as the Holocaust could not have happened if Pope Pius XII had not made a deal with Hitler to forbid Catholic opposition to Hitler in exchange for Hitler's acting as his tax collector in Germany.⁸ And while Catholic Croatia and Orthodox Serbia were on opposite sides in World War Two, and would have waged war on each other in the absence of any religious motivation, it was pressure from the Catholic Church that prompted Croatian Catholics to massacre over 500,000 Serbian Orthodox Christians, expel 250,000, and forcibly convert 200,000 to Catholicism under threat of execution.⁹

Catholic hierarchs in Europe, South America, Australia and Africa are actively campaigning to prevent secular governments from granting equal rights to ho-

mosexuals and women. Catholic politicians in the USA have never stopped conspiring to overthrow the Constitution and subject America to Vatican sharia.

The Church's most blatant quisling, Rick Santorum, publicly denounced John Kennedy for supporting the separation of church and state, and left little doubt that he plans to make the government of the United States subservient to the Pope if he becomes President.

There is little chance that the unrepentant Nazi Pope, Joseph Ratzinger, will ever replicate the crimes of the Inquisition. But his failure to do so will be from lack of power, not from choice.

The Catholic Church has been an organized crime syndicate since it was founded by the first Pope, Siricius, in 384 CE,¹⁰ and it remains so to this day.

References:

1. Robert Spencer, *Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith*, pp, Encounter Books, 2003, pp 1, 18, 29.
2. Deuteronomy 7:1-2, 23.
3. Leviticus 11:7, 12.
4. All religions exaggerate their membership, by anywhere from 50 percent for Catholicism to 500 percent for Mormonism ([exmormon.org](http://www.exmormon.org)) and 25,000 percent for the pretend-religion of Scientology ([Factnet.org](http://www.factnet.org)). The RC Church claims more than one billion adherents (*Wikipedia*), a figure that can only be reached by counting the entire population of countries with a Catholic majority, and pretending that there are only half as many non-theists as the true figure of 2.3 billion.
5. *Wikipedia* estimates the number of WWII deaths at between 50 million and 78 million, including 40 to 52 million civilians, a figure that includes 13 to 20 million from war-related disease and famine. If the higher figures are accurate, then Hitler caused more deaths than Ratzinger and his predecessor. That is really not a mitigating circumstance.
6. Gary Wills, *Papal Sin: Structures of Deceit*, Image Books, 2001, p 94.
7. *Spiegel Online International*
8. John Cornwell, *Hitler's Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII*, Penguin Reprint, 2008, p 153.
9. *Wikipedia*, "World War II Persecution of Serbs."
10. William Harwood, *Dictionary of Contemporary Mythology*, Third Edition 2011, World Audience, "Pope Siricius."

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points of view..



A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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FREEDOM OF RELIGION?

THE PHRASE “Freedom of Religion” crops up quite regularly in verbal and written discourse at all levels of political debate, typically “Freedom of religion is an individual fundamental right ...” (NSS in Europe: European Parliament Platform for Secularism in Politics).

But, of course, “religion” includes not only the tenets of faith but also the methodology by which that faith is enacted, and therein lies the rub.

Taking the Abrahamic religions as obvious examples, these are consistently misogynistic, largely homophobic and in some instances, murderous; not so much in their faith content, but in their methodology.

So, why should we accord religion the status of a fundamental right?

While I fully support the individual right to believe in whatever (freedom of thought being a most precious human characteristic), it does not follow that there is a corresponding freedom of action based on a particular belief.

In this country, for better or worse, we live in a multi-faith and no-faith society but we cannot, in practise, live in a multi-religious society without infringing some of our fellow citizens’ human rights in general terms and particularly within the framework of the laws of this land, assuming that those laws are not so riddled with religious exemptions so as to be without meaning.

To accord a section of society their “freedom of religion” as a right is to encourage social discrimination to an unacceptable level without at the same time loading that right with a burden of caveats.

So, let’s not go there!

Freedom of religion? No, thank you!
Freedom of belief? Certainly.

David Stevenson
Surrey

‘SONG OF DISPRAISE’

I WAS pleased to see Nelly Moia quote my parody of a popular hymn, in the August issue of the *Freethinker*, but the title was misprinted. It should be “Song of Dispraise”.

Barbara Smoker
Bromley

Editor’s note: When we received Nelly Moia’s letter, we cross-checked her reference to the parody hymn on the Internet, where it appears on www.barbarasmoker.freeuk.com/Poems.htm and is TWICE referred to as “Song of Praise”. We have since contacted the administrator of the site to point out the mistake.

SARAH PAYNE

RELEVANT to Ralph Jones’ article “The Imperviousness of the Religious” (*Freethinker*, October) in which he examines “the irrational manner in which Christians react to tragedy” is the fact that when eight-year-old Sarah Payne was murdered, her family arranged a THANKSGIVING (yes, that’s right!) service for her life.

Jack Hastie
Scotland

SPIRITUALITY

IN THE September issue of the *Freethinker* John Radford (power be to his writing elbow) touches on the way in which the God-fantasists seek to hijack the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” for their own purposes and to infuse them with a sense of contempt for the “merely material”.

May I suggest (perhaps not too dogmatically) that it can be useful to refute this religious sleight of hand by considering the Latin derivation for “spirit”, namely spiri-

tus meaning “breath”. Clearly this word therefore identifies the most obvious sign of life, namely that the animal breathes. So by “spirit” one need only signify that it applies to the works that a living, breathing, animal can engage in, as opposed to the lifeless material on which or by which the operation can be carried out: a work is done, we may say, with spirit or con amore.

By extension then a spiritual state signifies that sense of exaltation which a person experiences when they are engaged in that which intensifies or elevates their sense of livingness; of the worthwhileness of their action – whether that action be one of contemplation or execution. Hence any action that brings about such an enlargement of one’s sense of the worthwhileness of life can be deemed to be a spiritual experience. And equally, if not, not!

To put it another way, I would suggest that that experience is spiritual which unites us with a sense of truth and/or beauty (think Keats.)

Finally I respond to John Radford’s remark that religious writers quite often claim (“God” save us!) that atheism is a kind of religion. But atheism to my mind means no more than a disbelief in any form of “Godship” or the supernatural: it does not even of itself involve any claim to moral – as against intellectual – superiority. (Think the Marquis of Queensbury – Wilde’s nemesis, alas – who was a very unattractive character apparently but also a fervent atheist, so even he had his perhaps one good point!)

It would be just as logical for atheists to claim that religion is a form of irrationality. Come to think of it, that would not be so wide of the mark!

Albert Adler
London

Godbaby Christmas campaign exposes Christians to ridicule



SOME have called it cheesy, others think it's creepy. But most agree that an ad devised to remind Brits this year of Christ's role in Christmas is silly and smacks of desperation.

With a slogan that says: "He cries. He wees. He saves the world", Godbaby is the brainchild of ChurchAds.net and it aims to "remind people that Christmas starts with Christ!"

The poster will be displayed across the country during the festive season and has been backed by a number of key figures in the Christian community.

Rt Revd Nick Baines, Bishop of Croydon said: "It's another strong and arresting image. It will surprise some and disturb others ... Which is exactly what the real Jesus did. And it forces us beyond the tinsel to the human reality of 'God among us'."

But not everyone has been so positive. One commentator called the im-

age "hideously white" while others said "oh no" or "is this a joke?"

Rachel Farmer from ChurchAds compared the campaign to Marmite: "You either love it or you hate it."

The poster and radio advert can be downloaded for free from ChurchAds.net and developers are hoping that Christians of all denominations will get behind the campaign.

The "Christmas Starts with Christ" campaign has been running for four



years. According to research from the developers, 42 percent of people seeing ChurchAds material "made them think more about the true meaning of Christmas". The group say they had secured the services of top designers who have worked on the campaign for free. Thanks to funding from The Jerusalem Trust and donations from the public and churches, the group are hopeful that based on previous years success, around 1,000 poster sites and 30 radio stations will be covered this year.

When this story was first posted on the *Freethinker* website, one reader "BarrieJohn" suggested that Muslims should take a leaf out of the Christians' book and launch a Mobaby ad: "He rants, he raves; he waves the sword!"

The same person spotted a similarity to the horror doll, Chuckie, and another – Saul Hewish – Photoshopped the image to create Dogbaby.