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the voice of atheism since 1881

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Catholics predict a 'springtime for Christianity' in Europe, then warn of its imminent 'eclipse'

In mid-October, the Pope optimistically predicted that Europe is about to experience a "new springtime for Christianity". Less than two weeks later a synod of bishops from around the world who gathered at the Vatican warned that the Roman Catholic faith in many advanced countries risks being "eclipsed" by an increasingly secularised and materialistic world

The bishops had massed to discuss strategies on how to woo lapsed faithful back to the fold. The alarm was sounded in the final message of the synod who met to discuss the "New Evangelisation", or the need to stop the haemorrhaging of the faithful, particularly in developed countries.

"Everywhere indeed we feel the need to revive a faith that risks eclipse in cultural contexts that hinders its taking root in persons and its presence in society," the message said.

Reuters reported that the 1.2 billion-member Church will have its work cut out for it in developed nations in order to win back "the often distracted and confused hearts and minds of the men and women of our times".

The Church is suffering desertions from its practicing flock in former strongholds in Europe, North America and Latin America due to sex abuse scandals, increasing secularism, rival faiths and open dissent against Church teachings on homosexuality and its ban on a female priesthood.

The message, a synthesis of the topics discussed over three weeks by more than 260 bishops, said that while the Gospel could not be "a product to be placed in the market of religions", the Church needed to find new ways of putting it "into practice in today's circumstances".

It took a swipe at the US and Canada, saying North America needed to "recognise the many expressions of the present culture in the countries of your world which are today far from the Gospel".



Confused: Pope Ratzinger can't seem to make up his mind

While the 10-page message tried to convey optimism, the synod was dotted with examples of the hurdles the Church faces in its attempt to re-evangelize people in countries that were once a bedrock of the faith. During the synod, some bishops said it had become more difficult to ask lapsed and lukewarm Catholics to return to the Church after the sexual abuse scandals that had engulfed the Catholic Church in the past decade.

"We are believers ... we believe that the spirit of the Lord still is the principle of the source of whatever healing should happen," Archbishop-

op Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila told a news conference presenting the message when asked about the sexual abuse crisis.

"This optimism is not in order to lead us to a false sense of serenity but really to drive us to find ways in addressing those really painful and scandalising moments in the Church," said Tagle, who is one of six prelates who is due to be elevated to the high rank of cardinal this month.

Abuse scandals have been one of the greatest challenges faced by the Catholic Church, undermining its status as a moral arbiter and forcing it to pay hundreds of millions of dollars in compensation worldwide.

When the synod opened the Pope acknowledged there were "bad fish" in the Church but urged lapsed Catholics to rediscover their faith and stop the advance of what he called a "spiritual decertification" in the developed world.

His earlier "springtime for Christianity" prediction was part of a new documentary, entitled *Bells of Europe: A Journey into the Faith in Europe*, in which Ratzinger said: "The desire for God ... is profoundly inscribed into each human soul and cannot disappear. Certainly we

(Continued on back page)

Secularism and equality

OPHELIA BENSON REFLECTS ON FEMINISM, SKEPTICISM AND OBAMA'S SECOND VICTORY

I gave a talk at the Center for Inquiry in Los Angeles last weekend on the relationship between secularism and equality. One of the questions from the audience was why bring feminism into skepticism, when feminism is an ideology and skepticism is concerned with pseudoscience and quack medicine and the like.

There's a lot of turmoil right now about whether various egalitarian views and movements have anything to do with secularism, atheism, freethinking or skepticism. Many people argue that egalitarian movements are ideologies, and as such are not just irrelevant to atheism and skepticism but incompatible with them. The idea here is that ideologies are enemies of truth-seeking and free inquiry, because they reject any facts that don't mesh with the ideology.

That can be true, and it's important always to keep it in mind, but that's not all there is to be said.

Egalitarianism isn't necessarily an ideolo-



Wisconsin's Tammy Baldwin became the first openly gay member of the US Senate

gy in that sense; it's a political idea, a moral commitment. Democracy is one form of egalitarianism, and it needn't be an ideology. It certainly doesn't rest on any factual claims about all humans being identical, so it doesn't have to reject or ignore any evidence showing that humans are not identical. Democracy instead is a *practice*, based on assumptions about fairness rather than sameness.

Other egalitarian views – feminism, anti-racism, gay rights, opposition to xenophobia – can be seen the same way: as moral commitments about practices, rather than airborne claims that every human “equals” every other the way 3=3.

Or to put it another way, we've outgrown the idea that whoever has the biggest fist gets to grab all the things. Our social arrangements, however, have not all caught up with this, as Mill pointed out in *The Subjection of Women*:

If people are mostly so little aware how completely, during the greater part of the duration of our species, the law of force was the avowed rule of general conduct, any other being only a special and exceptional consequence of peculiar ties — and from how very recent a date it is that the affairs of society in general have been even pretended to be regulated according to any moral law; as little do people remember or consider, how institutions and customs which never had any ground but the law of force, last on into ages and states of general opinion which never would have permitted their first establishment.

And the fact is that this approach is a

better fit with secularism and atheism than with theocracy and theism. It's a this-world approach, based on human ideas of what's fair and reasonable for people on earth.

Happily, a this-world approach did well in the US elections three days ago – better than most of us this-worlders expected. Elizabeth Warren, the Harvard Law School professor and terror of the bankers, was elected Senator for Massachusetts. Tammy Baldwin was elected Senator for Wisconsin. Six years ago Wisconsin voted for a ban on gay marriage, and now the same state sends the first openly gay Senator to Washington. There are now 20 women in the US Senate, the most in US history (though still a paltry fraction).

Then there are those who lost. Todd Akin is the Republican who said that women who are victims of what he called “legitimate rape” rarely get pregnant from the rape because “the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down”; he lost the Missouri Senate race to incumbent Claire McCaskill, to the unfettered joy of everyone I know. Richard Mourdock (pronounced like Murdoch, oddly enough), also Republican and also an expert on rape, ran for the Senate from Indiana and lost to the Democrat, Joe Donnelly. Mourdock's contribution to conservative rape doctrine was to say that if a woman becomes pregnant after being raped it was “something that God intended to happen”.

Voters in three states – Maine, Maryland, and Washington – voted to legalize same-sex marriage, and Minnesota voters rejected a ban. Washington State (where I live, I'm proud to say) also voted to legalize recreational marijuana.

And then, the very right-wing pro-plutocrat Mormon Republican candidate for President lost.

It's hard to resist the temptation to see signs of progress here. If progress is putting it too strongly, it is still good to know that even here in the US there is such a thing as too much theocracy.



OPHELIA BENSON Picking fights with God

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All correspondence to:
The Freethinker

3 Queens Road, Beckenham, Kent
BR3 4JN

Email: barry@freethinker.co.uk

Tel: 01273 782 111

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

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Outrage expressed over death of an Indian woman who died after being refused an abortion in Catholic Ireland

THE mother of a young woman who died in Ireland in October after doctors refused to perform an abortion that may have saved her life has slammed the country's strict anti-abortion law.

Savita Halappanavar's mother, who lives with her husband in Belgaum, southwest India, said that "in order to save a three-week child, they killed my 31-year-old daughter". Savita's father added: "This is because of the negligence of the Irish doctors. We are looking for an enquiry. Irish rules must be changed."

Savita's husband, Praveen Halappanavar, an engineer at Boston Scientific in Galway, said: "Savita was really in agony. She was very upset, but she accepted she was losing the baby. When the consultant came on the ward rounds, Savita asked if they could not save the baby, could they end the pregnancy? The consultant said: 'As long as there is a foetal heartbeat, we can't do anything'.

"Again the next morning the consultant said it was the law, that this is a Catholic country. Savita said 'I am neither Irish nor Catholic' but they said there was nothing they could do."

He said his wife vomited repeatedly and collapsed in a restroom that night, but doctors wouldn't terminate the foetus because its heart was still beating. The foetus died the following day and its remains were surgically removed.

Within hours, Savita was placed under sedation in intensive care with blood poisoning and Praveen was never able to speak with her again. She was pronounced dead on Sunday, October 28. Praveen Halappanavar took his wife's remains back to India for a Hindu funeral and cremation on November 3.

Rachel Donnelly, a spokeswoman for Galway Pro-Choice, an abortion rights organisation, said: "If a story like this does not change the minds of the political establishment in Ireland, I don't know what will. We need to ensure something like this never happens again."

But the pro-life Youth Defence group, which campaigns against any change in the existing abortion laws, released a statement



Savita Halappanavar

in response to the death stating that "Ireland's ban on abortion does not pose a threat to women's lives".

The hardest-hitting reaction to the tragedy came from Professor P Z Myers, an American scientist and biology professor at the University of Minnesota Morris (UMM) and the founder and co-author of the *Pharyngula* science blog.

He wrote:

Monsters, every one of them. Seriously, shut them down. There is no acceptable reason that any hospital in any country should be shackled by the antiquated beliefs of Catholicism. Catholics should no more be permitted to manage hospitals than Jehovah's Witnesses are permitted to regulate blood transfusions. We are talking about simple, routine procedures that could save lives that are disallowed by a church. What are they doing in the surgery in the first place?

This is only the latest atrocity. Fuck the Catholic Church. Empty every pew, loot every coffer, disband every level of the hierarchy, take all their property and turn it over to secular authorities to be managed ethically and rationally.

And if you're still attending church ... what the hell is wrong with you?"

India's Ministry of External Affairs was also taking an interest in the death of the dentist. It said last month that the Indian embassy in Dublin was closely monitoring the developments. It stated: "We deeply regret the tragic death of Ms Halappanavar. Our Embassy in Dublin is following the matter closely. We understand that the Irish authorities have initiated two enquiries and we are awaiting the results."

India National Commission for Women also said a change in Ireland's laws was needed.

Even an Indian Catholic priest, Father Dominic Emmanuel, entered the fray, saying that while the Church forbids abortion, the mother in this case should have been saved.

The debate over legalising abortion in Ireland boiled over on November 14 when the Irish Government confirmed the circumstances of Savita's death. Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny said he was awaiting findings from three investi-

gations into the death.

Her case highlighted the legal limbo in which pregnant women facing severe health problems can find themselves in predominantly Catholic Ireland.

Ireland's constitution officially bans abortion, but a 1992 Supreme Court ruling found the procedure should be legalised in cases where a woman's life is at risk from continuing the pregnancy.

CBC News reported that five governments since have refused to pass a law resolving the confusion, leaving Irish hospitals reluctant to terminate pregnancies except in the most obviously life-threatening circumstances.

The vast bulk of Irish women wanting abortions, an estimated 4,000 per year, simply travel to England, where abortion has been legal on demand since 1967. But that option is difficult, if not impossible, for women in failing health.

The hospital declined to say whether doctors believed Halappanavar's blood poisoning could have been reversed had she received an abortion rather than waiting for the foetus to die on its own.

In a statement, it described its own investigation into the death, and a parallel probe by the government's Health Service Executive, as "standard practice" whenever a pregnant woman dies in a hospital.

The Galway coroner also planned a public inquest.

On November 14, angry protesters bearing placards with pictures of Savita gathered outside Leinster House, the Irish Parliament building, to call for the legalisation of abortion in Ireland.



justplaincrazy

ANOTHER 'MARY' SIGHTING

HUNDREDS of Catholics gathered in prayer and worship outside the Sime Darby Medical Centre in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia last month after claiming to see an image of the Virgin Mary on a seventh-floor hospital window. Worshippers also claimed they could see an image of Jesus Christ two windows below.

Said Eunice Fernandez: "We believe Mary, mother of God, has a message for us, as she is looking down on us and then at a Malaysian flag. We can also see Jesus and he is also moving, they are not static."

Father Lawrence Andrew said that the Church would need to investigate the experiences of the witnesses: "It could be private revelations. We have to make sure they are not imagined, but real apparitions."

EX-PRIEST LOSES EAR IN BRAWL

AN 80-year-old retired priest allegedly bit an ear off another elderly clergyman during a violent brawl over a parking bay at their Perth accommodation block.

The punch-up broke out last month in a Dianella complex that houses three retired Catholic priests.

Father Thomas Henry Byrne was charged with grievous bodily harm over the incident involving his neighbour, 81-year-old Father Thomas Joseph Cameron Smith.

After the brawl, Smith wrapped his ear in a tea towel and drove to a medical centre. He later underwent reconstructive surgery.

Byrne sported a black eye when he appeared in East Perth Magistrates Court where he did not enter a plea.

Magistrate Greg Benn imposed strict bail conditions on Byrne, including not going within ten metres of Smith, nor acting in a violent or threatening manner towards him or attempting to communicate with him.

PYRAMIDS IN EGYPT MUST GO

A RADICAL Muslim leader in Egypt has threatened to bulldoze the Great Sphinx and the pyramids of Giza.

Murgan Salem al-Gohary, a jihadist with links to the Taliban, told Egyptian media that the historical landmarks are "idolatrous" and must be destroyed.

His threats are being taken seriously because ten years ago Gohary helped smash Buddha statues in Afghanistan. He said it was the duty of Muslims to apply the teachings of Islam and remove these idols, "just as we did in Afghanistan".

New C of E top dog warns against homophobia in a broken Anglican Church

THE Archbishop of Canterbury elect, the Rt Rev Justin Welby who will be enthroned in March, said in his first major statement since the announcement of his appointment that homophobia is unacceptable within the Anglican communion. However, he will face an uphill struggle to convince Anglicans in Africa.

The Director of an organisation called Changing Attitudes, the Rev Colin Coward, said: "Homophobia is having a disastrous effect in places like Uganda and Nigeria and that is something that Rowan Williams has had to try and confront, not very successfully.

"I hope Justin Welby's steeliness demonstrates itself in relations to the Communion and that he has the confidence to say to people that such behaviour against lesbian and gay people really is intolerable."

The current Bishop of Durham strongly supports women bishops, but has so far been opposed to same-sex marriage. But his comments were positive about civil partnerships, and the responsibility of the state to decide about authorising such partnerships. He indicated that he would listen and reflect on issues that have been dividing opinion in the Church of England and within the worldwide Anglican Communion.

He declared in his opening statement at a press conference at Lambeth Palace last month: "We face deep differences over the issue of sexuality. It is absolutely right for the state to define the rights and status of people co-habiting in different forms of relationships, including civil partnerships. We must have no truck with any form of homophobia, in any part of the Church."

He added: "I know I need to listen very attentively to the LGBT communities, and examine my own thinking prayerfully and carefully. I am always averse to the language of exclusion, when what we are called to is to love in the same way as Jesus Christ loves us. Above all in the Church we need to create safe spaces for these issues to be discussed honestly and in love."

Though a strong evangelical, Bishop Wel-



Archbishop-elect Justin Welby

by was described by the Dean of Manchester Cathedral, Michael Sadgrove, as belonging to "a more holistic, more Catholic world."

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby has an opportunity to "witness boldly to God's love for all, including LGBT people", the Lesbian

and Gay Christian Movement commented. "Church involvement has been falling in recent decades and, for some people, unjust treatment of LGBT people has been a factor," the movement added.

It pointed out that in the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey, only 37 percent of the Anglicans who responded thought that same-sex relationships were always (or almost always) wrong, while a 2012 YouGov survey found that 79 percent of British Anglicans aged 18-29 believe that same-sex relationships are as valid as heterosexual ones.

"However, when in office, archbishops have failed to acknowledge publicly the strength of the case for greater inclusion, and this failure has harmed LGBT people."

... and then there's that little misogyny problem

THE CHURCH of England last month became a "national embarrassment" when its General Synod narrowly failed to pass draft legislation which would have allowed women to become bishops.

The "national embarrassment" remark came from the Bishop of Chelmsford, speaking to religious affairs journalist Andrew Brown. He failed to respond to Brown's suggestion that it had committed "a long and boring suicide".

Outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, spoke of his "deep personal sadness" after the vote and of his concern for its consequences.

He and Welby had their eloquent pleas for unity and progress ignored by a hard-line minority. The Archbishop elect tweeted afterwards: "Very grim day, most of all for women priests and supporters."

Catholic Church warned not to try to impose its vision of society on France

SHORTLY after the leader of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, was named Bigot of the Year by gay rights charity Stonewall, for saying, among other things, that same-sex partnerships were "harmful to the physical, mental and spiritual well-being of those involved", a spokesman for France's governing Socialist Party, David Assouline, said that it was not the Catholic Church's role "to oppose the will of the legislature, especially concerning civil marriage in a secular republic."

The party launched a swingeing attack on the Church for campaigning against its plan to legalise same-sex marriage.

Paris Cardinal Andre Vingt-Trois spoke against the proposed law in October and encouraged Catholics to write to their elected officials and take to the streets in protest against the reform due to be voted on by mid-2013.

Jean-Marie Le Guen, Socialist senator from Paris, said: "I'm shocked by this attitude which I think is a kind of return to a fundamentalism that I find problematic."

In his Lourdes speech, Vingt-Trois, who is head of the bishops' conference, said legalising same-sex marriage would profoundly affect the equilibrium of French society and harm children who would grow up without a father and a mother.

Citing the slogan of the campaign for gay matrimony he said: "It will not be 'marriage for all'. It will be the marriage of a few imposed on all."

Erwann Binet, the Socialist Party's expert on the issue of same-sex marriage, said he hoped that the Catholics don't try to impose their vision of the family on the society."

He told the *Le Parisien* newspaper France now has many different types of families, including homosexuals who are bringing up children.

"We parliamentarians should assure that all these forms of family can have the same rights.

He also said that gay couples should have the right to adopt children or to resort to medically assisted procreation, both of which are only allowed to heterosexuals now.

The Catholic Church and France's Jewish, Muslim, Orthodox Christian and Buddhist



Cardinals O'Brien and Vingt-Trois

religious minorities have been especially severe in criticising France's provisions for gay adoption and assisted procreation.

Commenting on O'Brien's win and the barrage of criticism Stonewall received after naming O'Brien the top bigot of 2012, Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said that the award was well

American Humanists launch 'Kids Without God' website

THE American Humanist Association (AHA) last month began targeting youngsters in a new advertising campaign and with a website called *Kids Without God*.

The campaign was created to strengthen and support kids and teenagers who don't believe in a god.

The main focus of the effort is to drive children to its new website. The AHA said: "This engaging resource offers a welcoming home for humanist, atheist and other non-traditionally religious kids where they can find information untainted by supernaturalism on a wide range of topics, including religion in public schools, science, discrimination, sexuality and reading suggestions."

Roy Speckhardt, AHA's Executive Director, added: "Whether they already made up their minds to reject supernatural explanations, or are just questioning, it's time to make available an online resource that's built just for kids without God."

earned, "and, once again, the aggressive Catholic Church is playing its age-old trick of turning the tables on its critics and making itself into the victim. It's a familiar technique which we've seen deployed repeatedly in the clerical child abuse scandal.

"When the Church has been found out not only to be enabling paedophiles within its ranks, but then concealing their activities from the authorities, it has constantly tried to shift the blame on to some-

one or something else.

"The Church has nominated a whole raft of villains as culpable for its crimes: an American problem, irresponsible permissiveness, then it was the gay community, then it was unfair reporters – and even 'secular values'. All have been made whipping boys by the Vatican."

Sanderson continued: "When Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor was found to have covered the tracks of a notorious child abuser in his Arundel diocese, all investigations suddenly ceased when he claimed that he was being victimised by the media.

"Now we have Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who has said some vile and hate-mongering things about gay people, all but dehumanising them by referring to paedophilia and bestiality, being portrayed as a victim of wicked gays because they dared to speak back to him."

He added: "But Stonewall is absolutely right. The Cardinal is a bigot, and the award was appropriate and well deserved.

"Let us not forget that it was the Catholic Church who declared this war on gay people, not the other way round. Is the LGBT community supposed simply to sit back and take whatever abuse and defamation the Catholic Church chooses to hand out?

"The Church, after all, is trying to deny gay people their human rights. And it seems it will stop at no dirty trick to achieve its goal.

"We say, lay off Stonewall and turn a more realistic spotlight on the scheming and conniving of a highly politicised Catholic Church. We hope that Barclays and Courtts will not reward the Cardinal's dehumanisation of this oppressed minority and add to it by withholding their generous funding."

American religious extreme

PAUL KARAFFA says that people in the US are getting increasingly annoyed

THIS calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666.

- Revelation 13:18

The number of the beast, to 80s heavy metal fans, is a classic Iron Maiden song; but to evangelical Christians, it is a symbol of the end times, when a rapture will occur leaving only the free-spirited, freethinking, non-religious individuals to roam the earth. Sounds great, right?

For Tim Tebow, a highly religious American Football star, it is a frightful thought.

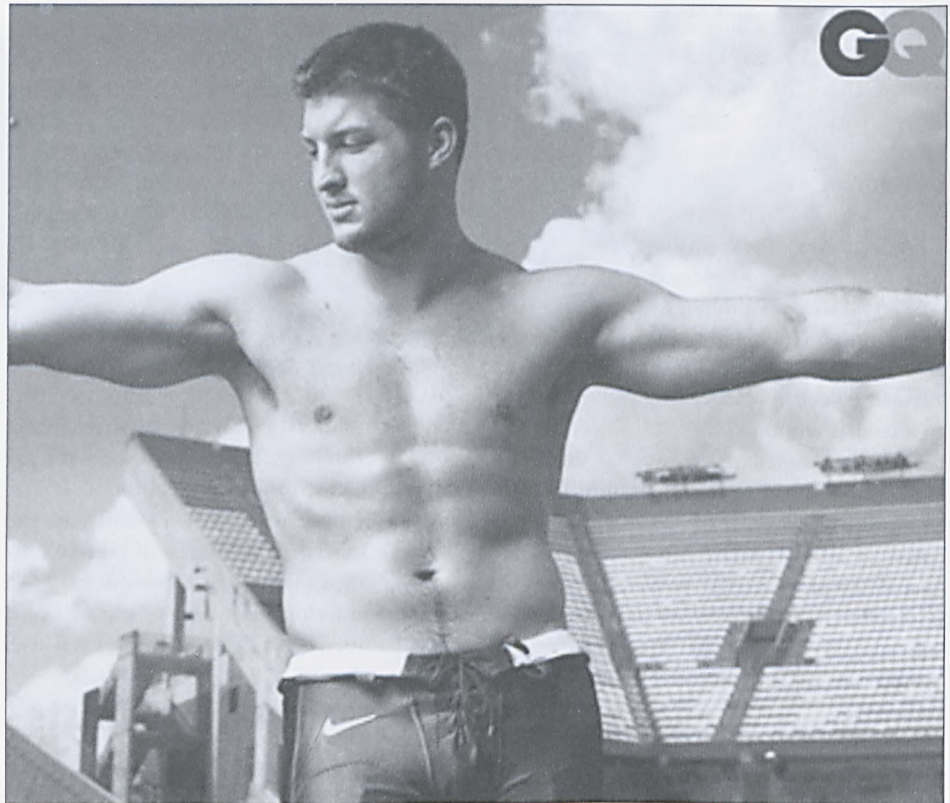
In the US, Monday Night Football has become something of an American tradition. Some families gather at home, friends meet in sports bars, all to watch the game together. But, on October 8, 2012, the date of the 666th Monday Night Football game, Tim Tebow took to Twitter handing over the "glory" of the night to God.

Religious and non-religious people alike questioned his message. *USA Today*, in a bit of a quip wrote: "I'm not sure what he was going for here. Does playing in a game number that's identical to the mark of the beast worry him? Or is anything with the number 666 a good way to promote his faith?"

It wouldn't be the first time that a celebrity used their fame to promote their beliefs. In the US, it has become the standard of celebrities to thank God, Jesus, or L Ron Hubbard for their successes. But that may be about to change, as more and more Americans are claiming no religious identity.

A study released only a day after Tim Tebow threw salt over his shoulder and turned around three times with crossed fingers gave a glimpse into just how annoyed Americans are getting with religionists. The Pew Forum On Religion & Public Life released a new study called "*Nones*" on the Rise highlighting the apparent rapid growth of atheist, agnostics, and those that are religiously unaffiliated.

Their studies concluded that from 2007 the growth of the religiously unaffiliated has grown from 15.3 percent to nearly 19.6 percent. Protestants decreased from 53 percent to 48 percent; Catholics decreased from 23 percent to 22 percent. Other religious affiliations stayed relatively consistent. The General Social Survey (GSS) conducted its own research over a span of nearly four decades



Tim Tebow is said to be one of America's most devout sportsmen, but, ironically, in September this year he outraged many of his religious fans with his 'sexy Jesus' pose which was published in GQ Magazine

which showed that from the 1970s through the early 1990s the demographic of religiously unaffiliated was below 10 percent. This group began to rise significantly in the 1990s reaching 18 percent in the 2010 GSS research study.

The Pew Forum concluded that the growth of the religiously unaffiliated is in part due to a change in thinking from generation to generation. One third, or 34 percent, of those surveyed between the ages of 18-22 years old claimed to be religiously unaffiliated. The study found that "older millennials (ages 23-30) also are substantially less likely than prior generations to be religiously affiliated".

The study also found that older generations have decreased their religious affiliation by a significant amount. Their final conclusions were that young adults were not only less likely to be affiliated to a religion as their elders, but that the percentage of Americans who were raised without any type of affiliation has been rising gradually "from about three percent in the early 1970s to about 8 percent in the past decade".

Trying put a brave face on the study the Rev Eileen Linder, a Presbyterian pastor and editor of *The Yearbook of American Canadian Churches* stated: "We are still twice as likely to be affiliated with a religion than Europeans, but there is strong evidence that our religious institutions, as we configured them in past centuries, are playing a less significant role in American life".

Eileen is correct. The role has been decreasing significantly. One in three Americans will claim no religion within the next decade based on current trends. These number give proof that the dialogue is changing in the US and that celebrities (and dare I say politicians) will likely have to change their message so as not to destroy their careers. Many Americans would claim that opening up about their disbelief in God has been one of the hardest things to do in their life; and though it is still not an easy ordeal, especially for those with highly religious family connections, saying you are a non-believer is becoming easier.

This, for many religionists, is worrisome. Rev Albert Mohler, President of the South-

tremism and indifference

annoyed with religionists, and cites some interesting statistics to back his claim

ern Baptists Theological Seminary in Louisville gave an eerie response to the Pew Forum research reports: "Today, there's no shame in saying you're an unbeliever, no cultural pressure to claim a religious affiliation, no matter how remote or loose. This is a wake-up call. We have an incredible challenge ahead for

committed Christians". Beware the Christians are coming!

For some in the age range of 18-22 years, such as Tim Tebow, the delusion of God plays a large role in their lives; but statistics have shown that those without religious affiliation are highly unlikely to change, whereas those

affiliated with religion have a good chance of coming to their senses. Non-religious Americans have a long road to travel before they will be in the majority, but with the ever-quickenning exchange of information and the right to freedom of speech, Americans may be traveling in the fast lane.

You don't need Christ to enjoy Christmas

RICHARD WHITE says atheists are living proof that we can enjoy the season without religion

WE IN the 21st century Western world live in a society that is, perhaps more than any time in history, concerned with reason and logic. A quick look at public health measures, such as the smoking ban, assure us that anything enacted is done so because "the evidence" tells us it is wise; gone are the days of alcohol prohibition where part of the reason for enacting a ban was for reasons of morality and it was accepted as such.

At the same time, however, we adore our fiction and mystery: the tooth fairy, the Easter bunny, Santa Claus (albeit those are considered nice stories for the kids, and there's no harm in that) and our chosen god. Granted, a belief in god isn't the annual festivity of the aforementioned fictional characters, and belief in it is ever diminishing – it seems as society evolves and science progresses, we ditch more and more of our incessant need for religion, which is the so-called theory of the "god of the gaps". The god of the gaps is the basis that we harbour a belief in god to cover up our ignorance, hence belief in the rain god before understanding of the water cycle, the sun god before our understanding of nuclear energy, and so on. For those of us who declare ourselves atheists or anti-theists like Christopher Hitchens, we often wonder why the idea of an omnipotent deity remains so prevalent; so does it have any similarity to our stories of Santa and the Easter bunny?

The main difference between these festive characters and our chosen god is of course the fact that we all acknowledge the first to be fictional while the latter is held to be true by the faithful. Religious folk accept that such gods as Zeus and Thor were false, created in man's image to counter prevalent ignorance of how the world works, and as Richard

Dawkins eloquently stated: "We are all atheists, some of us just take it one god further". Those that don't take it one god further find themselves trapped by reason: "yes, of course, *those* gods were false, but the one I believe in is true." And, for oh so long we've been told to respect those views, that faith is a good thing, that it causes no harm – with all traces of memory of the Inquisition, the Crusades, 9/11 and 7/7 disappearing faster than a hit-and-run suspect, not to mention the almost regular honour killings taking place on the shores of Britain in the name of religion.

Every year we enjoy the magic of Christmas; whether we're religious or not we appreciate the time with family, the exchanging of gifts, and the period of reflection. Indeed, atheists are living proof that Christmas can exist just fine without religion, and no doubt that's largely because it's no longer a birthday celebration but a dedicated time for us to put work and trivial matters aside and look at our families and see what's important. And as a final nail in the coffin on the matter, the celebration of Christmas predates Christianity anyway – as do most things cowering inside the religion, but that's for another day.

It's not a new argument that religion is responsible for countless heinous acts, the wake of destruction is too deep and wide to ever be defensible. And yet religion and its followers are convinced it teaches compassion, morals, teaches us how to be better beings, but the fact of the matter is religion teaches misinformation, fear and disdain of established facts. The simple truth is there's no valid reason for anyone to hold the belief today that the world is 5,000 years old. The tired argument that atheists are immoral is just that: tired, and baseless. Indeed, a strong argument is

that people who need religion to act morally aren't moral at all. A glance at other living creatures on our planet explicitly show how love and affection permeate throughout the animal kingdom, and I've never seen a dog wilfully go to church or take communion. Conversely, the very enemies of religion, such as Hitchens and Dawkins, are the very people openly expressing the need for truth, information, facts; or in other words the very thing religion claims to be providing. These two men and countless more like them oppose religion on the grounds of its immorality, yet it claims to be teaching morality. Perhaps we have quietly witnessed a changing paradigm, where the enemies of the organisations have taken the reigns and are teaching what said organisations purported to be offering, except through truth rather than dogma.

There is no issue with Christmas, fairy tales or stories of fiction, except for when those stories are labelled as truth and sold at a price – in this case the price is a premium of ignorance and intolerance. Without religion, many dividers would not exist: to the Northern Irish, the Catholics and Protestants would simply be people, as would the Palestinians and Israelites. The wars and horrors suffered by those people exist because of their faith. And so at Christmas, let's focus on the true message of compassion and time with family and leave the archaic ruins at the door. And while plenty has been written about the late, great Christopher Hitchens since his death, it is his words that provide a perfect ending to this article: "I am absolutely convinced that the main source of hatred in the world is religion." If anyone could hazard a guess at the total death toll amassed from religion, doubtless it would be difficult to disagree with the man.

A cat's-eye view of creation and all that

If cats wrote the Bible is a festive season fantasy written for the *Freethinker* by **PAUL BURNS**

In the beginning Bastet created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, not even enough to scrape a hole in. And the Spirit of Bastet moved upon the face of the waters, though on the whole She much preferred to remain dry.

And Bastet said, "Let there be light": and there was light. And She blinked.

And Bastet saw the light, that it was good, yet She never forgot that darkness gives the advantage to gifted eyes.

And Bastet called the light Day, and the darkness She called Night. And She saw that both were good for sleeping.

And Bastet said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." And at last, there was land to scrape and within which to bury that which is better buried.

And Bastet made the sun and tested its warmth on Her fur and it was good.

And Bastet made the moon and blessed it with the first caterwauling.

And Bastet said, "Let the earth bring forth grass and other plants with seeds to feed an army of mice."

And Bastet said, "Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and fowl that may fly above the earth. For cats shall not live by mice alone."

And Bastet said, Let the earth bring forth creeping things that will amuse catkind.

And Bastet said, "Let us make catkind in Our furry image, after Our likeness: and let catkind have dominion over the mice of the land, and the fish that live in shallow waters, and over the fowl of the air that come within the reach of a paw."

And Bastet created two cats, one female and one male. And unto both she gave whiskers because She loved her supreme creations.

And Bastet said unto them, "Be fruitful and multiply."

And Tibbles and Tom did not need to be told twice.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them.

And on the seventh day Bastet ended Her work; and She slept on all of the seventh day rather than just for twenty-two hours of it.

A mist went up from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground so that there would be more seeds to feed the

mice and fowl and more water for fish.

And Bastet formed a man and a woman from clay, and nudged their sides and padded their chests and they became living things.

And Bastet planted a garden eastward in Catden; and there She put the man and woman whom She had formed.

And She bid them and their children forever to take care of catkind.

And Bastet commanded the humans, saying, "Of every animal of the garden thou may freely eat, provided thou share tasty morsels with the cats and clean up any cat sick.

"Of every tree of the garden thou may freely eat, provided thou showest affection whenever a cat seeks it and keep the dogs from annoying their betters.

"And humans may make a bed or sit in any place other than where a cat has chosen to rest."

Now the serpent envied cats.

Why should he have scaly skin and shiver through the night when catkind had soft fur that kept them warm through all the hours?

And why should cats have hearing and eyesight and elegant whiskers that made the hunting so easy they played at it as well as chasing food?

And why should cats have humans as their servants and be the favourites of Bastet?

And the serpent shared its poisonous thoughts with the two humans until they neglected the cats.

But the cats were not having it, and with a gnashing of teeth and whishing of tails they meowed to Bastet saying, "The humans have forgotten their place in Thine great scheme of things and the dogs keep not a respectful distance."

And the humans heard the angry snarling of Bastet as She walked in the garden in the cool of the day, and the humans hid themselves amongst the trees of the garden.

But they could not conceal themselves as well as cats do.

And Bastet sniffed the air and found the scent of human guilt and fear.

She followed Her nose until She could hear nervous breathing.

Bastet said unto the humans, "What is this that thou hast done and allowed the dogs to do?"

And the humans said, "The serpent beguiled us, and we did neglect the cats and did usurp their resting places."

And Bastet spake unto the serpent, "Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life.

"And the poison thou spoke shall remain forever in thine mouth as thou slitherest outside of Catden."

And unto the humans She said, "Because thou hast not heeded my commandments, go from the garden."

So Bastet drove out the humans and also the dogs whom she found repellent with their slobbering one moment and going berserk the next.

And She placed at the cat flaps of the Garden of Catden angelic cats with flaming claws to keep out the cursed humans, dogs and serpents.

And it came to pass that some of the cats chose to leave Catden with the humans.

For it was ever the case, that cats are generous with their affection when the mood takes them.

And no matter how beautiful the garden, fences are made to climb and the land next door tempts the bowels more than familiar ground.

And the heart of Bastet was touched by the generous spirit of the cats that went with the humans and She commanded that each cat have nine lives.

And Bastet commanded that Catden serve as a paradise for the souls of the cats who had volunteered to accompany the banished humans.

And She also promised entry to the happy hunting ground that is Catden to the souls of the cats begot by the volunteers and all the descendants of the volunteers.

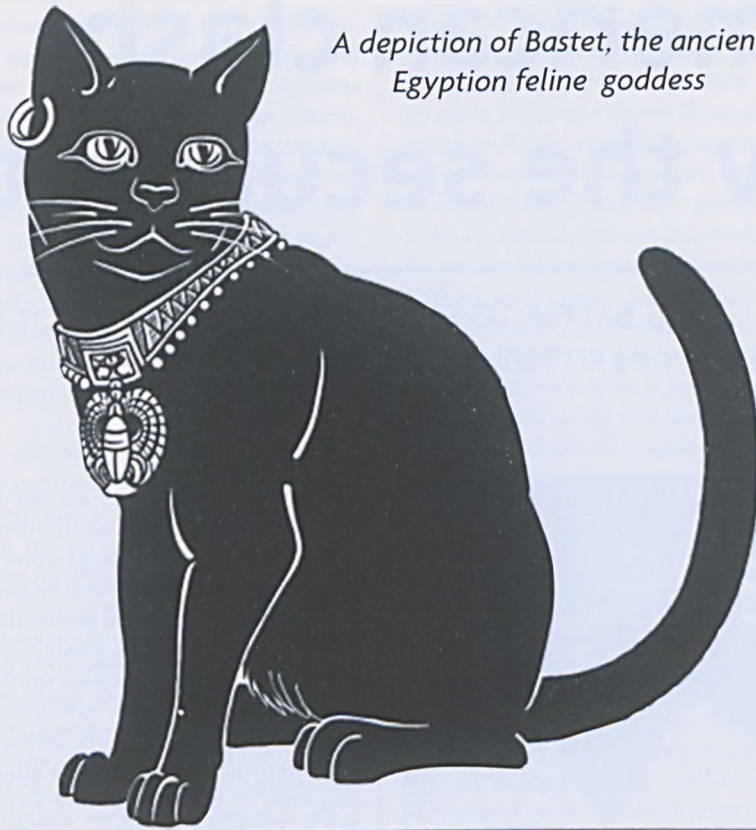
Noah

And it came to pass, when humans had begun to multiply on the face of the earth, that they ignored the duty Bastet had given them.

Cat sick went ignored. Dogs forgot their place. The sleep of cats was disturbed and their every wish was not granted or at the least the meeting of it was tardy.

Only one man, Noah, ensured that all in his family cared for their cats as Bastet had commanded.

And Bastet saw that the wickedness of humans and dogs was great in the earth.



A depiction of Bastet, the ancient Egyptian feline goddess

And Bastet said, "I will remove unworthy humans and all dogkind from the face of the earth."

And Bastet said unto Noah, "The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with a lack of consideration of cats."

And She had Noah build an ark with the upper deck reserved for all the cats on the earth and a lower deck for humans and other lesser beings.

And Bastet commanded Noah not to let any dog on board the ark, but to take many of the mice and other small beasts that cats enjoy hunting.

And Bastet commanded Noah to take on board a male and a female of each kind of creature that liveth on the land or flyeth.

And the cats boarded first and, when they were comfortable, Noah and his family gathered the other animals that would enter the ark.

And when the dogs saw that Noah permitted none of their kind to approach the ark, they made themselves look like other creatures.

And Noah whose eyes were no younger than his six hundred years admitted the disguised dogs and they hid their unwelcome faces among the clutter on the lower deck.

But the all-seeing Bastet punished the dogs by making them and their offspring keep the form of their disguise.

And even now dogs are big and small, sleek and plump, and come in many colours and with ears, faces and tails that vary greatly.

And the waters prevailed upon the earth and all the high hills were covered.

And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, of mice, of dog, of fowl and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every human who had spurned a cat.

And all that remained alive was in the ark.

And Noah brought some of the smaller creatures from the lower deck to the upper deck where they became playthings and food for the cats.

And the cats sore needed playthings and food to soothe their cabin fever, for lo the raindrops fell with the force of swiping paws and confined the cats within.

And many were the scratch marks in the gopher wood that sheltered the cats on the upper deck.

In the seventh month, the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat.

And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month when the tops of the mountains were seen.

And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the cat flap of the ark that he had made.

And he sent forth a raven, which was too slow for one of the cats and black feathers fluttered all around.

Noah next sent forth a dove to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground.

But the dove found no perch and she returned tired to the ark where a cat that slept not found her easy prey.

And Noah stayed yet seven days more; and again he sent forth a dove out of the ark.

And the dove returned in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf.

And the humans rejoiced that the waters were abated.

But the cats had a knowing smile because an olive leaf was not food unto them nor even food for a human. Yea, not even a dog would lick it.

And in the second month was the earth dried.

And Bastet spake to Noah, "Make the earth again a suitable place for catkind."

And Noah let the cats off first. Then went forth from the ark every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth.

And Noah builded an altar unto Bastet and took young animals born on the ark and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

And the sweet savour awoke the cats and they came near the altar where they whooshed and lay on their backs looking cute until fed the less burnt parts of the offerings.

And it pleased Bastet to see so sated by humans those She had made in Her furry likeness.

Bastet said in Her heart, "I will not again curse the ground with rain for so many days. My cats will never again endure such cabin fever."

And Bastet blessed the cats, and said unto them, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth.

"And every beast of the earth shall be in awe of thy fearful speed and stunning beauty.

"Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for thou. And what thou cannot bring down thyself, a human will serve unto thou."

And Bastet did sweep her claws across the heavens in a great arc and where the sky was scratched were diverse colours.

And Bastet commanded the humans to look in wonder at her sign and to recall each time it appeared in the sky that the primary duty of humans is to serve those She hath made in Her furry likeness.

• **PAUL BURNS** is a London-based writer who earlier this year won first prize in the Leonard A Koval Memorial short story competition. He studied Psychology in Wellington, New Zealand, and was a primary school teacher. He helped survivors of torture as a volunteer for seven years. Capturing the accounts of survivors for legal and therapeutic purposed reignited his interest in writing. His first published novel, *Mr Vitriol*, is available from Amazon. Sample chapters are available from Head in the Clouds. <http://paulburns.site50.net/>

A very American clash: Duquesne v the secularists

NICK SHADOWEN RECOUNTS A LOSING BATTLE TO ESTABLISH A SECULAR SOCIETY
AT A CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY IN PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

“IT HAS to be a realistic organization that fits within the Mission,” said a Duquesne University official. That was her explanation to a reporter from the school paper when asked why the Catholic university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania had just denied my proposed student club, The Duquesne Secular Society (DSS), in the fall of 2011.

A Philosophy classmate and I founded the DSS to foster discussion on campus about the merits of secularism and its role in society. It was to be a social group for secular students – atheists, agnostics, skeptics, humanists, etc – who felt disenfranchised by the university, as well as a venue for dialogue between students of opposing beliefs.

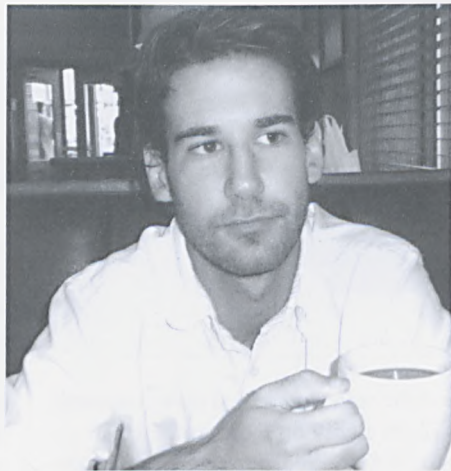
Our constitution stated this mission clearly: “The DSS encourages respectful relations between non-theistic and theistic students and through these relationships hopes to alleviate the various stigmas attached to non-believers.”

Respect? Alleviate stigmas? Catholics no likey.

The DSS was one of many student clubs that had recently sprung up in Catholic universities throughout the country. A few weeks before the university denied our proposal, the *USA Today* ran an article on the trend, interviewing secular group leaders from Dayton and Notre Dame, groups that would ultimately be rejected.

And yet while we at the DSS understood Duquesne was a Catholic University, we did not see anything controversial about promoting critical thinking, rationality, and scientific inquiry on a college campus. This is, after all, the 21st century. And we also knew that among the 230 student groups on campus were a Jewish organization, a Muslim organization, and a LGBT group, groups that hold beliefs directly antithetical to Catholicism. We felt we had a chance.

Far from antagonistic or divisive, the DSS was created to bring students together in honest conversation, unite them in productive debates about religion and its role in modern society. A university, we reasoned, is a place of learning in which serious topics



Nick Shadowen

are debated seriously. In the last two decades, I have seen no greater threat to humanity than religious extremism.

Upon our rejection, we were told to wait another year before resubmitting our application. Duquesne prohibited us from meeting on campus and our advertisements were torn down from school bulletin boards. The university then turned a cold shoulder – our calls went unanswered, our emails were ignored, and the administration and student government alike refused to meet in person. Our organization was met with the same discrimination and viewed with the same stereotypes we meant to eliminate. It became clear our group was more sorely needed than we had imagined.

A member of the student government oversight committee even compared the idea of Duquesne allowing a secular group on campus to a church running an abortion clinic. She said this to my face in complete sincerity. I was confused. She and her colleagues had the DSS constitution right in front of them – either they didn’t know how to read or they simply refused to believe that perhaps some students, religious and non-religious alike, might be interested in discussing their beliefs in an objective forum. Or maybe the school was simply afraid that Catholic students on campus, once having engaged in dialogue with secularists, might begin to see them as human beings, might

begin to understand we are not monsters but honest, kind, and charitable people. But if morality is not predicated upon religion, what then would the Church be needed for? No, they thought, best to ignore the issue.

When pressed by local media, who did not ignore the issue, Duquesne sputtered out vague and frail excuses. Asked by a school reporter why the university allowed groups that contradicted the school’s Catholic identity, such as the Muslim and Jewish clubs, but not a group meant to facilitate discussion of religion in general, Zachary Zeigler, the President of the Student Government Association, replied, “The thing is, those are not religion-oriented. That’s a facet of it, but they’re cultural.” When later interviewed by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Zeigler changed his approach, claiming that the Jewish and Muslim groups, while not in line with the Catholic identity, were still acceptable because “Both of those student organizations recognize that there is a God.” It seemed we were getting to the core of the matter. Student groups, they said, had to be faith-based. But as I scrolled down the list of accepted organizations, it became clear this wasn’t the case. How did the audio engineering club serve God, specifically? Was the chess club religious in nature? The fraternities certainly weren’t.

Our struggle against the school was not cause for legal action. As a private institution, Duquesne is exempt from anti-discriminatory laws that public institutions must adhere to. And yet the school receives millions of dollars a year in federal funding for its science programs, funding which is predicated on adherence to federal anti-discriminatory laws. These standards, of course, include religious discrimination. But we weren’t a religious group. Everyone recognizes that freedom of religion in America is an integral part of our society but freedom *from* religion – that’s trickier. The ACLU, seeing a murky legal battle, sat on their hands while the Pittsburgh Diocese rushed to the school’s defense.

Why would a non-Catholic attend a Catholic school? I heard this question a lot.

Duquesne doesn't advertise itself as a religious institution – it advertises itself as a university, a welcoming bastion of diversity and education, a platform for competing ideas and the blossoming of new horizons. Moreover, only about half the students at the university are Catholic. They chose Duquesne for a variety of reasons – scholarship money, a specific academic program, close to home, right size, athletic program, the list goes on. I personally attended on a hefty athletic scholarship, and even then only after being repeatedly promised that the school, apart from its chapel, was just like any other university.

As the administration continued to snub us, group members became incensed. They felt tricked and betrayed – they had paid \$30,000 a year to an institution that valued its religious identity over its education commitment. They realized they were taking out loans to attend Duquesne Church, not Duquesne University.

The law moves at a snail's pace and will for some time continue to turn a blind eye to the hypocrisy of religion. Churches are tax-exempt. Religious students can legally set up religious groups on secular campuses while secular students cannot legally set up secular groups on religious campuses.

The DSS struggle is indicative of a larger narrative in American society. We aren't victims – the Church has done far worse to non-believers. Ours was just another skirmish in a greater cultural war. Even today, countless polls show that atheists, who make up around two percent of the population (15 percent claim “no religion”) are the least trusted and most hated minority in America. Compare this to the 45 percent of UK citi-

zens who answered “no religion” in the 2011 British Social Attitudes survey.

In June of this summer, not even a year since their crackdown on intellectual expression, Duquesne found themselves again in the media for their religious hypocrisy.

The *New York Times* reported that the university administration was preventing adjunct faculty members to unionize, claiming the university's affiliation with the Catholic Church makes them exempt from the National Labor Relations Board. They're special, see.

Looking back now, I see my proposed student organization was doomed from the start. But I would do it again in a heartbeat. Like any under-represented group, atheists need to abandon the high road and get down in the mud, to be unafraid to declare that having an imaginary friend does not allow you to deny workers equal pay or to turn a blind eye to pedophilia or sit back and pass around a hat, collecting tax-exempt money while a family down the street struggles to put food on the table.

The Church in America remains safe and cozy in its legal fortress, secure in its walls of medieval tradition and hypocrisy. Asking them politely to join us in the modern age has repeatedly failed. Let Sam Harris fight the good fight with public debates and best-selling books – ours is an everyday battle, challenging a stereotype here and pointing out a hypocrisy there, tearing down their walls with our hands, brick by brick. And there is no brick too small.

When my friends and I founded the DSS, I expected apathy from the student body and a mixed reaction from faculty. And that's what we got. But what I didn't expect

was disapproval from fellow atheistic students. Many told me I was wrong – it's the school's legal right to discriminate against your group, they said, you're wasting your time. I was stunned by their assumption that legality presumes morality. It is like telling homosexual couples they are morally wrong for wanting to marry, simply because the law prohibits them from doing so. The law generally changes in response to society, not before it.

Atheists tend to be more rational than most people, less prone to fanatic or illogical behavior. But if my experience at Duquesne has taught me anything, it's that it takes some irrational action to get things done. It requires people who are angry and idealistic and crazy enough to work towards goals they know they might never achieve. Atheists cannot simply sit back, confident in the justness of their cause, and wait for another Scopes Monkey trial to show the world just how immature and dangerous religion can be. This is street warfare. We need to stick it to them where and when we can.

The DSS and I lost our battle and I can tell you it certainly wasn't fun being treated like a second class citizen on campus, but Duquesne would be mistaken to think no one was watching and they would be mistaken to think their blatant hypocrisy didn't cause some of their own faithful to have second thoughts.

And that is what New Atheism is about – tearing down the Church walls, brick by brick. And when the foundations have been shattered, and the walls have crumbled, then finally, from the rubble and debris, mankind will have taken the first step towards a new age of Enlightenment.

Must atheists be leftist or liberal?

FLORIDA-BASED **STEVE CARDON** PUTS FORWARD A CASE FOR CONSERVATIVE ATHEISM

I WAS recently explaining to a close friend why I felt it was so important for atheists to embrace conservative values. I monologued for a few minutes, which I am prone to do, then he suddenly cut in and asked: “So what you are saying is that you hope to convert conservative Christians to atheism.”

I understood immediately what he meant by this rhetorical question. In essence he was saying that I would stand a better chance of converting Billy Graham to atheism than converting Bill Maher to conservatism. I took his point, but it wasn't exactly what I had in mind. What if it were possible to catch individuals who were already in the early stages of moving towards atheism (losing their religion, so to speak), and persuade

them that conservatism offered the perfect framework upon which to structure their impending enlightenment.

Of course he told me that I was perfectly insane, and that the reason people make the break from religion is that events occur that shake their faith causing them to vigorously reject the religion in which they have been raised. “They always throw the baby out with the bathwater” he said with great conviction. Indeed, I had seen too many cases amongst my liberal artist friends to challenge his assertion, blanket though it might be. When one is undergoing extreme transition, it is often easier to simply cut clean of all one's legacy beliefs, than try to separate and salvage.

Successful missionaries of any religion, in fact salesmen of every stripe, know that there comes a moment when a person becomes vulnerable to a sale. When this occurs, it is often simply a matter of who gets there first. A person undergoes a faith shaking, traumatic event, and their church drops the ball. They pray, but seemingly get no answers from God until ... a knock at the door ... Hallelujah God did answer! He sent someone to bring them the truths that they are desperately seeking. Of course it's usually another religion. But sometimes they know an atheist. Or they might come across *The God Delusion* in a bookstore, and the sales

Continued on p12

clerk whispers “that’s an amazing book ... it changed my life”. If one surfs YouTube, you’ll inevitably come across *Religulous*, Bill Maher’s gambit to persuade through condescension and mockery.

One has to be fair and say that this tack seems to work with a fair amount of success, but at what cost? He is not simply lampooning Christians with relish, but conservatives more broadly by relentlessly entwining the two words. As one clicks on more and more Bill Maher clips, the liberal indoctrination sets its hooks. Bill is as good a manipulator as I have seen, if not always subtle.

Why does it matter? It matters because extreme liberals only seem benign and harmless, “hip”, because the parents have not yet left the room. I’m not talking about the peniless coffee shop liberals, I’m talking about the media mouthpieces and leftist politicians who know exactly what the game is.

They are a mix of those who resent the success of capitalists, those who really believe in the viability of an extreme socialism, and those who would just like to live in interesting times. What they share in common

is the backing of capitalists who would like to re-structure the system to their advantage, gaining even more leverage (power). That is, after all, what totalitarian socialism does. The reason this ideology is now more dangerous than ever is that atheists are soon going to be at the top of the food chain, even if they do not represent the majority.

The devil I say? Consider: Even as you read this, there are in the pipelines a cornucopia of new technologies and products that will fundamentally change human beings. Within the next five, ten, and 20 years, there will be a roll-out of brain and body enhancements, augmentations, and modifications.

Alterations in DNA will offer endless possibilities. These options will start boosting IQ levels, and physical capabilities far beyond what we now possess. Life expectancy will be doubled, then doubled again. Through science and technology we are about to see the next major evolutionary steps of our species, and over a time period that will dwarf anything Darwin could have imagined. Humans with enhanced intelligences will be chewing over the fact that

scientist are achieving what religious leaders had been claiming only God could do. With the rapid approach of the scientific singularity, how long can religion really hold out? If we become the “Übermensch” (nod to Nietzsche), what need is there for God?

The political system that is in place as these technologies come online will determine whether their distribution is available to the general populace, or to a select group. Party members, if you will. It is true that many will reject these enhancements, arguing that it is a sin against nature that only invites God’s wrath. But God’s wrath will not come, and those who do not jump on board will be left behind.

Consider the consequences of a Stalin or a Hitler seizing power in the mid-21st century. The human race could experience a forced transformation that permits autonomy for only a very small elite. Not the one percent, the .001 percent.

Why is there an imperative for maintaining Ideals like freedom, democracy, and small government going forward? If we cannot establish the philosophical bedrock for atheist

Consoling thoughts after encoun

NEAL STARKMAN SUGGESTS FIVE WAYS THAT ATHEISTS CAN GAIN COMFORT FROM TH

WE’VE all been there: A tornado destroys a house, and one family member out of five isn’t killed; the local pastor proclaims it a “miracle.”

You undergo a hospital procedure, and a friend says she’ll pray for you.

An athlete thanks God for having won a championship.

A Congressman quotes the Bible to reinforce the suppression of women, or gay people, or Arabs, or atheists, or rock singers, or people who like sex, or pretty much anyone he doesn’t like.

Don’t you get dizzy from all your eye rolling? Aren’t your teeth worn down from gritting them? How many times can you shake your head in disgust before you knock something loose?

And you can’t respond with a reasoned argument. These people don’t speak Reasonese; they won’t understand you. They know they’re right; they don’t see that their beliefs are merely substitutes for actual thinking. There’s nothing you can do to change their mind, because the foundation of their belief is not to change their mind.

So, what can you do? What can you say to yourself that will give you at least a modicum of pleasure amidst the frustration and despair that inevitably follows such an encounter?

I’ve taken the liberty of providing you with some consoling thoughts. They won’t eliminate the disgust you feel, or the hopelessness concerning the human condition but they may be slightly palliative: They may offer some momentary solace in a world that’s gone nuts.

Consoling thought #1: These people continually live in fear. Think about it: There’s this omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent God, and he is itching for a smiting. You stray from the course just a bit – you take his name in vain, you have a carnal thought, you cheat a little on your taxes – and bam! You’ve got a horrible disease, your dog dies, you lose the promotion, and – icing on the cake – you suffer eternal damnation.

And here’s the really insidious part: If you recognize your sin, then you can confess, or repent, or whatever, and all is forgiven. Whew; glad that’s over with. But what if you sin and don’t realize it? You can’t admit to something you’re not aware of. So these people have to be on their toes not only for what they do but also for what they might

have done but aren’t conscious of!

Can you imagine what anxiety that must produce? And to top it off, when they get older, they really can’t be sure whether they’re going to be sent to the penthouse or the basement. Wow—heavy . . .

Consoling thought #2: These people won’t be taken seriously by anyone outside their prayer circles.

Yes, it’s true that some God-fearing folks have huge followings. I won’t pretend otherwise. But the typical God-hears-my-prayers-and-then-decides-whether-to-answer-them true believers have to remain within a fairly tight cohort in order to maintain any semblance of respect.

Sure, they can hide their beliefs in mixed company. But as soon as they say something like “God in his infinite wisdom must have wanted that child to be abused,” people with IQs over 90 are going to heap all kinds of well-deserved scorn upon them. You can probably find a pretty good reverse correlation between religiosity and success outside the world of religion.

Consoling thought #3: You have an opportunity to brush up on your condescending remarks.

In most cases, it’s not kind to be conde-

conservatism going forward, then many of the paranoid ravings of anti-trans-humanists like Tom Horn could become prophetic. With a reduced regime of checks and balances, however cumbersome, we could really snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. This would truly be a tragedy, considering how far we have come to reach this point ... and considering the fantastic possibilities for the future if we can turn these evolutionary advances towards truly freeing humankind to reach for the stars.

This takes us back to the soon-to-be atheist, ready to be sold on new ideas. If we conservative atheists who value social responsibility do not pro-actively start providing readily available alternatives to the Bill Mahers of the world, the information vacuum will be filled with clever lies from the glamorous left. We must therefore seek to permeate the media with our own inspired visions of the post-religion future; find ways for TRUE reason to become seductive and fashionable. The left has already constructed "Pleasure Isle". By the time our friends start sprouting donkey ears and tails, it will be too late.



Lawyer Heather Mac Donald is a prominent US atheist and conservative. She is a John M Olin Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor of City Journal. She is also a recipient of 2005 Bradley Prize for Outstanding Intellectual Achievement.

ounters with the Super-Religious

FROM THE IRRATIONAL AND OFTEN INFURIATING MINDSET OF PASSIONATE BELIEVERS

scending. But when someone tells you that the earth is only 4,000 years old, that there really was an ark, that this guy born of a virgin was killed for your sins but then somehow returned to talk to his friends, and that slaughtering thousands of people is okay if God says it is, then you need to hone your condescension skills.

The trick, of course, is to say something that to intelligent onlookers indicates your utter contempt for what the person said but to the person itself presents somewhat of a question: What did he mean by that? So, for example:

"Given your background, I can understand why you'd say that."

"Setting aside all science, logic, and internal consistency, I guess that makes sense."

"Your view of the world is pretty special."

"I just want to make sure: When you say stuff like that, you're serious, right?" (And when the person says yes, that's when you frown, shake your head, and smile ruefully, in that order.)

Consoling thought #4: This gives you a more accurate view of the world.

Okay, I admit, this one may be more depressing than consoling. But really, you pride yourself on knowing reality, right? And too

often we encase ourselves in a wonderful little balloon of can't-it-be-like-this? Too often, despite our common sense, we think, oh, if only I could find the right words to explain to her that it's utterly absurd for God to have checked in on her desire to lose weight for the reunion but to have ignored the Holocaust. In short, we delude ourselves about the human condition just as much as some of these folks delude themselves about the superhuman condition. So encounters with true believers are reminders that some people are very different from us. And that protects us from future jolts of reality, when they might be more damaging. (He martyred himself because he thought he'd be orgified by virgins after he died?)

Consoling thought #5: Your life is easier without a god – or gods – and religion. You probably have a code of ethics: Be kind. Don't lie, cheat, steal, or kill. It's pretty basic, and you don't have to continually monitor your own behavior: Can I do this? It's okay with Corinthians but not Ephesians. But wait; Ephesians doesn't count since the latest Encyclical. But was that consistent with what Father Lowell said last Sunday? I guess I can do it and then ask for forgiveness? But isn't even that a sin?

See, it gets really complicated. This goes beyond fear of God. This is living in an army. Religians – highly religious people – get their marching orders from an established hierarchy of authoritarians, something like God, preacher, father, and Fox News, though I'm not sure of the exact order.

Disobedience results in either carnal or ethereal punishment, and sometimes both. You, on the other hand, are subject to your own ethical standards, the laws of the land, and the informal policies of your family, peer group, business, and community. But aside from that, you're a "freethinker"; you're not bound by the General in the Sky. You're free to worry about only the real stuff.

I'm well aware that a religious person may read this and take deep offense. How dare he, they might think, consider himself superior to us? Well, it's kind of tit for tat, isn't it: Though many religians like to consider themselves humble before their god, very few are humble before their fellow humans. On the contrary, part of their "rightness" relies on others' "wrongness." So if I did offend someone needlessly, then I guess I'll reap my just rewards in Hell. Maybe I'll see you there.

But probably not.

Four more years of godlessness

Fingers of blame for Obama's re-election point in several different directions

WITHIN hours of Obama winning a second term in the White House, conservative commentators and evangelical leaders were rushing to identify whom they thought was responsible for what they regarded as "an absolute catastrophe".

Some, like Michael Marcavage of the Philadelphia-based ministry Repent America, pointed the finger at Black voters, saying that Obama held the support of a large following of black churches from across the nation. He said that despite their disappointment with Obama's stance on homosexual marriage and abortion, they stated that they would agree to disagree with the President because they favoured his "Christian values" of caring for the sick and poor.

Marcavage also had harsh words for evangelical leaders, saying he had observed much hypocrisy from evangelicals who decried the sins of America while at the same time aggressively supported and promoted candidates who "advocate evil". He described this as support for "godless government gospel".

Hardin County Republican treasurer Peter Morrison pointed the finger at Asian-Americans and Hispanics, accusing them of voting on an "ethnic basis." He labelled them "maggots" and called on Texas to secede from the Union. "Why should Vermont and Texas live under the same government?" wrote Morrison, who authors a racist Tea Party newsletter. "Let each go her own way," he said and demanded an "amicable divorce" from the US and from the "maggots" that re-elected President Obama.

Morrison, worryingly was chosen by former Texas State Board of Education Chairman Don McLeroy to help screen Texas public school textbooks.

Maggie Gallagher, a marriage expert, author and the former chairwoman of the rabidly anti-gay National Organization for Marriage, laid the blame with the gay community and those who supported it, from the President down.

"Obama's endorsement of same-sex marriage, along with support from Democratic leaders, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, public employees and many other organisations and businesses cut strongly for same-sex marriage, she said, and complained that anti-

BARRY DUKE reports on the recriminations that swiftly followed the US election result



Michael Marcavage of Repent America

equality campaigners "were outspent by a factor of 8-1. There were no voices speaking out against it, except for a small band of people." Has it not dawned on her that this "small band" represent a shrinking number of bigots in the US?

Republican Senator Ron Johnson identified another culprit: "an ignorant electorate". He said: "If you aren't properly informed, if you don't understand the problems facing this nation, you are that much more prone to falling prey to demagoguing solutions."

The Roman Catholic hierarchy was especially devastated by the result, given the fact that the Pope and bishops had expressly warned that a vote for Obama was a ticket to Hell. Catholic voters just shrugged and voted for him anyway. According to Reuters, Catholics – the country's largest religious group with one-quarter of the population – have supported the winner of the popular vote in every election since 1972.

Reuters/Ipsos exit polling found that 51 percent of Catholics favoured Obama, compared with 48 percent for Republican contender Mitt Romney.

The real reason for Obama's win, of course, is the fact that the US electorate is growing up fast. It's had it with self-indugent piety, demands for religious privileges, misogyny, homophobia, and many other forms of religious intolerance.

Writing for the *Telegraph*, Damian Thomp-

son said the election result was "a victory for secular liberal America – or, to put it another way, America's emerging secular liberal majority. The US is still pious by European standards, but the gap is narrowing every year."

He then pointed out that "the Religious Right – and how dated that phrase already sounds – united around a candidate [Romney] who, by most standards, is not even a Christian. Also, and here I'm going out on a limb, America has just re-elected its first post-Christian President (unless you count Jefferson). I've never thought that Barack Obama's churchgoing was anything more than Chicago politics: why else would a sophisticated Harvard-educated lawyer sit through years of incoherent ranting by the Rev Jeremiah Wright?"

Christopher Petrella, writing an open letter to the Republicans for the online *Nation of Change*, said:

"You needed this defeat, and very badly. Over the last four years – arguably much longer – you seem to have forgotten that white, heterosexual, pro-corporate, god-fearing, married men are not the only people who live and vote in this country. Last night's election demonstrates in unimpeachable terms that your entire political strategy is obsolete, exclusive, and supremely short-sighted, a fact that we leftists have known for far too long. We're happy to have confirmation.

"According to unofficial exit polls published by CNN the white- and male-electorate represented the only two voting blocs that favoured your ticket. You won the white vote by 18 percent and the male vote by nearly 10 percent. The Obama/Biden ticket, by contrast, won nearly every other social demographic. With a quickly diminishing white electorate (77 percent in 2000, 72 percent today), you need to be open to coalition building and legitimate political compromise that benefits a far larger swath of the citizenry."

He concluded: "With a quickly diminishing white electorate your party needs to develop a new strategy for meeting the changing needs of a changing population. This isn't your parents' 'White' House. Don't say we didn't warn you."

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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TAKING & GIVING OFFENCE

TAKING offence or giving it, is no reason to resort to law or violence. Feeling offended is too subjective (and faux?) an emotion. Otherwise how could organs such as the *Freethinker* continue in a mission to expose frailties in certain cultural practices?

Hence, in all consistency, how can we do ought but snort in derision when in court a couple are awarded £3,600 because they “suffered injuries to feelings” no matter where our personal sympathies may lie? All else is hypocrisy.

I feel perturbed when practices nominally legal but found distasteful in our trend to a new sanctimonious puritanism are subjected to death by a thousand cuts. Whether it be something as trivial as smoking or as weighty as social mores the imposition by harassment of our morality on other groups is both reprehensible and short-sighted.

If we sanction partiality and allow the “act like me or else” approach then what defence do we have when such tactics are adopted in an assault on us?

Yes, you can follow any religion you like but if any of your beliefs upset me then you must alter them to suit me. Do we not constantly strive against such illogic being applied to us as secularists?

While a public service must have the widest possible inclusive ethos and expect compliance from both its agents and recipients, dictating an ethos to a legally constituted private activity leads to a vacuous grey world at best and an authoritarian state at worst.

Chris Oldman
London

IN MY student days, we on the right were victims of the infamous “no platform for racists and fascists” policy – the reds’ definition even included Indian businessman the late, great George Ward. Now we have Reading University Student Union’s “no platform for atheists, humanists and secularists with a sense of humour” (*Freethinker* report, November).

James Fletcher is surely rather young to be a pompous stuffed shirt. He and his colleagues should have had the courage to tell

these humourless Muslim bigots to lighten up.

I have always enjoyed seeing religion ridiculed, and, in reply to Student Rights – I say there should be no limits on the extremes of free speech. Hate speech is in the ear of the listener – the sanctimonious, petty, and politically correct have that effect on me.

Mark Taha
London

D FOR LATIN

D FOR Latin to Graham Newbery and your “esteemed editor” in the October *Freethinker*. You can have either “this phenomenon” or “these phenomena”.

Please go back to your Latin primers and try to do better next time.

Fiona Weir
London

GAY SECULARISTS

THANKS to Diesel Balaam for the explanation of recent history (“Gay champions of secularism”, *Freethinker*, October).

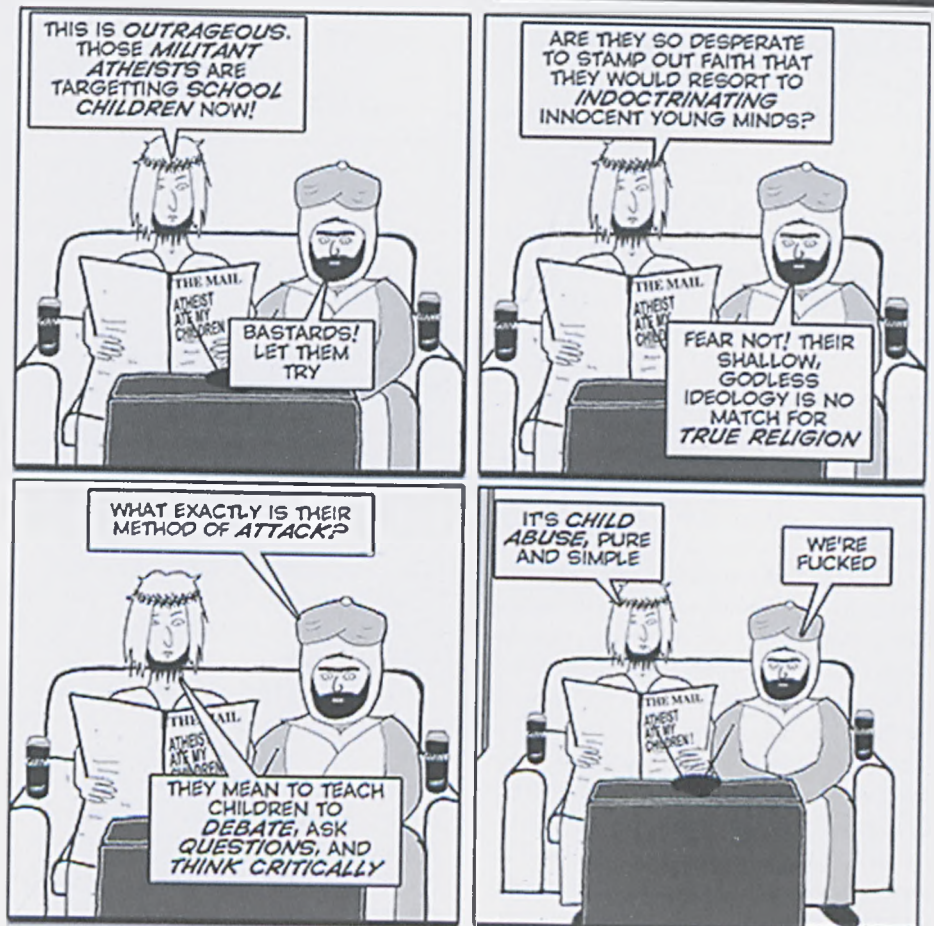
Population studies show that two percent or less of the total population are gay, but when I attend meetings of atheists and secularists these days, I sometimes feel like the token heterosexual.

Donald Room
London

Emails to the *Freethinker*

WHEN emailing letters or any other form of communication to the *Freethinker* please remember to include your postal address.

Jesus & Mo



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Royal Commission into clerical sex abuse to be launched in Australia

LAST month, Australia's most senior Catholic, Cardinal George Pell. (pictured right) expressed his opposition to calls for a Royal Commission to be set up in Australia to investigate clerical child sex abuse, and about "anti-Catholic bias".

He said he was "deeply ashamed" over child sex abuse perpetrated by members of his Church, but did not believe a Royal Commission was warranted.

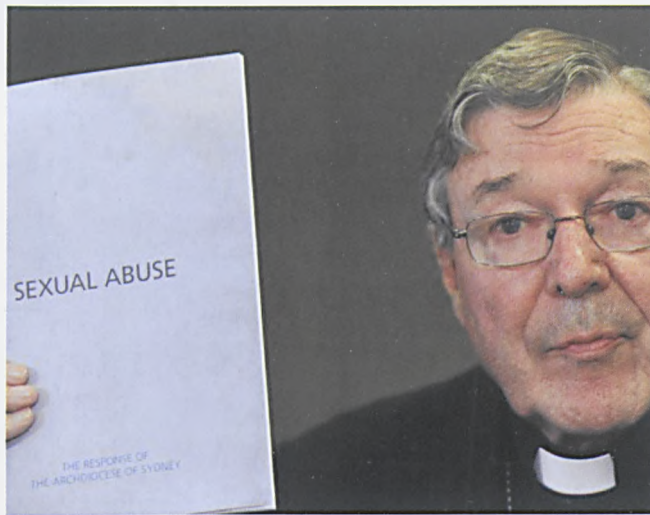
The Archbishop of Sydney said he accepted that priests abused children and that the crimes were covered up by other clergy but believed the Catholic Church was no worse than other organisations.

When he learned two days later that a Royal Commission *would* go ahead, he said he welcomed the investigation, and hoped the new enquiry would "clear the air". He said in a statement: "Public opinion remains unconvinced that the Catholic Church has dealt adequately with sexual abuse. Ongoing and at times one-sided media coverage has deepened this uncertainty. This is one of the reasons for my support for this Royal Commission."

His statement came after Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced a Royal Commission to investigate decades of child abuse in churches, schools and foster homes.

Gillard said the Commission would address "institutional responses to child abuse" – the instances of abuse as well as the manner in which they have been dealt – by a range of institutions.

The announcement followed calls by the



Greens and some Labor backbenchers for a Royal Commission into abuse in the Catholic Church, after it was alleged by a senior policeman that investigations were hindered and in some cases compromised by Church officials.

Gillard stressed the enquiry would not be limited to the Catholic Church but would examine children who were in state care, and in the care of not-for-profit bodies other than religious organisations.

She added: "The allegations that have come to light recently about child sexual abuse have been heartbreaking. These are insidious, evil acts to which no child should be subject. The individuals concerned deserve the most thorough of investigations into the wrongs that have been committed against them.

"They [victims of abuse] deserve to have their voices heard and their claims investigated. I believe a Royal Commission is the

best way to do this.

Opposition Leader Tony Abbott had earlier given his backing to a Royal Commission, provided it was not limited to the Catholic Church.

On hearing that a Commission would be set up, Pell declared: "I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement. I believe the air should be cleared and the truth uncovered. We shall cooperate fully with the Royal Commission.

But he added that it wasn't just the Catholic Church that believed abusive priests would mend their ways if moved to pastures new.

"Back in those days, they were entitled to think of paedophilia as simply a sin that you would repent of. They didn't realise that in the worst cases it was an addiction, a raging addiction."

He said that the Catholic Church had rid itself of "a great deal of moral cancer" after abuse claims came to light.

His comments came as NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell announced a special commission to investigate allegations of child sex abuse by Catholic Church clergy in the Hunter region.

The commission will be run by prosecutor Margaret Cunneen, SC, and will examine allegations made by a senior serving police officer of child sex abuse at the hands of Catholic priests in the Newcastle area.

It will also look into alleged cover-ups by members of the church and the police force.

A separate parliamentary enquiry into clergy child abuse allegations is currently taking place in Victoria.

'Springtime' or 'eclipse' for Christianity?

can forget God for a time ... but God never disappears. This restlessness ... is an expression of the hope that man may, ever and anew ... start to journey towards this God."

He expressed several reasons for hope for the future of Christianity in Europe. "The Gospel ... is true and can therefore never wear out. In each period of history it reveals new dimensions ... as it responds to the needs of the heart and mind of human beings, who can walk in this truth and so discover themselves. It is for this reason, therefore, that I am convinced there will also be a

new springtime for Christianity."

Another reason he offered is that "faith in Jesus Christ is quite simply true; and the truth never ages".

No ideology can prevail against Christianity in the long run, he stated. "Ideologies have their days numbered. They appear powerful and irresistible but, after a certain period, they wear out and lose their energy because they lack profound truth. They are particles of truth, but in the end they are consumed."

Young people were another source for

the Pope's hope. "Young people have seen much – the proposals of the various ideologies and of consumerism – and they have become aware of the emptiness and insufficiency of those things. " Thus, among the new generations we are seeing the reawakening of this restlessness, and they too begin their journey making new discoveries of the beauty of Christianity; not a cut-price or watered-down version, but Christianity in all its radicalism and profundity. That is Christianity. It is true and the truth always has a future."