

3



**Victim blamed:** Muslim zealot says Malala Yousafzai brought attack on herself

4



**Pickles' vow:** Community Secretary will protect Christians from 'militant' secularists

5



**Rowan's victory:** Comedian Rowan Atkinson's free speech campaign forces law change

10



**No to sharia:** Cameron Riddle profiles One Law for All's tireless Maryam Namazie

# the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

£1.25 FEBRUARY 2013 VOLUME 133 NO 2

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK



Bearing posters of Márton Gyöngyösi, doctored to show him wearing a Hitler moustache, thousands of Hungarians took to the streets of Budapest to protest against his anti-Semitism. Photo credit : BosNewsLife

## Hungary's new Christian constitution ushers in a new age of intolerance

**H**ungary's new constitution, according to a report in *The New Yorker* last month "recognises the role of Christianity in preserving nationhood". It added that anything judged to be "blasphemous" or "anti-national" is now the target of a full-blown campaign of suppression. But this worrying trend goes deeper than the imposition of "Christian values" on art and freedom of expression. It borders on neo-Nazism which last year manifested itself in a virulently anti-Semitic speech delivered to the Hungarian Parliament by Márton Gyöngyösi.

Gyöngyösi, 33, an economist and former tax advisor, is the deputy parliamentary floor leader for the Jobbik party, and he declared that people of Jewish heritage are a "security risk" and should be registered on a nationwide list. His comments sparked widespread outrage, but, according to the German newspaper *Der Spiegel*, "the government was slow to distance itself" from his remarks.

During a debate over Israel's military offensive against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Gyöngyösi demanded that "all Jews living in Hungary be registered" and that "Jews, particularly those in Parliament and the Government, be evaluated for the potential danger they pose to Hungary". In a comment directed at Zsolt Németh, a state secretary in the Foreign Ministry, he said: "I think you owe Hungary such a compilation."

Németh, the long-serving foreign policy expert from the conservative governing party Fidesz, neither condemned nor showed any indication of dismay at the comments. *Der Spiegel* reported him as simply saying: "The number of Jews in Hungarian government really has nothing to do with the serious conflict in the Middle East."

Gyöngyösi's comments triggered indignation and disgust from

*(Continued on back page)*



# Bad company

**BARRY DUKE** EXPLAINS THE BACKGROUND TO A PRO-GAY DEMO IN ST NEOTS

"LAY down with dogs and you're bound to catch fleas." That old saying – a warning to be wary of the company one keeps – apparently goes back to the 1500s, but never was it more apt than at the beginning of January when a Christian preacher from St Neots, near Cambridge, awoke to find himself embroiled in a controversy about Uganda's notorious "Kill the Gays" bill.

Late last year, Paul Shinnars, owner of the Cornerstone café and book shop in St Neots, and head of an evangelical outfit called Passion for Souls, accepted an invitation to share a platform at the Nakivubo Stadium in Uganda with a bunch of pentecostal preachers at a New Years Eve prayer fest. It was one of three huge religious rallies that took part in Uganda that night.

On January 2, a Ugandan newspaper, the *Monitor* – under the headline "Calls to pass the anti-gays bill dominate New Year messages" – quoted the rally's host, Bishop David Kiganda, leader of Christianity Focus Ministries (CFM) – as saying: "We ask Mem-

bers of Parliament to stop wasting time debating the bill but simply pass it to save school-going children, who are at risk of being recruited."

The *Monitor* pointed out that "several pastors", addressing "tens of thousands at the seventh annual National Prayer Day and Night at the stadium", also warned legislators against siding with the Western world, saying they risked losing their seats.

The newspaper added that the "Rev Paul Schinnars from the United Kingdom commended Uganda for the bill, saying it was a clear stand for God. 'There is no other nation world over that has such a plan and through this, Uganda is going to be blessed', Rev Schinnars said".

I thought I knew the names of virtually every anti-gay preacher in the UK, but the name "Schinnars" rang no bells whatsoever. So I did some digging, and learned that there was a Paul Shinnars in St Neots who spends a lot of his time preaching in Uganda. I then found, on the Cornerstone Café website, a poster for the Nakivubo Stadium's rally. A photograph of Shinnars featured on the flyer, which according to some local sources, was also placed in the café's window.

Fundamentalist Christian preachers in Uganda – ogged on by Western evangelicals – have been working themselves into a frenzy over the anti-homosexual bill which has been languishing in the wings for around three years.

The bill, introduced in October 2009 by Ugandan MP David Bahati proposed that a new offence be created in Uganda named "aggravated homosexuality" which would be punishable as a capital offence. From that point, it became known as the "Kill the Gays" bill.

The proposals included plans to introduce the death penalty for gay adults who had sex with those of the same sex under 18, with disabled people, or when the accused party is HIV-positive, or for those previously convicted of homosexuality-related offences.

Bahati, according to *Wikipedia*, had expressed a desire to "kill every last gay person".

Bahati, a core member of The Family, a powerful Christian evangelical political movement, became an internationally reviled figure among gay communities in the West, but he did succeed in doing two things: getting support from mainly US-

based fundamentalists, and throwing into sharp focus the terrifying levels of homophobia that he, with their assistance, had managed to generate in Uganda.

Unless one was living on Mars, it was impossible not to know what was going on in Uganda.

After reading the *Monitor* report, I posted a piece on the *Freethinker* website, pointing out the connection between Shinnars and the rally. Included in it was the quote attributed to him in the *Monitor*, and I ended by suggesting that a peaceful demonstration be held outside the café to demonstrate disgust over his involvement with what reportedly turned out to be a frenzy of homophobia. The *Freethinker* report went viral, and quickly appeared on a number of gay sites.

Shinnars responded with a statement published on January 9 in the *Huntingdon, St Ives and St Neots News and Cryer*, saying: "I am not homophobic. Never have been. Never will. I have never ever made any homophobic comments. As Christians we follow the commands which Jesus taught, to love God and love people. That means all people, irrespective of race, colour or sexuality. I do not and will not support any legislation or law which condemns anyone on the basis of the above criteria." He also claimed not to have had any knowledge of the anti-homosexuality bill.

By this time, a demonstration had been organised via the social networking site Facebook but the organisers of the "Support the Gays" group stated that it would not be aimed at Shinnars and Cornerstone, but against the Ugandan bill itself, and would take place in the market square on January 12. I understand that more than 100 people attended event.

I suppose that there is a possibility that Shinnars is a genuine maverick among fundamentalists, who do little else but demonise The Gays. It is also possible that he was misquoted, as he claims, by the *Monitor*.

The truth, to use Shinnars' own words, "will come out in the end".



**BARRY DUKE**  
*Freethinker* editor

## the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote  
UK ISSN 0016-0687  
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

All correspondence to:  
The *Freethinker*

3 Queens Road, Beckenham, Kent  
BR3 4JN

Email: [barry@freethinker.co.uk](mailto:barry@freethinker.co.uk)

Tel: +34 603 823 243

Website: [www.freethinker.co.uk](http://www.freethinker.co.uk)

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00

unwaged Overseas rate £25 sterling.

Special trial subscription for readers'

friends and contacts: £5.00 for six

months. Send name and address

of recipient with £5.00 cheque or

postal order made payable to G W

Foote and Company to:

The *Freethinker*, Unit 8, The Old Silk

Mill Brook Street, Tring

Hertfordshire HP23 5EF.

Tel: 01442 820580.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son,  
Sheffield.



# 'What's so special about Malala?' asks London-based Islamic fanatic

IN AN international poll carried out late last year, 87.53 percent of those who cast votes said that Malala Yousafzai, 15 – the Pakistani schoolgirl who survived a bullet fired by a Taliban terrorist who was part of a plot to silence the girl's impassioned pleas for female education – should be *Time Magazine's* Person of the Year.

Unsurprisingly, Barack Obama was named Person of the Year 2012, but Malala came in second place, to the delight of millions. But among those who would not have rejoiced was Iftikhar Ahmad, of the London School of Islamics, who lays the blame for the shooting on Malala herself and the BBC.

Shortly after the world's press carried news of the atrocity Ahmad, pictured below, emailed the *Freethinker*, asking "what is so special about this Malala, that she has been honoured with peace prize, and nominated for Noble?" sic.

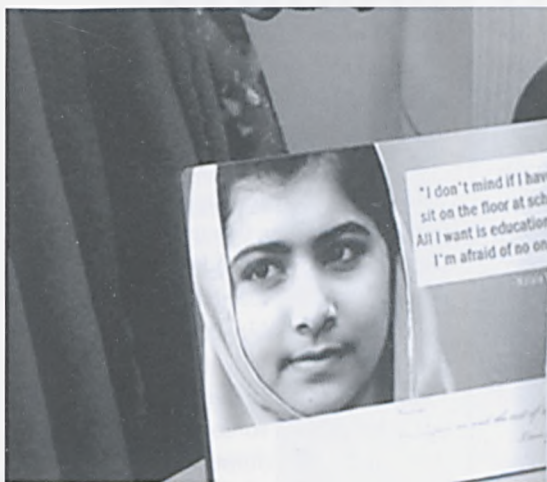
At the time of his writing to us last November, tens of thousands of people from around the world were signing an online petition calling for Malala be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, the UN special envoy for education, said the teen would be a worthy recipient of the prize.

The UK government was also urged to back the campaign, with advocates saying Malala Yousafzai represents those denied an education.

Malala came to prominence when, as an 11-year-old, she wrote a diary for BBC Urdu, giving an account of how her school in Mingora town dealt with the Taliban's 2009 edict to close girls' schools.

Her love for education and her courage in standing up to the Taliban made her an icon of bravery and earned her a national peace award in 2011.

Ahmad wrote: "At age 11 Malala began writing, under a pseudonym, for the BBC. Did the BBC encourage Malala, knowing she was only 11? If that is the case, what an irresponsible, unethical act!! I am sure the BBC feels somewhat remorseful that this story ended the way it did, and they are the ones who are paying for Malala's treatment



in England. I wonder if Malala's parents were aware of their daughter's blog."

As a matter of fact they *were*, and very proud of the fact too. With the encouragement of her devout Muslim father, Malala Yousafzai began blogging in her own name and revealed her face to the world.

Ahmad added: "There are countless women who are promoting education in Pakistan, but they don't promote via BBC, or any other foreign channels. There has never been an incident of violence by any, leave alone the Talibans, on any of these women from Pakistan. What Malala stood for, and what she was fighting against, is not my concern at the moment, for such concerns, whether right or wrong, have already been addressed by a large number of so-called advocates for human rights and justice. I am not even concerned in knowing who actually tried to kill her."

Then he declared: "She was the only girl shot on the bus full of girls by the masked terrorists." And he demanded evidence from

the media to prove that the shooting was carried out by a Muslim or the Taliban. "The truth will come out one day *Insha'Allah* and HE will punish whoever the culprits are. The lies cannot last for long."

Malala was *not* the only girl shot that day. The Taliban gunman also shot and injured Shazia Ramzan, 13 and Kainat Riaz, the 16-year-old 10th grader sitting to Shazia's left. He shot her in the shoulder, then dropped off the back of the truck and disappeared.

Commented *Time*: "Four bullets, three school girls, point blank range. It is nothing short of a miracle that all three survived."

On January 3, 2013, Malala was discharged from hospital, less than three months after the attack.

Doctors decided that "she would benefit from being at home" with her parents and two brothers in the UK. She was set to undergo complex cranial reconstruction surgery "as part of her long-term recovery", doctors said.

## Satanic children should also have rights

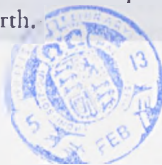
A GROUP of Florida Satanists gathered in Tallahassee last month to praise state Governor Rick Scott's support for Senate Bill 98 which allows school boards to draft policies allowing students to read "inspirational messages" at assemblies and sports events.

A spokesperson for the Satanic Temple, Lucien Greaves, said that Satanists were supporting the bill because it reaffirmed "our American freedom to practice our faith openly, allowing our Satanic children the freedom to pray in school."

Greaves added that the bill, which was slammed by groups like Americans United for Separation of Church and State, helps "alternative, marginalised religions".

Greaves likened the event to a "Satanic coming out" and said: "We are a compassionate religion, with humanitarian goals. We endorse people to pursue happiness so long as it doesn't intrude on other people's happiness."

The Satanists and the Satanic Temple, officially founded in 2012, believe that Satan serves as "God's proxy" on Earth.





# Eric Pickles vows to allow Christians to wear crosses with pride in public

REACTING to the news that three out of four “persecuted” Christians lost their high-profile cases in the European Court of Human Rights last month, UK Culture Secretary Eric Pickles said: “We’re committed to the right of Christians and people of all beliefs to follow their faith openly, wear religious symbols and pray in public.” Pickles also claimed that traditional religious freedoms were under assault from the “intolerance of aggressive secularism”, and insisted that faith provides a “clear moral compass” for society.

He declared that the coalition *does* “do God”, unlike the previous Labour government.

In his reaction to the ECHR decision, which upheld one of four high profile cases brought by Christians who complained of religious discrimination in their workplaces, the National Secular Society’s Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood said: “First and foremost, this ruling demonstrates that UK equality law is fully compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights and that there is no need to change UK law. Any attempt to do so by the Government would therefore signal a clear desire to give privileged treatment to religious believers, and would be robustly challenged.

Nadia Eweida, who made a long song and dance over wearing a cross to work, won her case against British Airways. Judges ruled Eweida’s rights had been violated under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights. They rejected the

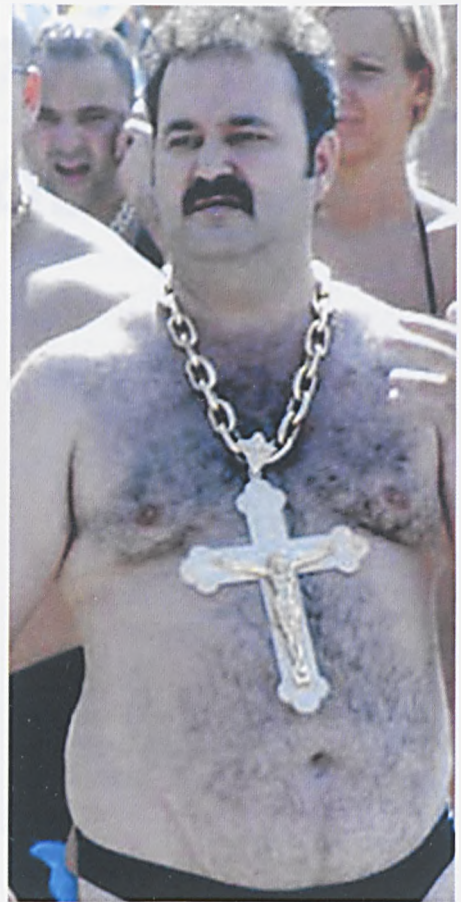
cases of nurse Shirley Chaplin, 57, who was switched to a desk job after she also refused to remove a crucifix she wore with her uniform.

Marriage counsellor Gary McFarlane, 51, who was sacked for saying he might object to offering sex therapy to homosexuals, and registrar Lillian Ladele, who was disciplined when she refused to conduct same-sex civil partnership ceremonies, also lost their legal action.

Wood added: “In the cases of the registrar who refused to conduct civil partnerships and the counsellor who wouldn’t counsel gay couples – the principle of non-discrimination against gay people has been upheld. If they had won these cases, it would have driven a coach and horses through the equality laws. The rights of gay people to fair and equal treatment would have been kicked back by decades.

“It is always better if employers can reach some kind of accommodation with their staff on these issues, and in the vast majority of cases, they do. But when employees refuse to carry out all the duties that their job entails, it is reasonable for employers to discipline them. Religious people who feel elements of their job go against their conscience can always find employment that better matches their needs. That is true religious freedom.

Referring to the Eweida case, he said it was: “A very limited victory which simply means that if employers want to prevent an employee wearing religious symbol for corporate image purposes, they must prove



*A proud cross-wearer spotted on a crowded beach*

that their image is negatively affected by such manifestations of belief.

“In the case of Chaplin we are pleased that the court has acknowledged that employers are better placed than the court to decide if jewellery is a health and safety risk and did not support the idea of blanket permission to wear religious symbols in the workplace.”

In all four cases Christian applicants complained that UK law does not sufficiently protect their rights to freedom of religion and freedom from discrimination at work.

The NSS was the only organisation that intervened to support the UK Government to argue that all four cases of Eweida, Chaplin, Ladele and McFarlane were correctly dismissed by the UK courts.

Mike Judge, spokesman for the Christian Institute which backed Ladele’s case, said: “Obviously, we are disappointed to have lost by a majority decision. But we are encouraged that two judges thought we should have won.

“What this case shows is that Christians with traditional beliefs about marriage are at risk of being left out in the cold.

“If the Government steamrollers ahead with its plans to redefine marriage, then hundreds of thousands of people could be thrown out of their jobs unless they agree to endorse gay marriage.”



*The four ‘persecuted’ Christians who complained of religious intolerance to the ECHR: from left, Nadia Eweida, Lillian Ladele, Shirley Chaplin and Gary MacFarlane*



## justplaincrazy

### GIDEONS GET COMPETITION

BIZARRELY claiming that Bibles have “a positive effect” on hotel guests, a Hindu outfit in California – The Pancjanya Project – has decided to place over 150,000 copies of the Bhagavad Gita in more than 1,100 hotels and motels in the state.

The Motel Gita website explains: “Just as the Gideons place holy Bibles in motel and hotel rooms throughout the world, the Pancjanya Project would like to introduce Srimad Bhagavad Gita in as many rooms as possible, to provide inspiration and education to travelers and other guests.”

### HANDCUFFED PRIEST

WHEN police were called late last year to free father Thomas Donovan from a pair of handcuffs, they found him in the St Aloysius Church rectory in Springfield with his hands cuffed behind him, and a gag in his mouth.

The Springfield Police Department report, released last month, revealed that when officers arrived at the church they found the Catholic priest wearing an orange jumpsuit and “a leather bondage type mask with bar in his mouth.” His hands were also cuffed behind his back.

Donovan told the police he was alone, and had “put himself in this configuration and does this from time to time.”

He explained that on this occasion “he put the handcuffs on with the keyhole up instead of down”. This prevented him from freeing himself with a handcuff key, which he showed to officers.

The priest, now on leave from his post with the Diocese of Springfield, did not further explain why he placed himself in such an unorthodox “configuration.”

### MUSLIM SIDE-SADDLE EDICT

AUTHORITIES in the Indonesian city of Lhokseumawe are to ban women from straddling motorbikes. Civic leaders in Aceh province, which is ruled by strict sharia law, claim that straddling a bike constitutes an “un-Islamic” practice, and henceforth females are to ride side-saddle.

Mayor Suaidi Yahya said: “Women sitting on motorbikes must not sit astride because it will provoke the male driver.”

The mayor lamented the fact that behaviour and morals were straying from Aceh’s Islamic cultural values, saying “we want to save women from things that will cause them to violate shariah law. We wish to honour women with this ban because they are delicate creatures.”

# Calling a copper’s horse ‘gay’ will no longer be a criminal offence

FOLLOWING a highly popular campaign spearheaded by comedian Rowan Atkinson, pictured right, the Government last month agreed to scrap a law outlawing “insulting words or behaviour”.

Home Secretary Theresa May announced a dramatic U-turn, saying the government would ditch the contentious words from the Public Order Act amid fears that they are strangling free speech.

Atkinson led a coalition of campaign groups complaining that the legislation has been abused by over-zealous police and prosecutors to arrest Christian preachers, critics of Scientology, gay rights campaigners and even students making jokes.

According to the *Daily Mail*, the government caved in after suffering a humiliating defeat in the House of Lords before last Christmas.

May told the Commons that the word “insulting” would be removed from Section 5 of the Public Order Act, as part of the Crime and Courts Bill.

She told MPs: “Looking at past cases, the Director of Public Prosecutions could not identify any where the behaviour leading to a conviction could not be described as ‘abusive’ as well as ‘insulting’.

“He has stated that the word ‘insulting’ could safely be removed without the risk of undermining the ability of the CPS to bring prosecutions.

“We will issue guidance to the police on the range of powers that remain available to them to deploy in the kind of situations I described, but the word ‘insulting’ shall be removed from Section 5.

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, who had been active in the campaign to bring about this change, said: “We congratulate the Home Secretary for removing a much-abused catch-all provision where the police could seemingly arrest and charge anyone that irritated them for using trivial or mocking words.



“The police did not even need to identify the victim that allegedly had been insulted, leaving the whole thing open to misuse. This is a welcome victory for freedom of expression.

“One such ‘insult’ was a student telling a policeman his horse was gay, and another student’s banner claiming ‘Scientology is a dangerous cult’. The change should also prevent street evangelists preaching against homosexuality being arrested and

charged. We’ve said all along that free speech is not free unless it is for everyone – even those we don’t agree with.”

The campaign had the effect of bringing together under one umbrella the unlikely partnership of The National Secular Society and the Christian Institute. Keith Porteous Wood said: “As secularists we are not anti-religious and we will work with Christians or any other religious group when our aims are in accord.”

Reform Section 5 campaign director Simon Calvert was “very pleased” by the Government’s statement, adding: “This is a victory for free speech. People of all shades of opinion have suffered at the hands of Section 5.” And Nick Pickles, director of civil liberties campaign group Big Brother Watch, said: “It should not be the police’s role to intervene when someone feels they have been insulted and the Home Secretary and her Coalition colleagues should be applauded for accepting this important change.”

Comedian Rowan Atkinson blamed the law, introduced in 1986, for creating an “outrage industry” and a society of an “extraordinarily authoritarian and controlling nature”. Last year Atkinson was commended by Paul Connolly, writing in the *Belfast Telegraph*, for saying: “The most precious thing in life, I think, is food in your mouth and the third most precious is a roof over your head, but a fixture in the Number 2 slot, for me, is free expression, just below the need to sustain life itself.”



# Rape: the Christian tradition

**DALE DEBAKCSY** examines the mindset of two US politicians who found themselves in hot water after making statements about rape

One of the most surreal aspects of our 2012 political season here in the US was the sight of not one, but *two* highly placed Republican officials waxing philosophical about rape. Shortly after Representative Todd Akin offered us his distinction between legitimate and illegitimate rape, Indiana State Treasurer Richard Mourdock opined that rape is all part of God's larger and benevolent plan.

Many found these statements outrageous, but I find it odd that we were all so shocked. Akin and Mourdock, as we shall see, are precisely in line with mainstream, orthodox biblical thinking on the subject of rape and women's duties in preventing it. The Bible is very explicit in its views about women as property and man's authority over them, and subsequent theology has done little to ameliorate those original sentiments.

The Old Testament places an interesting

and horrifying dual burden upon women. Firstly, they are property, owned originally by their father and then bartered to their husband. If a woman displeases her husband, he need only write out a bill of divorce and send her on her way, to make do as best she can (Deuteronomy 24:1-4). The only time when he loses this right is if he rapes an un-engaged virgin, after which he must pay 50 shekels of silver to the father and marry his victim, the marriage being then indissoluble (Deut. 22:28-29).

This is the ancient equivalent of "You Break It, You Buy It". The daughter is no longer saleable goods to the father, and so he is monetarily compensated for his loss, while the new husband has leave to legally rape his victim in perpetuity. Virginity is a commodity under this system, and both Judaic law, and the Christian theology that sprung from it, are positively frantic about guarding it.

But it is the second burden that is particularly cruel. Not content to reduce women to

property, the ancient Israelites then charged them with being their own subjugators. Women must not merely accept their role passively, but must actively fight to maintain it, and if they don't, they are to be exposed to the full measure of punishment the law can mete out. This is the great legacy of biblical thinking on the subject of rape: that the responsibility for a woman's rape only rests fully on her rapist's shoulders if every other alternate explanation has been eliminated first. It is worth quoting the relevant passage of Deuteronomy 22:23-27 in full:

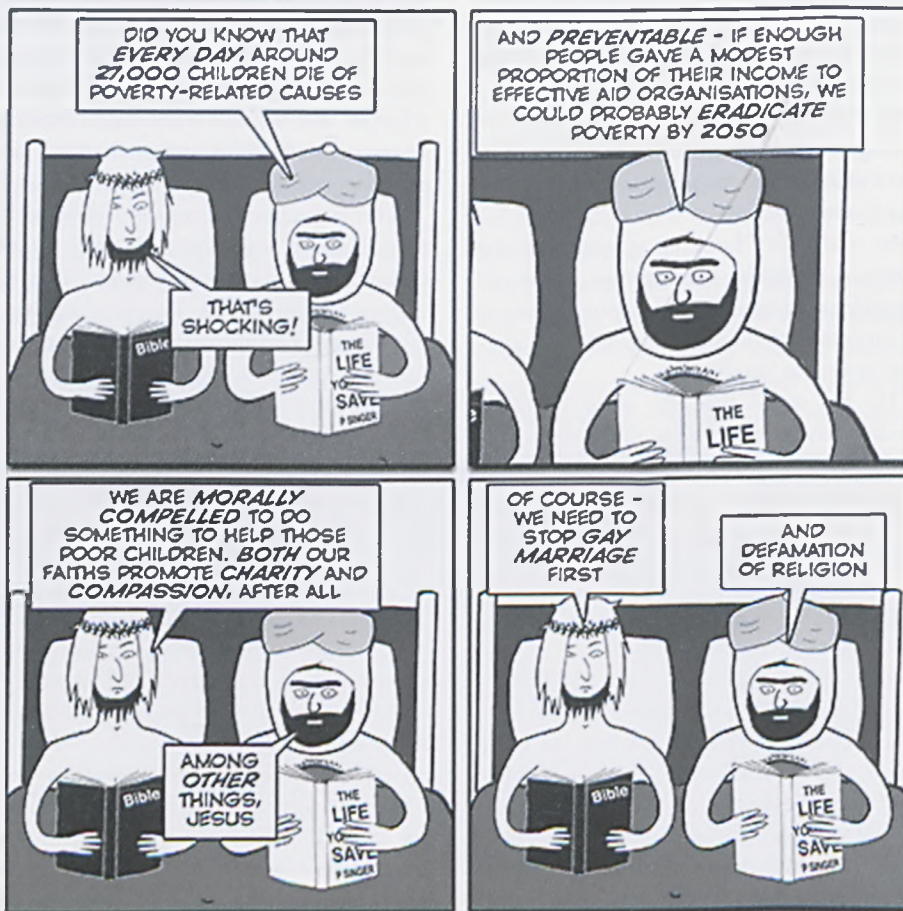
*In the case of a virgin who is engaged to a man – if a man comes upon her in town and lies with her, you shall take the two of them out to the gate of that town and stone them to death: the girl because she did not cry for help in the town, and the man because he violated another man's wife ... But if the man comes upon the engaged girl in the open country, and the man lies with her by force, only the man who lay with her shall die, but you shall do nothing to the girl... He came upon her in the open; though the engaged girl cried for help, there was no one to save her.*

This is the germ of Todd Akin's worldview. If a woman is raped anywhere in the city, she bears the blame of it for not having tried hard enough to rouse her neighbors to her protection, and deserves to die for her failure, and the man to die for having ruined another man's property. Only if she is far removed from all possible help, so far that her loudest scream couldn't be heard, is she allowed to live.

The former is an illegitimate rape – she could have fought harder against it, but didn't, and the latter is a legitimate rape. Akin maintained precisely the same structure, but just added a biological sugar coating to it when he said, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down." If the woman's internal organs do not fight the invader's sperm hard enough, then the rape was not legitimate – her biology somehow wanted it to happen.

The woman merits consideration and pity only if she is successful in internally repelling the semen of her attacker. For a Christian to express horror at Akin but not at identical sentiments in his own central spiritual text is a maneuver in double-think that can only be excused by the fact that Deuteronomy

## Jesus & Mo



© jesusandmo.net





Todd Akin, left, and Richard Mourdock. Their rape remarks sparked widespread condemnation in the US and beyond

is a book more often skimmed than read.

But perhaps our horrified Christian has indeed read these lines, and responds with the usual, “but that stuff is in the Old Testament – the New Testament does away with all of that barbarism”. Does it now? After all, you don’t have to look particularly far to find the rape mentality of the New Testament. Jesus is, quite explicitly, the product of a rape. Mark and John, in their accounts of Jesus’ life, pass over the topic of his birth entirely.

Matthew is, typically, more concerned with detailing the bartering between God and Joseph over the affront to his property than with Mary’s story (Matthew 1:18–25, in which God pays his 50 shekels by promising fame and glory as recompense, as long as Joseph agrees to keep the girl.)

Luke, however, in his telling of Jesus’ birth, wrote a positive textbook for “authority” rape. Susan Brownmiller, in her genre-defining *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* describes this mode of violation as follows:

*Rapists may operate within an emotional setting or within a dependent relationship that provides a hierarchical, authoritarian structure of its own that weakens a victim’s resistance, distorts her perspective and confounds her will –* (p 256).

And such is the rape carried out by Jehovah against Mary in Luke’s account. It makes for chilling reading, particularly in view of the thousands of years of priests and teachers that have used it as a primer for their own debauches:

Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Congratulations, favored lady! The Lord is with you!”

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.

“Don’t be frightened, Mary,” the angel told her, “for God has decided to wonderfully bless you! Very soon now, you will become pregnant and have a baby boy, and you are to name him Jesus. He shall be very great and shall be called the Son of God.”

Mary asked the angel, “But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.”

The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon you, and the power of God shall overshadow you ...”

Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to do whatever he wants” (Luke 1: 28–38).

In summary, one of God’s lieutenants shows up, tells Mary how it’s going to be, how she’s going to be impregnated, what to name the child, and how she should be glad about being done the honor. She is told, not asked. And she submits in the manner of so many women since presented by the authoritative command of a figure they trust and respect. But this isn’t enough for Luke – in a positive orgy of male domination fantasy, he puts a long, panting speech into Mary’s mouth after the act, glorifying her rapist’s power, and rhapsodizing over the favor done her:

*How I rejoice in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and now generation after generation forever shall call me blest of God. For he, the mighty Holy One, has done great things to me... How powerful is his mighty arm! How he scatters the proud and haughty ones! He has torn princes from their thrones and exalted the lowly* (Luke 1:47–53).

This is every wretched stereotype about rape writ divine. Women want to be overpowered. They want to be shown who’s boss. They consider it an honor to bear the seed of powerful men. They view being taken as something great done TO them. Even when they seem afraid that’s just a sign of how much they actually want to be violated.

Mary is every girl or boy who has ever been taken in by a priest with soft, glorious words and the promise that they are doing the Lord’s Work. She is a submissive breeding vessel who worships her defiler, and that trope has been part of the Christian mindset, and the rapist’s ready vocabulary, ever since.

The years that separate the Bible from modern times have seen variations upon these themes, but little in the way of improvement. St Augustine notoriously added to woman’s double burden a third: not only must she be property, and not only must she fight to protect her status as property, but if that fight fails and she is raped, she must accept the fact in chaste humility, taking it all as a fruitful lesson about the dangers of being too proud. She is not to be stoned to death, granted, but her emotional life af-

ter the event is to be dictated by the men around her who would really rather she just get over the whole incident and get back to normal life.

This enforced stoicism is, in effect, her punishment for not having had the good sense to die during her rapist’s attack. For there is nothing that medieval Christianity (and not just medieval, as it turns out) loved so much as a virgin who dies at the hand of her rapist.

In 1975, Brownmiller ferreted out no fewer than five medieval saints who were noted for nothing more than dying to protect the commodity of their virginity: Agnes, Agatha, Lucia, Philomena, and Susanna. The interpreters of the New Testament, for all their obscure talk about not casting stones at prostitutes, still plainly expected of women that they protect their status as property to the death, awarding them with sainthood if they succeeded, and punishing them with a code of silent humility if they survived.

In this context, Mourdock’s opinion of rape makes complete sense. In his view, “Life is that gift from God that I think even if life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen.” In other words, if the woman were really the stuff of a saint, she would have followed St. Agnes and died during the rape, but given that she didn’t, she must suffer in silence and bow to the wisdom of god.

In Mourdock, and in the tens of thousands who rushed to his defense, Augustine walks again, and women, after decades of struggle to be recognized as independent entities, are to be reduced to the watchdogs of their own virtue, and given sympathy only in so far as they match up to that standard.

Akin and Mourdock are not the archaic examples of a worldview gone by that the religious establishment rushed to characterize them as. They are rather the faithful interpreters of 2,000 years of theological tradition in a country still overwhelmingly steeped in that tradition. They present the thoughts in their original essence, as they stood then, and as to thousands of American Christians they still stand now in various diluted forms.

Women as self-guarding property form the basis of the Judaic conception of family and our modern expectations of women’s duties during their own rape, just as rape as a zealous surrender to a superior being inform both the birth of Jesus and the fraternity mentality that has plastered modern headlines with cases of gang rape on American campuses.

Dealing with the modern incarnations of rape requires grappling honestly with the root sources, something that can’t be done so long as we see Akin and his ilk as aberrations rather than faithful representatives of their religion.



# Purgatory: a hell of a problem

RALPH JONES EXAMINES ONE OF RELIGION'S 'MOST MORBID INVENTIONS'

*As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs* – Johann Tetzel.

I WOULD have liked to begin this article with a joke about Purgatory. It is testament both to the seemingly dated and vague nature of the concept that I could only find about two examples, neither of which was remotely funny enough to include. We start therefore on what may be uncertain ground: what is Purgatory and what are its implications for the present-day religious, to whom the concept would appear at first sight to mean rather little?

The notion of Purgatory, much like that of Hell, is one of religion's most morbid inventions. It is also one of its most needlessly complicated, relying as it does on the proposition – famously unfounded in scripture – that there exists a grey area between salvation and damnation.

Diarmaid MacCulloch explains in his superb *A History Of Christianity* that it was at the end of the second century that Alexandrian theologians first imagined “a middle state between Heaven and Hell”, but that only really in the traumatic wake of the Black Death did the notion begin to ignite in the imagination of the common people and become embedded in the

formal dogma of the Church.

It was not even until the 1170s that theologians started using the term itself. The way in which the concept initially began to be instilled in Western Christianity was pragmatic and to be found, unexpectedly, in the development and proliferation of parishes in the 10th century. With this evolution came the introduction of compulsory taxes – “tithes” – paid by landowners to parish churches; as churches became wealthier they became more acutely aware that they ought to address the notion that riches are inextricably linked to sin and that only the wealthy could afford to have their souls cleansed by paying for clergymen's prayers. It was therefore submitted that the Church would be able to grant “indulgences” to Christians wishing to cut down the level of punishment due to them in Purgatory.

MacCulloch seems eager to lend an ill-advised credibility to the notions of indulgences and Purgatory by writing that understanding the way in which the former functioned rests on connecting “a number of assumptions about sin and the afterlife, each of which individually makes considerable sense”. One of these assumptions is

that Jesus Christ's virtues are “more than adequate for the purpose of saving the finite world from Adam's sin”; another is that a pope's position as “Vicar of Christ on earth” means that he is able to dispense a “treasury” of celestial saintly merits to “anxious Christians”, thereby cleansing them – but only to a certain extent – of sin in the afterlife, providing these sins have already been forgiven in the Sacrament of Confession. It would in fact be extremely difficult for these propositions to make any less sense; if they were as coherent as MacCulloch suggests, it is difficult to see why the dogma has not been whole-heartedly rather than feebly accepted by even the credulous faithful themselves.

What began as the complimentary granting of indulgences to the faithful soon of course began to be mired in financial exploitation. Though the Catholic Church claims always to have condoned the financial sale of indulgences, it was only in 1567 that Saint Pius V declared an official ban, and it is common knowledge that the practice took place on a vast and embarrassing scale (and indeed largely funded the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica). Christian ‘pardoners’ would claim that relief from eternal damnation could be granted upon a financial donation, and, given that this proposition is no less obviously absurd than the Church's official position, they were readily and hungrily believed.

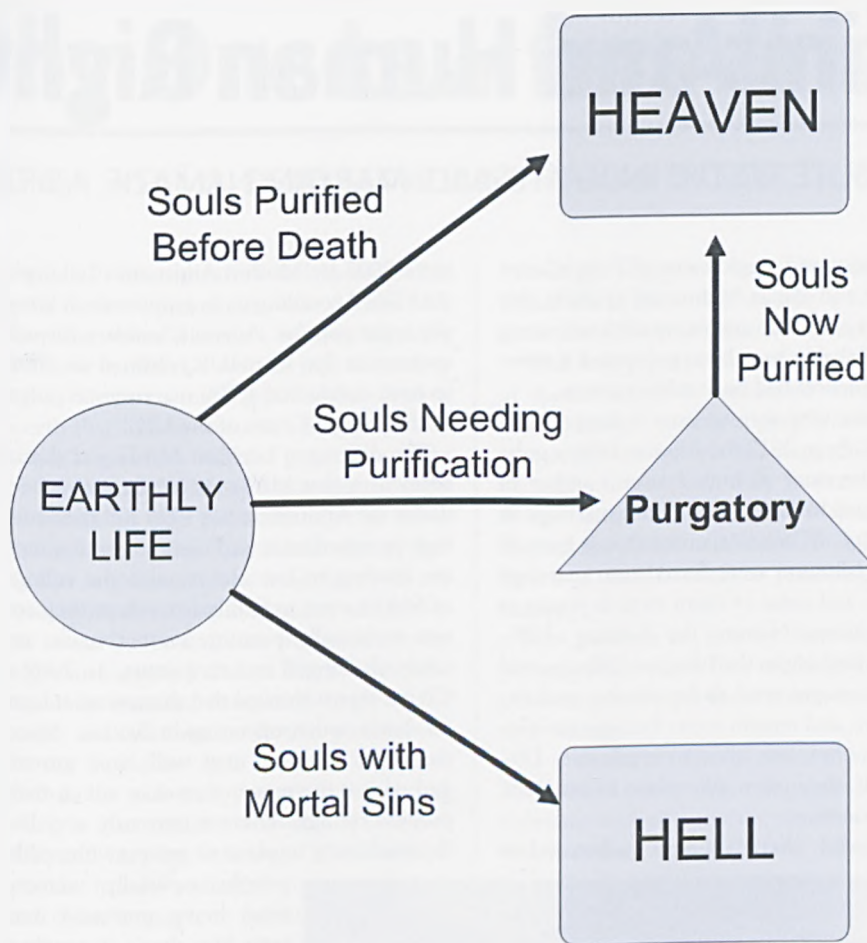
Catholicism – the denomination with which the practice is most associated – has since struggled to maintain a consistent stance on non-financial indulgences. In 2,000 Pope John Paul II officially authorised bishops to offer indulgences once more (as some kind of millennial celebration), a tendency that has become more prevalent under the papacy of Benedict XVI. Moreover, in 2009 it was announced that some churches would officially begin sanctioning them once again – though not on financial grounds – essentially because their attendances for confession were falling.

The Reverend Tom Reese told the *New York Times* that “the church wants the idea of personal sin back in the equation”, as if religious doctrines with supposed implications for one's afterlife can go “in” or “out” like items of fashion. In the same article a practicing Catholic asks the per-



*Catholic saint Padre Pio allegedly had the power of flight and could be in different places at the same time. He also had conversations with souls trapped in Purgatory, and could release them. This photo was taken of the old charlatan when he was disinterred in 2008 and found to be in an ‘incorrupt’ state. In fact, extensive work had to be done on the corpse by a London wax museum before it was fit to be exposed to the faithful*





fectly valid question, “What does it mean to get time off in Purgatory? What is five years in terms of eternity?” and unaided almost stumbles upon the obvious lunacy of the idea.

One to whom the conception of Purgatory and of indulgences seemed grotesque was Martin Luther, who engaged himself in a commendable act of rebellion when, in MacCulloch’s words, he claimed that “it was not divine mercy upholding this system, but a lie told by clergymen”. Lutherans believe therefore that human acts have no impact upon God’s decision whether to forgive us or not. It is impossible to refrain once again from commenting that here the very obvious truth, that the Church is precisely as uninformed as anyone else on the finer points of any potential afterlife, is tantalisingly close to being uncovered. It is, however, very encouraging to see a certain level of humility here, a quality lacking in those who believe that God ought to adjust his actions on the basis of certain propitiations.

Purgatory, it will come as no surprise, has given numerous clergymen licence to conjure up wild visions of fantasy. Saint Pio of Pietrelcina, one of the Catholic Church’s most venerated Italian saints, is famously said to have spoken to the souls of various individuals consigned to Purgatory. So vivid were his supposed recollections that there are Catholic scholars – of

whom Dr. Taylor Marshall is one – who are capable of saying things like, “*Without a doubt*, many souls from Purgatory visited Padre Pio seeking his prayers, sacrifices and sufferings to obtain their release”. If there are any matters over which we ought to exercise the precious doubt of which we are in possession, it is ones such as this. Padre Pio is recognised to have been an obvious fake, about whom false claims of miraculous power were made and whose supposed stigmata were obviously self-administered. In a case such as this we need to pose a very straightforward question: is it more likely that various souls of the dead – hitherto presumed not to inhabit our world in any sense – would visit an Italian priest in a southern farming town and ask him to experience pain so that they could be released from Purgatory; or that the priest might be fabricating his story for attention? Marshall also goes on to say that “God chose Saint Pio of Pietrelcina to reveal the supernatural life to our tepid era”; why then, it is tempting to ask, was this revelation not more effective? Why not billions of lost souls rather than the handful that he recorded?

One aspect of the Purgatory doctrine that remains a little ill-defined is whether or not absolutely all souls must dwell there a while or whether this spell is saved only for those good enough to escape Hell but

not good enough to be sent directly to Heaven. Neither is it entirely clear what fate befalls those who are sent to Purgatory but are never prayed for. Another astonishing characteristic worth noting is that there are allegedly sins sufficiently serious for prayer to be futile. In other words, divinely ordained indulgences will only get you so far; however nice you may be, you’re on your own if you think they will prevent you from descending to Hell on account of being, for example, homosexual or the member of another faith.

I concur, as I do on many issues, with Richard Dawkins’ phrasing in *The God Delusion* that “[t]he doctrine of Purgatory offers a preposterous revelation of the way the theological mind works”; the notion is so self-evidently convoluted and contrived that a rational mind finds it extremely difficult to take seriously. While reading the various explanations and justifications for it one is unsure whether to laugh or to cry; the notion that anything on the topic can be “proven” or even asserted is of course inherently ludicrous, no matter how intelligent or authoritative the person bravely attempting it. Catholic doctrine seems to find it sufficient to assert that the age of the belief lends it automatic credibility, assuming it blasphemous for one to hold one’s own opinion in disagreement with St Thomas Aquinas. As one is well advised to bear in mind, the age of a doctrine has no bearing whatever on its truth; for more information see witches and child sacrifices.

MacCulloch tells us also that the doctrine of Purgatory was brought to fruition because it provided in some sense a “useful and comforting” explanation for the fate of those who die without full repentance of sin. There we are given all the explanation it is necessary to have: in order to be accepted as plausible, a belief ought to comfort and to promise salvation. When one is at the mercy of religious authority in this way – when more is promised than can conceivably be given – all manner of exploitations can and have been committed.

As Sam Harris writes in *The End Of Faith*, “The truth is we simply do not know what happens after death”. That ought in the grand scheme of things to be enough for us; and yet, as we are well aware, it doesn’t come close to satisfying the yearnings of the faithful. Purgatory is a way in which many attempt to make sense of this unhappy fact – the unwelcome realisation that we are all going to die. This does nothing either to validate its existence or excuse the ill that has been done in its name, and we ought always to be wary of those who claim to know in great detail what cannot possibly be known in any detail at all.



# British Muslims and Human Rights: v

CAMERON RIDDLE PAYS TRIBUTE TO THE INDEFATIGABLE MARYAM NAMAZIE, A BRAVE CAMPAIGNER

Assuming for a second we take away the current view society as a whole has on religious doctrines, practices and moral judgements and look at them for what they really are: opinions. We'd struggle to find anything but vacuous bigoted claims about how someone *thinks* the world should work.

If you have a strong sense of justice, you may find it impossible not to support the Iranian human rights activist Maryam Namazie. Originally from Tehran, Namazie currently resides in the UK where she speaks out on behalf of those oppressed by theocracy and misogyny throughout the world. It's amazing how much work she and those like her have to do right here.

In December 2012, she and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain gave the University of Bristol's Christian Union a justly deserved clip round the ear for banning women from speaking at its main meetings. On her blog, she writes: "The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) is appalled to learn of the Bristol University Christian Union's ban on women speaking at its main meetings and events. The sexist policy, which demonstrated a blatant disregard for gender equality, has been reversed after an ensuing uproar."

As Namazie and the CEMB point out, we often fail to face up to similar discrimination against women in ethnic minority groups, for fear of being called "racist". This fear costs lives. Tragically, for example, Britain is no stranger to the atrocities known as "honour" crimes. In 2011 the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) conducted a study, based on Freedom of Information requests to all 52 police forces in the UK, which revealed that there had been about 3,000 cases of "honour" violence in the previous year. The victims of these "honour" crimes were mainly female and the perpetrators tended to be close relatives who believed the victims had brought shame on their families.

Twelve of the police forces also provided statistics for 2009, showing an increase of 57 percent in "honour" crimes between 2009 and 2010 across those 12 forces. According to some recent estimates by police chiefs as cited in *The Independent*, the figure now may be as high as 17,000 victims a year. As in

the famous and tragic cases of Tulay Goren in 1999 and Banaz Mahmood in 2006, this situation costs lives and many of these crimes could probably have been prevented if more decisive action had been taken sooner.

Another very serious issue is forced marriage. Early in 2012 the *Islington Tribune* published the story of how a large number of young girls had been forced into marriage in its locality. IKWRO claimed that at least 30 girls in Islington were forced into marriage in 2010, and some of them were as young as nine. Dianna Nammi, the director of IKWRO, speaking to the *Islington Tribune*, said such marriages tend to be abusive and exploitative, and remain secret because the victims are often too afraid to speak out. Disturbingly, they often take place in mosques' sharia courts.

The word "sharia" is now understood to

since 2007 by Muslim Arbitration Tribunals (MATs). According to its proponents it is really quite popular. Anjem Choudary, former spokesman for Islam4UK, claimed in 2009 to have conducted 1,800 marriages as judge of the "Sharia Court of the UK".

The difference between MATs and sharia councils is that MATs are legally recognised under the Arbitration Act 1996 and their rulings on inheritance and commercial disputes are binding in law. In practice the rulings of MATs, even in family law where they are not technically permitted to arbitrate, are rarely challenged in a civil court. In 2009 a Civitas report showed that there were at least 85 sharia courts operating in Britain. Since then, this number may well have grown, and with it the range of cases in which they provide rulings. There is currently very little machinery in place to protect vulnerable

people, especially women, from being pressured into attending sharia courts and accepting their judgements.

One of the main arguments used to defend sharia courts in Britain is to highlight that they rule on civil law, not criminal law. The sharia's criminal code is of course notoriously brutal. In various Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Yemen, active homosexuals receive the death penalty. Apostasy may also be punished by death, at least providing the apostate is an adult male of sound mind.

Adultery and even sex outside of marriage may be punished with a flogging or even stoning to death. Men and women (but especially women) must adhere to a strict dress code. In Saudi Arabia in 2002, the religious police or mutaween hindered efforts to rescue schoolgirls from a burning building because the girls were not correctly attired, resulting in 15 deaths. In Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003, girls who went out unveiled were subjected to acid attacks. Muslim reformers may argue that these punishments are not strictly Islamic, or are based on misinterpretations of sources. This however, is little consolation to the victims, and does not explain why an individual's attire and other personal choices should be a matter for criminal law at all.

The sharia's civil code, though less chill-



Maryam Namazie addressing One Law for All rally in London in 2010

mean Islamic law, but it comes from old Arabic meaning "pathway to be followed". The British public's understanding of sharia may have much to do with stereotypes, but is this a defence for sharia, and does it mean sharia is desirable? In a modern democracy, forced marriages and honour crimes thrive when communities are denied equal and proper treatment before the law. This is the reason for one of the most important causes spearheaded by activists like Maryam Namazie: the call for the total abolition of religious courts and tribunals across the UK. For this purpose, the 10th of December 2008, International Human Rights Day, saw the launch of the campaign known as One Law for All. Controversial? To some it certainly is. Sharia law has been implemented in Britain since the early 1980s by sharia councils, and



# Why One Law for All is the answer

THE CAMPAIGNER WHO IS DEAD SET AGAINST THE INTRODUCTION OF SHARIA LAW IN THE UK

ing, is still discriminatory and incompatible with modern, democratic law. A man may have four wives whereas a woman may have only one husband; a woman may not marry a non-Muslim; a man's testimony in court is worth that of two women; a female's inheritance is generally half the portion received by a male, and in theory, a man has the right to punish his wife physically (Qur'an 4:34). According to a One Law for All report, *Sharia Law in Britain: A threat to one law for all and equal rights*, there have been cases where sharia courts advised violent husbands to take anger management classes. Their wives subsequently retracted complaints made to the police and there was no further punishment for the husbands. It is easier for a man to divorce his wife than the other way round: when a man initiates a divorce it is called talaq and may be unilateral. By contrast, a woman has no unilateral right to divorce and if she attempts to initiate one and her husband disagrees, it is called khula. A judge must decide the case and the woman has to prove she has a good reason.

Another argument in favour of sharia courts is the claim that no one is forced to go to them. Islamophobia Watch says:

"The reality is that 95 percent of the work of sharia councils is concerned with matrimonial issues – mainly applications for a religious divorce by women trapped in failed marriages from which their husbands refuse to free them. In that regard, Najma Ebrahim of the Muslim Women's Helpline has described such councils as providing a vital service."

The problem is exactly that: these are women who believe they are bound by religious duty to attend these courts and accept their rulings.

At a One Law for All seminar in March 2010, Yassi Atasheen, the campaign's legal coordinator said of one case, where a woman was threatened with Hell if she did not listen to her husband: "This is clearly not mediation; instead, it is taking advantage of a vulnerable woman who has been pressured into attending these courts."

The One Law for All Campaign, though

unpopular in some quarters, is important and necessary. The next key step in this struggle is a bill currently being debated in Parliament, the Arbitration and Mediation Services (Equality) Bill. The bill was introduced into the House of Lords by Baroness Caroline Cox and had its second reading on October 19, 2012.

If it becomes law, it will make it a criminal offence for arbitration bodies to claim jurisdiction they don't have, and will make them give all parties equal standing. Public bodies will have to inform women of their rights under UK law, and it will be easier for civil courts to set aside discriminatory rulings and agreements made under duress.

Women who are victims of domestic violence will be given protection from witness intimidation. The bill is a step in the right direction, but all the while it is vitally important to raise awareness of this issue, which is too often ignored.

• CAMERON RIDDLE is a teacher and lecturer currently living in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

## Breakdown. Then break out

TEXAS STUDENT **SAMUEL MCMURRAY** RECALLS THE DAY THE BIBLE MISSED ITS MARK

"DUDE, this is like the third time this week you've brought it up," said my buddy Shane; the look in his eyes was one of frustration, and a little pity.

"Man, I just don't know," I said, "I mean, how does God reconcile cruelty and injustice in the world? I mean, if he is omnipotent, he's a sadist."

"SAM!" he snapped, "God is not a sadist, I'm so sick of this: God is real, and you need to stop right now!"

I couldn't say I really blamed him; instead of another ho-hum morning memorizing Bible verses, they had to endure my anti-theist outburst. To be honest, I was a little tired of discussing it too; but I didn't have any right to complain: I was the epicenter of today's tension.

Shane went back to his lunch briefly before he and the rest of the group around me decided they weren't hungry either and threw away their lunch. Yet again, I found myself eating alone; like a leper in the streets.

How did this happen? I was raised in private, Christian schools; faith was a part of

life: I attended church twice a week, sung tenor in the choir, and had a large group of friends that I knew from church. I had great respect for my youth leaders and preachers – their words were inspiration for living a happy, faithful life with a God who loves you eternally. Throughout elementary and into junior high I was a popular, likeable Christian with good grades and a strong desire to impress those around me.

What a difference a year made. In a short time, your life can be upended and shook up like the victim of a cartoon bully searching for lunch money. My parents had always told me that anything someone else tells you must be met with skepticism; never take anything someone says at face value. It was only a matter of time before my inquiring mind turned its criticism to religious matters.

The problem began in the summer between the seventh and eighth grade. I had – with a fair amount of assistance from my father – just built my first computer. It was a clunky PC even during its day, but it worked faithfully; more importantly, after a

long dial-up tone, I had Internet. While idly surfing the Web one day, I navigated to a religious chat room. "Chat" is a loose term I admit; there hasn't been civil discourse over the Internet since the military unleashed it on the public, and this site served no exception.

"2 all u atheissts out here deenyng God and his son Jesus Christ, kno this: your time b4 the Creator will be short," said one.

"Christianity is the root of evil. Religion is poison," said another.

"Hey prettycat," one poster replied to another, "have you ever thought why you haven't found any artifacts or proof of a global flood is because it didn't happen? No, I bet not."

"I feel sorry for all you atheists," said 1w/God, "you will never know true joy. I pity you."

Great, people collectively smashing their heads against that old wall – I should have known better. Conversation strayed like the prodigal son, often digressing from profound

*Continued on p12*



points and philosophical debate into the kind of name-calling one might hear in a brothel or biker bar. But buried beneath all the dirt, a seed had been planted: was it possible the reason God seemed so elusive and mysterious was because he didn't exist?

Throughout the rest of the summer, serious, nagging doubts persisted; questions about my existence left me feeling exhausted, achy, and irritable. By the end of the summer, though, I had worked through most of my doubts to come to a stark conclusion: God was a figment of the collective imagination. I felt less conflicted internally, but I was still worried what my peers at a fundamentalist school in the buckle of the Bible Belt might think of my newfound atheism.

That year the responsibility of teaching Bible rested squarely on my football coach, Alan Richards. An ex-coke dealer turned fire-and-brimstone preacher, he took his role as shepherd amongst sheep very seriously; unfortunately, he wasn't the most amiable guy. In fact, disagreement with coach Richards provoked terrible retribution in the form of embarrassment. I had seen him shout down opposition with so much zeal that sparks shot out from his eyes as he quoted Bible verses (picture Rayden from *Mortal Kombat* as a rancher in Roby, TX).

"Son, are you literate?" he said to a student who had the gall to question the notion of pre-destination. "Jeremiah 1:5" coach Richards continued with a comically exaggerated drawl, "before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you born I set you apart. See son, whether or not you like it, God knows exactly what you're going to do before you do it. Do you really think you can challenge the Lord God Almighty? I feel sorry for you."

Coach Richards berated this kid (we'll call him "Tim" to protect his identity) for five minutes, but it felt like an hour to me. I can only imagine how long it felt for Tim; sitting in the hot seat while some overly-aggressive former coke dealer turned pastor brought the full wrath of the Almighty down on his unsuspecting head.

I didn't see Tim in coach's class after that, and if I was smart, I would've followed him. Such is the folly of youth.

About halfway through November, our class had the dubious honor of listening to coach Richards' impassioned sermon on atheists. "Atheists are the only people in the world that try to disprove God," he said. "Their religion is a religion of nothing."

"So what do atheists think will happen when they die?" asked Will, one of several insufferable suck-ups occupying the surrounding desks.

"Nothing, you have no soul. You just die, all of this means nothing."

"That sounds sad. But even by not be-

lieving, they still believe in something. That doesn't even make sense."

"Exactly, they are truly deserving of our pity."

I had heard this all before, *ad nauseam*. None of this was new to me, and for the most part I had learned to ignore it. But for some reason, every time I had to take notes on it, I wanted to flip my desk over and start an altercation with the coach and the rest of the over-zealous nut jobs that usually filled this tedious hour with asinine, childish chatter over a man they'd never met.

**'The Bible?' I asked, 'You mean that Bronze Age book written thousands of years ago by unverified authors, compiled by despots, translated by chauvinists and manipulated by sociopaths to control the lazy and stupid? That Bible?'**

Today was not my day: my mother had found my smokes, I had gotten rejected again by the few single girls in my class who hadn't committed themselves to Christ (it never ceased to amaze me how many pretty girls a dead virgin can pull), and the fluorescent lighting was buzzing incredibly loud thanks to the amplifier affectionately known as a hangover. I was miserable to begin with, now these hicks had started up yet again; collectively bashing my philosophy which they didn't understand and had no intention of learning.

"Atheists are the great deceivers. Part of the 'if it feels good do it' crowd," coach continued, "they're the enablers. Who do you think accepts the homosexuals' perverted lifestyle? Atheism's followers try to convince those of weaker faith to vote in favor of them."

Coach Richards paused for effect before finishing with a deathly overtone: "They hate us, and love their sinful lives."

"I still don't understand," said Stacie, "how can you not believe in God? I mean, just look around."

"In the beginning," coach responded with smile on his face, "and it was good. What else do you need to know? Anything they think they discovered just disproves their case. Like I said, they're truly the most pitiable people."

I was seething: my jaw clenched so tight I felt my teeth start to crack. I gripped the end of the desk so hard I had left a faint hand-shaped indentation. I was pushed to my breaking point; unfortunately, I was as bad at playing Christian as I was at playing poker.

"Sam," coach said, "you look like you got somethin' to say. What's on your mind?"

He must've seen me. How could he not?

By now I was snorting like a bull; and he had just unfurled the cape.

"You're wrong," I said. It was all I could say without literally charging coach.

"What? What are talking about, son? Did you just say I was wrong?"

Me and my damn delicate sensibilities. In its still-somewhat-inebriated state, my better judgment had arrived just too late to stop my mouth from shooting off. I didn't say anything immediately afterwards; I was apprehensive and nervous having opened the box, but now was the time to face its evils.

"Did you hear me, son? You go dumb all of a sudden? It's what happens when people can't defend their position," he said.

All right, I said to myself, let's handle this. If you're going to out yourself, make it worth your while.

"You're wrong," I said with more composure, "nothing about what you just said was true. In fact, I've suffered through this class and its asinine views regarding outside beliefs long enough. You want to spend time pointing the proverbial finger? Try pointing it at a mirror ... but if you can't find one, you could stick it up your ass!"

Silence fell. The idea that one of the popular kids could be an atheist – the horror! But to be honest, I was so jacked up I didn't care. It was time to go on the offensive.

"Son, you better realize who you're talking to. First off, I won't tolerate foul language in my class. But more importantly, I will not tolerate blasphemy."

"It isn't blasphemy if it isn't real. You have no evidence to corroborate this goofy mythology. Why should I care what you think about how I interact with something that isn't real?"

"The Bible is all the proof I need; if you don't think the Bible is real I've got some ocean-front property in Arizona for ya."

"The Bible?" I asked, "You mean that Bronze Age book written thousands of years ago by unverified authors, compiled by despots, translated by chauvinists and manipulated by sociopaths to control the lazy and stupid? *That Bible?*"

Coach Richards' skin tone turned a bright, crimson red. His voice became a deep, guttural growl. I can only assume what he wanted to do to me at that moment, but I was certain I smelled sulfur. Good thing I wasn't there to buy coke.

"I just said I won't tolerate blasphemy! I'm calling the principal out here to listen to why you're going to fail this Bible class!"

"Mrs Smith?" he asked over the intercom. "Could you please bring Principal Carter out here, please?"

"Sure," Mrs. Smith replied back.

"Now where were we? Oh yes," coach Richards turned back to me. "Let's have a talk, you and I."



"You want to wait for the principal?" I asked. "Naw, he'll get here quick enough. So let me get this straight. You're an atheist? You believe in nothing?"

"Yeah. And just before you start, calling 'atheism' a 'faith' is like calling 'clear' a 'color.' It isn't a belief; it's a distinct lack thereof."

"You build your house on sand, son? You must have no moral compass."

"If that were true, I'd have no qualms with leaping out of this desk and punching you in the —"

"That a threat, son? HUH?"

"No, I'm trying to tell you I know right from wrong. I don't need your imaginary friend to help me."

"If you think the Bible isn't true and God is imaginary —"

"It isn't and he is."

"— then there isn't anything left to do but pray."

"Can I lead it?" asked Will.

"Class," coach Richards announced, "we are all going to pray silently. Then I'll lead us in a verbal prayer for Sam's soul."

"Fuck you." I couldn't help it. I knew I was being flip-pant but they had crossed a line. I wasn't going to win over any converts, but I wasn't going to roll over for these theatrics.

"I don't need your prayers, pity, or pious crap. You think this is going to do anything to change my mind? Fuck you, every one of you."

That set him off, the red returned with a vengeance. Coach Richards officially lost his cool, and like me, he wasn't in control; his eyes burned like hellfire, and the ominous aroma of sulfur excreted from his pores.

"That is it!" he yelled as he picked up his hardbound Bible off the podium and hurled it at my head. I ducked and the book soared past my head — right into principal Carter's groin.

Principal Carter had just entered the room and turned to face an enraged pastor attempting to literally beat one of his students over the head with the Word of God. Two thousand pages of salvation collided with Principal Carter's divine staff; his cries of pain rang out like a falsetto "Alleluia" normally reserved for mass.

Christ in a gimp suit couldn't have provoked a more horrified look on coach Richards' face. His red had receded to sickly white. The rest of the class just looked on as our principal silently moaned as he tried to regain his composure.

"Mr Richards," he asked, "can I see you outside?"

"Uhh, yeah sure," coach replied.

Principal Carter was still in his rookie year; so it came as no surprise that in all the hullabaloo both men forgot to shut the door completely. After some shouting on the topic of "appropriate behavior," my name came up.

"Sam, come out here," Principal Carter said. I got up without saying a word and walked outside.

"Did you provoke coach Richards into a fight?"

Both men looked at me earnestly: my words suddenly held this man's career in my hands. For a brief moment, a rip in space-time had opened and I had made it to the other side. Should I wreck this man's life like he'd wrecked mine for years?



"We were debating religion. Things got heated and I goaded coach Richards. I'm not proud of it, but I am sorry and would like to move on with class if that is all right with everyone."

Both men looked at each other; principal Carter started intently at coach Richards, then at me, then back to coach before finally sighing as his eyes fell back on me.

"Two hundred demerits and a week's detention during break."

Principal Carter slowly meandered away (presumably to the nurse's for an ice pack), leaving me and coach Richards face-to-face, just as I fantasized about over and over again.

"I'll make you a deal," I said, "we call this day a wash: I'll take the rest of the morning off and for the rest of the year you're gonna discuss something irrelevant like the dimensions of the Ark of the Covenant."

"And what do I get?" asked coach.

"You mean beside your job? How about my assurance I'll never participate in your class as long as you work here."

His face had contorted in an angry, pained expression; I could even hear his teeth

gnashing. I could tell he was deliberating whether I was capable of turning him in and if my promise to remain silent the duration of his tenure as Bible teacher was veracious. The hellfire in his eyes flickered as he looked down at the ground, all around, and then at me again. By the time his eyes fixed back on me, I could tell the fight inside had died down; my nose confirmed his defeat as I realized the sulfuric smell had dissipated.

"Deal," he said reluctantly.

If only the rest of the school was as prone to violent outbursts. In a high school of less than two hundred, hot gossip spreads like a grass fire in Taylor County; our spirited session in class made its way across the academic landscape with a kind of speed and efficiency that'd make the Postal Service sit up and take notes. By Thursday, I was a full-blown pariah: lepers in ancient Rome got more positive attention.

Many of my peers I had considered friends were suddenly too busy to hang out (or too socially acute to be seen around me). Most of my lunches after that day were solitary affairs, and I could forget finding a lab partner; but I didn't care: I had laid my burdens down, and I felt reborn.

No one wanted to be seen around me, but the feeling was mutual; I knew they couldn't live up to their own standards: they were no different as result

or in spite of their belief. As time went on, I realized the depth of their moral hypocrisy: they ostracized scores of kids deemed undesirable for trivial reasons; like bullying a girl because she didn't like football and spoke three languages. Eventually I came to understand it was them who knew not what they did — they were just kids with the same insecurities and chaotic self-image every teenager experiences. In many ways, they were unremarkable Christians and typecast teenagers, barely a footnote — much less a threat.

Coach Richards eventually lost his job over more of his impassioned motivational speaking the next year. I couldn't say I was surprised, but I did feel some empathy for the poor kid he mercilessly lashed. As for me, I graduated (somehow) and am still a devout atheist. I still feel a twinge of anger when I hear the same tired arguments I had to endure, but I just smile now.

No sense getting riled up about things that aren't real.

• SAMUEL McMURRAY is a university student at McMurry in Abilene, Texas.



# points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS LETTERS TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.  
THE POSTAL ADDRESS IS POINTS OF VIEW, FREETHINKER,  
3 QUEENS ROAD, BECKENHAM, KENT BR3 4JN



## CONTINUING HOMOPHOBIA FROM OLD GUARD SECULARISTS

I SEE that my potted history of the rise and fall of the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association has had the unintended consequence of drawing out yet more homophobia from old guard secularists, however apologetically and diffidently it may be expressed by your correspondents, Graham Newbery, and, to a lesser extent, Edwin Salter.

Graham misrepresents what I said. I did not say that gay people “disproportionately dominate ... the secular movement in the UK”. What I said was that the secular movement has benefited from the influx of gay people brought into the movement via the portal of the Gay Humanist Group (or the Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association, as it later became). Dedicated and talented people, who happen to be openly homosexual – for example, Terry Sanderson and Keith Porteous Wood – have re-invigorated an otherwise ageing, some might say, moribund secular movement. We are lucky to have them.

Graham also says “homosexuality seems to come with the territory”. Incorrect. Rather, the territory comes with significant input from homosexuals. Big difference. This should not surprise anyone. Religion is the main spur to anti-gay prejudice and legislation the world over – look at what happens in Iran, in Russia, or is about to happen in Uganda – so it’s hardly surprising that secular organisations attract the most intelligent, politically motivated homosexuals. Moreover, gay people usually don’t have children, so can therefore devote more of their time, money and energies to the secular cause.

Nonetheless, Graham and Edwin can relax – gay people are still a minority within the movement, it’s just their profile that is disproportionate for the reasons just explained.

Besides, the “gay rights agenda” Graham says “turns him off” has very little to do with sex. It’s much more to do with the rights of gay couples in terms of housing, the provision of services, inheritance rights, power of attorney, and so on.

Until very recently, lesbians and gay men routinely faced the sort of discrimination and lack of legal redress that would have

caused an outcry if those things had been visited upon any other social constituency in Britain. The agenda is one of simple social justice, long overdue.

Lastly, as I have said before, secularism is big on its wish list and not always so big on strategy. Ideas have their moment, as do opportunities for legislative change. Currently, the push to complete equality for gay and lesbian people is to the fore in the UK. Its time has come. Assisted dying is probably next in the queue. If Graham and Edwin could only think strategically, they would see that it’s important for all secularists to engage in the struggle that is happening now, rather than selfishly “sit this one out” just because they derive no personal benefit from it. After all, the homosexuals they feel anxious about, if not secretly despise, have devoted themselves to a whole panoply of non-gay secular causes over the years.

It is time now for Graham and Edwin to reciprocate and demonstrate solidarity with gay secularists who are pushing to remove the last religiously enforced barriers to full gay equality. The question is whether they are man enough, or rational enough, to do so.

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

**Diesel Balaam**  
London

ONE expects religious people to spew unscientific nonsense like volcanoes erupting raw sewage but it is sad to read letters by an alleged secularist like Graham Newbery (*Points of View*, January) doing so.

Without offering any evidence, he claims that gays are only two percent of the population. Meanwhile it has been held by those in a position to know better since the 1960s at the latest that homosexuals account for roughly one in 20, or five percent of the male population. This figure excludes lesbians and bisexuals.

Most recently respected actuaries working for really large insurance companies, banks and governments have been estimating the

gay and bisexual community at more like six to seven percent of the total population. This is not much less than the percentage of left-handed people.

Newbery admits to “diffident homophobia”. I would suggest that his homophobia is worse than that and his scientific theories are closer to a belief that dinosaurs must have swum from Alabama to reach Noah’s Ark.

**Graham Livingstone**  
London

## PHILOSOPHERS’ SURVEY

I WAS interested to read in the article on surviving Armageddon (January *Freethinker*) about the survey of philosophers which showed that 72.8 percent leaned towards atheism, except in the study of philosophy of religion, where 69.3 percent were for theism.

This does not surprise me because you would expect philosophers to be rational thinkers and atheists to have little time for the philosophy of religion. I obviously bucked one trend when I studied philosophy of religion for my degree many years ago. I found it interesting to try to discover how normally rational minds could possibly accept such bunkum.

My lecturer was a reverend and someone whose intellectual ability I respected in moral philosophy. What became clear to me was that he was an apologist for religion, trying to scrape some intellectual respectability for an absurd belief system by winning the tiniest concession. For instance he spent a long series of lectures claiming that a statement such as “the absolute is pure spirit” is not meaningless.

He used Wittgenstein’s theory of “language games” to argue that it was meaningful to all those (ie theists) who played the particular game. I can just about accept that view because even though such statements have no relation to the world they may have meaning in the broader sense of conveying emotion to those that participate in the game. He (and other philosophers) have also spent a significant amount of time trying to



demonstrate that the Christian God is not a self contradictory concept. In my view this has been spectacularly unsuccessful because they are unable to reconcile the idea of a benevolent omnipotent god with the existence of suffering without incredibly torturous twists of logic.

However my lecturer did not – as far as I can remember – attempt to argue rationally for the existence of God. Presumably this was because he couldn't – all the traditional arguments such as the Teleological and the Ontological arguments having been conclusively dismissed.

I therefore found philosophy of religion quite revealing and worthwhile for an atheist to study.

**Des Langford**  
Doncaster

## CONSERVATIVE VALUES

IT WAS interesting to read Steve Cardon's article about why atheists should embrace conservative values (*Freethinker*, December 2012). Even in the USA, Steve might have more success than we imagine.

One of the heroes of free-enterprise and conservative values in the USA was Ayn Rand. Her lengthy pro-capitalist novels have been made into a number of films. *The Fountainhead* is the best early example, but more recently *Atlas Shrugged* has been filmed too.

A refugee from Soviet Russia, Rand was also an atheist. She believed atheism fitted best with what she claimed was the rational basis of a free-enterprise system.

However, as a left-winger I remain highly sceptical of such ideas. I don't think the USA or UK needs more conservative values or policies.

The "glamorous left" might still provide many of the real answers to our problems.

**Graeme Kemp**  
London

## 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.

In the November 2012 issue of the *Freethinker* Albert Adler wrote an interesting letter on Spirituality with which I generally agree.

He gives us the Latin derivation for "spirit" and correctly translates it as "breath". I should like to do the same for the word "atheist" because it is a much-misused word particularly by the religious who take delight in beating humanists over the head with it. In my 83 years of life I have consistently tried to convert people to translating

this word correctly from the Greek *atheos* whose prime definition is given as "without God or gods".

When Denis Diderot (1713-1784), the French Philosopher was asked by Catherine II the Great (May 2, 1729 – Nov 6, 1796) whether or not he believed in God he famously replied "I have no use for that hypothesis". The next time anyone tells you that being an atheist is to be against God simply reply, as I do, that it would be quite irrational for me to be against anything for which there was no evidence of existence. It is analogous to saying I am against unicorns when I have never seen one. To know the word atheist or the word unicorn is not enough for them to exist. I have to see one. It must be added that because I haven't seen either one of them does not mean that they do not exist. I have not had the time, nor will I, to search every nook and cranny of the universe so I cannot say dogmatically that they do not exist.

What I can say, and do say, is that I live my life without any reference to them. Like Diderot they are "hypotheses for which I have no use". Taking such a stance greatly simplifies my life for I no longer have to indulge in fruitless arguments involving what I believe or don't believe.

**Ralph Ison**  
Chalgrove, nr Oxford

**Editor's note:** Shortly after Ralph Ison sent us this letter, we were informed by his family that he had sadly died after a lengthy illness. Ralph had been a dedicated supporter of the *Freethinker* for many years.

## PHENOMENA

Whilst Fiona Weir (*Freethinker* December 2012) is right that "phenomena" is plural, even in English, she is not likely to find it in her Latin primer because the word is Greek: *φαινόμενα!*

**Charles Rudd**  
Middlesex

## VIZ AND ISLAM

TERRY McGrath's plea to *Viz* magazine (January *Points of View*) for a more comprehensive lampooning of religion on its pages was profoundly depressing, though unsurprising.

Attacks on newspaper offices and mayhem around the world leading to several deaths, confirms the humourlessness (especially of the self-deprecating kind) of Islam.

Such reactions and the resulting inhibiting of criticism shows just how effective their version of censorship has become.

No longer can we so easily accept the maxim that one man's terrorist is another's free-

dom fighter, for what sort of freedom will Islamic republics offer? Certainly not for women; or for children's education; or for freedom of expression, when the freedom to offend or be offended is unrecognised.

**Paul Walker**  
Buxton

**Editor's note:** The most recent example of editorial cowardice in the UK was provided by the *Daily Mail* which recently posted a story about the French satirical paper *Charlie Hebdo's* new life of Mohammed comic book.

They illustrated the story with a photo of a man standing in front of the *Charlie Hebdo* offices after Islamic jihadists had firebombed them. He is shown holding one of the earlier issues of the paper that featured cartoons of Mohammed cartoons, but the *Mail* pixelated out the image, as shown below:

"This," commented the website Jihad Watch, ([www.jihadwatch.org](http://www.jihadwatch.org)) "is the suicide of the free press. The *Daily Mail* is generally better than the other papers in Britain in covering the jihad threat, but it is also careless, sensationalistic, and – as this proves – execrably cowardly. The *Daily Mail* is hereby signaling that violent intimidation works, and that all you have to do to get the West's vaunted 'free press' to cover before you and give up its freedom is lob a few bombs, kill a few innocents, and make a few threats."



*Stephane Charbonnier, of Charlie Hebdo, pictured outside the offices that were destroyed by Muslim zealots in France*



# Hungary's lurch to the right

representatives of Jewish organisations, politicians and civil rights activists. Several hundred people wearing yellow Jewish stars gathered to protest “creeping fascism” in Hungary’s parliament. Slomó Köves, head of the Unified Hungarian Jewish Congregation, pledged to take legal action against Gyöngyösi.

*Der Spiegel* added: “Officially, Jobbik politicians have thus far vehemently refuted any ideological proximity to neo-Nazism. But the denials have been half-hearted. On its Internet television channel N1, for example, the party once praised Adolf Hitler as one of the ‘greatest statesmen in the 20th century’.

“In the summer, the viciously extremist and anti-Semitic European Parliamentarian Csanád Szegedi was expelled from Jobbik when it was discovered that he had Jewish ancestors.”

Only after Jewish groups protested did the Government release a statement in which the governing parties sharply condemned Gyöngyösi’s statements in Parliament and pledged decisiveness in the fight against extremism, racism and anti-Semitism.

Reporting in *The New Yorker* last month, Hari Kunzru wrote that “across Hungary, the cultural scene is in a state of crisis”, pointing out that the current Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, has rebranded his Fidesz Party – which won a large majority in national elections in 2010 – “as a right-wing Christian nationalist organisation”.

Kunzru pointed out that the new constitution had opened the way to a “frightening” crackdown on the arts and freedom of expression. After the election, the Mayor of Budapest fired the head of the New Theatre (one of the country’s leading producers of contemporary drama) and appointed in his place György Dörner, an actor who supports the far-right Jobbik opposition party, an openly anti-Semitic, anti-gay, and anti-Roma organisation with a recently disbanded paramilitary wing, whose presidential candidate has declared that Israeli Jews are “lice-infested dirty murderers.”

Dörner has promised to reverse what he sees as a “degenerate, sick liberal hegemony” and to produce only Hungarian plays. Last August, protests forced him to cancel a proposed production of *The Sixth Coffin*, a play set in France after the First World War, fea-



György Dörner is described by ultra-nationalistic Hungarians as a ‘patriot’

turing “a group of powerful Jews plotting to destroy Hungary and plunge humanity into another world war”.

Kunzru also pointed out that an organisation called the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA) has recently been made into a public body under the control of György Fekete, 80, who said that, in addition to artistic ex-

cellence, “unambiguous national sentiment” is required for membership in his organisation. A member has to be “someone who feels at home and doesn’t travel abroad in order to revile Hungary from there”. He has pledged to prevent “blasphemy” in state institutions, citing an exhibition at the Mucsarnok called *What Is It To Be Hungarian?* – which had sections on “stereotypes” and “conflicts” – as an example of the kind of show that will no longer be presented.

In a TV interview, he stated that Hungary is “built on Christian culture; there is no need for constant, perpetual provocation.” Asked about the separation of church and state, he said that he wished it were not so, despite the fact that the separation is central to modern democracy.

“I don’t give a damn for this modern democracy, because it’s not modern and it’s not a democracy.”

THE IRWIN PRIZE FOR

## Secularist of the year 2013

1pm SATURDAY 23 MARCH 2013  
CENTRAL LONDON

Tickets on sale now >>

## Get your nominations in now

NOMINATIONS are now open for the Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year Award.

Please send an email with the person’s name and a brief reason for nominating them to [nominations@secularism.org.uk](mailto:nominations@secularism.org.uk). Only nominations from National Secular Society members will be considered.

The Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year award is presented annually in recognition of an individual or an organisation considered to have made an outstanding contribution to the secular movement. The award is sponsored by NSS Honorary Associate Dr Michael Irwin. Previous winners include Peter Tatchell, Sophie in ‘t Veld MEP, Southall Black Sisters, and Evan Harris MP with Lord Avebury.

This year’s prize will be presented on Saturday, March 23, at a lunch in central London.

Tickets cost £45, and can be bought online at <http://www.secularism.org.uk/secularist-of-the-year-2013.html>. The event includes a three-course lunch with coffee or tea and a welcome drink on arrival.

Tickets are also available by sending a cheque made payable to the National Secular Society to NSS, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL. Tel inquiries: 0207 404 3126.