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the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

£1.25 MARCH 2013 VOLUME 133 NO 3

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK

Attack on Hedegaard is the latest sign of Denmark's troubling clash of cultures



A scene from *Det Slører Standig*, a Danish TV satirical programme that has unleashed death threats against the four young Muslim women who feature in it (watch it at <http://tinyurl.com/b5dlqm9>)

A failed attempt last month to kill Danish free speech advocate Lars Hedegaard has thrown into sharp focus a clash of cultures in Denmark, with fears being raised that freedom of expression is increasingly being stifled to appease a growing number of Islamic fundamentalists in the country.

Danish Prime Minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt condemned the attack on Hedegaard, saying: "It is even worse if the attack is rooted in an attempt to prevent Lars Hedegaard using his freedom of expression." But that statement, according to Mark Steyn, writing for *The National Review*, "would be more persuasive had not the Danish state spent the last three years in multiple attempts to prevent Lars Hedegaard using his freedom of expression in one of the oldest free societies in the world".

Hedegaard is an outspoken critic of Islamic fundamentalism, and in 2011 he was put on trial and convicted of "racism" for remarks he made about the "religion of peace". He was fined 5,000 kroner (£570) for making a series of insulting and degrading statements about Muslims, but last year the Danish Supreme Court struck down his conviction.

Hedegaard, 70, President of the Free Press Society, narrowly escaped death when an assassin, dressed as a postal worker, shot him at point blank range at his home in Copenhagen. The bullet missed his head, then the gun jammed. The attacker fled after a short struggle.

The day after the incident, the *Freethinker* was contacted by American-Danish poet, J P Christiansen, who drew our attention to a row that has erupted over a satirical programme aired by Danish television featuring four young Muslim women who expose to ridicule not only the "small-country" mindset of some Danes, but aspects of Muslim culture as well. The show is called *Det Slører Standig*, which translates into something like *Still Blurred*.

The women are now facing death threats from some Muslim zealots, who, for example, see as grossly insulting a sketch showing one of the women dressed in a highly-accessorised pink burqa while walking a dog in a matching outfit.

Christiansen wrote: "It has now come to the point where these four young lovely later-generation Danes are being threatened by Islamic co-habitants of this peaceful, democratic country."

(Continued on back page)

Feminism is not the opposite of skepticism

FAILURE TO TREAT WOMEN AS EQUALS IS A STUPID MISTAKE, SAYS **OPHELIA BENSON**

I gave a talk last November on the connection between women and secularism, and in the question period at the end a guy asked me why I was dragging (his word) feminism into skepticism when feminism is an ideology and skepticism is the antithesis of ideology.

His question was slightly odd since I had talked about *secularism*, not skepticism, but I replied as if skepticism had been the subject. I don't consider skepticism and feminism opposites. Skepticism is a method, and feminism is a moral commitment. The two can work together – feminism can be seen as skepticism about the status quo in gender relations.

There are many ways one could be skeptical about feminism, of course. One could be skeptical of the goal and ask why equality is desirable at all. One could do research on the costs and benefits of gender equality. One could ask what is meant by equality, whether the goal is always exact parity in all occupations, whether the traditional di-



'Sweetheart, duty calls to another meeting. Make sure that the job is done when I come back home! OK?' – from the French satirical magazine *Le Grelot*, 1886

vision of labour is beneficial (and to whom), and so on *ad infinitum*.

But one can also be skeptical of non-feminism, and anti-feminism, and attacks on feminism. One can be skeptical of the merits of traditional arrangements, of stereotypes about women (and those about men), of the ways women are portrayed in advertising, films, television, gaming, comedy, toys – the list is endless. Skepticism is flexible and wide-ranging, and can be applied to just about anything.

In fact, skepticism can be, and often is, used to justify all sorts of woo and bullshit. Prince Charles is skeptical of "traditional" medicine, and he is free of any pesky traditional qualifications in the subject that might hinder his skepticism or turn it in a more evidence-based direction.

It's possible to be skeptical of the very concept of evidence. There are people who are skeptical about the Holocaust, in general and in particular. Some are skeptical about the six million figure, others turn their attention to the chimneys at Auschwitz. Turkey is officially skeptical about the Armenian genocide, so "skeptical" that it punishes citizens for so much as mentioning it.

There are skeptics about what happened on September 11, 2001, who insist darkly that no Jews showed up for work at the World Trade Center that day. There are skeptics of science, skeptics of the causes of HIV, skeptics of the US citizenship of Barack Obama. Skepticism as such is not automatically free of all bias or prior commitment, nor is it necessarily responsive to evidence or criticism.

Mind you, I do realize what my questioner

was getting at. I'm aware of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias. I admit that I don't particularly like sentences of the type "women on average are less intelligent than men." I concede that I'm suspicious of people who say "women are bad at chess/logic/mathematics/computer science/philosophy/engineering", and much less suspicious of people who say it's necessary to evaluate people as individuals, rather than refusing to consider them based on averages.

I grant all that, but I don't think the alternative is to take the view from nowhere, not least because there is no such view.

It's not the case that there is, for instance, feminism on the one hand and no opinion on the other. There is no such thing as "no opinion" on such a basic subject, there is only the sum total of what each person has learned and picked up and absorbed, with or without critical thinking and analysis.

Viewed from that angle, feminism can be seen as more skeptical than non-feminism, because it interrogates what we have all learned and picked up and absorbed instead of just taking it for The Way Things Are.

And then, let's get real. Secularism, skepticism, atheism, freethinking – they all need bums on seats. They all need numbers. A movement that doesn't treat women as equals is making a stupid mistake. The same goes for other marginalized groups, but women are a particularly large segment of the population, to put it mildly.

So I'm not "dragging" feminism into other subjects, whether atheism or secularism or critical thinking. I'm not dragging anything, I'm simply turning up myself, as I am, and part of what I am is a woman who declines to accept that women are an afterthought.

That means I am sometimes obstreperous about media stereotypes, or absent-minded failure to invite women to speak at conferences, or people who shout sexist epithets whenever they get annoyed at a woman. That's life. People are prickly and difficult, and we have to negotiate with each other. There's no avoiding it.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights
with God

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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.

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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.

UK anti-sharia activist targeted by Sudanese armed forces

NAHLA Mahmoud, an environmentalist and human rights activist originally from Sudan, faced an immediate backlash after appearing on Channel 4's *4thought.tv* programme in which she spoke out against Islamic law (sharia) in Britain and elsewhere.

The programme, entitled "What does Sharia Law have to offer Britain?", was broadcast in January, and Mahmoud, one of seven people interviewed, was only one of two interviewees who supported a secular state and opposed sharia. The other was a gay Muslim activist, Omar Kuddus, who agreed that sharia discriminates against homosexuals and was a threat to his safety and civil rights.

Reaction was swift. Writing for the *Left Foot Forward* website, Mahmoud said: "My interview has triggered a debate in the Sudanese media, both at home and in the diaspora, from which campaigns have emerged inciting people against me, calling me a 'Kafira' (infidel) and 'Murtadda' (left Islam)."

Furthermore, the Sudanese Armed Forces' Facebook page posted her picture (right) declaring her "an infidel and apostate".

Mahmoud said the reason she was campaigning against sharia "is mainly because of my experience living under an Islamic regime. I deeply believe in secular, humanist values which put each human being on an equal basis with every other individual. International human rights are a testament to that principle and stand directly opposed to the discriminatory practices enshrined in and justified by sharia law".

She wrote: "It is important that we secularists demand not only a secular Britain, but also a secular Middle East, North Africa, and world. Sharia as such is a law of a religion with state power in many regions around the world. We have also witnessed in the last two years a grand hijacking by Islamists of the achievements of civil society in the Middle East. Not only that, but here in Britain there are now 85 sharia councils implementing sharia law on the streets of London, Birmingham, Bradford and elsewhere."

She noted that shariah discriminated in particular against women, children, homosexuals, non-Muslims and non-believers.

"It truly disgusts me that apostasy and blasphemy laws are still in practice in some regions of the world. Did you know that free-thinking and freedom of speech are a crime punishable by death, public flogging and imprisonment in the 21st century? I have



seared in my memory the brutal persecutions and executions of many atheists and scientists for the simple crime of critical thinking.

She cited as examples prosecutions brought against Iranian Ali Ghorabat for apostasy, Jafar Kazemi and Mohammad Ali Haji

Aghaee for "enmity against God", Sudanese theologian Mahmoud M Taha for his progressive Islamic views, and Egyptian Nasr H Abu Zaid for his critical views on the Koran. These, she said, "show the widespread persecution of people who dare to question blind belief."

She added: "This is not a thing of the past: just this month Kuwait jailed Abdel Aziz Mohamed Albaz for criticising Islam, Saudi Arabia jailed Raif Badawi for his liberal views, and Tunisian artist Nadia Jelassi is facing prison for her 'un-Islamic' artistic pieces. Countries like Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen implement the death penalty for those who renounce or criticise Islam, but they also punish anyone who is progressive, liberal or wishes to think freely and live a modern, 21st century life.

Mahmoud's article in full was reproduced in full on the National Secular Society's website (<http://tinyurl.com/autg32y>).

Botched circumcision: nurse walks free after the death of an infant



A NURSE who caused the death of an infant by crudely circumcising him last month walked free from Manchester Crown Court.

Grace Adeleye, 67, of Salford, was found guilty of manslaughter by gross negligence but was given a sentence of 21 months, suspended for two years.

The case involved 27-day-old Goodluck Caubergs who died following the operation at his home in 2010.

Nigerian-born Adeleye was paid £100 to perform a "cultural circumcision" using the traditional clamp and cut method, a technique which the court heard has been 'discredited' by medical professionals.

Goodluck's parents, also Nigerian-born,

were not aware that a proper procedure was available on the NHS and the infant tragically bled to death as a result of the operation. The nurse stated in the trial that she had performed more than 1,000 circumcisions over the course of a 40-year career, but stopped after baby Goodluck's death.

The defence argued in mitigation that Adeleye, a grandmother caring for her two-year-old grandson, was of good character and had no disciplinary hearings against her previously.

The court also heard that Adeleye had not breached any guidelines or guidance from the Nursing and Midwifery Council when performing the circumcision and the procedure she had carried out was not illegal. Mr Justice Lindblom sentencing said: "This was a tragic death that could have been avoided if, as the jury believed, more care had been taken in the carrying out of the duties and responsibilities."

The conditions of the sentence require Adeleye to not re-offend in the next two years, report to an officer when required and maintain a curfew at her home between the hours of 9pm and 7am for six months.



You can bank on Christian fundies to deploy dastardly deceptions

By ROBERT STOVOLD

WHEN a couple of pensioner friends, John and June Clout, found two £20 notes lying on the ground in the port of Newhaven, East Sussex, they thought their ship had come in. Each of the notes had been carefully folded to display only the part saying “£20”. On unfolding the notes and inspecting them more closely, however, the couple was disappointed to discover that their £40 was faulty.

They’d been duped momentarily by a deceitful technique used by unscrupulous (and, it appears, increasingly desperate) Christians to “Spread the Good News” – fake £20 notes.

These look real enough when folded, but open to display a cheesy message exhorting the unlucky finder to “turn away from everything that we know is wrong in our lives and say sorry to Jesus”.

Comedian Milton Jones once condemned farting in lifts as “wrong on so many levels”. The same charge could be made concerning these notes.

The Christians who produce them deliberately drop them, littering the planet. The notes raise false hopes in those who find them. And there’s always the risk that someone with poor eyesight might pass a fake note on “in good faith” (so to speak), and end up in real trouble.

Precisely how the producers of these notes manage to square such dubious practices with Romans 3:8 (which explicitly condemns the tactic of “Let us do evil that good may come”) is anyone’s guess. But if they can square talking snakes with

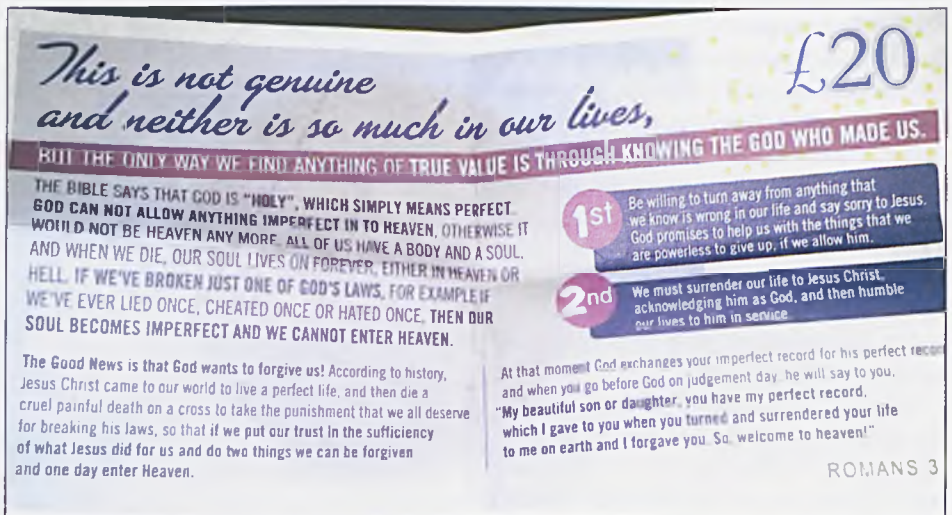


reality, or a loving god with eternal torment in Hell, perhaps we shouldn’t be too surprised?

Perhaps they took inspiration from the Angler Fish, and thought, “Well, if God can intelligently design a fish that uses a lure to draw in unsuspecting victims,

surely he wouldn’t mind if we try to lure people in with a few fake notes?”

Whatever twisted theology lay behind these notes’ origin, I can think of but one suitable destination for them – the collection plate in your local church. It’s better to give than to receive.



Get your fake Christian bank notes on the Internet

FAKE banknotes are available from numerous sources on the Internet. The one below is one of several varieties sold by an evangelical outfit called Living Waters. On the back it states: “The million dollar question: Will you go to Heaven when you die? Here’s a quick



test. Have you ever told a lie, stolen anything, or used God’s name in vain? Jesus said, “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” Have you looked with lust? Will you be guilty on Judgment Day? If you have done those things, God sees you as a lying, thieving, blasphemous, adulterer at heart. The Bible warns that if you are guilty you will end up in Hell. That’s not God’s will. He sent His Son to suffer and die on the cross for you. You broke God’s Law, but Jesus paid your fine. That means He can legally dismiss your case. He can commute your death sentence: ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’ Then He rose from the dead and defeated death. Please, repent (turn from sin) today and trust in Jesus alone, and God will grant you the gift of everlasting life. Then read your Bible daily and obey it.”

justplaincrazy

AMISH LEADER JAILED

DESPITE prosecutors demanding a life sentence for Amish leader Sam Mullet Sr for co-ordinating a series of bizarre beard- and hair-cutting attacks on other Ohio Amish that drew national attention, a judge last month decided on a far more lenient sentence – 15 years.

Mullet, who led a breakaway Amish group, was sentenced in Federal District Court in Cleveland for assaults that prosecutors argued were motivated by religious intolerance.

Fifteen of his followers, including six women, were given lesser sentences, ranging from one year and one day to seven years.

All the accused were convicted last year of multiple counts of conspiracy and hate crimes, which carry harsher punishment than simple assault.

Judge Dan Aaron Polster told them they being punished for depriving victims of a constitutional right, religious freedom, the fruits they enjoyed themselves as Amish through exemptions from jury service and other laws.

The trial of the 16 defendants, including three of Mullet's sons, exposed a tiny sect in thrall to its leader, who in the name of purity abolished Sunday church services and punished men for ogling non-Amish women by confining them to chicken coops.

Testimony also detailed how Mullet pressured married female followers – including a daughter-in-law – to have sex with him.

BURQAS FOR BABIES

A SAUDI cleric has issued a fatwa calling for female babies to wear burqas.

Sheikh Abdullah Daoud issued his controversial edict during an interview on the Islamic al-Majd TV that aired six months ago, but it was only last month that his proclamation went viral via the Internet.

According to Daoud, dressing infants and children in the traditional Muslim veils would reduce the sexual molestation of minors, though the cleric did not cite any evidence for his view.

On Twitter, where the story gained media traction, the response to the idea of covering up baby girls had been almost universally negative – and Sheikh Mohammad al-Jzlana, a former judge at the Saudi Board of Grievances, told al-Majd TV that the fatwa was “denigrating to Islam and shariah and made Islam look bad”.

Human rights campaigner Leo Igwe calls for world-wide campaign against witchcraft

LEO Igwe, recently appointed as a research fellow by the James Randi Educational Foundation, a sceptical, non-profit organisation founded by magician and sceptic James Randi, last month issued a statement in the wake of the murder of a 20-year-old woman from Papua, New Guinea.

Accused of being a witch, Kepari Leniata – was tortured with a hot iron, stripped naked, and thrown onto a the fire while hundreds of people looked on.

Her relatives had accused her of using sorcery to kill a boy. Police and firefighters were at the scene but couldn't save her life – they were outnumbered by the lynch mob.

In his statement, Igwe said that the UN Human Rights office in Geneva was deeply disturbed by the killing. It said the incident “adds to the growing pattern of vigilante attacks and killings of persons accused of sorcery in Papua New Guinea”. Amnesty International also “cited reports that last July, police arrested 29 members of a witch-hunting gang who were murdering and canibalising people they suspected of sorcery”.

“But issuing statements is not enough,” said Igwe. “It will not make the problem disappear. Witch-hunting is a social disease – rooted in local superstitious and irrational beliefs – that is ravaging many parts of the world. Just condemning the attacks and killings of alleged witches makes little or no difference. Urgent action is needed. Some firm global response is required.

“The international community must take a more proactive approach to addressing this problem. For a long time, the UN agencies and other international human rights bodies have kept silent and turned a blind eye to this issue, all in the name of ‘respecting’ cultural beliefs.

“Witch killing is a horrible criminal act that should not be condoned or tolerated anywhere in the world. The UN Human Rights office and other human rights agencies around the globe must speak out and act now.”

He added: “Belief in witchcraft and sorcery is very strong in Papua and witch killing is widespread in this former Australian colony. Every year, hundreds of people, mainly women, are murdered.

Women are made scapegoats for the ills many people in the country suffer. These killings take place mainly in rural communities where belief in superstition and magic



Leo Igwe

is very strong. Modern education and development including the introduction in 1971 of the Sorcery Act by the Australian Colonial administration have not succeeded in eradicating this harmful traditional practice.

“The government of Papua New Guinea lacks the political will to make witch hunts history on the island. Like in India and in many countries in sub Saharan Africa, the authorities in Papua have caved in to pressures, threats and intimidation from witch hunting gangs.

“There is no excuse or justification for the government's inability to tackle this problem. There is an urgent need for a campaign to stop witch hunts in Papua and help bring to an end this wave of violence ravaging the country.

“Public education and enlightenment is needed to change the mentality of the people of Papua and get them to abandon the beliefs that drive them to commit these atrocious and savage crimes. To this end we have contacted a number of NGOs in Papua New Guinea, including the Business and Professional Women's Association, ChildFund Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Council of Women, Family Health & Rural Improvement Program, and FamilyVoice Inc, in order to explore ways of prosecuting this important campaign.

“I hope that critically-minded individuals and groups in the country will come forward and volunteer to execute this important task. Sceptics and critical thinkers and all people of reason in Papua need to rise up to the challenge of bringing end to witchcraft related murders and other superstition-based abuses. Sceptics and critical thinkers in other parts of the world should support this initiative to ignite the flame of reason and scientific thinking in the country.”

A Tweet from Heaven

POPE BENEDICT XVI last month became the first Pope to resign since Gregory XII in 1415. Ratzinger was also the first Pope to enter the world of social media. **PAUL KARAFFA** was not best pleased by the move.

On December 12, ex-Pope Benedict XVI took to Twitter for the first time, reaching out through social media to remind people of how sinful they are, how guilty they should feel, and how Christ is shaking his head and wagging his finger. He joined the ranks of fellow religious crazies like evangelist Joyce Meyer, Iranian Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Rabbi Shmuley.

Telecommunications have allowed businesses and community organizations to reach out to individual people and get them involved in their product or cause. Social media, the newest wave of telecommunications, has allowed people to connect quickly and in a more personable way than ever before thought possible.

Social media companies like Twitter and Facebook have given communities a creative outlet to share art, photography, writing and other user-generated content. It has given people an opportunity to discuss philosophy, engage in debate, and learn how

their peers feel about their personal views. It has connected major thinkers, educators and human rights organizations to developing minds; and created a community of individuals addicted to the opportunity of learning from one another.

The Vatican, as well as most religious organizations, makes it a part of its mission to eliminate or reduce protest and controversial discussions. In an effort to accomplish this objective, in an ever changing communication ecosystem, the Vatican, on June 13, 2012, announced its formal application to control a new Internet address extension “.catholic,” and will decide who is allowed and not allowed to use it. The Internet address extension is expected to be assigned later this year.

There was, then, a religious necessity for the Vatican to leverage social media to access these personal relationships to thwart free inquiry, philosophical debate, and general freethinking. When the Vatican first became involved in social media it operated like a

machine, churning the engine of religious dogma, and spitting out nuggets of doctrine like a Pez dispenser. It would seem the Vatican’s first attempt was a failure, giving reason for the Pope to open his personal voice to the world of social media in an interactive way.

As someone that follows a lot of people on Twitter, I did not leap at the opportunity to follow the Pope. I decided his views were best left to the dusty shelves of antiquity. His perverted words would never have blended among the freethinkers, comedians, and human rights advocates I prefer to follow and read.

When I first read about the plan, I was not pleased. I feared a religious takeover of Twitter, and was concerned that a large number of people following the Pope would give his ignorant words credibility and spread them to impressionable minds. Those concerns have passed, as his voice is going largely unnoticed. With only 1.5 million followers, he is hardly a social media sensation. The Twitter user with the most followers, a whopping 34 million, is pretty-boy pop sensation Justin Bieber; and the Dalai Lama exceeds the Pope’s popularity by nearly six times.

I took to Twitter to read what the Pope had to say, and found the stereotypical religious doctrine one would expect from a sheltered old man. But I was still surprised – not because of the Pope’s words, but because of the individuals responding. For example, on January 9 the Pope tweeted, “Following Christ’s example, we have to learn to give ourselves completely. Anything else is not enough.”

The latest five comments from the expanded thread of that Tweet were from individuals disgusted with the message. Such as from @MartinSoneby stating, “Are those principle (sic) you learned as a boy in the Hitler Youth?”, or from @rjstelling referring to the comments as “vacuous nonsense” (sic), or @godlessnat who wrote, “Is this what priests say to take advantage of kids?”

What was sanctioned as an opportunity to reach new support has quickly turned into a target for non-believers, who have never had the opportunity to vent the anger and disgust they have harbored for such distasteful theology.

Of course, the Pope did not respond to these comments and questions, but one can



After defecting last year from the Church of Scientology and leaving her husband actor Tom Cruise, one of a number of celebrity Scientologists, Katie Holmes Tweeted Ratzinger to say how pleased she was to be back in the Catholic fold

(Photo: Getty Images/Getty Images Entertainment /Alberto E. Rodriguez)

be certain he read a great many of them.

The Pope, not to mention the Vatican, was staring into a new age of communication, a transparent one, and there are no ways of throwing disbelievers and defectors to the flames. Banning books and blacklisting people doesn't work anymore. When everyone has a voice, there are simply too many people to silence.

It is yet to be seen whether or not the Church and other religious institutions will use social media to communicate to the public or if they will use it as a one-way marketing tool. The latter is most likely. The 21st

century requires transparency for effective communication, and transparency is not a trait the Church practices well. A short study of the Vatican handling of pedophilia scandals over the last 50 years easily gives credence to the fact that the Church prefers privacy.

Social media will increase the reach of religion. It will sway minds away from individual progress and doom them to a future of intellectual impotence. But those minds will be few. For the majority, social media gives a voice to people who otherwise would be voiceless; it allows one to engage people otherwise unreachable; and it helps cultures

progress organically.

Twitter is a social media treasure for people looking to learn about cultural trends, and may not be amenable to the Pope's message. Looking at the retweet statistics, one can easily conclude that most people are uninterested in the Pope's message, preferring religion remain a topic of humor. On that, I will leave you with a tweet ranked #7 most funny of 2012 from @shariv67, "I'm free of an abusive cult, based on money & power that worships a fictional deity & safely back with the Catholic Church" – Katie Holmes".

Time come for the C of E to call it a day?

THE Anglican Communion is a conglomerate of churches in over 160 countries throughout the world. The Church of England is the leading church and the whole is presided over by the Archbishop of Canterbury. At the present time it is going through a series of rather strange events: a vote to ordain women priests as bishops has been held, the decision by the Government to allow same-sex marriages has been taken, and it has now been announced that the Church of England is to allow gay priests to become Bishops.

On top of this there are two Archbishops of Canterbury, one going and one coming. So how do these various activities fit together? The vote to allow women to be ordained as bishops was carried out with strong support for the motion but using an archaic voting system that required a two-thirds majority for the motion to be carried; not only that, but the electorate was to be divided into three sections each of which had to give the two-thirds majority.

It takes only a moment's thought to realise that such a system was devised for the sole purpose of severely restricting the possibility of the old order being changed. And so it was that the motion was defeated despite a goodly majority in favour of the change! Those in favour included both of the archbishops.

So here we had an organisation largely backing a change and led by two men of power in the organisation, and yet the motion was defeated. The result can only be seen as a fiasco! It has shown the women priests (who currently make up about one in three of all the C of E priests) how little they are really cherished and that they are required only because there are too few male priests to fill the posts available. So how do they feel about that? It is putting it mildly to say they are not all happy bun-

RON COOPER poses the question

nies! I imagine that the women in the C of E generally are not best pleased either. If we turn our attention to the women in the rest of the Anglican Communion they fall into two categories, those who already have women bishops (yes, there are several churches that already have them and have not been struck by thunderbolts), and those such as the African churches which are implacably opposed to the idea. Neither group is happy; the first because of the slight implied on them and the second because of the horrors of even contemplating women as bishops.

And what of the congregations? One glance at the crowds (mostly numbering up to a dozen) coming out of the churches after services shows them to be mostly silver haired women who can see an affront when one is offered to them, which inclines one to think they would not be best pleased with the treatment of their sex by the powers behind the bishops' thrones. But their objections need not bother the bishops for long, for they are a diminishing group and time is against them.

So how does this matter stand at the moment? Well, as the voters got it wrong the archbishops are now trying to come up with another way to get the motion approved; the voters must be given another chance to do as they are told!

Meanwhile there is the matter of gay clergy; if they want to be bishops they must wring their hands in sorrow and promise to be good boys in future and be celibate. Surely, if they become celibate they will no longer be gay so that problem will be solved. But that does not seem to satisfy some of their brother priests who are saying they will revolt if any gay priests are ordained as bishops.

Then there is the problem of same-sex marriages. Once again there are two sides to this story and once again the Archbishops of Canterbury seem not to have their followers behind them

I think that I can see a way out of these conundrums. Why don't they read their Good Book, think about it and decide that it is time to give up all this claim to magic power. Let them sell their vestments, treasures, etc, and give the proceeds to the poor. They could set up church buildings as shelters for the homeless and stop trying to push the rest of us around.

I can dream, can't I?



In and out: Justin Welby, the New Archbishop of Canterbury, left, and Rowan Williams

Rejecting religion; embracing realism

Freelance writer and martial arts *aficionado* **HARJIT SINGH** sought many paths to 'enlightenment' but after discovering the *Freethinker*, enthusiastically embraced rationalism

After coming across the *Freethinker*, the world's oldest surviving freethought journal, I promptly began penning my personal thoughts drawn from my personal experiences of a spiritual journey that began during my early childhood. So this article focuses on my problems with religion in general, and certain beliefs of the Abrahamic faiths in particular.

During my school days, I found myself diving into the pages of the Bhagavad Gita, Bible, Koran, Dhammapad, selected teachings of Zoroaster, etc, as well as countless library books covering the history and practices of various religions. I would also sleep listening to many religious audio cassettes such as Hanuman Chalisa, Jain songs, Buddhist chants and Sikh hymns. My search for spirituality took me on a once-a-week visit to UK Sikh and Hindu temples as well as energetic singsongs at an open-to-public Sai Baba cult gathering.

I travelled several times to India, the birthplace of the Dharmic religions, in order to visit the historical temples. In India, I bathed three times in the holy pool of Sikhism's Harimandir Sahib (Amritsar, Punjab), worshipped the idol of a Hindu goddess at Chintpurni by driving up an almost 1,000-metre-high peak (Himachal Pradesh), and contemplated besides the coffin of a Muslim saint (Jalandhar, Punjab).

I have also taken yoga classes (with focus on intense breathing exercises), fasted several times (various types, including nine days on water) and even observed celibacy (stressful).

I have come across people of most religions and sought an insight into their thoughts about their faith. I was eager to see what all religions had to offer, but felt that devoting myself to one faith would limit my learning.

However, after all these years of wholehearted searching, I can honestly say I did not find what I was seeking. I expected something mysterious and magical to occur. One *does* get goose bumps when venturing into the whole religion thing. Experiencing new and strange things and visiting certain places, especially if they are of historical significance, does that to you.

But I found myself with more questions than answers. I also found it was not the regularly visiting, help-seeking devotees

who were finding fulfilment, but the priests and management running the temples and shrines. The congregation's donations just kept on flowing into their hands. I saw them as materialistic and capitalistic. There is nothing wrong in being either or both – except if you are a priest.

I remember the days when the headmaster of my primary school used to make us listen to him reading the Bible, largely the New Testament, on most days during the morning assembly, despite about one-third of the school being non-Christian. Around the Christmas season, we had to sing songs such as "Away in a Manger". Intrigued, I further researched Christianity, especially with all the talk of Jesus, the Devil, sin, Hell, etc – mostly fear-inducing stuff.

After looking into the Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths with an open heart and mind, I drew some conclusions, some of which include the following:

Regarding traditional religions and modern cults in general, I see them as bear traps covered with pretty blankets. Watch where you step or else – WHAM! Fortunately, some manage to pull open the sharp jaws and drag themselves to safety.

I feel that religion breeds OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). OCD sufferers believe that if you perform these rituals, everything will be fine, but if you don't, bad things will happen to you. I also came to understand that a religion's long history does not make it any more truthful than a religion founded yesterday. Many ancient religions have only survived to this day because they have been imposed upon the masses, ie the Spanish Conquests, Jihad and the like. Once in, people find it difficult to get out because of the psychological barriers that are placed, such as fear of isolation, threats of physical violence, as well as so-called eternal damnation.

Around the globe, scores worship one god or several. Many also say that all gods are fictitious, a creation of manipulators used to control the masses. Several say the so-called gods who contacted the ancients were in fact extra-terrestrials from other worlds or dimensions.

After years of searching, I comfortably concluded that God may or may not exist because I cannot recall having had the pleasure of meeting him in person, and I'm certainly not going to accept the word of

some other person or piece of literature. I feel we can only say we know God if he personally appears before us and reveals all. Therefore, without real, obvious proof, acknowledging the names and attributes of some god, and following detailed rituals and dietary laws that some "messenger" claims his god prescribed for humankind, is a gamble, and gambling is not for the wise.

What guarantee do we have that the so-called prophets of some or other deity even existed? There are numerous legends about them, but how do we know the events actually took place? We only know anything about them because we have been informed by literature and other people, but how truly reliable are they and their claims? What guarantee do we have we are not being deceived for the sake of hidden agendas? What guarantee do we have that these prophets even existed?

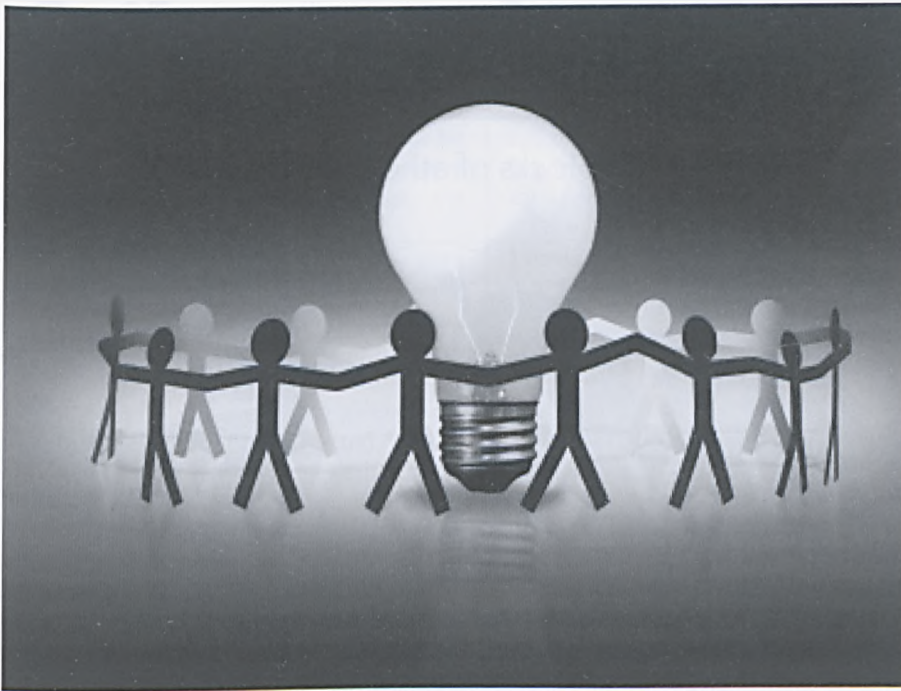
If they did exist, how do we know for sure they were not financially motivated schemers, or sufferers of mental illness?

I find it funny how many millions of people can fanatically devote their entire life to ancient, foreign "holy" individuals they have never met, yet they so easily ridicule and reject the logic of living, breathing, contemporary rationalists.

How reliably sourced are scriptures? Did the so-called prophets actually write them? What real proof is there? If dictated to followers, how faithfully did the followers write down each word together with correct punctuation? If written after the death of the prophets, who were the writers and what proof of their credibility do we have? Some scriptures are very beautifully written, but that cannot be taken as evidence of divine origin. Any ordinary person can be exceptionally articulate.

These scriptures, which many follow without question, can be found to contain contradictions (Matthew 27:5 and Act 1:11, New Testament), hypocrisy (Luke 6:27-31 and John 2:13-15, New Testament), scientific impossibilities (54:1 Koran), and even some disturbing material, ie genocide (Samuel 1, 15:3, Torah), mutilation (8:12, Koran), incest (Genesis, 19:32-35, Torah), etc. which is not mentioned in the pre-watershed version used to lure people in to the faiths.

I see places of worship not as locations where people find salvation, but as centres



where shepherds gather their sheep only to guide them to intellectual slaughter. One may note how religious folks tune into a “holy” state of mind within the confines of their places of worship, but when outside, are back to their usual selves. It is almost like a personality disorder.

Perhaps they believe their omnipresent god does not have access beyond the bricks and mortar? Why does there even have to be a place of worship when God is supposed to be everywhere? Should not then every place be regarded as holy as the insides of churches, etc?

I find the notion of Hell quite primitive, even childish. Another creation from the dark imaginative minds of religion’s scaremongers designed to keep the masses filled with fear to prevent them from daring to escape to freedom. No matter what you do, no matter how wrong it may be, nobody will be condemned to some fiery Hell by some deity and suffer torments for eternity. Prison, however, does exist, and is a place to be avoided because one’s freedom there becomes limited, which for anyone would be a tormenting experience.

Whilst the Hell-myth prevents religious zombies from leaving religion, the Heaven-myth pulls them closer to their faith by tempting them, particularly with the promise that if they were to fight and die to protect their religion they will enter paradise, where they will reap divine rewards. This false belief has led to an immense amount of worldwide suffering and loss of life throughout history. With no proof of Heaven’s existence, those who engage in “holy war” and attain “martyrdom” in the name of their religion, do so in vain.

I believe the Devil is just a character

designed to persuade religionists that any rational thoughts they may have are not sensible, but instead derived from the evil influence of some monstrous fallen angel/djinn who wants their soul. It is quite silly if you take a step back and think about it. If people experience problems in life, it is either their own fault for lacking focus, or because of the plotting of others.

Religion’s manipulators knew that there are bound to be revolutionary freethinkers – people who question and expose all the silliness. The manipulators want their stooges to see freethinkers, particularly the influential ones, as the anti-Christ, whom they should oppose and perceive their logic as unholy temptation. Just as there have been many “final” messiahs and mahdis throughout history, fortunately, there were also thousands of rationalists. Sadly, many paid for their scepticism with their lives.

The devoutly religious observe the various rituals of their faith, including animal slaughter. Personally, I believe whether you kill an animal like “this” or “that”, the method of slaughter cannot make it pure or impure. Ultimately, the animal becomes a corpse. The real focus should be whether you wish to eat dead flesh or not. Therefore, at a restaurant or butchers I would not specifically request halal/kosher meat nor avoid it, because I do not acknowledge biblical dietary laws and do not wish to give those rules any legitimacy. The only right choice to make when it comes to food is whether you want to eat vegan/vegetarian or non-vegan/vegetarian food.

I find that visiting historical religious buildings and ruins can only benefit the pilgrimage organisers/caretakers in a finan-

cial way. For spiritual upliftment, one can visit a safe nudist beach. Or perhaps take on daring challenges like bungee jumping or skydiving, or even enjoy a world cruise. Daring and fun activities unlock suppressed areas of the mind, can relieve stress and deliver other beneficial results.

Then there are the so-called holy relics of various faiths that serve to make religious fiction appear to have some legitimacy. Rather than debating about which relics are the “real” ones, I believe devout believers should first seek explicit proof that the prophet to which the relic is connected actually even existed. As well as keeping the masses tied to religion, these relics make good tourist attractions, bringing in considerable income for the relic-displays.

Many religions and sects also demonise sexual intercourse, portraying it as something shameful, filthy and only right if performed for procreation. But I believe sex is a wonderful game that should be played over and over again. I also believe that sex should not be limited to either heterosexual or homosexual relations – bisexual relationships should be explored and understood by all. Even many of the “manly” Japanese, Greek and Roman warriors engaged in same-sex or bisexual love.

Finally, enlightenment. This, I believe, is not attained through mysterious and magical rituals, reciting prayers, practicing celibacy, fasting and the like. Religions promise enlightenment, but their promise is like the board game Snakes & Ladders: there are only a few ladders, a heck of a lot of snakes, and no box 100.

I have learned from my experiences that true enlightenment is basically seeing through all the ignorance of religions, not getting seriously involved with them. It is freeing yourself from the restraints that religions so firmly impose. Enlightenment is found after tuning into your maternal side, enjoying sexual freedom, being proud of yourself, indulging in flavour-some foods, relaxing in the day and sleeping well at night.

If we can spread rationalism among religionists in a polite and intellectual manner, we shall make good progress. But negative acts like scripture-burning, verbal abuse, physical assault, or vandalising places of worship are anti-productive, and will only strengthen and increase fanatical religious convictions.



HARJIT SINGH has been published in *Martial Arts Illustrated* (UK), *Black Belt Magazine* (USA), *Blitz* (Australia), *Asana Journal* (India) and other publications

Dad, what happens when we die?

DALE DEBAKCY runs through five stumbling blocks of atheist parenting

We atheists tend to be a hair-splitting lot. I have had conversations that lasted HOURS over whether “supernatural” is a qualitative or quantitative modifier. But something that we all largely agree on is that it is unforgivable to push a metaphysical belief system on a child before they have the intellectual ability to grasp or resist it. And yet, as parents, we are bombarded by a steady stream of questions about life and the universe from our delightful yet cat-tossing offspring. How do we navigate all of this while still staying true to our basic principles of intellectual freedom?

In my time as a dad, there are five things that I’ve found particularly tricky to deal with, and while my solutions are of course far from perfect, there are perhaps a couple of ideas in there that might help smooth the way for those atheist parents just coming up the ranks.

1. *Sally at school says that Jesus died for our sins. Is that true?*

Your first real test isn’t going to come from something your kid says, but from something that somebody else compelled their kid to believe. The tempting answer is, of course, “No, and Sally’s parents are drunks.” But resist. What you say is what your kid is going to say the next time that Sally repeats those things that she has no reason to doubt. Sally is as much a victim in this as anyone else. My response has been, “That’s an idea that a group of people told to make sense of the world thousands of years ago. When you get older, you’ll learn more and more ways of figuring out what’s likely to be true and what isn’t. But for now, it’s just one idea. If Sally believes it, that’s her business, but you don’t have to. If she brings it up again, just say, ‘Tag, you’re it’ and start running like crazy.”

Now, even as I typed that, it sounded like equivocating to my *Écrasez l’Infâme* heart – that the artillery of organized religion and social pressure are being brought to bear on my kiddo and all I’m giving her to fight back is a limp fish. But that’s because, as an adult, I give kids way too little credit for their social perceptiveness. My eldest daughter just turned nine, and the birthday party was a tour de force of elementary school social calisthenics. Even in the midst of the most raucous games, each child was keenly attuned to what the others were doing, how they were doing it, and how to adjust one’s own behavior to fit the general flow.

In other words, kids are pretty good at sensing when it’s time to change the subject, and



In 2009 the New Humanist carried an article – Humanism for kids? – illustrated with this delightful photo (see <http://tinyurl.com/ab2939v>)

if Sally sees that her speech isn’t being met with overt acceptance, she’ll figure out that it’s something to keep to herself. And if she’s given an option to play a rad game as a way of backpedaling out of social awkwardness, she’ll probably take it all the more thankfully. Give kids an avenue to be kids, instead of warriors for your own personal perspective, and things tend to work out okay.

2. *Why are we here?*

It’s a metaphysical question, and though my usual response to metaphysical questions is, “Bad Question,” it’s one you’re going to need to at least provide something of a coherent answer for. The trick is to give enough of a sense of the rich variety of life without then immediately restricting its potential to a few of your preferred avenues. My elder daughter happens to be particularly interested in science, so I’ve put it to her this way: “Each human is an experiment being run by the universe. You and I are intensely unique combinations of universe stuff built upon the millions upon millions of experiments that preceded us. So, it’s up to us to be as much *US* as we can be, to take all the random things you’re good at and develop them to their fullest, and if you do, then you’ll be the building block for a brand new experiment. I took all of the stuff that my Dale DeBakcsy makeup seemed good at and worked on it and worked on it until one day an Erin Metzner experiment came along who had been working on all of things that the Erin Metzner build is good at. We both liked what we had managed to pull off on our own so much, we decided to make a fresh experiment. And that’s you,

with a little bit of me and a little bit of her and flashes from thousands of humans and animals before us. So, it’s up to you to be the best Anna you can be, to take what you’ve been given and run with it. The universe will never get another chance to see what you can do, so don’t hold back.”

3. *What happens when we die?*

The big one. I remember being seven or so and being just paralyzed by thoughts of death and what it meant – not so much my own, but that of my grandparents and parents. I thrashed the idea around in my head, wrestling with it while stubbornly refusing to ask anybody else about it. Maybe I didn’t trust their ability to give me an honest answer – maybe I was afraid that my most dire conclusions would be validated, but in any case, I didn’t ask and so the first time that I heard an adult give an answer was at the local fair when a man in a booth waved me over and asked me, “Have you ever thought about what happens after death?” before pressing a pamphlet about Jesus in my hand. I was eight. Taking the pamphlet home, I saw everything I feared and worse in the lurid pictures of Hell, and everything that I could possibly want offered in the bunny-bestrewn illustrations of Heaven. Luckily, it was just ridiculously enough presented that it broke the bonds of credulity, even for a frightened eight year old, and I tossed it away after a couple of days.

I’m telling this story for a couple of reasons. First, kids, raised freely and unencumbered by preconceptions, are mentally pretty tough. My mother, even though she was a very secular computer programmer,

never mentioned to me that Christianity was something that one needed to be skeptical about. I went into that fair encounter without any parental conditioning, during my most death-fearing period, and was hit with a piece of literature calculated to prey on precisely such fears, and came out of it just fine.

I know it's part of parental nature to want to give your kid a set of armor for each possible misfortune that might befall them, but armor can be awfully hard to move in, and is often the first thing to be thrown off when the road gets rough. My parents kept me light, and that let me move and discover a lot more easily than if I had Ten Cogent Arguments Against Christianity in my breast pocket for any possible encounter with religious fanaticism.

Secondly, even if you don't remember pondering death at a particularly early age, there are lots of kids who do, but keep it to themselves. Don't be afraid of talking about death with them just because your notions about it aren't as pepperminty as those that other parents can offer. Because, really, the news isn't all that bad. Here's what I've come up with:

"A week ago you were sitting on this couch and had absolute knowledge of whether there was a squirrel on that fence or not. But if I ask you now, "Was there a squirrel on the fence a week ago?" of course you don't remember. We forget stuff about our lives all the time — they just get poofed away to make room for the next round of stuff, and that's fine. It happens every moment of every day. Ask me what tie I was wearing two days ago, and I can't tell you, even though I sweated through the decision of picking it out at the time.

"But, just as we lose bits and pieces of our old selves to make room for our new selves, other people take those discarded bits and carry them along. Every time we touch the world, that action's consequences continue to zoom about long, long after we forget about them. So, even as the old us passes away, everything it did is still shimmering out in the web of humanity and the world. When you get to be ancient like me you have friends come up to you and tell stories about things you did and said that you not only don't remember, but can't even believe. We are very bad keepers of our own past, but the world never forgets.

"There is more of you Out There than you could ever contain inside of you at a single moment, versions of you long past and only recently gone, and so even if, centuries from now, people have forgotten your name or your job, the decisions that you made shaped their world and so you keep marching along with humanity even if you personally are gone. We don't entirely know yet what death means, even though we get

better and better evidence every day, but what I can tell you is that the what we lose by it is nothing compared to what we leave behind us. We leave behind a beautiful life full of consequence in an endlessly interesting world, and all we lose is some squirrels on a fence."

Okay, I didn't actually say that last line, but I couldn't help myself.

4. What made the world?

A dialogue:

"Dad, what made the world?"

"Well, who made this pencil?"

"I don't know. A pencil worker?"

"Maybe. Or a pencil-making robot."

"Or a dinosaur who eats trees and poops out pencils?"

"First, that's awesome. Second, that's sort of the point. There are parts of even our greatest and most impressive theories that we don't quite know yet, but that doesn't mean that we can stuff just anything in the hole. There are answers that are more or less likely, and as we learn new things, some answers get more likely still and others drop out of the race entirely. Now, of our three choices, the dinosaur, the pencil worker, or the pencil-making robot, which is the most likely, do you think?"

"The dinosaur!"

"..."

"...The pencil making robot."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because robots are fast, and we use a lot of pencils at school."

"And those are some great ideas to follow up on. You can use them to do research or form experiments or generate questions to ask the next pencil company president you meet. Now, when we think about the Earth, we have some ideas about how it's made based on what we've observed deep in its crust and in the stars all around us, and that keeps us asking the next question.

"The important thing is that we don't get anywhere if we just put in an answer that we happen to like and then fold our hands and call it a day. It's important to be comfortable saying "I don't know" about something, and even more important to know that saying that doesn't mean you have to believe the next person who comes along and says they *do* know. A lot of the time, they stopped at pencil pooping dinosaurs.

"The person who admits not knowing is in a lot better position to take the next step than the person who decided too soon on something that seemed awesome at the time. That being said, let's see what we do know..."

5. Is Santa Claus real?

Yes. *Absolutely.*



God and the Folly of Faith

The latest book by **VICTOR J STENGER** – *God and the Folly of Faith: the Incompatibility of Science and Religion* – is reviewed by **WILLIAM HARWOOD**

It annoys me immensely whenever a media person cites a list of “Four Horsemen” of superstition-debunkers that does not include Victor Stenger. Stenger’s bestselling *God: The Failed Hypothesis* guarantees that he will eventually be credited alongside Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens with wiping the god fantasy from the face of the earth. That does not mean that I think he can do no wrong. Even Dawkins, author of the incomparable *The God Delusion*, has written books I could not give an unequivocal endorsement.

The same is true of Stenger. I wrote of his *The Fallacy of Fine Tuning* that the physics in the book was “so far beyond my expertise that the only endorsement I am able to give is by saying that his previous books give me the confidence to take his word for it.” The same is true of *God and the Folly of Faith*. Anyone who has not at least passed Physics 101 will find some of Stenger’s arguments beyond comprehension.

That said, let me cite some of the conclusions he reaches based on arguments I did understand. For example, “Science flies us to the moon. Religion flies us into buildings.” “Science and religion are fundamentally incompatible because of their unequivocally opposed epistemologies.” “Evangelical Christians seem to think that teaching the Bible will bring more people to Jesus. In fact, the opposite is likely to happen. A re-

cent poll showed that the more people know about religion, the less likely they are to be religious. The best way to become an atheist is to read the Bible from cover to cover.” That echoes Isaac Asimov’s observation that, “Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived.” And my own reading of the Bible led to the recognition that it is the most obscene paean to evil ever written, with *Mein Kampf* not even a serious challenger.

Stenger contrasts faith with trust. Scientists trust the findings of other scientists that are supported by evidence and not falsified by contrary evidence. But “Faith is belief in the absence of supportive evidence and even in the light of contrary evidence.”

He also contrasts religious hypothesis with myth. “Science does not conflict with religious myths any more than it does with Harry Potter. Although sometimes based on actual events and personages, myths are basically fictions.” But, “The argument I presented in *God: The Failed Hypothesis* that God does not exist beyond a reasonable doubt is a scientific one. It is based on the fact that the theist (as opposed to the deist) God should be detectable by his actions in the world, and has not been.”

In other words, since the myth that Jesus rose from the dead is fiction, it cannot be subjected to scientific evaluation. It is when theists claim that Jesus’ resurrection is a fact of history rather than an incident in a work

of fiction, that it becomes testable by the methodology of science and fails to overcome the falsifying evidence.

Stenger does not share the view of some non-theists that religion is no more dangerous than belief in Santa Claus or the Great Pumpkin. “Those who rely on observation and reason to provide an understanding of the world must stop viewing as harmless those who rely on superstition and the mythologies in ancient texts passed down from the childhood of our species.”

What makes that admonition vital is that even moderate theists are conditioned to believe that right and wrong are whatever their imaginary Sky Führer or its self-appointed scriptwriter says they are. “If God defines what is good and what is evil, then those who follow God’s commands are morally justified to commit similar atrocities. History shows the result: holy wars, burning of heretics, the Crusades, the Inquisition ... eventually leading to the Holocaust.”

For the benefit of persons who swallow the Big Lie that the Holocaust was atheist-inspired, Stenger points out that Hitler and his heretic-hating fellow thugs were committed Catholics.

Stenger responds to the doublethink to which apologists have resorted in order to defend their position in the face of what has been called the problem of evil. He cites a Templeton Prize winner (awarded to rationalizers who can harmonize A and not-A),

In Search of Gentle Death: The Fight

CORINTHIAN Books describes *In Search of Gentle Death: The Fight for Your Right to Die With Dignity*, by Richard N. Côté, as “the most intensely valuable book we’ve ever published” – and following its release last year right-to-die activists across the globe have been singing its praise.

Among them is Derek Humphry, founder in 1980 of The Hemlock Society and author of *Final Exit*. He wrote: “Côté’s book is unique in being the most current, the widest ranging, and remarkably intimate look at those people behind the burgeoning world right-to-die movement in the last 30 years”.

Zoe FitzGerald Carter, the US author of *Imperfect Endings: A Daughter’s Story of Love,*

Loss and Letting Go (Simon & Schuster) was another of the many who welcomed Côté’s book. Faced with her mother’s decision to end her life after suffering from Parkinson’s disease for many years, she spent the last year of her mother’s life wrestling with how to respond.

“Because her doctors were unwilling to help her – and because assisted suicide is illegal in my hometown (Washington DC) – my mother decided to stop eating and drinking, believing it would pose less of a legal risk to my sisters and me. Despite the near total cessation of food and liquid, she lived for close to two weeks and would have lived longer if she hadn’t taken an overdose

of morphine several nights before she died in order to speed things along.”

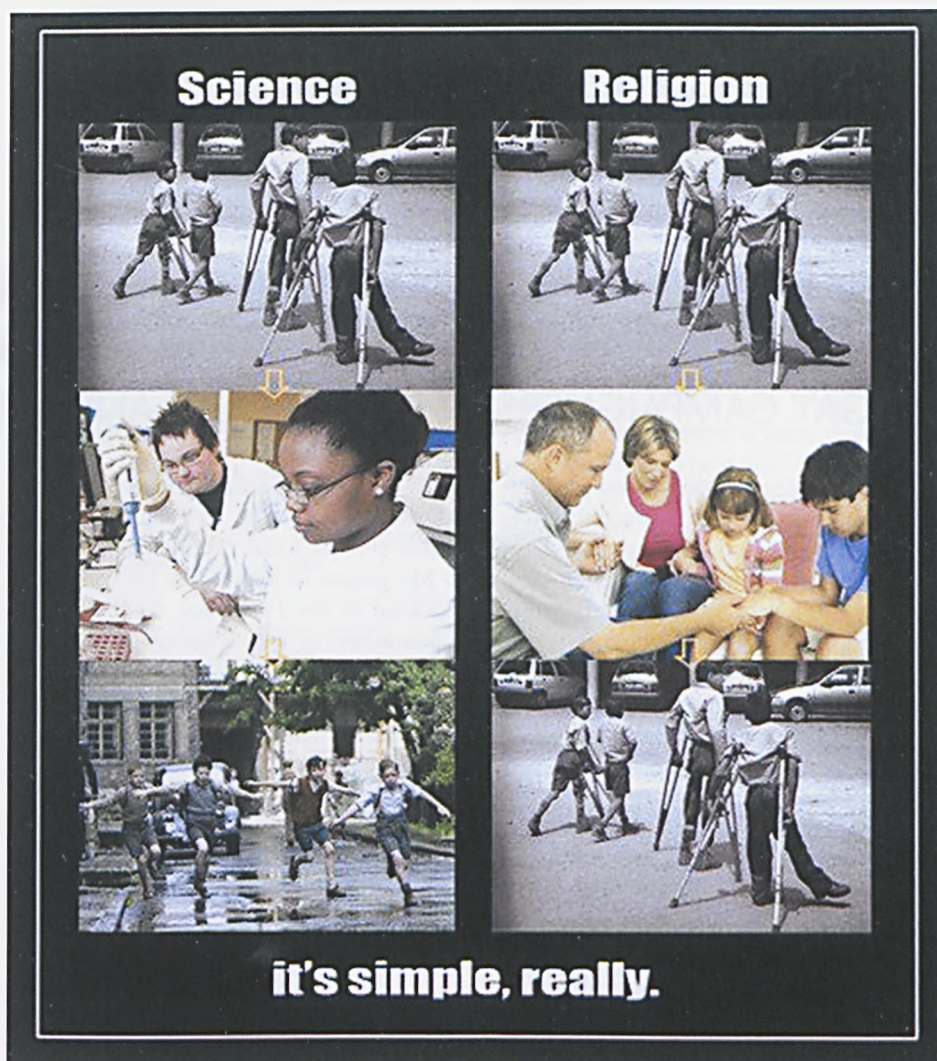
Carter added: “Although I did not initially embrace her decision to end her life, I was angry and distressed at how hard it was for her to accomplish her ‘good death’ and, in the years since, I have become deeply convinced that choosing when and how you die is a basic civil right. In his cogent, detailed chronicle of the modern right-to-die movement, social historian and author, Richard N. Côté, makes this argument in eloquent, quietly reasoned prose.

“In a passage that I found deeply resonant, he writes: ‘Only the suffering person is capable of determining how much agony is

that “the only way to justify evil and suffering and maintain belief in God at the same time is to relax at least one of his traditional trinity of attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence Of course no one wants to believe in a non-omnibenevolent God, but either omnipotence or omniscience can go.”

He also draws attention to myth-makers’ free use of their imaginations to explain away inconsistencies in their allegedly historical narratives: “The claimed prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem was fulfilled after the fact by the Gospel writers inventing implausible, inconsistent, and historically disprovable scenarios by which Jesus could have been born there.” Since Stenger is not a biblical historian, he does not mention that Jesus was actually born in Capernaum, but that is an issue on which he would have to take my word for it.

While liberal theists acknowledge that the universe is billions of years old, but argue that the “seven days of creation” were eons rather than 24-hour days, inflexible dogmatists have tried to explain away the evidence of a cosmography incompatible with Genesis. Stenger recognizes that failing to rebut the dogmatists might give the impression that they cannot be rebutted. So in addition to dignifying the incompetent ravings of apologist Dinesh D’Souza with a rebuttal, he also paraphrases the defenders of biblical literalism “that God is pulling the wool over our eyes, planting phony evidence that carbon-dated fossils, geological formations, and galaxies are older than the six thousand years since creation implied in the Bible.” Actually literalists argue that it was the god Satan who planted the false evidence, apparently unaware that they are thereby implying that the god Yahweh gave him permission to do so – either that or Yahweh is not om-



nipotent. Stenger continues, “And if religion doesn’t work in the sphere of nature, why should we expect it to work in the moral or other spheres?”

My argument has long been that, if we cannot believe the Bible’s 15 assurances that the earth is flat, why should we believe its description of a god revealing its existence?

And if we recognize the moral bankruptcy of the philosophy, “Cheat those who are no longer useful to you, and use the stolen money to bribe those who are in a position to do you good” (Luke 16:9 paraphrased), how can we simultaneously believe that a Bible advocating such a policy is anything but a paean to evil?

ht for Your Right to Die With Dignity



Richard N Côté

endurable and deciding that the choice of a peaceful, painless death is preferable. The death-with-dignity movement declares that it is an individual’s right to decide whether

or not to continue living, not the privilege of someone else to require that he or she must live’.”

The publishers point out that “all around the world, a small army of unpaid volunteer end-of-life researchers, death-with-dignity activists, and a half-million members of their groups have been working for over three decades to establish access to the right to a gentle, pain-free, dignified, self-chosen death at the time and place of their own choosing. The result so far: five countries and three US states have finally answered the question, ‘Who owns my life?’ with the unequivocal answer, ‘You do’.

“The other 190 countries still say, ‘You

don’t’, despite the fact that approximately 75 percent of the residents of developed countries approve of physician aid-in-dying for these stricken people.”

Through its 525 pages and 90 images, Côté describes the rapidly growing international death-with-dignity movement through direct interviews with its founders, leaders, and volunteers worldwide. The book explores why and how they developed means that people who were terminally ill or enduring unspeakable, untreatable pain could use to end their tortured life legally, painlessly, in a dignified way, and surrounded by their loved ones, at the time and place of their own choosing.

points of view...

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GAY CAMPAIGNERS IN THE SECULAR AND HUMANIST MOVEMENT

SEEMS I've intruded too far into gay controlled opinion-making: Diesel Balaam's arcing shot across my bow cautioned me against further homophobic comment (*Points of View*, February); Graham Livingstone's pop-gun vitriol fell short.

I again acknowledge my homophobia, without apology, because it represents my own sexual instinct in counterpoint to correspondents so preoccupied by their own. Isn't honesty a good thing?

This phobia is a response to gay promiscuity, evidenced by an abhorrent reaction to those loitering lasciviously for sexual encounters in public places – unavoidable when nature calls – and experienced by uninvited sexual advances from some gays with whom I'd previously happily worked.

Wary diffidence, if not repugnance, of such intrusive gay behaviour (Peter Tatchell talking about his partner's backside blowing bubbles – giggle, giggle – doesn't help) inhibits making any contribution to their cause, but doesn't preclude my moral support for fair and equal treatment under law. That's common humanity, the "right thing to do" as compassionate politicians have argued.

There's no hypocrisy: adding to what I said, the LGBT community can do what they like short of harming others or criminality and should have full equality rights to do so under UK law along with all other free citizens.

So why did I complain about the NSS banging on about gay issues? Because that's not why I joined ten years ago. Back then the priority wasn't gay rights, or even universal human rights, so much as ending religious privilege and the power and influence of mainstream churches with the aim of promoting a truly secular United Kingdom.

But over the past few years the NSS has shifted focus, and appears to have incorporated aspects of the defunct GALHA, with its emphasis on gay rights to which heterosexual members are apparently obliged to subscribe (existing or potential: the NSS *Newsline* symbolically has a hot pink-coloured portal to join, another to access letters). Mr Balaam said as much, telling me to

man-up and get onboard, with the advice to think strategically. That's above my pay grade. Besides, I have other interests.

My motive in joining the NSS, and subscribing to the *Freethinker*, was to be in a community of non-religious people with whom, albeit *in absentia*, I could share my atheist views, which – with thanks to the redoubtable editor – I have done in letters columns.

In future, then, I'd better stick to exposing the delusions, dishonesty and madness of religion and not stray into subjects where my views are not appreciated. But think! A homophobe who agrees with gay equality. That's got cache.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

DIESEL Balaam is quite right to point out (February *Points of View*) that the secular movement has benefited from the influx of gay people (or perhaps more politically correctly LGBT people) and the same can be said of the humanist movement.

Other names he could have added, besides the current NSS President Terry Sanderson and its Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, are Jim Herrick (former NSS Vice-President and member of its Council of management, former editor of *New Humanist*, the *Freethinker* and *International Humanist News*), Barry Duke (current editor of the *Freethinker*) Andrew Copson (current BHA Executive Director) Robert Ashby (former BHA Executive Director) and Rob Teilman (former President of the International Humanist & Ethical Union).

Incidentally, like myself, Barry Duke and Jim Herrick were co-founders in 1979 of the Gay Humanist Group later to become the Gay & Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA).

Mr Balaam is also right in claiming that gay people have been attracted to the secular and humanist movements, at least in part, because of the continuous hostility shown towards their relationships and rights by the churches and various other religious institu-

tions (eg the Salvation Army) in sharp contrast to the unequivocal support provided by the secular and humanist movements.

George Broadhead
Secretary and Trustee
Pink Triangle Trust

AGGRESSIVE SECULARISM

ERIC Pickles, a government minister, claims that traditional religious freedoms are under assault from the "intolerance of aggressive secularism" (*Freethinker*, February).

He says this knowing that the UK has a sovereign who is head of the C of E, 26 unelected bishops in the House of Lords, a BBC awash with religion which is spread on license fee funded channels and a press overwhelmingly supportive of Christianity.

His government supports faith schools and gives tax advantages to religions. There is even a medieval law that permits the C of E to force people to pay for the upkeep of churches in their vicinity regardless of their faith or lack of it.

The abuse of animals in the interests of providing halal meat is accepted and the government is invisible in its comments on paedophile priests.

So what is aggressive secularism and who are these aggressive secularists whom Mr Pickles finds so threatening? Aggressive secularism is no more than people who do not share Mr Pickles' views about religion and society and choose to exercise their freedom of speech.

Like many religious people Mr Pickles is in favour of free speech but, it seems, feels under assault if it challenges his beliefs. There is no "assault", no "intolerance" and no threat except to the incredible and destructive beliefs that underpin religion. The so-called aggressive secularists should be welcomed as contributors to the vigorous exercise of free speech in a robust democracy.

In setting up secularists as attackers of freedom, religious or otherwise, Mr Pickles weakens the very democracy I assume he wants to be strong. If his faith must be

protected from the challenge inherent in the exercise of free speech then it must be feeble indeed. And that fragility, inherent in faith, is the problem for Mr Pickles and those who think like him; when opened to challenge faith tends to crumble.

Public fear created by fantasies of aggressive secularists is needed to sustain the tottering edifice of unquestioning faith. It is sad indeed that a government minister should play such a prominent role in such nonsense.

Denis Watkins
Wales

CHRISTIAN HIJACKING

HOLOCAUST Memorial Day, January 27, was marked in my town by an event led by the Bishop and the Mayor, with a single Jewish representative of the victims

This is not good enough. Those persecuted included so-called degenerate and inferior Jewish, Gypsy, Slavic, homosexual and impaired people along with those of contrary belief – atheists, left-wingers, liberals, pacifists. This second group was the Nazi's immediate targets when they destroyed German opposition.

As with Remembrance Day, the church inclines to hijack the occasion, despite Hitler being at ease with the Christian faiths. Some events held were secular and inclusive, but if yours was similarly inappropriate then it is another opportunity to claim representation for ourselves and others too readily ignored.

Edwin Salter
King's Lynn

LORD SACKS

I NOTE that the Chief Rabbi (*Thought for the Day*, Monday, January 28) continues to flaunt his vanity, as a humble servant of YHWH and his nationwide flock, with his insistence on being addressed by the secular glorification of "LORD"

Does modern Jewry now have a new commandment – "Hear, O Israel, the LORD thy God, that the LORD is One Jonathan Sachs.?"

And theists have the effrontery to accuse science of arrogance.

P J Wain
Cleethorpes

LOST SOULS

*If people lost their souls
what would religions do?
they could not send a person
to lofty heaven's bliss
an indecisive purgatory
or down to hell below.*

Their carrot they would lose

*and then their stick as well
archaic hierarchies just collapse
and become their earthly hell
so that is why they have them the souls
and inquisitions too.*

Human nature, its experiences and knowledge are electro-chemically etched upon the brain. When the brain dies the person, which religions call "the soul" ceases to exist.

There can be no afterlife, no heaven, purgatory, hell or transmigration.

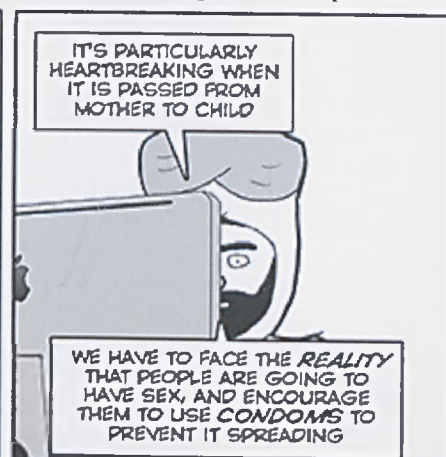
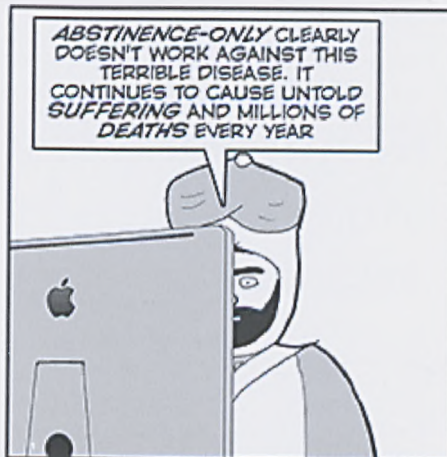
Minds have no separate existence. They are just the brain communicating with itself and with other brain/minds.

We humans have, personally, no more of a future than the fishes, reptiles and animals from which we have evolved along with the flowers, trees and insects. We are nature's creatures – billions of years old.

The "afterlife" is a creation of the Archaic World whose ancient non-scientific religious hierarchies invented the supernatural world of gods, goddesses, devils, demons, angels and other fabulous creatures, many of whom they themselves have now discarded as one religion has replaced another.

The images of our "blue planet" taken by Apollo astronauts show that the "heavens/paradises of religions (populations billions) do not exist in the real world. Hundreds of satellites surveying the Earth confirm these findings.

JESUS & MO



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Finally: the Ontological Argument. This says "God is perfect". But a deity (should one exist) that is perfect can do nothing; it cannot become more (or less) than perfect; it cannot create. Since the universe exists it was not created by "God" – a deity. It is purely natural.

W K Harper
Stoke-on-Trent

FAITH

FURTHER to the letter on "Spirituality" from the late Ralph Ison (*Points of View*, February): My atheism is more than a mere absence of faith. The word "agnostic" is often used to mean unknowing for lack of evidence, but "agnostic" in the philosophical sense, as used by T H Huxley when he invented the word, means unknowing because knowing is impossible. In the natural world, there is no way of proving whether the supernatural exists or not.

I am utterly convinced, deep down, that there is no god. But I cannot prove it. An intuitive, deep-down conviction, which cannot be proved, is surely a faith.

Donald Room
London

Editor's note: It has been drawn to our attention that Ralph Ison, in his letter, wrongly attributed the "I had no need of that hypothesis" quote to Diderot (addressing Catherine the Great). It was, in fact, Laplace to Napoleon

Denmark's culture clash

In November last year, Soeren Kern, writing for the *Jewish Press*, homed in on an incident in which Muslim immigrants in a town near Copenhagen forced the cancellation of traditional Christmas displays.

Kokkedal is a town situated some 30 kilometers (20 miles) north of Copenhagen where Arab and Turkish immigrants now comprise more than half the total population.

Kern reported that the controversy had escalated into an angry nationwide debate over the role of Islam in post-Christian Denmark, "where a burgeoning Muslim population is becoming increasingly assertive in imposing its will on a wide range of social and civic issues".

In Kern's article a spokesman for the Danish Conservative Party, Tom Behnke, was quoted as saying that he fears "there are people who want to convert Denmark into a Muslim country". Behnke said: "I think it is deeply alarming that our integration efforts are so ineffective that the moment there is a Muslim majority, we do away with good-old Danish traditions and introduce Muslim traditions instead. We are living in Denmark, and people have to adapt to the situation that applies here."

The Christmas tree controversy took an ominous new twist on November 12, when a van carrying two journalists from TV2 News was attacked by 25 masked hoodlums. The journalists had gone to the Egedalsvænget housing complex in Kokkedal to film a report about the story, but immediately upon their arrival their van was bombarded with bricks and cobblestones. The attackers destroyed the van and chased the hapless journalists out of the area.

According to TV2, the perpetrators were Muslim youths who were seeking to silence media coverage of the Christmas tree dispute. Local police reportedly sided with the Muslim attackers by blaming the journalists for sending a television truck into the area in the first place.

Dan Houtved of the North Zealand police said that he would not have gone there had he been a journalist with TV2. "You choose to enter a tense area. One can argue about whether it is wise. I probably would not have done it."

Houtved added that there were a growing number of "no-go zones" in suburbs of Copenhagen and other Danish cities that are increasingly becoming autonomous en-

claves ruled by Muslim youth gangs. There are now some areas where Danish police fear to tread.

Last March, for example, more than 140 Muslim gang members raided a courthouse where two fellow Muslims were being tried



Lars Hedegaard: as we were going to press, we learned that he is suing several Swedish newspapers for libel for describing him, after the attack, as a convicted 'certified racist'

for attempted murder.

The Muslims – all members of criminal street gangs that have taken over large parts of Danish towns and cities – were wearing masks and bullet-proof vests and throwing

Health workers in Nigeria killed by Islamist fanatics

THREE North Korean doctors in northeastern Nigeria were killed last month by members of a radical Islamic sect, Boko Haram. One doctor was beheaded.

The deaths in Potiskum, a town in Yobe state, came shortly after gunmen killed at least nine women administering polio vaccines in Kano, the major city of Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north.

The Islamists reportedly attacked the doctors in their home, said Dr Mohammed Mammam, chairman of the hospital managing board of Yobe state. The North Koreans had no security guards and typically travelled around the city via three-wheel taxis without a police escort.

By the time soldiers arrived, they found the doctors' wives cowering in a flowerbed outside their home. The bodies of the men appeared to have machete wounds.

way into the district courthouse in Glostrup, a heavily Islamised suburb of Copenhagen, on March 6. Many of the gang members are ethnic Arabs, Bosnians, Turks and Somalians. They also include Iraqis, Moroccans, Palestinians and Pakistanis.

Over the past several years, the immigrant gangs have proliferated geographically across all of Denmark. The gangs have spread south from Copenhagen to the rest of Zealand, from inner Nørrebro, to the suburbs Ishøj, Greve, and on to Køge. The gangs are also active in Albertslund, Herlev, Hillerød, Høje Gladsaxe, Hundige, Roskilde and Skovlunde, among many Danish localities.

Danish authorities estimate that each year more than 700 immigrants between the ages of 18 and 25 are choosing crime as a permanent career by joining gangs such as Black Cobra, the Black Scorpions, the Bandidos, the Bloodz, the International Club, or any other of the more than 100 gangs that are now operating in Denmark.

In August, more than 80 Muslim gang members raided a hospital in

Odense, the third-largest city in Denmark, in a failed attempt to kidnap a 26-year-old rival gang member who had previously been shot and stabbed at a shopping centre in the Vollsmose district. Hospital police had to use weapons to prevent the angry mob from getting their hands on the shooting victim. An ambulance and four police cars were destroyed in the violence.

More recently, Muslim gangs have been extorting shops and bars in the Nørrebro district of Copenhagen, threatening local business owners with violence if they refuse to pay protection money for operating in "Muslim territory."

But some non-Muslims have refused to give in to the threats. One is 67-year-old Jane Pedersen, the courageous owner of the Café Viking, a bar that has been the focus of repeated attacks by Muslim gangs because of her refusal to pay.

Pedersen set up a Facebook page called "No to Bullies, Yes to Beer" which has drawn national and international attention to her plight. The "politically-correct BBC", said Kern – Senior Analyst for Transatlantic Relations at the Madrid-based Grupo de Estudios Estratégicos/Strategic Studies Group, one of the oldest and most influential foreign policy think tanks in Spain – managed to report on Pedersen and Copenhagen's gang problem without once using the word "Muslim".