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Gay marriage

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The great Irish awakening

Survey shows Ireland is abandoning faith faster most other countries

The Republic of Ireland is abandoning religion faster than almost every other country worldwide, a massive global survey on faith reveals. Only Vietnam has seen a bigger drop in people declaring themselves to be religious over the past seven years.

In this period the Catholic Church in Ireland has been rocked by sex-abuse scandals and a crisis of leadership.

One of the latest indications of the fact that Ireland is slipping out of the grip of Catholic control came when the Irish Senate, in early December, passed a bill enabling secular bodies to nominate people who can legally solemnise marriages. Currently only the State or a religious body can do this.

The Humanist Association of Ireland has for years nominated people who can conduct marriage ceremonies, but such marriages also have to be legally solemnised by the State.

The bill could be a significant step forward for secularism in Ireland, but it has three important flaws that must be amended if it is to serve its intended purpose, said Atheist Ireland in a statement on its website.

The organisation raised three important points:

- The definition of 'secular body' should be amended to define 'secular' objectively, and to include secular bodies that are not humanist;
- Secular bodies and religious bodies should be treated equally in terms of restrictions when nominating people to solemnise marriages; and
- The restriction on secular bodies promoting political causes should be qualified to match the wording in the Charities Act 2009.

Atheist Ireland called on secularists to lobby their TDs immediately to let them know about the need for these important changes, saying "it will be debated in the Dail very soon, and it may be inaccurately presented there as providing equality between religious and non-religious bodies".

AA takes issue with a section that says a body shall only be consid-



2005 photo by Robert Hanashiro, USA TODAY

ered a secular body if "its principal objects are secular, ethical and humanist."

Secularism, it said, should never be defined in a way that necessitates allegiance to any particular version of a philosophical non-confessional belief system. This definition prevents secular bodies whose principal objects are not humanist from applying to nominate people to solemnise marriages.

For example, "while Atheist Ireland is not seeking to nominate people to solemnise marriages, we could not support a bill that would prevent us from having that option. Indeed, in

principle, this bill would prevent a purely secular body, whose objects stressed the philosophical neutrality of secularism, from being defined as a secular body".

AA added: "This in turn subverts the stated purpose of the bill, which is to extend marriage solemnising not only to humanist bodies, but to any secular bodies that fulfil the other criteria in the bill. It also subverts the ideal of political secularism, which is that a secular State is neutral between religious and non-religious philosophical beliefs."

The bill came close on the heels of a worldwide religious survey that showed that only 47 percent of Irish people declared themselves to be "a religious person". This is a significant drop from the 69 percent recorded in a similar survey in 2005.

After the *Belfast Telegraph* published the results of the Red C survey, the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, said the figures required "closer critical reading" but he acknowledged that it highlighted the challenges facing the Catholic faith in a changing Ireland.

"The Catholic Church, on its part, cannot simply presume that the faith will automatically be passed from one generation to the next or be lived to the full by its own members," he said.

There was a need for strong ongoing education in the faith, he said.

(Continued on back page)

Separation of church and health care

OPHELIA BENSON ARGUES THAT MEDICAL TREATMENT IS NOT A 'GODDY' BUSINESS

CONSIDER two items. First, from the *Irish Times*, November 14:

Two investigations are under way into the death of a woman who was 17 weeks pregnant, at University Hospital Galway late in October.

Savita Halappanavar, 31, a dentist, presented with back pain at the hospital on October 21st, was found to be miscarrying, and died of septicaemia a week later.

Her husband, Praveen Halappanavar, 34, an engineer at Boston Scientific in Galway, says she asked several times over a three-day period that the pregnancy be terminated. He says that, having been told she was miscarrying, and after one day in severe pain, Ms Halappanavar asked for a medical termination.

This was refused, he says, because the foetal heartbeat was still present and they were told, "this is a Catholic country".

And then, from the *National Catholic Register*, "America's Most Complete

Catholic News Source":

Washington – Participants at a recent interfaith conference in the nation's capital discussed how interreligious dialogue can play an important role in establishing peace and fighting secularization in America.

The first item demonstrates why secularism is so necessary. If that Galway hospital had been fully secular – as all hospitals should be – Savita Halappanavar would have had the abortion and would probably still be alive, and looking forward to a successful pregnancy.

Medical treatment is a secular field, not a goddy one. Hospitals are secular institutions, not churches or mosques. When we are ill or injured we need treatment, not prayer or sacrifice. We want swift action in an emergency, not doctors who stand idle waiting for a miracle.

I'm not just being fussy here, after all. This applies to other areas of life as well. When we get on a plane we expect the pilots to use their skills and training, not let go and let God. We expect bridges and tall buildings to be designed by engineers, not priests. If our house catches fire we want firefighters with hoses, not sacrificial offerings.

In other words, these are technical fields. They are not based on scripture or mysticism or holy rites. Priests, and priestly rules, have no place. Doctors and nurses, hospitals and medicines are there to solve technical problems with human bodies, not to provide occasions for clerics to create obstacles.

This truism is what Auxiliary Bishop Barry Knestout, who gave the keynote address at the "interfaith conference", wants to fight when he talks about fighting secularization. He wants Catholic rules to be allowed to trump the medical standard of care. He wants hospital personnel to do whatever the Church tells them, even if that means letting a woman die of a miscarriage. *The National Catholic Register* summarizes Bishop Knestout's message:

The secular response to religious diversity is to push all religious beliefs out of public life, Bishop Knestout warned. But while this approach has become prominent in the modern era, it is dangerous to all religious beliefs and fails to respect

"the reality of the spiritual dimension of life."

Interreligious dialogue that builds and maintains relationships among different faith traditions is therefore even more important in protecting the role of religion from the secularism that threatens it, he explained.

No, secularism doesn't fail to respect "the reality of the spiritual dimension of life" (whatever that may mean). Secularism has no problem with comfortably woolly formulas of that kind. If people want to tell themselves there is a "spiritual dimension of life" and, even better, it is real, secularism isn't going to stop them. Secularism simply refuses to import woolly formulas into public policy and into various technical disciplines that we all depend on for our survival.

No doubt to career theocrats this sounds harsh. Priests have to make a living, after all. Naturally they hate secularism: the more people get the idea that religion is not actually mandatory, the more clerics will be out of a job. They have the same kind of stake in the fight against secularism that car-makers have in the fight against public transportation. A little compassion is in order.

But hey, that's the creative destruction of capitalism. Think of the tragic people who used to make a living manufacturing typewriters – what a shock they must have had. Blacksmiths, phrenologists, vaudeville comics, manufacturers of whalebone corsets – they've all had to retrain in new lines of work.

Clerics can follow suit. Humanity has had enough of their ruthless meddling in earthly affairs.

Meanwhile, Praveen Halappanavar is taking the case to the European Court of Human Rights, because Ireland's Minister for Health hesitated to agree to a public inquiry into the circumstances of her death. Fighting secularism can be bad for the reputation of nations and churches.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights
with God

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

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Christian numbers plummet according to latest census

THE number of people in England and Wales identifying themselves as Christian has dropped dramatically from 72 percent to 59 percent according to the 2011 census, published last month by the Office for National Statistics, while those who say they have no religion has risen from 15 percent to 25 percent.

The census figures also reveal that Muslims are the second largest religious group in the country at 4.8 percent. The third most popular religion was Hinduism, with 1.5 percent of the population, while 0.8 percent were Sikhs and 0.5 percent Jewish.

Responding to the findings, NSS president Terry Sanderson said "Such an enormous reversal in the space of ten years is an indication of the huge upheaval there has been in religious attitudes in Britain.

"It should serve as a warning to the churches that their increasingly conservative attitudes are not playing well with the public at large. It also calls into question the continued establishment of the Church of England whose claims to speak for the whole nation are now very hard to take seriously."

Sanderson said he was surprised at the size of the drop. "It will certainly give the churches a great deal of food for thought, and should tell the Government that although it might 'do God' as Baroness Warsi claims, a huge proportion of the population do not. This should be reflected in policy-making."

The least religious place in Britain in this census, as in the last one, was Norwich, where 42.5 percent said they had no religion. Brighton was the second most godless place in the country. Halton, which is part of Runcorn in Cheshire, is one of the most religious places in Britain.

The National Secular Society pointed out that the latest census backs up other polling data that reveals a similar cultural shift. The 2012 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) showed that only about half of Britons as a whole now say they have a religious affiliation, sharply down from 20 years ago when it was two-thirds. Barely a quarter of young people now identify themselves as religious.

In Wales, 32 percent of people said they had "no religion" – a higher proportion than any English region. The proportion of people in Wales who said they were "Christians" has decreased by 14 percent since 2001.

In Northern Ireland, the gap between the proportion of Protestants and Catholics has narrowed. The Census reveals 48 percent of

the resident population are either Protestant or brought up Protestant while 45 percent of the resident population are either Catholic or brought up Catholic.

The number of people defining themselves as Jedi Knights was 176,632; atheists 29,267, agnostic 32,382; humanist 15,067; Freethinker 513.



Christianity: fast becoming a relic of the past in England and Wales

This dramatic "flight from religion", according to the NSS "is complicated, but we have to take into account that in that intervening period we have had the trauma of 9/11 and the subsequent rise in Islamic militancy."

It added: "We have seen a lurch towards conservatism within Christianity, with the Catholic Church becoming aggressively political and reactionary. But the Anglican Church, too, has been taken over by evan-

Free schools must teach evolution

FAILING to teach evolution by natural selection in science lessons could lead to new free schools losing their funding under new Government rules.

New rules state that from 2013, all free schools in England must teach evolution as a "comprehensive and coherent scientific theory". The move follows scientists' concerns that free schools run by creationists might avoid teaching evolution.

Sir Paul Nurse, president of the Royal Society, said he was "delighted". He told *BBC News* the previous rules on free schools and the teaching of evolution versus creationism had been "not tight enough".

gelicals with an agenda that repels people, even those who have been traditionally attached to the Church of England.

"After the debacle over women bishops, we have seen another demonstration of the inhumane approach that the Church of England is taking to same-sex marriage. Some of the rhetoric coming from the bishops and their supporters in parliament is verging on the crackpot."

It added: "There is nothing wrong with them being out of step with the opinions of the rest of the nation, but they have to accept the consequences of their stance – and that is a wholesale defection of their supporters.

"The terrible activities of Islamist terrorists also reached their peak in Europe during these ten years. The London bombings, the Madrid bombings, the constant demands for special treatment, the attacks on free speech and the hysterical threats that are made by fanatics may not represent the opinions of the average Muslim, but they bring Islam into disrepute – and in its wake the whole of religion is questioned.

"We should also not underestimate the effect of the surge in New Atheism prompted by people like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. The influence of their thinking, particularly on young people, has been tremendous. As the Catholic commentator Damian Thompson wrote in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'It cannot be said too often: the default position of people born since 1980 is agnosticism or atheism'.

"When the results of the 2001 census were announced and 72 percent of people had ticked the Christian box, we were told that this meant that Britain was a Christian nation and that religion must have a much greater say in legislation and policy-making.

"In another ten years, if the present trend continues (and all the signs seem to point to it accelerating rather than reversing) the Church of England will be non-functional as a religious institution, but it will still cast a huge shadow over our education system. Its role as the established Church will be unsustainable, but there still may not be the political will to disestablish it.

"Unfortunately, this is likely to be the last census that is conducted. The Government is questioning the cost of the exercise, so we will have to rely on other surveys and polls for the answers. But they bring even bleaker news for the churches."



justplaincrazy

'ACIDIC' JEW CHARGED

AN ultra-Orthodox Jew called Lemon Juice was arrested last month, along with two other men, for photographing the alleged victim of a Hasidic counselor who is on trial in Brooklyn for sexually abusing the young woman.

Juice was charged alongside two others – Joseph Fried and Jonah Weissman – with criminal contempt for taking pictures during the explosive sex abuse trial of Satmar Hasidic counselor Nechemya Weberman, 54, described as a member of a powerful “modesty committee” that enforces the morality rules of the insular sect.

The alleged teenage victim of Weberman testified that he showed her pornography and then made her re-enact the sex acts during their closed-door molestation sessions.

INDIAN RATIONALIST IN EXILE

IT was out of pure concern for people's health that prompted Sanal Edamaruku to demonstrate earlier this year that water oozing out of a statue of Jesus was actually seepage of sewage. That, and to demonstrate what gullible imbeciles the faithful can be.

This was all too much for the Catholic & Christian Secular Forum, which saw the exposure of the “miracle” at a cross at the Church of Our Lady of Velankanni as an attack on Catholic faith, and promptly initiated a blasphemy charge against him.

Now the Indian rationalist, having been denied bail, was forced into exile in Finland last month.

Joseph Dias, of the C&CSE, said that Edamaruku had a right to free speech, but this ought not to be allowed to “encroach” on people's religious beliefs.

However, in a gesture of Christian magnanimity, his organisation was prepared to drop charges if Edamaruku were to apologise.

Edamaruku has flatly refused to say sorry.

IRAN GETS ITS OWN 'YOUTUBE'

THE Iranian government last month launched an Islamic video-sharing site called Mehr as an alternative to YouTube, banned in country since 2009.

Mehr is the first state-backed incursion into YouTube territory. “From now on, people can upload their short films on the website and access Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting produced material,” said IRIB deputy chief Lotfollah Siahkali.

It got off to a bad start. Poor download speeds affected the service, and as of mid-December Mehr was not functioning despite users' repeated attempts to access it.



Shhhhhh!

Don't you know women are not allowed to speak in Church?

Bristol University Christian group does a rapid U-turn after being blasted for its misogyny

BRISTOL University's Christian Union's recent decision not to allow women to preach at its main meetings met with such outrage that BUCU did an immediate U-turn and announced last month that it will allow both sexes to preach at all events.

BUCU said: “The executive committee now wish to make clear that we will extend speaker invitations to both women and men, to all BUCU events, without exception. BUCU is utterly committed to reflecting the core biblical truth of the fundamental equality of women and men.”

The university's students' union launched an investigation after the emergence of an email in which BUCU members were informed that women would not be asked to preach – unless, in the case of a handful of married students, their husbands accompany them.

The decision, according to a report in the *Telegraph* “Represents the latest sign of the growing influence of conservative evangelical teaching, particularly among younger Christians”.

Commenting on the issue in the *Guardian*, Joel Lewis, a former editor of the BUCU newsletter, pointed out the union had never had a woman as its president.

“Many objected strongly to this, of course – and warned the CU that sooner or later it was inevitable that this stance would be made public, with the inevitable reputational consequences for both Bristol University CU and the national association of Christian unions with which it is aligned, the UCCE”

He concluded: “Unfortunately, though, it is apparently still deemed acceptable to treat women as inferior under the banner of ‘inclusivity’ in a way that no one would countenance if the issue was race. Now that the issue has finally come under public scrutiny, the students' union has a duty to establish whether BUCU's stated belief in gender equality will be reflected in practice or not. BUCU have already had at least 15 years to reflect internally on this issue – it must not be simply brushed under the carpet for another decade.”

Uganda fails to get its promised Christmas gift – a gay hate law

IN A recent speech, Rebecca Kadaga, speaker of the Ugandan Parliament, promised to bring introduce a vote before Christmas on a proposed law that would introduce the death penalty for homosexuality. But last month the anti-homosexuality bill – described as a “Christmas present” to Ugandans by Kadaga was postponed until February.

Just before the delay of the bill, the Pope blessed Kadaga after she travelled to the Vatican to meet Ratzinger and to attend a human rights conference.



Greek blasphemy prosecution highlights continuing attacks on free expression

AMNESTY International recently called on the Greek authorities to protect freedom of expression by scrapping the blasphemy charges brought various artists involved in Terrence McNally's play, *Corpus Christi*.

A production of the play in Athens was cancelled in November after weeks of almost daily protests outside the theatre by priests and right-wing groups, including deputies from the ultra-nationalist Golden Dawn party.

The lawsuit is understood to have been instigated by the Greek Orthodox Bishop, Seraphim of Piraeus who claimed that the play contained blasphemous messages. He was particularly outraged by Jesus being portrayed as gay.

Said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's programme Director for Europe and Central Asia: "This is an alarming development for freedom of expression in Greece. The right to freedom of religion does not extend to having one's religious beliefs protected by the state against criticism or commentary." Dalhuisen called on the Greek authorities to immediately and unconditionally drop the charges against the play's producers and cast and fully respect freedom of expression.

Shortly after the Greek prosecution was announced, a Pew Forum study released in December revealed that eight out of 45 European countries still have blasphemy laws on their books, while 35 of them have laws against the defamation of religion in general or hate speech against members of a faith.

According to a report on the National Secular Society's website, the eight countries with blasphemy laws are Denmark, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands and Poland. A blasphemy law in England and Wales was scrapped in 2008.

The Netherlands and Ireland are actively considering abolition of their blasphemy laws, while Denmark's 50-year-old law has never been implemented.

In Malta, the Constitutional Court last month upheld a censorship board decision to ban a play called *Stitching* for blasphemy.

The Pew study said blasphemy laws were more common in the Muslim world, where 13 of 20 countries in the Middle East and North Africa had them as well as nine Asian states that are mostly Muslim or, in the case of India, have a large Muslim minority.

Some 20 countries, all majority Muslim states in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, also outlaw apostasy or conversion to an-



Greek Orthodox Bishop,
Seraphim of Piraeus

other religion, the Pew study said.

The shift in Ireland also resulted from an election last year won by a coalition of the Fine Gael and Labour parties that favoured a reform of the 1937 constitution that explicitly states blasphemy is a crime.

Changing that will require a referendum, which can only be held after the constitutional convention completes its work, which should take at least a year if not more.

Ireland passed a new blasphemy law in 2009 after its previous one, a remnant of pre-independence English law there, was ruled illegal because it violated the constitutional guarantee of religious equality.

Muslim countries seeking a United Nations ban on blasphemy subsequently cited that law as an example of Western support for the concept. Western states have consistently rejected the Muslim proposal as a violation of free speech.

Pakistan, whose strict blasphemy law has drawn worldwide criticism for cases of misuse against religious minorities, threw out a case against a Christian girl in December after a wave of international condemnation.

Rimsha Masih, believed to be no older than 14, was charged with burning pages of the Koran in August but was granted bail in September after a Muslim cleric was detained on suspicion of planting evidence to stir up resentment against Christians.

Since then, a 22-year-old Christian Pakistani youth, who was accused of burning a copy of the Koran, died while in police custody last month.

A police spokesman said the youth, named only as Nadeem, had "fallen seriously ill while in custody and subsequently died".

He also said that the allegations had not been substantiated, but that the youth – who was described as mentally ill – had been tortured by a neighbour who allegedly caught him burning the Koran.

A Christian woman, Asia Bibi, who was sentenced to death in 2010 on blasphemy charges, remains on death row.

In the United States, a 1952 Supreme Court decision effectively killed state blasphemy laws when it ruled that a movie titled *The Miracle* could not be censored on grounds that it is sacrilegious.

"From the standpoint of freedom of speech and the press, a state has no legitimate interest in protecting any or all religions from views distasteful to them which is sufficient to justify prior restraints upon the expression of those views," the court ruled.

Another study published shortly after by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) revealed that atheists and other religious sceptics suffer persecution or discrimination in many parts of the world and in at least seven nations can be executed if their beliefs become known. It showed that "unbelievers" in Islamic countries face the most severe – sometimes brutal – treatment at the hands of the state and adherents of the official religion.

The report, *Freedom of Thought 2012*, said "there are laws that deny atheists' right to exist, curtail their freedom of belief and expression, revoke their right to citizenship, restrict their right to marry."

Other laws "obstruct their access to public education, prohibit them from holding public office, prevent them from working for the state, criminalise their criticism of religion, and execute them for leaving the religion of their parents."

The report was welcomed by Heiner Bielefeldt, United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, who said in a brief introduction there was little awareness that atheists were covered by global human rights agreements.

IHEU – which links over 120 humanist, atheist and secular organisations in more than 40 countries – said it was issuing the report to mark the UN's Human Rights Day on Monday, December 10.

According to its survey of some 60 countries, the seven where expression of atheist views or defection from the official religion can bring capital punishment are Afghanistan, Iran, Maldives, Mauritania, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

God hates gays ... but thinks sacr

RICHARD SILVERWOOD interviews EDWARD FALZON, the Ca

The Christian right are always quick to cite the Bible when opposing gay marriage, claiming their bigotry is a reflection of God's will. But how well do they actually know their "holy" book? Are they aware that the same book also advocates human sacrifices or that, as well as condemning homosexuals, it bans cross-breeding animals and wearing clothes made from multiple types of thread?

In *Being Gay is Disgusting* Edward Falzon argues that religious fundamentalists are cherry picking which parts of the Bible they follow to suit their own prejudices.

He points out that the god of the Bible displays a moral code that is at odds with that of most modern day Christians and draws attention to the parts of the so-called "good book" that nobody who isn't a complete psychopath could possibly follow. *Being Gay is Disgusting* lays the Bible bare and pokes fun at some of

its less ethically commandments. I caught up with Edward to find out the inside story of this controversial yet highly necessary book.

RS: *What inspired you to write Being Gay is Disgusting?*

EF: Many years ago, I became curious about the contents of the biblical books – not from a spiritual "I'm looking for answers" perspective but rather an intellectual curiosity. I began to read a bible and immediately fell asleep. I had discovered why even Christian websites admit that over 90 percent of Christians haven't read it; it's long, it's boring and it's repetitive. Incidentally, I never use a capital for "bible" any more. It's not like there's only one of them; there are countless translations, leaning towards whatever ideology the translators desire, so "bible" has very much become a noun.

RS: *Your book sheds light on disturbing parts of the Bible that most Christians probably don't*

know exist. Do you think that Christianity's popularity is partly down to its followers' lack of familiarity with the book?

EF: Absolutely. In fact during the "Biblical Morality Tour" that I'm doing now, I've spoken several times on the subject of Christians not following their own bibles.

Not only that but they wouldn't follow some biblical directives if Jesus himself were standing next to them holding a crucifix to their heads. They think they're following the bible in their morality and lifestyle but they simply aren't. That's what I try to discuss with Christians and I want to encourage them not to follow the bible any more than they are now.

RS: *Can you say a little bit about the tour that you're doing?*

EF: I'm presently travelling throughout North America giving speeches, primarily on biblical morality. I'd prefer debates but ministers and theologians are yet to step up and share the stage.

The Secular Student Alliance has been very supportive, with several student groups booking me to speak on campus. Many groups connected to the Center For Inquiry have also invited me to speak. It has been great meeting so many atheist and secular people who are as concerned for civilisation as I am.

My expat friends in Shanghai, where I've lived for four years, aren't really aware of the constant and seemingly accelerating encroachment of religion into politics, education and law. I want to do my part to stop that, and so I'm on tour, speaking to anyone who wants to listen.

RS: *As well as being informative and insightful, your book is also laugh out loud funny in places. How important a tool do you think humour is in the fight against hateful religions such as Christianity?*

EF: I think humour is crucial. It's perfectly okay to ridicule the ridiculous. People have been misled – not since the last election, not even their whole lives but for literally millennia. They don't realise it so taking what they have perceived to be solemn and true all their lives and delivering it as an insightful punch line has the effect of helping them to see how silly these notions are. In some cases, it can even snap someone out of religion entirely.

RS: *Have you received much opposition to the book from Christians/religious types?*

EF: The only opposition I've encountered

Death of a valued contributor

TERRY Liddle, a member of the National Secular Society and a contributor to the *Freethinker* for many years, died of a stroke on November 18 aged 64.

In a tribute published in *Workers Liberty*, Bruce Robinson wrote that Liddle was mainly involved in secularist activities with the South East London Humanists and in founding the Freethought History Research Group (FHRG), for whom he wrote a number of pamphlets.

"[But] he will be best known to readers of *Solidarity* for his activity in the Socialist Alliance and its successor groups in the early 2000s.

"This was however only part of a rich life in revolutionary politics stretching back over 50 years in South East London. He joined the Young Communist League in the early 60s, was briefly in Healy's Socialist Labour League, and then became a libertarian Marxist, open to and with links to anarchism, remaining active on the left until his death despite a long period of poor health.

"From the mid 60s onwards, I don't think there were any major shifts in Terry's basic political standpoint, though he certainly was influenced by the rise of green politics and radical environmentalism. His politics found a home in a wide array of political organisations."

In the 70s Liddle was involved in a number of small libertarian and Council Communist groups. He eventually had phases in the Labour Party – writing in 1991, "After a decade as an intransigent ultra-left sectarian, joining the Labour Party wasn't easy. Staying in it is harder still" – then the Greens, the Socialist Alliance and the small groupings that tried to keep it alive after the SWP and SP had walked out in order to wreck it.

Robinson added: "Terry was a person who was difficult to dislike. He had a great love of life, which was tested by poor health and increasing disability over recent years, and a keen sense of humour. While he never found an organisation for any time that suited his temperament and views, he remained committed to revolutionary socialist politics, making a distinct and individual contribution to the movement."

sacrificing your daughter is okay

the Catholic-turned-atheist author of *Being Gay is Disgusting*

so far is people saying that *Being Gay is Disgusting* only covers the Old Testament, which Christians say isn't as relevant as the New Testament.

Of course Original Sin, from which Jesus is said to have come to absolve us, all the commandments, which Jesus is said to have come to uphold, and the prophecies of Jesus' coming, which Jesus is said to have fulfilled, are all in the Old Testament. No one would have been on the look-out for Jesus if the Old Testament didn't exist.

The OT also accounts for 80 percent of the content and ninety-five percent of the timeline of any bible so to disregard it is to disregard most of one's owner's manual. Other than that, there has been a small amount of opposition on "moral" grounds, but for the most part, even Christians have been positive about this book, acknowledging that it's okay to laugh at the silly parts of the bible.

RS: What would you say is the most disturbing part of the Bible that you discovered whilst writing your book?

EF: It's hard to pick just one, since it seems that any minor transgression comes with a death penalty, which is pretty damn disturbing. Of course, above that would be the transgressions that were not specified as wrong but which resulted in death anyway.

Lot's wife comes to mind. All the angel said was "run for the hills and don't look back." Apparently he meant that literally because when the missus looked back, she was killed by being turned into a pillar of salt.

But I think the most disturbing story might be the one of Jephthah in Judges 11. He makes a deal with Yahweh that if he wins in the upcoming battle, he'll sacrifice whatever first comes out of his gates to greet him when he gets home. He wins the war, heads home and his daughter come out of the gates. He's sad but still goes ahead and sacrifices her on the altar. There's better morality in *Mein Kampf*.

RS: Why do you think some Christians are so obsessed with homosexuality?

EF: Because they're trained from the pulpit to be bigots and taught only to read the "happy" parts of the bible. They don't realise that something as random as Yahweh liking the smell of burning fat is mentioned more often than homosexuality.

RS: How has *Being Gay is Disgusting* been received by the gay community?

EF: Extremely positively. I was very gratified



Edward Falzon

to see reviews come in from *South Florida Gay News*, *Out in Jersey*, *Out in Perth* and so on. Actually I think most of my reviews have been from gay mags and every single one was extraordinarily supportive.

RS: You have previously stated that you were raised in a Catholic household. When did the turning point come where you realised that the Bible probably wasn't true?

EF: Actually that was only once I started reading it a few years ago. As a Catholic kid, I was never given a bible to read; I was just told that Jesus totally loves me and Hell is a bad place.

After prepping myself with multiple shots of Red Bull and Jolt Cola and sticking toothpicks in my eyelids, I began reading through it from page one. But there's the problem; page one is just objectively wrong. It asserts that the moon is a source of light, that the sun is inside the sky of earth, above which there is water stored for rain, and that the stars are there purely to remind us of the seasons.

I also delved into archaeology to find out the accuracy of the bible's historical claims.

It didn't go in favour of the biblical account. Archaeologists have found less than nothing to support the biblical account, by which I mean they've not only found nothing in support of it but also an abundance of evidence against it. The Old Testament biblical accounts, at least in the books of Moses, are entirely, inescapably untrue.

RS: You have criticised the Bible's effect on children, stating that growing up in a household run by religious fundamentalists can jeopardise a child's well-being. Can you elaborate on this?

EF: Though most households, Christian or otherwise, make the safety and well-being of their kids the highest priority, many fundamentalist families have allowed their children to die rather than take them to those Satan-inspired hospitals. Mothers have drowned or even stoned their own children because they've sincerely believed that Yahweh and/or Jesus told them to. A quick search on CNN, BBC or *Huffington Post* will show story after story.

RS: Finally, do you have any more books on the cards and what can we expect from you throughout the years to come?

EF: My Biblical Morality series is a pentalogy that began with *Being Gay is Disgusting*. I'm now writing the fifth volume, which will be about the whole New Testament, from Matthew to Revelation. The title is *Women Should Shut Up and Listen*. It'll be out just as soon as I've finished it. Then I'll write the three in the middle.

Phase one of my tour covers the Pacific and Midwest states of the USA and the southwestern provinces of Canada. I'd like to get enough interest to be able to do phases two and three, which will take me to Southeast Canada, the northeast states of the USA, the southern states and the West. I'd like to be on tour until next year but this depends on how long my budget and sanity hold out.

I've also started blogging on the *Huffington Post* at www.huffingtonpost.com/edward-falzon so that's a great place to keep up with what pisses me off in current affairs. I'm gradually developing a YouTube channel for the enjoyment and ridicule of netizens everywhere, which you can find at www.youtube.com/edwardfalzon. Naturally, I also do the whole Twitter and Facebook things so follow me at @edwardfalzon and add me at www.facebook.com/edwardfalzon.

Reply to a *Friendly Letter*

‘Reading Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens I encountered the pervasive claim that religion – all religions – are dangerous (as well as false). Belief in God, they argue, is toxic, even the root of all evil, and we’d be vastly better off without it. Well, I thought, religion does have its horror stories. But the available data refute the thesis that religion is predictably harmful. And thus was born this little book, which supports a Christian faith that is, methinks, reasonable, science-affirming, healthy, hopeful, and humane.’

– David G Myers, author of *Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists*

After reading Myers’ book, **JOHN RADFORD** felt a letter of response was called for

Dear David Myers, I have read with interest your *Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists* (Jossey-Bass, 2008). I was intrigued because it has been praised as a moderate alternative to polemics both for and against religion, and particularly because we have both spent much of our professional lives in explaining and promoting psychological science.

The *Letter* is of course a book, though of only 152 pages, and this is a short response, in which I can mention only a few points. I am sure that you would wish me to give my honest opinions, as I am confident you have. You begin by announcing two “unoriginal assumptions: that (1) there is a God and (2) it’s not me (and it’s not you)”. With (2) I entirely agree. But (1) is quite an assumption. When you add that it is the Judaeo-Christian God, you must also be assuming that the fierce and vengeful tribal God of the Old Testament is the same as that of the New. And perhaps, like many religious apologists, you are assuming that yours is the only game in town.

Christianity is currently the largest faith in the world, if you include all its manifold and sometimes contradictory variants, but that still means, at most, a third of the human race. The numbers of religions run into the thousands, some much older and possibly wiser than yours, others sparkling new. There is no obvious reason why your faith should take priority.

I certainly applaud, and totally agree with, your commitment to scientific method, and rejection of both “fundamentalist zealotry and scientific ignorance”. I don’t agree that “not all questions are amenable to science”. I take “science” in its original meaning of “knowing” (Latin *scio*). I think we can pursue all knowledge objectively, empirically and rationally.

You spend some time on examples of

the good things that very many religious people undoubtedly do. But I don’t think you show that religion is the cause of their behaviour. As a fellow psychologist, I think you would agree that it must be the result of a complex interaction between nature and nurture, each involving many factors. Religion is certainly an important one, but it can be an influence for either good or bad. Again I think you would agree. But here is what seems a fundamental point. How can you, as a committed Christian, distinguish between the good and bad applications? Is it from the Bible, or by a message from God? But that is what they all say, from the kindest country parson to jihadist bombers or the torturers of the Christian Inquisition.

You must be referring implicitly to some standards outside your faith. I suggest these rest on the humanity we all share. As I am sure you know, research shows that such standards are in fact found throughout all human societies, regardless of race, culture, religion or lack of it, sex or anything else. If we did not generally share these values, we could not survive as a species. It seems to me most likely that they have evolved in the same way as other survival mechanisms.

You say that “Christendom gave birth ... to famous settings that have nourished so much scholarship and science – Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton and the like”. This is true in the sense that nearly all people were Christians in the societies that saw their birth. Harvard and Princeton began by training ministers but fairly soon became secular. Oxford and Cambridge originated in informal gatherings of scholars with no particular religious function. We should also remember that Christians destroyed the irreplaceable books of the Serapeum at Alexandria (and many others), lynched the philosopher and mathematician Hypatia, suppressed the philosophical

schools of Greece, and for centuries forbade any non-Christian teaching, while persecuting heretics and schismatics. Even today many Christian groups impose or seek to impose their dogmatic views in schools.

You apply science to belief in life after death, which is found in probably all religions. I entirely agree with your conclusion that there is no soul or spirit or mind that can exist without a body. You then show that this is not the Christian or indeed Jewish belief (although avowed Christians I have met do believe it). Nevertheless, you hold, we continue beyond death. We are, apparently, resurrected in our physical form, as Jesus himself was. Whether this means all people, or all good people, or all Christians, or all good Christians, I don’t know. But in any case there must be a lot of them. God will presumably not only pluck people from their graves, as Jesus allegedly was, but reconstruct those who have crumbled to dust. Where will they go? In physical form they must be somewhere that has food and drink and a breathable atmosphere. And what is resurrected? From the moment of conception to some point after death, we are constantly changing. There is no moment at which we are uniquely ourselves. Perhaps we are to live our whole lives over and over again, presumably without realising it, as in some science fiction nightmare. Or maybe I have misunderstood you.

Another line you pursue is that not only is science compatible with religion, but many current scientific findings can be found in essence in the Bible. Two examples you give are four “big ideas” in your own field of social psychology, and the Big Bang account of the origin of the universe. The first idea is “Our cognitive capacities are awesome. But to err is human”. The other three are likewise counterbalanced general statements. You show that similar



David G Myers

views can be found in the Bible. It is hardly surprising. They are of such generality as to be more or less common currency, like “too many cooks spoil the broth”, but “two heads are better than one”.

The Bible is a hotchpotch of folklore, myths, legends, poetry, proverbs, putative genealogies, etc, almost certain to contain such statements. What psychology seeks to do is establish how far they are true, under what conditions, how they come about, how they influence behaviour and so on.

That is the difference between science and folklore. The argument about the Big Bang is that this is just what the Book of Genesis describes: “Let there be light” etc. There are so many problems with this that one hardly knows where to begin. Genesis is far too general to equate to the scientific account. And it is not clear that Genesis (which actually conflates two separate myths) describes creation from nothing: “Darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” – where did the deep and the waters come from? Why did God give a small desert tribe, but no one else, a hint (no more) as to what he had done? Cosmologists have already gone beyond the Bang, and are supposing that the universe may be cyclical, expanding and then contracting endlessly.

Or there may be multiple universes, in a continuous state of creation. And so on. The problem is that science does not stand still. But whatever it comes up with, I have no doubt that something in the Bible can be found to resemble it, however vaguely.

You cover a lot in a short book. I will mention two more points. You rehearse the well-known “fine tuning” argument: the physical constants of the universe, such as the speed of light, are exactly such as can produce the conditions for life, and for us. The probabilities against are so large that they can only have come about by a deliberate plan.

Well, first the speed of light is a unique feature, and it is not possible to calculate the probability of a single event (and if the probability is of one speed against all possible speeds, these are infinite). The universe does not seem very well adapted to us, or to life at all. As yet we have found no other examples of life, so it is certainly rare, and the story of life on earth is one of extremely precarious survival, with continual near-extinctions. “Chancy” seems the obvious word. Even if this were not so, one cannot infer intention simply from an event, however unusual.

A million people might enter a lottery with one winner. The odds against are obviously a million to one, but that does not

mean that God, or anyone, caused Bill to win (although he might think so).

Finally, as I have gone on long enough, you conclude with an appeal for a “leap of faith”. This is actually another old war-horse, “Pascal’s wager”. Blaise Pascal argued that if uncertain whether religion is true or not, it is better to accept it, because if it is we will gain by it (ie Heaven rather than Hell), but if it is not we lose nothing. Conversely, if we assume it is not, and it is, we lose (we lose the chance of heaven and may end up in the other place). A problem which was less obvious in Pascal’s day is that there is not just one religion but a multitude, so choosing one has a high risk of being wrong.

Your version is that while religion cannot be proved to be true, it is better to plump for something that “helps make sense of the universe, gives meaning to life, opens us to the transcendent, connects us to supportive communities, provides a mandate for morality and selflessness, and offers hope in the face of adversity and death”. Well, of course if you believe, you may experience these things. Or again you may not. Many believers in your God have lived in fear of everlasting damnation. And belief may crumble in the face of alternative and, as I would say, more rational views. Then what? You suggest that the choice is between sitting on the fence, and making a leap of either belief or disbelief. But atheism is not a leap of faith, it is the absence of faith.

I don’t, personally, make a leap of faith. Rather, I know of no evidence or rational argument, and I have had no experience, that suggest to me that as far as reality goes, religions are essentially any different from fairy stories. I recognise that they have far greater emotional power, depth of meaning for believers, importance in society and history and so on. But I think that the benefits you list are better, indeed in the last resort can only be, found in ourselves.

David, I have dealt cursorily and inadequately with your thoughtful *letter*. Its moderation is indeed most welcome. It seems that our common background in psychology has led us to very different conclusions. I have read yours with interest. Just possibly you may come to read mine.

Yours sincerely
John Radford.

JOHN RADFORD is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London. **DAVID G MYERS** is Professor of Psychology at Hope College at Holland, Michigan, USA. Hope has historically been affiliated to the Reformed Church in America, which originated in the Dutch Reformed Church, and now has a broadly conservative Christian commitment.

Why we will survive Armageddon

PAUL KARAFFA ANTICIPATES A NEW DAWN OF SECULARISM

When one liquid meets another of a different kind, what happens? The two fundamentally opposing liquids, in a futile collision, become something different entirely – something new and, often, better. Such is the case with all human interaction. In a day and age when people interact so persistently across all ethnicities, cultures, and locations the human race is tossed about, clashing in a futile effort to keep cultural differences alive.

I don't think anyone would claim that local culture will die in the coming years, but I think it is fair to suggest a new world is coming, a very connected world that will be shaped by the clashes we are having today. Social media, mobile technology, and 24-hour news keep the networks across the world constantly clashing, with philosophical arguments and social bickering. It is also, I suggest, fair to assume that many of these clashes are the individual and cultural breakdown of meaningless beliefs from antiquity.

On November 28 of last year NASA took time to address Mayan doomsday concerns from frightened individuals, some children and some suicidal. NASA, in fact, went so far as to add a webpage for debunking these apocalyptic rumors, consisting of a polar shift, planet collision, giant meteors, and solar storms.

As many of you – hopefully all of you – have noticed, the Mayan people were wrong, as the world did not end as they predicted it would on December 21 of last year. We are all still here, alive, with the same problems we've always had. Most people did not believe the claim made by the Mayan people and their calendar formed several thousands of years ago, but many did. I expect those that bought into the ancient nonsense will have better sense in the future. As moments like this pass, secular and skeptical groups of society gain credence; and with each nonsensical claim being tested, we can take pride in knowing that the nonsense is at an all-time low.

A great example dates back to the 16th century, when the Catholic Church took vampirism seriously, staking the claim that vampires existed and were the work of the



Earlier this year Chevrolet in the US created a TV commercial that suggested people driving a Chevy Silverado would survive Armageddon, but Ford drivers would perish.

devil. What was once considered proof of vampires is now often attributed to a misunderstanding of post-mortem bodily conditions and village disease.

Though the vampire explanation may have been in some cases the best guess at the time, there are not many in the modern-day world that believe in the existence of the creatures.

The modern-day individual has their own mythos to contend with like the myths of Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, and alien abductions, but there is a big difference in the margins of belief between antiquated myths and modern-day myths.

Most people in the 16th century believed vampires existed, going so far as to dig up their relatives and carry out exorcisms. Most people today do not favor the belief in such creatures whether they are ancient or modern. The belief in Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, or alien abductions are more often than not comical and nothing more.

In November of 2009, a worldwide survey of over three thousand philosophy faculty members, PhDs, and philosophy graduate students was conducted. Questions were of a philosophical nature and raised several controversial topics. One of the simple questions posed to these respondents was the following: *God: theism or atheism?*

Of those that responded, 72.8 percent said they accepted or leaned toward atheism, while only 14.6 percent accepted or leaned toward theism. The remaining 12.6 percent claimed "other".

Upon further analysis of those surveyed, it was discovered that all but one discipline responded in favor of atheism over theism.

For instance, 19th Century Philosophy (67.1 percent for atheism, 24.2 percent for theism), Philosophy of Decision Theory (77.5 percent for atheism, 10.0 percent for theism), and the Philosophy of Biology (83.0 percent for atheism, 1.5 percent for theism), just to name a few. In fact, the only philosophical discipline that claimed theism over atheism was the Philosophy of Religion (19.8 percent for atheism, 69.3 percent for theism).

One must ask if they would indeed dedicate their lives to researching some-

thing they did not first claim to be true. I would go so far as to suggest that atheists would prefer not to pursue a high level of education in religious thought merely for the fact that they do not agree that it holds any credence.

For this reason, I would argue that those studying the Philosophy of Religion are outside the scope of the question; but even keeping them within the total results, three of every four educated philosophers or philosophers-to-be either accept atheism or lean toward it.

If the philosophy study is any indication, it could be argued, quite convincingly, that a generation of young skeptics, particularly in the United States, is being raised among an older, outdated, religious population. With this shift a new generation of teachers will likely nurture the next generation of youth with an increasingly larger yield of secularists and skeptics.

The world is taking more of a skeptical look at the unexplained every year, whether it is the Loch Ness Monster or religious mythology.

Armageddon and the Mayan apocalypse are events that will most likely never come to pass, because there is no evidence to prove the contrary. As the religious, the faithful and the believers in the supernatural continue to persist, their numbers are dwindling; and as those that were once staunchly religious become apathetic, there is hope that the next generation, in this ever-churning cup of solution we call the human condition will finally come to a resting place outside the realm of nonsense and sit on the grounds of reality.

What harm can they do?

DALE DEBAKCSY finds more morality in mythology than in religion

I was on the grand tour of a friend's new house recently, when he showed me his husband's shrine. It featured a rather large statue of Athena at the center, ringed around by objects from various other polytheist traditions.

My immediate reaction was, "Wow, that's actually really cool," which gave me pause. Had it been a cross-festooned Catholic nook or crystal-bedecked altar to the celestial dolphin, I would have responded with that guarded politeness that is the stock in trade of the atheist faced with something that he can't quite believe that other people believe.

But there is something about folks returning to ancient forms of polytheism that disengages my critical senses, and in this I am not alone in the atheist community. Where does this soft spot come from, and is it hypocrisy to allow it to go unchecked? What will society be like if humanists continue to rigorously critique Christianity and Islam while giving, say, worshippers of Athena and Thor a free pass?

There is no surer road to atheism than religious studies. Once a person climbs out of the religious system he was raised in and engages with the vastness of past and present world beliefs, it becomes intensely difficult to regard any one organized subset of those beliefs as having The Answer.

At that point, some level of non-theism is but one drawn conclusion away. The result of all this is that the atheist community boasts more than a fair number of mythology buffs. We have tittered over the love triangle between Hephaistos, Aphrodite, and Ares, laughed at the antics of Hanuman the monkey, and sighed in mock frustration to Loki's love of needless scheming.

And while we recognize that none of this is the stuff of worship, I think we see that there is much that is human and good to be learned. In the Hindu tale of Yudhishtira's refusal to enter Heaven for the sake of keeping his promise to a dog there is more to be grasped about real humanity and decency than in all of Yahweh's torturous legal posturing in the Old Testament.

As against the Thou Shalts of the monotheistic religions, these stories seem to grapple honestly with the murky subtlety of mankind and the lack of easy answers when it comes to issues of on-the-ground morality.

So, while part of that soft spot that I have



A depiction of the Norse God Thor battling a giant

for modern polytheists comes from the significant intellectual merit of their source texts, I think most of it comes from how good those stories look when placed next to the ham-fisted blustering of the monotheistic systems. Even Bismarck seems quaint and charming if you stand him next to Himmler.

Now, were I surrounded on all sides by neighbors sacrificing chickens to Asclepius and chanting to Hecate, I'd probably inveigh as much against them as I do against circumcision and Sunday School. It is the relative paucity of practicing polytheists (about a million or so by last count), then, that lends them an aura of harmless charm. There aren't many of them, their books are kind of cool, and there are worse systems to buy into. Considering all of this, I am instinctually inclined to leave them be under the banner of "What harm can they do?"

And in that I think I am entirely wrong.

I have argued this point with other free-thinkers, and their spirited attempts to buoy up my sense of moral consistency usually run along the lines of, "Listen, these are people who clearly have a need for some form of belief. You can't make atheists out of everybody. Would you rather have them becoming dogmatic Baptists, or Friday Night Pagans? Everything that shunts bodies and resources away from church pews is for humanity's good, and if those replacement religions grow to be a problem later, they will

be much easier to deal with than Christianity is now.

"Just relax – in the long run leaving polytheists be actually serves the cause of humanism better than attacking them, and it makes us look less like forever combative dicks."

This is all tactically very sound. It's the pragmatic thing to do. But it's also not particularly honest, and I think that atheists lose whenever we trade honesty, which is our cardinal virtue, for tactical positioning, which has been the watchword of mainstream Christianity since the time of St Paul.

Besides which, it's rather insulting. By our silence, we are telling a segment of the population that has done some legitimate hard thinking that they are, in our estimation, nothing more than fundamentalist Christians waiting to happen. We are saying, "No matter what you think of yourself and the content of your own beliefs, we atheists know what you *really are*, and where you're really going, and since there's no help for you, we're going to manipulate you to where you can do the least harm."

By continuing to treat polytheists, pagans, and New Agers as harmless children, we are undervaluing their everyday struggle to carve out an identity in a largely monotheistic culture, and denying ourselves perhaps the greatest friends and allies we could ever hope for. If we can stop obsessing over categorizing and judging people by a few items in their belief system, and shift the focus to how all of their beliefs work together, we shall start seeing these practitioners for what they are: people more like us than we would credit, and not to be written off quite so condescendingly.

But we'll never discover any of that, never have any of those conversations, if we don't apply the same rigor in every confrontation with supernaturalism that we come across, polytheism included. Will they all turn atheist? Of course not – but they will see that we are engaging with them honestly rather than dismissively, and should they ever choose to move away from their current beliefs, it will be towards rather than away from us.

For my part, I'll continue to say, "That's pretty cool," but I'll do my level best to follow it with, "But the coolest parts are the ones that aren't supernatural at all, don't you think?"

Why I don't need God

RICHARD WHITE EXAMINES THE MITHRAS FACTOR IN CHRISTIANITY

Christians are like followers of any faith: they have utter conviction that it is true, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. I recently sat and watched a documentary in which an Irish comedian took a group of five fundamentalist Christians to America to try to prove evolution to them.

The attitude of these people became clear when, after one of them said the Great Flood created the Grand Canyon, they visited the Grand Canyon and were told by an expert that water travels in a straight line, it does not create bends such as those found in the Canyon.

The lesson ended with a demonstration – a bucket of water emptied, and they all watched the water travel in a straight line. Then one Christian retorted that because God created water, it's his to do what he wants with, and therefore could have suspended his own laws. When faced with a mind that works in such a way, there can be no getting through.

That's the fundamentalists, though. It is probably fair to say that most Christians are not that way inclined and are often quite open to a discussion, although probably not conversion. Most are simply unaware that with Christianity, ie the belief in Jesus as a saviour, we've been here before.

This was something I was aware of already, but didn't give much thought to. Then one night I was happily watching *QI* on TV when the incredible bastion of intelligence and endless knowledge Stephen Fry began to talk about Mithras, the Persian god. Specifically, how Mithras shared a great many characteristics with Jesus Christ. So many characteristics in fact that scholar of religion Marvin Meyer explained that "early Christianity ... in general, resembles Mithraism in a number of respects – enough to make Christian apologists scramble to invent creative theological explanations to account for the similarities."

Invent creative theological explanations they did. When stories of Jesus began to gain popularity the pagan members of society would think, "Hmm, this sounds familiar. Have these people not heard of Dionysus or Hercules, or Mithras?" A church father Justin Martyr, in trying to convince people Jesus was unlike those mythical gods in that he was real, created a reply that can

only be borne in a religious mind (brace yourself): "For when they say that Dionysus arose again and ascended to heaven, is it not evident that the devil imitated the prophecy?" In other words, Satan went back in time to plant the suggestions and worshiping of pagan gods, to induce scepticism in the minds of people when Jesus became known. The most revealing thing about this quote is not Martyr's insanity, but rather, the lack of denial that people similar to Jesus were supposed to have existed.

For anyone wondering just what sort of similarities we're talking about, Mithras was born on the winter solstice, and was resurrected around the spring equinox. Mithras was born on December 25 as the child of the Sun. It is written that: "Mithras is spiritual light contending with spiritual darkness, and through his labours the kingdom of darkness shall be lit with heaven's own light; the Eternal will receive all things back into his favour, the world will be redeemed to God. The impure are to be purified, and the evil made good ... In relation to the Eternal he is the source of grace, in relation to man he is the life-give and mediator". Mithras had 12 companions like Jesus had 12 disciples, and he performed miracles. He was called the "good shepherd" and "the way, the truth and the light, redeemer, saviour, Messiah." Mithras was born of a virgin mother. He was supposedly buried in a tomb and rose after three years, and his resurrection was celebrated every year. Mithras's sacred day was Sunday, or the Lord's Day, and the religion of Mithra had a Lord's Supper.

The *International Encyclopaedia* even says that believers regarded Mithras as "the source of life, and [that he] could redeem the souls of the dead into the better world ... The ceremonies included a sort of baptism to remove sins, anointing, and a sacred meal of bread and water."

The similarities, or rather shared details, are undeniable, and indeed it is not a surprise to many people today that Christianity stole certain dates and symbols from paganism. What may be more surprising, though, is to what extent Christianity lacks its own identity. The story of Jesus conforms to the 'hero pattern', a 22-point scoring system that awards one point for certain characteristics. Jesus scores 19, including: his mother

is a royal virgin, his father is a king, the circumstances of his conception are unusual, he is the son of a god, an attempt was made by his father to kill him at birth, nothing is known or told of his childhood, he returns in his adulthood to take over his kingdom, he becomes king, he prescribes laws, loses favour with his subjects, meets an unexpected death, is nailed to a cross, at the top of a hill, his body was not buried and he was not succeeded by children.

Other attributes Jesus shared with saviours prior to him are: being born of a virgin on December 25, stars appeared at the birth, he turned water into wine, healed the sick, cast out demons, performed miracles, was transfigured before followers, was betrayed for 30 pieces of silver, celebrated a communal meal with bread and wine to represent his flesh and blood, descended into hell, arose on the third day and ascended to heaven to sit beside god. Of the 22-point scoring system, on which Jesus came in third place with a hefty 19, Oedipus got full marks at 22, Theseus got 20, Romulus and Hercules scored 17, Perseus was awarded 16, Zeus 15, and even Robin Hood got on there with 13. What's interesting is not so much that Christianity wants people to believe in the ridiculous, but just how many similarities there are with saviours before Christ and the suggestion that we must accept they are all false, but Jesus is the right one.

This would be a more worthwhile stance if there were evidence that Jesus actually was who the Christians claim him to be, but evidence isn't of the strongest calibre. Jesus died in 33 AD, and Mark wrote the first Gospel many years later. The exact date of this is unknown, but he mentioned the destruction of the Jewish temple, which happened in 70 AD, so it must have been written after that. That means there was a gap of at least 40 years between the death of Jesus and the writing of the first Gospel. Call me cynical, but I wonder what the recollection is like when remembering the events of something that happened four decades ago. His age at the time of the incident and the time of writing must be considered – if he was ten years of age when he was with Jesus, he would have been 50 when he wrote the Gospel. That's a long time to forget something, especially a memory stored in a child's mind. The other Gospels all came

after Mark, making their authenticity even worse, especially as they do not all share the same detail. King Herod, for example, is only mentioned in one Gospel, and not even the crucifixion makes it into all four. Personally, if there was one thing I doubt I would ever forget, it would be witnessing a man put to death and then resurrecting.

Most of the information we have on Christ comes from St Paul – the man who did not see Jesus in real life, but saw him in a vision. Jesus told Paul to spread the word of God, and he did so with gusto, composing letters that amassed 80,000 words. Between 33 AD and at least 70 AD, the only information available on Christianity is the work of Paul, and he doesn't talk of much of what we consider to be facts of the religion. Omitted from Paul's writings are Mary, Joseph, Bethlehem, John the Baptist, Herod, miracles, quotes from Jesus, Jesus's ministry,

his entrance to Jerusalem, Pontius Pilate, the Jewish mob and the trials before the crucifixion. Indeed, the only things mentioned by Paul are the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, but even they differ to what Christians believe because Paul wrote they occurred in another realm, not here on earth. Actually, Paul never said that Jesus existed as a human on this planet.

Essentially what history tells us is that Jesus lived and died, no one except Paul wrote about it for at least 40 years, then Mark remembered all the things that Paul was unaware of.

What's important to know is that allegorical literature was very common in the time of the Gospels. Historian Richard Carrier explains that Mark probably didn't know he was writing history; he was writing a gospel, which is "good news", and used symbolism alongside biblical and pagan paral-

els. Many gospels were written beside the four included in the Bible, but most were discarded because they were too folkloristic. In other words, the creators of the Bible decided what could and couldn't be used based on what was most believable.

When it comes down to it, the 'knowledge' we have of Jesus appears to have come from nowhere – or the mind of someone recollecting an event that happened no less than forty years earlier. It's flimsy at best. On a supernatural level though, Jesus is not as unique as Christians would like to believe, and it's ironic that Christians themselves will denounce the existence of gods like Thor, Zeus and Mithras, while simultaneously preaching a belief in Christ. Next time the debate comes up, maybe just ask them why they don't accept Mithras – after all, he had all the same purpose as Jesus, but he was there first.

Who's afraid of Tina Beattie?

TINA Beattie, Director of the Digby Stuart Research Centre for Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, is as far removed from Catholic traditionalism as it's possible to be. Her name hit the headlines earlier this year when she was one of 27 theologians, clerics and activists who wrote a letter to the *Times* arguing that "not all Catholics share their hierarchy's stated views against proposals to extend civil marriage to same-sex couples. We suggest that it is perfectly proper for Catholics, using fully formed consciences, to support the legal extension of civil marriage to same-sex couples".

This, not surprisingly, prompted an outcry from traditionalists and led to the cancellation of a lecture Beattie was due to give in Bristol. Her public support of something the Church has branded an "intrinsic evil" prompted Bishop Declan Lang of the Diocese of Clifton to cancel a planned lecture she was due to give on the Virgin Mary at the local cathedral.

Shortly after, Beattie, who had been invited to be a visiting fellow and give public lectures at the University of San Diego this winter, had her invitation rescinded by the university. Beattie's invitation came from USD's Frances Harpst Center for Catholic Thought and Culture (CCTC).

The decision to rescind the invitation, according to a report in the *Guardian*, sparked a furious row, with Eamon Duffy, professor of the History of Christianity at Cambridge accusing the university of "colluding in the Sovietisation of Roman Catholic intellectual life". He urged the university to reconsider. "It is deeply dispiriting that the President of a Catholic university should characterise academic discussion and debate among

BARRY DUKE reports on a major Catholic controversy

Catholics as 'dissent', and should seek to suppress academic exchange by black-balling an individual whom the Church has not condemned," he wrote in a letter to the university's President Mary Lyons.

Comparing her stance unfavourably with that of Cardinal Newman, who "deplored similar attempts to silence discussion in the church", he concluded: "I fear that by publicly withdrawing this invitation, the University of San Diego has brought academic ignominy on itself, and is colluding in the Sovietisation of Catholic intellectual life which many feel is one of the saddest features of the contemporary Church."

Last month, *The National Catholic Register* – "America's most complete Catholic news source" – described Beattie as "openly at odds with some of the Catholic Church's most fundamental moral teachings", saying she "disagrees with the Church's teachings on contraception, early-term abortion, same-sex 'marriage' and women's ordination".

And it reported that a "firestorm of debate over academic freedom" has "pitted Lyons against many of her own faculty and has now involved the university's board of trustees, too".

In her letter, Lyons told Beattie that the mission of the CCTC and the intention of its donors are to "provide opportunities to engage the Catholic intellectual tradition in its diverse embodiments.

"This would include clear and consistent presentations concerning the Church's moral teachings, teachings with which you, as a Catholic theologian, dissent publicly".

Lyons added: "At a Catholic university, there has to be congruity between this institution and our values and those people whom we hold up for endorsement or support."

But CCTC's Director, Gerard Mannion, disputed Lyons' claim that Beattie was receiving an honour from the university or the CCTC. "The term 'visiting fellow' is intended for administrative purposes. It's to indicate to students that we have a scholar on campus for an extended stay," he said. "There's not an honorary element attached to it."

Mannion accused Lyons of violating CCTC's academic freedom and independence, and the charge was taken up by many of the USD faculty. Student supporters of Beattie held meetings and demonstrations on campus and organised a Facebook page supporting her.

The NCR reported that "the Vatican has expressed concern recently that Catholic theologians dissenting from Church teaching, as defined authoritatively by the Pope and the Church's bishops, are undermining the Church's stance in the public square", and pointed out that Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, the apostolic nuncio to the United States, had stated in November that dissenting Catholic professors at colleges and universities posed a "grave and major problem", both to the Church's effort to defend its religious liberty and to "the higher purpose of the human person".

Said Archbishop Viganò: "We have witnessed that some instructors who claim the moniker 'Catholic' are often the sources of teachings that conflict with, rather than explain and defend, Catholic teachings in the important public-policy issues of the day."

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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GAYS AND THEIR ROLE IN PROGRESSING THE SECULAR CAUSE IN THE UK

FOR Latin? I should be so lucky. I think Fiona Weir (*Points of View*, December) was being tactful about the error in my English grammar she spotted. Incidentally, the editor, Barry Duke, is definitely esteemed, not for writing or editing skills – I'm no judge – but for his indefatigability in progressing the atheist cause.

Here I'd like to pick up on Donald Room's observation, following Diesel Balaam's, that gays disproportionately dominate – way beyond their statistical two per cent of the population – the secular movement in the UK. Homosexuality seems to come with the territory, upon which I tread warily because I'm diffidently homophobic and don't want to offend sensitivities. People by

nature are different, a fact increasingly acknowledged after a hiatus of 50 or so years, acceptance of which should trump moral judgement about sexual proclivities, and I agree members of the LGBT community, like all free citizens, can do what they like short of harming others or breaking the law. But I turn a deaf ear to any person or group who incessantly try to influence my thinking, and gays seem to be the most publicly strident minority in their demand for equal treatment – and the most successful, what with Gay Pride pink parades, from Brighton to Sydney, and soon to be same-sex weddings. Astonishing the changes I have seen in my lifetime.

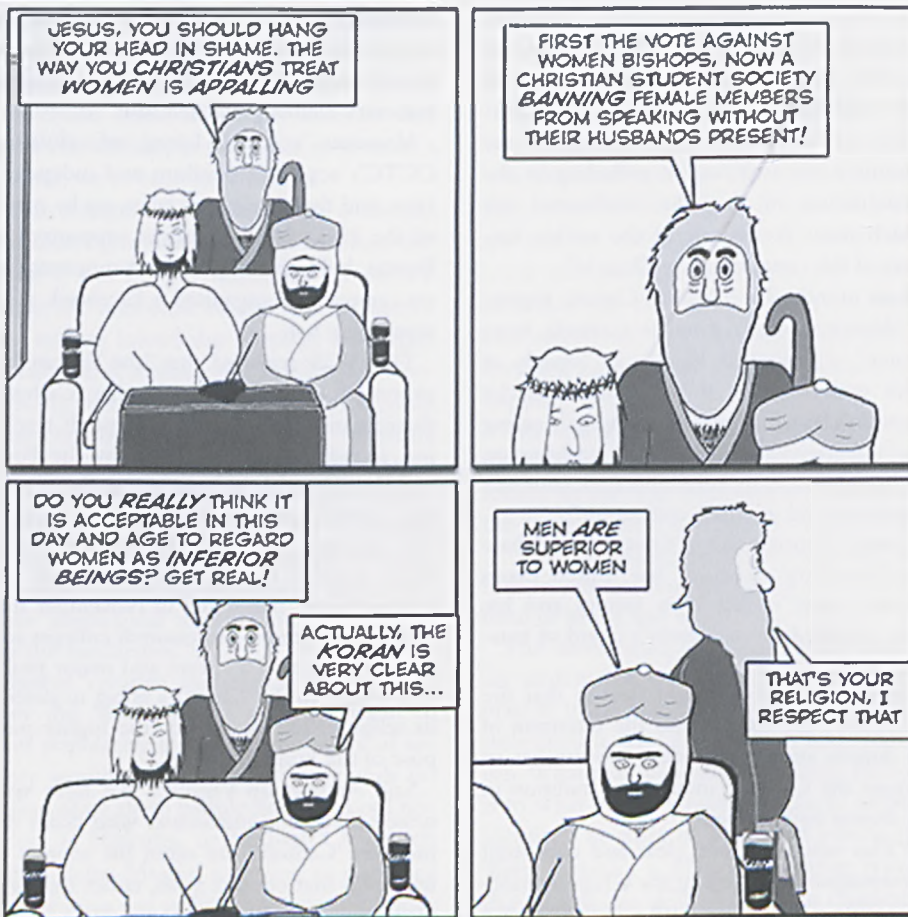
My old-fashioned prejudice – don't start me on the feminist movement! – doesn't prevent me from respecting and greatly

admiring the atheist gays who are courageously raising public awareness about the dishonesty of religions and their bigotry and cruelty that can destroy lives and happiness, and those in the NSS, and the *Freethinker*, who are leading the intellectual argument against religion to try and shift the sclerotic establishment's intransigence. More power to their pens! But to repeat myself to make a point: I turn off when, in tandem with promoting secularism, the gay rights agenda is shouted too loudly for my ears.

Surely turning down the volume would attract a lot more heterosexuals – the 98 per cent of the population – to the secular movement.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

Jesus & Mo



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IT IS concerning if, in our irreligious groups, someone feels like a token, particularly when in fact quite average (Donald Room in December's *Points of View*). If we want to persuade the general public, it helps to be part of it. It is even more important, as a matter of principle, for our leadership to be broadly representative of the very large non-religious population; but just that bit better of course.

Your correspondent's point was about sexual orientation. It would also matter if we were strikingly of any significant category, for example vegetarian, wealthy or even – for a change – female.

My own local group, Lynn Humanists, is relatively older (we wish otherwise) and more educated, but otherwise a fair and inclusive mix.

Our personal characteristics do impinge, especially on public roles, and collectively can have, or be accused of, distorting effects. Some rebalancing would be wise.

Edwin Salter
Norfolk

WHICH RELIGION IS TRUE?

PEOPLE believe what they are told as children. Hence, adherence to religious belief is merely a product of culture and socialisation. This is perfectly obvious, otherwise religious

beliefs would be spread randomly around the globe.

Yet beliefs are more than just expressions of cultural loyalty. They are held to be actually true. That is historically why they generate such passion, and also the religious violence, war and persecution that continues today. It is also why religions are given exemption from tax, from discrimination laws, and even from criminal prosecution.

Given the damage and conflict caused by such “cultural truths”, it could be imagined that societies may seek to resolve the issue by asking the simple question: which religion is true? Yet asking this question is culturally suppressed. It is considered taboo, impolite, offensive. University religious studies departments never ask this question. The United Nations is urged to mandate blasphemy laws so that asking it is illegal.

The answer, of course, is that no religion is true. All religions rely on beliefs in historical events that never happened. Their beliefs are contradicted by historical, archaeological, biological and geological evidence. Religions are known to be false. If religions were true, they would not be religions.

But the truth about religion is unwanted, so it must be suppressed. Societies are in a state of mass psychological denial. It is a dangerous departure from rationally that increasingly imperils humanity.

To highlight the absurdity of this situation I have previously issued the \$100,000 Religious Challenge. (<http://challenge.theatheist.net/>)

It is now more than five years since this challenge was issued. Not a single response has been received. Is it cognitive dissonance or willful blindness? The issue remains. I hereby reissue this Challenge.

John L Perkins

Melbourne Atheist Meetup Group
Australia

VIZ AND ISLAM

I EMAILED one of my favourite periodicals in 2009:

“As a long time subscriber to *Viz*, and atheist, I do enjoy your send-ups of Christianity and other religions; very scathing and often hilarious!

“I am still waiting for you to give Islam the same treatment. There are loads of topics in this religion to go at. Why the omission? Are you scared of retribution?”

“Come on *Viz*, take a brave stance on this, or explain in your magazine why not.”

Their reply was: “Re: Islam. We’re scared of being killed. Cheers, Stevie.”

I replied: “Thank you for your honest and understandable reply Steve.

“Could you possibly print my original letter and your original reply *verbatim* in

the next *Letterbooks* column?”

Sadly, and for the same reason, I would ask you to substitute the word email for Birmingham. What are we coming to...

Their reply: “Erm ... I don’t know. I’ll put it in the pile and see how brave the lads are feeling. Quite understand re the substitution. Stevie.

Nothing appeared in subsequent issues

Terry McGrath

Birmingham

POT AND KETTLE

NO mirrors in the Vatican, then? Following a NSS media link to “Public Catholic” (November 14, 2012), we see the papal nuncio, Cardinal Carlo Maria Viganò, complaining about the increasing threat to religious freedom from the “great democracies”, but he prefaces that with this remarkable statement: “Evidence is emerging which demonstrates that the threat to religious freedom is not solely a concern for non-democratic and totalitarian regimes”.

So, the debate between the pot and the kettle continues.

David Stevenson

Shepperton

SPIRITUALITY

I WOULD like to comment on and discuss aspects of “Spirituality” written by Barry Duke (*Freethinker*, September) and subsequently published on the *FT* website.

I consider myself to be “spiritual but not religious” and I felt that aspects of the first parts of the article were mean spirited and aggressive.

I am open to reasoned and rational dialogue on issues around spirituality and religion, but I feel that threats of and incitement to violence are unacceptable and inappropriate to the process of rational debate.

I don’t feel that my “spirituality” makes me naïve, stupid, or selfish or unhappy. I am openly critical of and question many aspects of organised religion, and I engage in and encourage debate and criticism of ideas, freedom of thought and speech, and agree with many of the points that were made in the later part of the article.

But I feel that certain comments that were made in the first part of that article, and the general tone of that part, was mean spirited and aggressive.

Rick George

USA

Paul Kurtz: Humanism loses a dedicated champion

PAUL Kurtz, who died last October aged 87 “was one of the most important humanist activists in the 20th century”, according to Jim Herrick, writing in the November 2012 issue of the *Ethical Record*.

“He remained faithful to the ideas of his mentor Sydney Hook and was persistent in his belief in the philosophy of the pragmatist John Dewey. Although philosophy was always a primary concern, he was very active in developing and promoting secular humanism. It was in this role that I knew him especially in his leading role in the International and Humanist Ethical Union. He worked closely with many groups including the Dutch and Norwegians.

“As a forceful individual he sometimes differed from others, but he was always faithful to international humanism. When he disagreed with a group his tendency was to set up another group. He was a great entrepreneur of ideas and groups. In later years he set up an international network of secular humanist groups around the world.

“His centre in Buffalo was the largest humanist institution in the world – and he invited me to visit it and share in its activities on several occasions. I was envious of the money that enabled the library to buy specialist freethought books from around the world – creating the finest freethought library in the world. I met him in many places round the world and he was always generous with ideas and friendly. When someone comes to write a biography of him it will chart a remarkable personality of considerable achievement.”

Ethical Record editor Norman Bacrac added: “In October 1997, Jim Herrick and I attended the opening of a new Center for Enquiry in Moscow State University, established by Paul Kurtz and Prof. Valery Kuvakin of the Russian Humanist Society (est 1991).

In January 2008, Paul Kurtz and the Center for Enquiry launched Centre for Enquiry London at Conway Hall in a well-attended event with many speakers. At this event, Richard Dawkins of CFI London’s Advisory Board, answered questions from the audience. Since then, CFI UK has organised three or four all-day events per annum at Conway Hall jointly with South Place Ethical Society.

Death knell of Irish Catholicism



The Pope and the Vatican: increasingly out of touch with reality

with a growing need for adult religious education to stop people drifting from the faith as they got older.

A spokesman for the Catholic Communications Office said faith was not a “numbers game”, and pointed out that the latest survey contrasted sharply with last year’s census in the Republic, which found that 84 percent described themselves as Catholic, with just five percent saying they had no religion.

But according to the latest research, the Republic is now in the top ten for the number of people declaring themselves to be “a convinced atheist”.

Although this is still a minority group at ten percent, it puts the country high in the global league table, and is a stark rise from three percent seven years ago.

The poll asked people, irrespective of whether they attended a place of worship, if they considered themselves to be religious, not religious, or an atheist.

But the nature of the question may have affected the results – something the pollsters themselves admit, reported the *Telegraph*.

They said that while there had been a nine percent drop globally in the number describing themselves as “religious”, most people still felt part of the faith they grew up in.

This was the second survey in recent months to show massive alienation from religion among the Irish population. A survey in February by market research group Amarach found the public at odds with the Church hierarchy on a range of issues, including women clergy and married priests.

That survey, which questioned more than 1,000 Irish Catholics, found that 77 percent believed women should be ordained. Nine out of ten said priests should be able to mar-

ry. It also revealed just 35 percent went to church on a weekly basis.

The Catholic Communications Office was asked what actions had been taken by the bishops since the survey was published, but a spokesman declined to comment, suggesting that the study had no credibility as it had been commissioned by the Association of Catholic Priests, a group of 800 clerics critical of the hierarchy.

Asked about the new Red C poll, the spokesman queried the language used by the poll.

“The word ‘religious’, if left unqualified, is too general to be used as the keyword in a survey questionnaire – especially in the Irish context – where people prefer words such as ‘spiritual’. Being ‘religious’ is a very subjective measurement,” he added.

“For example, in the Catholic Church, someone who attends Mass on a daily basis may not describe themselves as ‘religious’, yet they are outwardly a person of deep faith.”

Fr Brendan Hoban, a spokesman for the ACP, said the Red C results were “predictable enough” given the fall-off in Mass attendance and the drop in interest in the Catholic Church in recent years.

However, he said Irish Catholic numbers were “holding up markedly” and pointed to the census figures and the 35 percent attending Mass on a weekly basis.

He suggested that the Catholic Church was “almost traumatised” by the scandals of the last ten to 15 years, and this was affecting its ability to take steps to address declining religious observation.

“It’s so difficult for the bishops to provide leadership because, on the one hand, if they speak out, they are criticised, and if they

don’t speak out, they are also criticised.”

Meanwhile, Michael Nugent of Atheism Ireland said the Red C poll showed people were rejecting the idea that atheism was an “extreme position”.

He said the figure of ten percent of the population being atheists could be an under-estimation, as there were still people who did not believe in a God, but disliked the “atheist” label.

The Red C global poll also found that the richer you got, the less religious you defined yourself. Religiosity was higher among the poor, with people in the bottom-income groups 17 percent more religious than those in the top-earning groups.

One in four Americans call themselves Catholic, but a 2011 survey finds this is more a cultural brand label for many than a religious identity.

The American survey showed that 40 percent of Catholics polled believed one could be a good Catholic without believing that in Mass, the bread and wine really become the body and blood of Christ – a core doctrine of Catholicism.

An overwhelming majority, 88 percent, said “how a person lives is more important than whether he or she is Catholic,” according to *Catholics in America: Persistence and change in the Catholic landscape*. The survey is part of ongoing research by teams of sociologists led by Catholic University sociologist William D’Antonio.

The survey, a comprehensive look at the beliefs and practices of 1,442 U.S. Catholic adults, also finds that 86 percent say “you can disagree with aspects of Church teachings and still remain loyal to the church.” Only about 30 percent support the “teaching authority claimed by the Vatican”.