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Debbie Langdon-Davies accepts the award on behalf of Plan UK. Photo: Trevor Aston

NSS Secularist of the Year prize awarded to charity in honour of schoolgirl Malala Yousafzai

A global charity that campaigns for girls everywhere to have equal access to education has received £7,000 from the National Secular Society, which today donated its Secularist of the Year prize fund to Plan UK in honour of Malala Yousafzai, the schoolgirl from Pakistan who was shot by the Taliban in October for campaigning in support of female education.

Her story sparked outrage around the world after the Taliban said they shot Malala for "promoting secularism".

The prize was collected on March 23 at the National Secular Society's Secularist of the Year event by Debbie Langdon-Davies, whose father John founded the charity in 1937. The prize was handed over by NSS honorary associate Michael Cashman MEP.

The money will be used to support Plan's Girls Fund which, as part

of its 'Because I am a Girl' campaign, helps girls to claim their rights and access life-changing education.

Malala Yousafzai was nominated for Secularist of the Year by NSS supporters for campaigning for girls' education in the face of violent and brutal Islamist opposition.

News of the award in Malala's honour will not please Islamic hardliners. Towards the end of last year a group of fanatics said they planned to gather at the notorious Red Mosque in Islamabad to denounce her as an apostate, accusing her of turning her back on Islam.

Anjem Choudary, the London-based Muslim hate preacher who is one of the founders of al-Muhajiroun, which was banned in the UK in 2010, said the gathering would announce a fatwa against the

(Continued on back page)

Pope Idol

THERE WAS MORE THAN A WHIFF OF CELEBRITY CULTISM IN THE CHOOSING OF THE NEW POPE, SAYS **OPHELIA BENSON**

It's funny the way a habit of polite deference to religion persists even in societies where religious belief is no longer the overwhelmingly majoritarian view. I don't mean just tact about directly challenging an individual's beliefs, I mean public deference to religion as an institution.

Look at all the breathless reporting on the papal conclave, for instance, as if the Pope were the Pope of everyone. It seems like a spell, sometimes – as if everyone is hypnotized into taking the Vatican at its own estimation. The Vatican certainly ought to be grateful to the news media, because they do a brilliant job of shoring up its reputation as serious and weighty and important, even as they also report on priestly child rape and cover-ups.

I suppose it's just some quirk about the human brain, or the primate brain, or the mammal brain, that makes us think in pyramids, with a single powerful point at the top that we should bend the knee to. Monarchs,

CEOs, film stars, rock stars, gold medalists, *Top Chef* – it's all the same sort of thing. Maybe the stupidly fascinated coverage of the Pope is nothing to do with religion at all, but just another brand of celebrity worship. You have your Will and Kate, your Posh and Becks, your Donald Trump, your pontiff in his brocade gowns and scarlet shoes.

Somebody should make that a competition, with a reality TV show full of cliff-hanger eliminations and embarrassing sessions in front of poker-faced judges. Top Celebrity. Iron Chief. Project Monarch. Top Pop Celebrity Idol. Challenges to test charisma, glamour, looks, the common touch, regality, stamina, big white teeth.

But enough frivolity. The Vatican has less risible ways of making itself conspicuous and special than fancy shoes and guards in red and gold doublets.

On March 6, for an example of one such way, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement on the US Congress's reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act. You're opening your eyes wider, aren't you – you're thinking "Surely the Catholic bishops didn't oppose a bill outlawing violence against women, did they?"

Well they did, actually. They begin by saying they "state as clearly and strongly as we can that violence against women, inside or outside the home, is never justified," which is kind of them, but they still oppose the actual bill.

Unfortunately, we cannot support the version of the "Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013" passed by the House of Representatives and the Senate (S. 47) because of certain language it contains. Among our concerns are those provisions in S. 47 that refer to "sexual orientation" and "gender identity." All persons must be protected from violence, but codifying the classifications "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" as contained in S. 47 is problematic. These two classifications are unnecessary to establish the just protections due to all persons. They undermine the meaning and importance of sexual difference. They are unjustly exploited for purposes of marriage redefinition, and marriage is the only institution that unites a man and a woman with each other and with any children born from their union.

They balk at supporting the bill – they issue an official statement telling us they can't support the bill – because they balk at codification of the classifications "sexual orientation" and "gender identity," and they balk at that because the classifications "undermine the meaning and importance of sexual difference." The mountain labored and brought forth a mouse. Of all the pettifoggling trivial reasons for opposing a bill against violence against women! But then from their point of view it's not really trivial, is it, since they consider the ordination of women an excommunicable offense. They are Men, and if the meaning and importance of sexual difference ever got undermined, maybe they would no longer be automatically better than half of all human beings.

The bishops cite another reason for opposing the bill:

The Senate's decision to incorporate into S. 47 a title reauthorizing the Trafficking Victims Protection Act also raises concerns because this title omits language to protect the conscience rights of faith-based service providers to victims of human trafficking. We strongly supported efforts to include such provisions. Conscience protections are needed in this legislation to ensure that these service providers are not required to violate their bona fide religious beliefs as a condition for serving the needy.

What they mean, of course, is that they want "protection" of their "right" to refuse to provide contraception or abortions to victims of trafficking, on the grounds that their refusal is based in religious beliefs. It's a funny conception of rights, one that frets about rights to refuse things to people rather than the rights of the people who need the things that are being refused. It's not "serving" a victim of trafficking to deny her an abortion. When the bishops' tender concern for their putative right to say no to people motivates them to oppose a Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act, they cease to be funny.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights
with God

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IHEU calls on Islamic states to stop persecuting apostates and blasphemers

INTERNATIONAL Ethical and Humanist Union representative Roy Brown last month once again reminded Islamic states of their responsibility to uphold the right to freedom of expression.

At the 22nd regular session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Brown read a statement saying: "Freedom of expression is once again under sustained attack from the member states of the OIC. In Saudi Arabia last week, two activists were sentenced to ten years in jail for exposing hundreds of cases of human rights abuse in the kingdom.

"In Iran, we have seen protesters imprisoned and even sentenced to death, for 'waging war against God'. But what strange logic can possibly equate criticism and peaceful protest with waging war? And since when did any government equate itself with God?

"In Morocco, a colleague has had to flee for his life because he wrote of his doubts about Islam. In Mauritania, last Saturday, a group of nine anti-slavery protesters were attacked and severely beaten by police.

"In Pakistan, hundreds of Shias have been murdered for holding the 'wrong' beliefs.

"But we have waited in vain for condemnation by the OIC of human rights abuses carried out by agents of the state within its member states. Instead, we have seen protests against Islamic extremism condemned as 'Islamophobia', which was recently described by the Prime Minister of Turkey as 'a crime against humanity'.

"A crime against humanity, Mr President? No Sir. We see murder, ethnic cleansing, torture, kidnappings, suicide bombings, and terrorist attacks as crimes against humanity. It is people that have human rights, Mr President, not beliefs. Protesting against human rights abuse, and pointing out where the responsibility lies, is not a crime, it is a duty. And it is the duty of every member state of this Council to uphold the right to freedom of expression, not condemn it."

Brown's statement came shortly after an International Day to Defend Apostates and Blasphemers was staged in a number of centres to draw attention to those who have fallen victim to draconian blasphemy and apostasy laws in Muslim countries. Calling for support for the day of action, Maryam Namazie, of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, said: "Countless individuals accused of apostasy and blasphemy face threats, im-

prisonment, and execution. Blasphemy laws in over 30 countries and apostasy laws in over 20 aim primarily to restrict thought, expression and the rights of Muslims, ex-Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Adding his voice to Namazie's call for support, David Nichols, President of the Atheist Foundation of Australia, said: "It is a clear demonstration of an imaginary deity's impotency and incapacity to do its own bidding when humans have to make edicts to defend its alleged hurt pride.

"Blasphemy laws are more about the insecurity of the believer than an attempt to protect a god. Any god in need of such human intervention is a god not worth its salt.

"People all over the planet are being threat-

except that Islamism is this era's inquisition and totalitarianism".

"One of the characteristics of an inquisition is the policing of thought. Freethinking and freedom of conscience are banned. Even for Muslims, a 'personal' religion is impossible under an inquisition. You can't pick and choose as you'd like. You don't want to wear the veil; acid in your face should teach you a lesson. You want to go to school; maybe we can gun you down on your way there. You want to be an atheist. Off with your head...

"Islamists will kill, threaten or intimidate anyone who interprets things differently, dissents, thinks freely or transgresses their norms by living 21st century lives. Of course people resist day in and day out but that is a testament to the human spirit despite Islamism and sharia."

Referring to the countries that consider apostasy from Islam illegal and a prosecutable offence, she said: "Depending on the influence of Islamism and sharia law, in places like Malaysia, Morocco, Jordan and Oman punishments vary from fines, imprisonment, flogging and exclusion from civil or family rights. In ten countries apostasy is punishable by the death penalty.

"And whilst there are religious justifications for the execution of apostates, apostasy laws today under the Islamic inquisition are the ultimate means of political rather than religious control.

"Of course, from a religious standpoint, apostasy is the unravelling of the entire system from within by those considered to be 'members' of the imagined Muslim community (often out of very little choice of their own). Question one law, one hadith, one sura in the Koran, and you begin to unravel it all.

"To question and dissent denies the Islamic inquisitor the opportunity to feign representation. And it prevents the submission that they demand. If you are allowed to leave, you undermine it all."

"Also don't forget the implications of being accused of apostasy. It means you are denied a proper burial, your family are often not even told where you are buried or you are buried in a place like Khavaran – which the Iranian regime calls the 'place of the damned'.

"But, of course, Khavaran for many of us is a meeting place for remembering a slaughtered generation in Iran."



ened, imprisoned, tortured and killed by religious fanatics for daring to make comment about the veracity of religious magical thinking. This is one of the worst aspects of accepting mythology as fact. It turns humans into mob-ruled ideological monsters willing to destroy the lives of others in protecting their own doubts and fears.

"Replacing freedom of expression and speech with legally binding penalties for a myriad of subjective notions is a recipe only benefiting tyrannical religious/political systems. I urge all rational and reasonable people to strongly oppose any attempts at having blasphemy initiated into law anywhere on the planet."

Earlier, at the end of February, Maryam Namazie was a guest at Birmingham University when she spoke on apostasy and freedom of conscience for the Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society's Reason Week. She told her audience that "punishing apostates is a long-standing and fundamental feature of all major religions. Repudiating religion is deemed to be the worst of crimes".

She added that "in Islam it's no different"

Francis: foe of the The Gays and friend to brutal dictators



By **GEORGE BROADHEAD**

I AM not in the least surprised that the new Pope Francis I is just as homophobic as his predecessors and any chance of him doing a *volte face*, or even moderating his views, on the Church's stance on issues like abortion, contraception, voluntary euthanasia and LGBT rights is just wishful thinking.

When he was still Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in Argentina, he strongly opposed legislation introduced in 2010 by the Argentine Government to allow same-sex marriage, calling it "A real and dire anthropological throwback".

In a letter to the monasteries of Buenos Aires, he wrote: "Let's not be naive, we're not talking about a simple political battle; it is a destructive pretension against the plan of God. We are not talking about a mere bill, but rather a machination of the Father of Lies that seeks to confuse and deceive the children of God."

He added that the bill called into question "the identity, and the survival of the family: father, mother, and children" and said the country needed "the special assistance of the Holy Spirit, to place the light of truth in the middle of the darkness of error, to defend us against the enchantment of so many sophistries with which they seek to justify this bill."

This homophobic outburst received a sharp rebuke from Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, who said: "It is disturbing to hear phrases like war of God or the devil's projects, which are things that take us back to medieval times and the Inquisition."

The new Pope has also insisted that adoption by homosexuals is a form of discrimination against children.

The Argentine President's comment couldn't be more apposite. All rational thinking people must have been sickened by the sycophantic coverage by most of the worldwide media of the new Pope's election in which the iniquities of the Roman Catholic Church – the cover-up of child sex

abuse, the opposition to the use of condoms, especially to prevent AIDS, the opposition to voluntary euthanasia for those suffering terminal illness and of course the opposition to LGBT rights – were largely ignored.

The Cardinal's biographer, Sergio Rubin, has defended him as a noble man. In 2001, writes Rubin, "he visited a hospice and washed the feet of AIDS patients. That same year he spoke out in defence of those less fortunate, contrasting poor people who are persecuted for demanding work, and rich people who are applauded for fleeing from justice."

Justice? That's rich coming from a man who, as a leading light in his Church, was complicit in the horrendous crimes of the unspeakably brutal Western-supported military dictatorship that seized power in Argentina in 1976 and maintained it for years. This was just like the support the Catholic Church gave to the ghastly dictators Francisco Franco in Spain and Augusto Pinochet in Chile.

One thing is certain: under the direction of the new Pope there will be no let-up on the hostility shown by the Church to LGBT rights. In fact this may well get worse.

• **George Broadhead is Secretary and a Trustee of LGBT Humanist organisation the Pink Triangle Trust.**

Ratzinger was 'a disaster'

WHEN Pope Benedict announced his decision to step down, Catholic commentator John Cassidy, writing in *The New Yorker*, said: "Spare me any more reverential coverage about Pope Benedict XVI and his decision to give up his office.

"On a personal level, I wish him well. At the age of eighty-five and increasingly infirm, he surely deserves a rest. But as far as his record goes, he can't leave office a moment too soon. His lengthy tenure at the Vatican, which included more than 25 years as the Catholic Church's chief theological enforcer before he became Pope, in 2005, has been little short of disastrous.

"By setting its face against the modern world in general, and by dragging its feet in response to one of the worst scandals since the Reformation, Benedict's Vatican has called the Church's future into question, needlessly alienating countless people around the world who were brought up in its teachings.

Cassidy added that "the strategy of circling the wagons and seeking to defy the world was displayed, to terrible effect, in the Church's reaction to the child-abuse scandal. As the Vatican official that John Paul II asked to deal with the crisis when it broke, Benedict was presented with extensive evidence that sexual abuse was widespread and tolerated by church authorities. But it wasn't until many years later, when tremendous damage had already been done and many further crimes had been committed, that Benedict, as Pope, apologised for the acts of paedophiles in cassocks, adopted a zero-tolerance policy for the Church, and met with some of the victims. Even then, though, say some critics, he and his colleagues in the Vatican resisted efforts to find and punish the perpetrators."

Prime Minister Cameron vows to protect Christians from 'aggressive secularists'

PRIME Minister David Cameron last month told Christians that the Government "cares about faith" despite the clashes it has had with religious groups over gay marriage and welfare cuts.

At an Easter reception in Downing Street, Cameron pledged that the Coalition was committed to Britain's links with the Church of England.

"It does care about the institutions of faith and it does want to stand up and oppose aggressive secularisation that can sometimes happen in our society," he said.

"Wherever we go, we stand up for the right of Christians to practise their faith," Cameron added.

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, he praised Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, for handing out Bibles to state schools and said the right to say prayers before council meetings will be protected.

"We've sent out a very clear message to aggressive secularists," he said. "We changed the law so that people can go on saying prayers before council meetings. Michael Gove made the very brave decision, I thought, and right decision to give every state school a copy of the King James Bible. Some people said, 'What a waste of money;' I say no, I think it was a great use of money. This book is one of the things that made our country what it is today in terms of its messages and its brilliant language."

Mr Cameron said it had been "a great week for Christians" on the eve of the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

He attended the event at Canterbury Cathedral, and had earlier sent two cabinet ministers to the Pope's inauguration.

The Prime Minister had been criticised by the Church of England over plans to introduce gay marriage. The new laws were eventually accepted after the Coalition promised several safeguards to ensure the Church will not have to conduct same-sex ceremonies.

The new Archbishop of Canterbury has also joined other bishops expressing concerns about the level of cuts to welfare spending.

Everyone is welcome at Wyndgate Country Club – unless your name is Richard Dawkins



WHEN Wyndgate Country Club of Rochester Hills, Michigan, accepted a booking from the Center for Inquiry (CFI) for a 100 seat, \$95 per ticket dinner, it did so not realising the speaker at the 2011 event was renowned atheist, Professor Dawkins.

But when the club owner, Larry Winget, got wind of the fact he ordered the booking to be cancelled. had reportedly seen Dawkins on *The O'Reilly Factor* discussing his atheism and opposition to religion saying that he that he did not want to "associate with certain individuals and philosophies".

Winget appeared to believe that, as he owned the club, he was free to do as he wished in accordance with his own religious rights. The CFI, however, disagreed and filed a lawsuit in April 2012 alleging violations of Title II of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlaws discrimination based on race, colour, religion or national origin in hotels, motels, restaurants, theaters, and all other public accommodations, and the Michigan Civil Rights Act

Last month it announced that a settlement has been reached in the case.

"We're very pleased with the outcome of this case, which we regard as an unqualified vindication of the rights of non-believers," Ronald A Lindsay, president and CEO of the Center for Inquiry, is quoted as saying. "We are confident it will send a strong message that as much as this country now rejects discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, and religion, so must we reject just as strongly discrimination against those with no religion."

The Wyndgate has agreed to pay an undisclosed sum to the CFI. The settlement also calls for Wyndgate staff to undergo "sensitivity training" that will reportedly educate them regarding the rights of atheists and how federal and state law applies in public accommodations like the venue they

have made available for public use.

This comes as atheists, agnostics, humanists and the wider non-believing community are increasingly "coming out" against the assumed norm of religious belief, with groups arising in the military and a more cognisable presence forming in schools and on university campuses.

Feisty atheist, 82, pitches intrusive cross into Brearton village pond

RETIRED solicitor Alan Pickard, 82, saw red when parishioners from St John the Baptist Church in Brearton, north Yorkshire, put a 6ft free-standing cross at the edge the village green. Pickard hauled it down in the dead of night and dumped it in the pond.

The former chairman of employment tribunals who has lived in the picturesque village for 17 years with his wife Ina, said he took the action because he thought the grounds church was the "proper place for the artifice" and not the communal green.

Afterwards he penned an email to residents explaining his actions and claimed he had initially planned to dress the cross up as Worzel Gummidge.

Furious worshippers fished the cross from the pond and planted it in the churchyard. Pickard was then branded a "vandal".

Said Pickard: "I'm quite happy to stand up for my actions and it is no secret that I am the culprit. We're content now the cross is back on church land and not standing on the village green, which is owned by all of us. And he warned: "If I see it back on the green I shall take similar action."

We must resist pressures not to offend

RICHARD WHITE argues that if something needs saying it should be said

Why is it that the religious mind thinks it has a monopoly on emotions, specifically that of being offended? Personally, I don't hold much respect for offence – that's not to say I will say anything to anyone, though: I am mindful of not intentionally hurting someone, but if something needs to be said, I believe it should be said.

Two comedians sum up the situation perfectly for me. The first, Jimmy Carr, with his statement that “offence is received, not given” – meaning that it is subjective and a person can be offended from a benign statement.

The second, Australian Steve Hughes, explained the situation far more vividly: “What happens if you say that and someone gets offended?” They can be offended. What's wrong with being offended? When did sticks and stones may break my bones stop being relevant? Isn't that what you teach children, for God's sake? That's what you teach toddlers. ‘He called me an idiot.’ ‘Don't worry about it, he's a dick.’

“Now you have adults going ‘I was offended. I was offended and I have rights.’ So what? Be offended, nothing happens!

You're an adult, grow up, deal with it. ‘I was offended!’ I don't care! Nothing happens when you're offended, there's nothing ... ‘I went to the comedy show and the comedian said something about the Lord, and I was offended, and when I woke up in the morning I had leprosy.’ Nothing happens. ‘I want to live in a democracy but I never want to be offended again.’ Then you're an idiot.”

If truer words were ever spoken, I haven't heard them. Yet there is a real and growing alarm in our society that we must be careful not to say something lest we offend someone – as though it's the worst crime that could be committed.

And of course, it overlooks the fact that any statement could be construed as offence by someone, and some people may even be offended that they must be quiet. It's a vicious cycle. But I would argue that the most ardently opposed to “offensive” statements are the religious – even saying something along the lines of God is a bastard for letting people suffer and die yields responses of “Blasphemy!”.

It's also a reaction that tacitly suggests *their* being offended at *my* mere words outweighs my being offended that I should be wor-

shipping this pain-inducing deity.

As recently as December 2012 I had a run-in with a religious person in America (where else, right?). There's a country where seemingly everyone is offended right now: the talks of gun control have one half of the population crying over fascism encroaching on the second amendment, and the other half is offended that guns are more important than lives.

And if both sides are silenced on grounds of being offensive, the victims of gun tragedies will be offended. You can see the problem with the subjectivity of offence already. During our visit to see family over Christmas, my American wife posted online that she is in favour of gun control, after the devastating massacre at Sandy Hook.

Naturally it turned into the “If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns” that these discussions also morph into. And being America, it didn't take long for the religious to interject, first stating that they “will, however, use my gun to keep someone from my boys” – demonstrating true faith in action by feeling the need to arm oneself. Then came this: “I'm just so grateful to The Lord that I have them here with me, safe.”

It's a phrase I would give my right foot for in exchange for a Christopher Hitchens' response, but alas, it was just me, my passion for a good debate and disregard for causing offence in certain situations. How can a sane and rational mind not take offence at that statement? Who can morally justify it? If you're not sure what the problem is, hopefully my immediate response to it will shed light:

“That would infer The Lord allowed the other kids to die and their families to have this suffering.” And so it would, because if God had the power to stop some children dying, he must have had the power to stop all the children dying. Were those children's parents not good Christians? Were they undeserving of life? Or did God have other reasons for thinking they weren't worthy of life?

Or, conversely, are these Christians not Christian at all, for if they were, surely they would much prefer their children be in Heaven, with the Lord Almighty taking care of them, away from the pain and suffering of life on Earth? No, most religious people curiously don't agree with that. Instead, it was somehow my moral assertion that caused offence, and the subsequent reply involved some serious dancing around reality:

“I would like to say that it's offensive to



Parents leave a staging area after being reunited with their children following last December's shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, about 60 miles northeast of New York City. A total of 27 people were left dead, including 18 children. It was the worst school shooting in the country's history. (AP Photo/Jessica Hill)

take my statements about thanking The Lord for my children's safety and try to twist my words. I don't think there's a parent who heard of this terrible incident that didn't hug their children and thank God for their safety ... I don't think in anyway does God have anything to do with such horrible heart-ache. I am thankful to God everyday (before and after the incident at Sandy Hook) for the safety and health of my children."

Amazing, isn't it? I somehow managed to "twist" the words by directly responding to them, apparently all parents thank God, and God is responsible for the health and safety of these children because they are alive and well, but he must have been making a fresh batch of cookies for Heaven's inhabitants when the gunman was at work.

No longer is God omniscient and able to know what's happening, when and where it's happening, and *know what you will do before you do it*; apparently he is now able to caught

with his trousers around his ankles, reading a copy of *Playboy* and it is then that bad things happen. Bad things end when God realises what the naughty people are doing when he diverts his parental gaze.

I took another deep breath and tried one more time to explain the gaping hole in the logic: "That doesn't work though does it? God is responsible for your kids being alive and well but had his back turned when the others were gunned down?"

If any of you are wondering, it's that easy to end a conversation with a Christian. Just assert something so undeniably true that they feel as though their head will explode if they give it any further thought, and they will cease: "I need to end this conversation. Whether it was intentional or not, your comments about The Lord has [sic] offended me." And just like that, the discussion has ended. No thought is given to how offensive the original statement may be – and I

for one would be incredibly offended if I was a parent with a murdered child, because, whether it's admitted or not, the implication of God saving some children but not others is that it was God's will for them to die, or they weren't worthy enough of saving.

Isn't it a moral duty to call out such immoral bullshit, rather than keep silent in case we offend the moron spouting it? Fellow religious people won't see the problem, because they agree with it, and the thinking is probably that it isn't offensive because atheists don't count as they're cold-hearted and immoral anyway.

These mental gymnastics and suspension of morals need to be confronted head-on, without any thought for causing offence. The offence posed to other people and humanity as a whole is far greater than anything truth and honesty can offer in such a conversation. Don't we owe it to people everywhere?

New study destroys what shreds are left of Mother Teresa's reputation

THE myth of altruism and generosity surrounding Mother Teresa is further dispelled in a paper by Serge Larivée and Genevieve Chenard of University of Montreal's Department of Psychoeducation and Carole Sénéchal of the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Education.

The paper, published in the March issue of the journal *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses*, is an analysis of the published writings about the sainted Teresa. Like the journalist and author Christopher Hitchens, who is amply quoted in their analysis, the researchers conclude that her hallowed image – which does not stand up to analysis of the facts – was constructed, and that her beatification was orchestrated by an effective media relations campaign.

"While looking for documentation on the phenomenon of altruism for a seminar on ethics, one of us stumbled upon the life and work of one of Catholic Church's most celebrated women and now part of our collective imagination – Mother Teresa – whose real name was Agnes Gonxha," says Professor Larivée, who led the research. "The description was so ecstatic that it piqued our curiosity and pushed us to research further."

As a result, the three researchers collected 502 documents on the life and work of Teresa. After eliminating 195 duplicates, they consulted 287 documents to conduct their analysis, representing 96 percent of the literature on the founder of the Order of the Mis-

sionaries of Charity (OMC). In their article, Serge Larivée and his colleagues also cite a number of problems not taken into account by the Vatican in Mother Teresa's beatification process, such as "her rather dubious way of caring for the sick, her questionable political contacts, her suspicious management of the enormous sums of money she received, and her overly dogmatic views regarding, in particular, abortion, contraception, and divorce".

At the time of her death, Mother Teresa had opened 517 missions welcoming the poor and sick in more than 100 countries. The missions have been described as "homes for the dying" by doctors visiting several of these establishments in Calcutta.

Two-thirds of the people coming to these missions hoped to find a doctor to treat them, while the other third lay dying without receiving appropriate care. The doctors observed a significant lack of hygiene, even unfit conditions, as well as a shortage of actual care, inadequate food, and no painkillers. The problem is not a lack of money – the Foundation created by Mother Teresa has raised hundreds of millions of dollars – but rather a particular conception of suffering and death: "There is something beautiful in seeing the poor accept their lot, to suffer it like Christ's Passion. The world gains much from their suffering," was her reply to criticism, cites the journalist Christopher Hitchens. Nevertheless, when Mother Teresa required palliative care, she received it

in a modern American hospital.

Mother Teresa was generous with her prayers but rather miserly with her foundation's millions when it came to humanity's suffering. During numerous floods in India or following the explosion of a pesticide plant in Bhopal, she offered numerous prayers and medallions of the Virgin Mary but no direct or monetary aid. On the other hand, she had no qualms about accepting the Legion of Honour and a grant from the Duvalier dictatorship in Haiti. Millions of dollars were transferred to the MCO's various bank accounts, but most of the accounts were kept secret, Larivée says. "Given the parsimonious management of Mother Teresa's works, one may ask where the millions of dollars for the poorest of the poor have gone?"

Despite Teresa's dubious way of caring for the sick by glorifying their suffering instead of relieving it, Serge Larivée and his colleagues point out the positive effect of the Mother Teresa myth: "If the extraordinary image of Mother Teresa conveyed in the collective imagination has encouraged humanitarian initiatives that are genuinely engaged with those crushed by poverty, we can only rejoice. It is likely that she has inspired many humanitarian workers whose actions have truly relieved the suffering of the destitute and addressed the causes of poverty and isolation without being extolled by the media. Nevertheless, the media coverage of Mother Teresa could have been a little more rigorous."

Be shamed, then be saved

DALE DEBAKCSY examines the Pink Cross Foundation and Christianity's obsession with prostitutes

In 2008, the Pink Cross Foundation was founded by an ex porn-star who had the goal of redeeming others in the porn industry through the word of Christ. Perhaps it makes for a titillating story, but it's hardly a new development. Ever since Jesus accepted a rather sensual foot oiling from a prostitute, Christianity has had trouble being of one mind about the workers of the pleasure profession.

Witches and blasphemers, Jews and heretics – these it historically has had an unflinching instinct to eradicate, but when it came to the prostitute, there has always been a double conscience wavering between ill-informed attempts at reform and politically-minded persecution, both of which are woven into the mission statement of today's Pink Cross.

The Old Testament didn't suffer from this dual mindedness. The Hebrew forefathers were locked in a struggle to supplant the heavily matriarchal religions inherited from the Babylonians. Their greatest competition came from the persistent worship of female divinities, and the temples devoted to them where the lower echelons of the female priesthood also operated as temple prostitutes.

For the patriarchs, prostitution meant competition. Asherah was being worshipped by more and more Hebrew families as the wife of Yahweh, and the conservative elements of the male priesthood would have none of it, increasing their invective against female priests, divinities, and the prostitutes associated therewith. So, organized religion, which once worked hand in glove with prostitution, came to be its greatest critic, but less on grounds of morality than out of a ruthless desire for political dominance. It was okay to rape women (as long as you married them after and paid the father fair coin), but it was decidedly not okay to let them speak or act as representatives of divinity.

And then came Jesus.

Or, more properly, then came Mary Magdalene. No single figure has sent Christian theology into more fits of self-censoring panic than this prostitute-turned-disciple. The early history of the Church can be more or less neatly gerrymandered between those who wanted to admit her as a significant figure in the story of Jesus and those who wanted to bury her as far as the records would allow. In several Gnos-

tic texts, Mary Magdalene is portrayed as fully qualified to interpret the teachings of Jesus while at the same time being a fully sensual figure, refusing to denigrate her body or physical pleasure in general. These texts threatened the power base of St Paul's followers, men who scorned the body as weak and polluted and women as nothing but vessels of sin.

Influenced by Orphic traditions, and counting among their number many able wheelers and dealers, this group managed to work the vote at the Council of Nicea in 325 to exclude any texts which hinted at Gnostic influence, giving us the Bible we largely have today – a testament not so much to the ideas of Jesus as to the political fears and philosophical prejudices of St Paul's descendents. Again, the body and its champions, the prostitutes, were sacrificed so that a group of over-cunning men might maintain its theological control.

But it's one thing to say that prostitutes are out, and another thing to make it so. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church realized that there was money to be made in them there prostitutes, and took upon itself the business of organizing the trade. The city of Rome in particular was zealous in fostering the industry, keeping up a registry of thousands of sex workers and funding its more grandiose religious projects on the back of their labor. After the philosophical battle with the Gnostics was decided, prominent theologians of the rank of Thomas Aquinas recognized in prostitution a necessary component of civilization, while the priesthood benefited not only from their money, but from their skills. Sex workers had places in religious festivals and in the halls of power. While not as respected as in Babylonian or Greek times, the highest echelons of the profession were nonetheless powerful forces in their communities.

Leave it to Protestantism, then, to ruin everything. With its unerringly dreary instinct for building power on a morbid obsession with the crushing of anything that promotes life, the Protestants rabidly attacked the Catholic Church for its support and organization of a sex industry, setting off waves of small town violence against anyone suspected of loose sexual morals. In city after city, prostitutes were beaten, shaved, and had their ears chopped off before being stripped and kicked out

of town. Because the Pope was far away, and the prostitute at hand, she had to bear the brunt of the religious mania that swept northern Europe in the 16th century. The Catholic Church joined in since, after all, how much easier was it to set the masses loose on the harlots than to actually rethink the core of the Church's architecture? Both Catholic and Protestant vied with each other to see which could be crueller to the pleasure classes, torturing thousands of poor and uneducated women by way of gaining political clout. It was a bloodbath in bad faith that Christianity was not to recover from.

In these paroxysms of hysteria, centuries of societal progress by women were effaced. The slow and steady gains of the late Middle Ages, when a new code of conduct which allowed women to speak as equals at the dinner table and everybody to regard their bodies as not strictly evil, were wiped out in the grand game of proving which theological system was most pure in thought and deed. The body was once more reviled, with prostitutes being the living instantiations of the devil's arts.

It was a novel situation for the trade. Whereas Hebrew scholars and the early Church fathers heaped their venom on prostitution because of its association with powerful competing strands of thought, now the profession was attacked by all and sundry precisely because it was so powerless. It was an easy target, a convenient battlefield before the 17th century carried the conflict between the religious systems to a whole new level of destructive extremism.

If modern Christianity has a gift for anything, it is for finding contradictory terrible viewpoints from its storied history and improbably stitching them together into a new system that is more horrendous still.

Enter the Pink Cross. The project of former porn star and current self proclaimed prophet Shelley Lubben, the organization and its "prayer warriors" harness the message of Jesus in their attempt to rescue people from the porn industry, and to combat the consumption of pornography in the world generally. As is usual with these sorts of foundations, there are a few useful things that it does. It is currently working towards the passage of a bill that will require governmental inspection of porn studios to ensure safety and health standards are maintained (though, of course, we



Ex-porn-star-turned-born-again-Christian Shelley Lubben is head of the Pink Cross Foundation

all have learned to be ever so slightly nervous when the words government, health, and sex pop up in the same sentence).

But for the rest, the Pink Cross is a fundamentally 16th century institution. There are two pillars to its mission in the world – one is to spread the message that “Porn is not glamorous.” It is a vile profession that demeans everybody it touches, and makes you, by virtue of being in it, miserable. And then, in case that message doesn’t stick, they follow it up with the notion that, even if it is something you enjoy doing, pornography as an institution is destroying the world family by family, and so you still have to leave it. So, presented with say a 20-year-old porn star, Pink Cross’s first tactic is Shame, and if that’s not successful, their second tactic is More, Different Shame.

I don’t think I’ve ever said this before, but these people really need to take a page from medieval scholasticism. For all of their faults, most of these scholars realized that people really enjoy sex, and that, no matter how lamentable you find that trait, it is something which takes very dark turns if you try and turn it off. In the age after the war against Gnosticism but before Luther’s body-hatred and Victorianism’s perpetual case of the vapors, people just had sex from time to time, sometimes with prostitutes, sometimes not. It’s sort of central to our continuance as a species, and just like we’ll always enjoy watching TV shows about precocious offspring spouting one-liners to their witless parents whether or not it’s the best use of our time, so will we spend some

treasured moments out of our busy week watching other people have sex. And if we aren’t horrid people for doing that from time to time, as the medievals realized but we have come to forget, then they certainly aren’t horrid for producing the films.

Do some people take it to extremes and neglect their families? Certainly. But that’s hardly cause to put the burden of society’s familial ills on the shoulders of a class of professionals trying to carve out a living wage while they can.

So, as to the second prong of Pink Cross’s attack, it amounts to little more than trying to whip up outrage that people are really quite interested in sex in its various manifestations. But it’s not that outrageous. Aquinas knew it. Augustine knew it. And we’d all be better off not backpedalling from stuff that fourth century Christian theologians had already admitted about sexuality, I rather think.

Which leaves the first pillar – Porn Is Not Glamorous. “Aren’t you tired of feeling ashamed of yourself?” the site all but purrs with empathy. “Well, luckily for you, Jesus has a plan to make you feel good about yourself again.” This is clever stuff. Because who is really making people in the pleasure industry feel ashamed of themselves? Perhaps the people who just gave over half of their website to detailing how porn is destroying the modern world. It is a classic Christian strategy – making you feel ashamed of something you weren’t particularly ashamed of, and then offering a way out of that shame by joining the organization that set up the structures

that allowed the shame to happen in the first place.

It’s the religious equivalent of the boyfriend who tells you that you won’t ever find anybody else because you’re fat, and then, in the midst of your tears, graciously accepts you as you are, provided you keep cleaning the house and going to work to support his online casino addiction. A cheap psychological trick, but an effective one, particularly on people suffering from esteem issues to begin with.

If one cared about the workers of the porn industry, *really* cared about them rather than one’s fame as Jesus’ right hand person, wouldn’t it be better to work towards removing the stigma attached to that industry, to do your part to dial down the knee-jerk reactions that have been causing civilization to react with such uncalled for vehemence to prostitution and pornography since the Reformation? To make these people’s lives better without making them first submit to the deity system you happen to think makes you important? Perhaps the day for that is coming, but in its way stand organizations like Pink Cross, combining Pauline views of sexuality with Lutheran shame tactics, all wrapped in a false layer of empathy which says less, “Let me make your life better” than, “Let me validate my own choices by compelling you to be more like me.” And on that day we shall finally have achieved the impossible goal of achieving a balanced view of human sexuality that starts to approximate that of the Ancient Babylonians.

One can hope.

William Stewart Ross, the spiritu

PROFESSOR ALASTAIR BONNETT EXAMINES THE LIFE OF A MAN – BRANDED BY G W FOOT

The point of looking to the past is that it tells us something about the present. In the case of current debates about freethought and spirituality having some historical knowledge is particularly useful. It turns out that this is a pairing that has been argued about for many years. I want to look at the contribution of one man, someone who, for all his faults, had important things to say on the topic.

I'm talking about William Stewart Ross, who wrote under the name of "Saladin". During the late 19th century he set out to turn freethinking – more specifically, agnosticism – into a spiritual quest. He saw freethought as an open-ended and open-minded exploration into the "unknown", the



reverse of religion. The religious like to pity the non-religious as lacking a "spiritual dimension". Perhaps many of us do. But here is a nice counter-example that shows that, for many Victorians, it was only with the collapse of religious faith that spirituality became possible.

Ross was born in Kirkbean, Galloway in 1844. He was the son of a farm servant who was also a strict Presbyterian. His *God and His Book* (1887) was hailed by one American rationalist journal as "the heaviest iconoclastic broadside that has been fired ... by any modern Freethinker". It displayed an agenda Ross shared with the atheist campaigner and MP Charles Bradlaugh, a deep dislike of Christianity's ethical narrative. Ross was particularly appalled by the Biblical message that if people are not obedient to God's will they will be tortured for eternity in hell. Ross accused God of being small-minded and nasty.

[If you] order me to go to hell because I have been rebelliously honest to you, and will be rebelliously honest again, I will tell you to your divine teeth that I will not voluntarily go of hell to please you. If for this you send me to hell, I can only say that, for this, I should not send you to hell. Are you meaner and more vindictive than I am, although you are a god and I am only a man?

The Victorian freethinkers were moralists and they considered the Bible to be an immoral book.

But here the similarities with Bradlaugh

end. A lot of religious people respected Bradlaugh. Ross did not. He was "a petted baby six feet high" who "wields the pen of a fifth-rate journalist". He was "a blot and an infamy upon Freethought". Along with others alarmed by Bradlaugh's dominance Ross sought to create a rival movement to oppose him.

The British Secular Union, founded in 1877, was the result. The Union was dedicated to the anti-Bradlaughite cause. But Ross was embarked on a bigger project than sniping at his popular rival. He wanted to steer freethought away from atheism and towards agnosticism. He believed that the search for transcendental knowledge was a difficult but necessary quest.

In 1882 he took over editorship of the Secular Union's journal, *The Secular Review* and began to realign it with his own convictions. In 1888 it was relaunched as *The Agnostic Journal*. The year before Ross had doubled the cover price, from 1d to 2d. It was a small but indicative reflection of the fact that, for Ross, part of the appeal of agnosticism was that it was not a mass movement but the pursuit of "scholars and gentlemen".

Ross hailed the rise of agnosticism in the 1880s as a sign of the waning of atheism. And others concurred. In a summary of the decline of atheism amongst intellectuals that Ross would have enjoyed, the Christian magazine *The Rock* noted that,

Among the sections of society where [atheism] was popular, Socialism is now the vogue. For

educated men it never had charms, being too gross and unscientific. They are caught in the meshes of Agnosticism.

The idea that agnosticism was both more sophisticated and more contemporary than atheism was even supported by some atheists. To explain his preference for the less complex, more "definite" thesis of atheism, Rosalind Hyndman, the wife of one of the country's most prominent Marxists, H M Hyndman, felt it was enough to note simply that he was "a man of the 'sixties rather than the 'nineties". In *Why I am an Agnostic* (circa 1889) Ross also pushed atheism's hay-day to the 1860s whilst implying that even back then it was derivative. He mocked earlier generations of freethinkers as the "rapid

Atheists, Socialists, red-cap reformers, and mad-brained enthusiasts of 30 years ago, fresh from the alcohol of Voltaire and Tom Paine". In a display of the kind of steely self-regard that marked much of his output, he went on to declare that agnosticism is "the dominant thought-current of this era" and "the focus up to date of the convergent thought of the world's thinkers".

Ross was drawn to London's growing coterie of mystics and esoteric societies. What he termed "The Night Life of the Soul" – in which he placed "Mesmerism, hypnotism, Idiosomnambulism, Clairvoyance, Neurohypnology" – deeply interested him.

Ross was far from gullible about the genuineness of such "psychic aspirations". But he found in them the kind of openness and absence of dogma that he hankered for. The same sensibility drove Ross towards Buddhist and Hindu transcendentalism.

The Theosophical Society, established in London in 1875, seemed to offer exactly the kind of synthesising, intellectually aristocratic and vaguely Eastern outlook that he was after. And he was not alone. One of Bradlaugh's most impressive colleagues, Annie Besant, converted to theosophy in 1889, attracting the scorn of many of her former comrades.

Ross opened the pages of *The Agnostic Journal* to theosophists as well as "spiritual researchers" such the President of the London Occult Society. Unfortunately the theosophical contributions suffered in com-

itual agnostic known as 'Saladin'

FOOTE AS AN 'ODDITY' – WHO BELIEVED THAT AGNOSTICISM WAS BETTER THAN ATHEISM

parison with the clear, no-nonsense, style that remained typical of most freethought. A characteristic theosophical insight informed readers that,

In obedience to a mighty and unfathomable LAW, inherent in the nature of the Absolute Itself, Parabrahm [the "One Reality" or "Absolute"] throws, as it were, upon Itself, its SHADOW and the UNMANIFESTED SUPERME TRIANGLE becomes the TRIANGLE IN SPACE AND TIME.

Many readers and contributors to *The Agnostic Journal* were not impressed. In the April 11 issue, 1891, "Agnosco" roundly condemned theosophy as a "jumble of meaningless words of half-a-dozen syllables, of misread science, and ridiculous philosophy".

Ross himself remained sceptical but fascinated. His attraction to theosophy seems to have been largely a response to the personal magnetism of the movement's guru, Madame Blavatsky. In a rather self-obsessed obituary for the Ukrainian émigré Ross wrote that she was "one of the very few who ever understood me". He also describes her as "the most extraordinary woman of our century, or any century".

Ross's attraction to the lofty genius of Blavatsky returns us to a central aspect of his agnosticism, namely his conviction that only a small elite is capable of real spiritual exploration. Ross's descriptions of ordinary, uneducated Christians are shot through with revulsion. He had a particular loathing for The Salvation Army, one of whose assemblies appears to be the target of the following recollection.

The other night I stood out in the starlight and beheld about two hundred little heaps of yelling dirt rant themselves hoarse over the, to them, consolatory fable that once, nearly 2,000 years ago, for their sakes, the God of Heaven was nailed to a stick ... I wept to see such a holy dome overshadowed with a puny swarm of blasphemous maggots.

Unlike Bradlaugh, who saw the poor as his people, Ross was convinced that the masses would never break from the chains of tradition. The simplistic faith of materialism might appeal to such people he declared but agnosticism was far too subtle: it was "one man in fifty thousand" he said, who could be an agnostic.

It was an aristocratic argument that ap-



Ross had a particular loathing of the Salvation Army

pealed to certain aristocrats. Ross's most important patrons were the Marquis of Queensbury and his sister, Lady Florence Dixie. Yet Ross was one of the most renowned polemicists of his day and his readership was always broader than his snobbery implied. He even attracted a working class following, as this letter to *The Secular Review* from 1884 testifies:

Allow me, dear Sir, to inform you that I am only a poor working man; but having thought and read myself out of supernaturalism, you may conclude that your remarks about my class have given me some pain ... thousands of us call ourselves Freethinkers, Atheists, and agnostics, which you may perhaps think a pity.

For George Foote, the founder of *The Freethinker*, Ross was an oddity: "He could never have worked with a party, and a party could never have worked with him". In 1904 Ross admitted that he was suffering from sclerosis. From the end of 1905 he was working from his bed, writing with two hands, "the one guiding the other".

He died in 1906 and, like Bradlaugh 15 years earlier, was buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Woking.

"The household of Unfaith has suffered an irreparable bereavement" mourned Ernest Pack in *The Agnostic Journal*. C A Watts

wrote "We have lost a Chief whose name shall live in our movement". Some might be less generous about the Victorian "Saladin". He could be cast as more angry than enlightened, spiritually hungry but self-obsessed. Perhaps these are the very things that make him seem so contemporary. And Ross's particular brand of agnosticism contained many fertile ideas.

Although I find his patronising attitude to atheism unconvincing (and certainly nothing he says makes me question my own atheism) his vision of freethinking as an open-minded, opened-ended quest into the unknown (and of religion as a set of absurd and unpleasant truth claims that mark it out as the reverse of spirituality), was a significant development.

Ross can be seen as the curmudgeonly forefather of New Age spirituality and of on-going attempts to negotiate between the collapse of belief and the continuing search for something more than materialism. Ross's central argument – that the end of faith does not destroy spirituality but makes it possible – has lost none of its power.

• ALASTAIR BONNETT is Professor of Social Geography, School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University.

The Grandfather

If God has a son, might he not also have a father? **WILLIAM CHASE** poses the question

Walking in the Forest of Eden one day, Jesus sees an old man sitting on a log. He approaches him more closely.

“Beautiful day,” says the old man, looking up through the trees.

“Thank you,” says Jesus. “Somehow you look familiar. Have we met?”

“Unlikely,” says the old man, adjusting his robe.

“Have you been here long?”

“Oh yes,” says the old man. “Yes, indeed.” And then, with a sweeping gesture, “I remember when all this was a garden. Beautiful place. Quiet. Restful. Nothing else like it on earth.”

“Ah, yes,” says Jesus, “I have heard of that. But tell me, where are you from?”

“From beyond the light of day and the black of night.”

“That’s a long way,” says Jesus. “May I ask who you are?”

“I was hoping you would,” says the old man, smiling slightly. He is silent for a moment. Then slowly and fixing Jesus with his gaze: “I am your grandfather – your father’s father.”

Now, Jesus knows a tall tale when he hears one. In the days when he dwelt below, many such were in circulation, each with its own god or gods and its little band of believers. Yet something about the old man commands his attention, and Jesus decides to humor him.

“Most interesting,” says Jesus. “But verily, I have never heard of you.”

“Of course you haven’t. Your father and I never intended you should.”

The old man picks up a stick and begins to draw little circles on the ground.

“Long ago I allowed your father to create heaven and earth, with no interference from me. For the most part he did his work well. Majestic mountains. Deep and endless oceans. Sunrises, sunsets. The moon, the stars. And everything in just six days! Then, of course, his later achievements with man – Michelangelo, Mozart, Shakespeare, and all the rest.”

“And Voltaire?” says Jesus, for he had often worried about that one.

“The devil’s work, my boy” says the old man. “Unavoidable.”

“But there were difficulties right from the beginning. First of all, that business in the Garden with Adam and Eve, and the idea of Original Sin. Imagine! Every child to be born a sinner! What kind of a way is that to

start a world?

“But surely you cannot blame that on my father. Adam and Eve were warned that they must not eat the forbidden fruit. They disobeyed.”

“Ah, yes,” says the old man. “But whence came the fruit? From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And who put the tree in the garden – and why? Your father, it is said, does nothing without a purpose.”

Jesus had no answer.

“Then later,” the old man goes on, “he sent the Flood, to rid the earth of corruption and violence. But to no avail. No sooner had the waters receded than the killing and destruction began again

Jesus listens closely now, for what he hears is a voice like only one he has ever heard before.

“After the Flood came the serial massacres – ethnic cleansing it’s called today – and all the other bloody events of the Old Testament. Then for a while things went better, especially when Paul of Tarsus came along and wrote all those letters, building on your teaching and spreading his message far and wide.

“I only met Paul once,” says Jesus, “On the road to Damascus. We owe Paul much.”

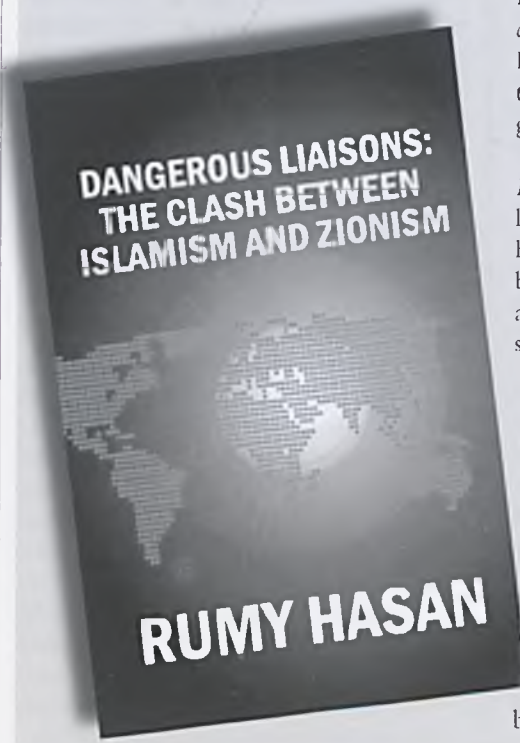
“We do indeed,” says the old man, “But still there were the Romans. You remember them, of course, with their circuses and lions. Then a few centuries later came the great uprising in Arabia, with Mohammed riding off to tell the world that, while you were to be respected, he and only he was the Final Prophet – so convert, pay tribute or die. Then came the Crusades, the Wars of Religion, the horrors of the Inquisition, the witch hunts, the burnings at the stake.”

“One thing Mohammed got right,” says the old man, nodding. He kept the message simple. One god, one prophet, one book, that was it. Nothing to study, nothing more to know. How many Christians can name the four gospels? Or more than a few of the 60-some books of the Bible?

Jesus had had similar thoughts.

“Today,” the old man continues, “the killing goes on – Israel, Afghanistan, India, Ireland – but now with a difference. Now, mankind has the bomb, with the power to destroy all life

Book scene: new titles



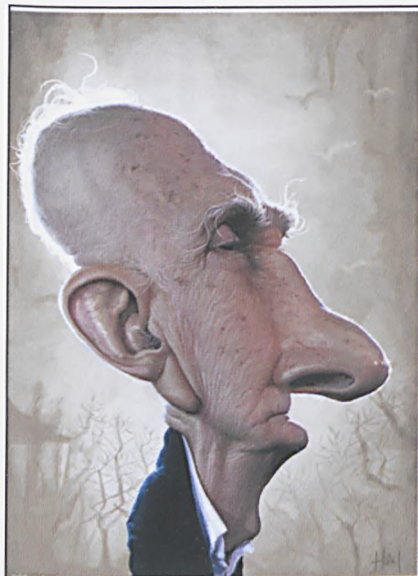
IN A follow up to his acclaimed *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths* Romy Hasan examines a little explored but extremely important issue that has profound global implications

In *Dangerous Liaisons: The Clash Between Islamisation and Zionism* he takes a fresh look at the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. This, he argues, is set to become an “iconic clash between a colonising, aggressive Zionism and the Islamic states and cultures which surround it”.

It is a timely, broad-based and rich analysis of the civilisational conflict affecting people the world over, from the “War on Terror” to the complications of a multi-cultural Europe.

Prof Haim Bresheeth, SOAS, University of London, describes it as “a highly-recommended, fascinating and rewarding read on a little understood aspect of modern politics”.

Baroness Jenny Tonge said of the book: “Romy Hasan’s thorough analysis of the tensions between Islamism and Zion-



on earth. One day, if the world continues on its present course, this power will surely be used – used by zealots in the name of religion.”

“If your prophecy is true,” says Jesus, “then surely we must do something.”

“Must we?” says the old man, “What would you suggest?”

Jesus considers for a moment. “Could we not revise the Ten Commandments? The First, for instance. Why could it not say, ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me – but live in peace with those who do.’ And we could update the second commandment, the one about idolatry, which isn’t much of a problem

these days. We might say instead, ‘Thou shall not bomb’.”

“An interesting idea,” says the old man, “Indeed, The Ten Commandments are not all they might be. Especially the first four, which I regret to say concern only your father himself – his image, his name, his day. They have nothing to do with man’s treatment of man.”

“But remember, my boy, holy dos and don’ts can only be revealed so many times and still be believed. Moses did it once, coming down the mountain with the tablets, and there were others before him among the ancients.

“Then, a few centuries later, there was Mo-

ammed, with his rules for all occasions. Not to forget the Book of Mormon, dug from the earth, they say, on golden plates. So you see, another set of commandments is probably not the answer.”

Now the sun is going down, and the old man gathers his robe around him.

“Well, then,” says Jesus, “Why not a miracle, or miracles? I’ve had some success with those.”

“Another tempting approach,” says the old man, “But remember the Flood and what came thereafter.

“The human race always return to its violent ways. So a miracle here, a miracle there, and soon you would be doing nothing else, with no lasting result.”

“Then tell me, grandfather, what shall we do?”

“With sadness in my heart,” says the old man. “I conclude that we can do nothing, for it is too late.”

He stands up and, with his stick, wipes out all of the little circles.

“Alas, we are beyond the point of no return. Now we can only wait. Wait and see what happens. If the human race destroys the planet, then we learn from our mistakes and start again. And if it come to that, one thing I can assure you – next time around, I will see to it that your father works the full seven days!”

Jesus bows his head in prayer, and when he looks up the old man is gone.

titles to keep an eye out for

ism is very welcome and should be widely circulated. It should be compulsory reading for our political leaders who seem to have no idea just how dangerous is their policy of unconditional support for Israel.”

And Tam Dalyell, MP West Lothian (1962-2005) and Father of the House of Commons (2001-2005) wrote: “A signpost to realities about the clash between Islamism and Zionism, Romy Hasan’s *Dangerous Liaisons* is important reading for those

of us, reflecting on the chilling prospect of senior Israeli figures contemplating – a vital word – launching a pre-emptive strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities, with incalculable consequences.

• *Dangerous Liaisons* is available in paperback from worldwide outlets at £9.99.

Our second recommendation is James Merryweather’s *Reality is Enough*, which consists of more than 50 essays – chapters – bundled into three themes sections: 1: Thinking about Thinking, 2: About Atheism and Religion and 3: Defending Science.

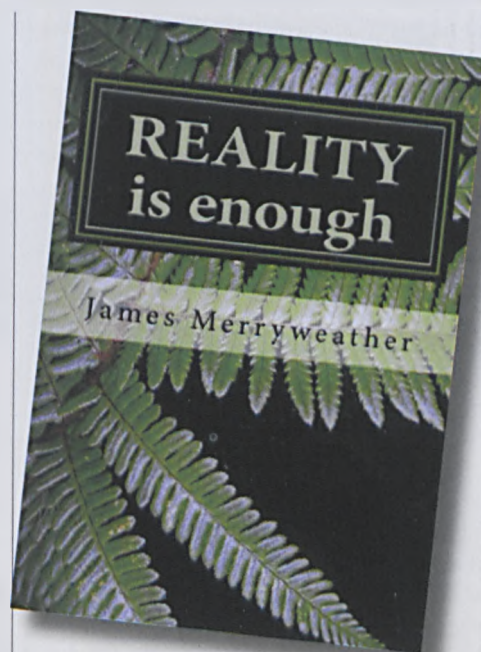
The author dissects the mind: his own, scientists and that of the faithful, discussing what it is to be an atheist in a religious world.

Merryweather, a regular contributor to the *Freethinker*, shows how science – particularly biology, and notably evolutionary theory – is under attack from extreme religion. With reference to science itself, he demonstrates how religion is, more often than not, just plain wrong.

He explores aspects of brain behaviour that have interested him as he sorted out his own life and explored the extraordinarily baffling religious world, paying special attention to the incompatibility of science and religion.

He explores belief vs reality and what different people mean when they refer to “truth”. He maintains that when belief agrees with reality it makes no difference and if it does not, it still makes no difference – to reality.

• *Reality is Enough* is available directly from Blue-Skye Books, Auchter-



tyre IV40 8EG UK. Contact: james@blue-skye.org.uk.

Paperback: £10.00, Kindle (ebook) £5.00

Disinformation: Bullshit the media encourage you to believe

G RICHARD BOZARTH reviews the latest offering from WILLIAM HARWOOD

William Harwood, a prolific Australian-born freethought writer who now lives in Canada, has made numerous admirable additions to freethought's library. *Disinformation: Bullshit The Media Encourage You To Believe* proves once again his status as one of freethought's eminent writers. It deals with troubling trends in Western culture with Harwood's typical *Écrasez l'infâme!* attitude.

It's very unusual for me to read a book and agree with everything, hence there are a few things in *Disinformation* that I object to: his disrespect of Will Durant as a historian in the foreword; the *niveau* of his condemnation of trade unions in chapter 13; his solution to the age-of-consent problem in chapter 15; and his use of "pre-human" to describe one stage of a human life's development during pregnancy in chapter 16 (there is not a single second between conception and death when a human life is not biologically human). These objections, however, are insignificant compared to how much I agree with the rest of the book's content.

It would be surprising in a Harwood book to find no content on religionism. Like any militant non-theist (he doesn't like using "Atheist" as a personal identifier), he doesn't like religionism because it so easily exerts detrimental moral influence that causes an assortment of cultural pollutions. He is most disgusted by faith-based violence, which he makes clear on page 196: "If the reader is getting the impression that the author feels a special hostility toward sects and fanatics who justify unspeakable atrocities by claiming to be obeying a god, he will get no argument from me."

Chapter one debunks supernatural possession, encounters with supernatural entities, and the pseudoscience version of demon possession known as multiple-personality disorder. Chapter two debunks hypnotism, which he is uniquely qualified to do since he worked for many years in touring hypnotism shows. Chapter three very nicely debunks the modern pseudo-

science of recovered memories. Chapter four is the first of several condemnations of the decline of quality public school education in North America. Chapters five, six, seven and eight debunk several pseudoscience hoaxes, such as UFOs, the time travel of information (that is, supernatural or psychic prophecy), and the anthropological scam that was a big success for Carlos Castaneda.

Chapter nine is another one about the decline of public school education. Chapter ten debunks the kind of elaborate conspiracy theories that *The X-Files* exploited so well. Chapter 11 returns to pseudoscience to debunk creationism, Atlantis, lie detectors, and similar such nonsense that way too many gullible people believe in.

Chapter 12 focuses on the particular pseudoscience called psychiatry, which also demonstrates how terribly harmful pseudoscience can be (the child sexual abuse hysteria which has imprisoned so many innocent people, could not have succeeded without the services of an enormous number of psychiatrists and lesser mental-health therapists).

Chapter 13 pounds on trade unions and makes many valid points, but goes too far in my opinion. Chapter 14 debunks fraudulent medicines and medical procedures and the evil of facilitated communication, a deceit that is responsible for a lot of the harm caused by the child sexual abuse hysteria. Chapter 15 debunks sex taboos and is especially interesting because he gives the history of their evolution.

Chapter 16 condemns missionar-

ies because of the harm they have caused throughout history. He's not talking about door-to-door missionaries, who are merely annoying. He is condemning the imperial missionary activism that doesn't exist much anymore. Those missionaries had the swords and later guns of an aggressive, pernicious government behind them to force disagreeing populations to convert and then obey purulent faith-based laws. Of these missionaries, Harwood writes on page 140: "About the only difference between vampires and missionaries is that vampires, being mythical, are less dangerous."

An extremely brief chapter 18 offers a very pragmatic calendar that makes all the days of each month fall on the same day of the week year after year after year. Chapter 19 returns to paranormal pseudoscience and gives it some more excellent debunking. Chapter 20 presents his objections to laws that go too far to prevent wrongful convictions (I could not entirely agree with him because I live in Texas, USA, where wrongful convictions are way too easy to win despite the laws he thinks go too far). Chapters 21, 22, 23, and 24 return to the decline in public school education, this time focusing on the education future teachers get.

Chapter 25 comes down heavy on TV for doing so much to disseminate the kind of disinformation he has been debunking. Chapter 26 offers fascinating histories of several religions, showing all of them to be hoaxes even if the founders were sincere. He ends with a strong condemnation of theofascism and the fundamentalist fanaticism that fuels theofascism. Chapter 27 is a summary of the sharp, merciless blows he delivered to the disinformation he debunked. And then, as a bonus, there is a long, yet surprisingly interesting "Synopsis Of English Grammar" at the end of the book.

What I usually do with Harwood's books is highly recommend them for all atheists, freethinkers, secular humanists, and non-theists. I'm glad to continue doing that for *Disinformation*.



Oh, I love your religion ... for the crazy! Virgin birth. Water into wine. It's like Harry Potter, but it causes genocide and bad folk music.

- Roger the Alien, American Dad

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.



HOMOPHOBIA AND GAY SECULARISTS

GRAHAM Newbery's letter (*Points of View*, March) is both well-argued and entertaining, but the reasoning behind his stance of "instinctive" homophobia coupled with an acknowledgement that gay equality would be a good idea is still flawed on several counts from a rational perspective.

Part of the problem is that he confuses his distaste for certain sexual practices and behaviour with homophobia. It is not homophobic simply to have a distaste, or aversion, to man-on-man sex, any more than finding heterosexual liaisons unappealing makes one a heterophobe or a misogynist. That's just personal taste and a choice one is entitled to make. Besides, many gay people, myself included, would share Graham's distaste for the behaviour of some homosexuals, but let's not pretend that vulgar, predatory and squalid sexual activity is unknown in heterosexual circles!

Real homophobia is consciously malevolent, a desire to denigrate the love that is central to the lives of millions of people, out of spite and insecurity, or perhaps the power-play intrinsic to certain religious and political convictions. It is particularly malevolent when it is formalised by discriminatory laws, or is expressed through violence and intimidation. On all these counts, Graham is exonerated.

He says he joined the NSS to end "religious privilege and the power and influence of mainstream churches with the aim of promoting a truly secular United Kingdom". Well, so did we, Graham. The point is, that the churches' privilege, power and influence is often spent in the active pursuit of homophobia, hence the attraction of secularism to gay and lesbian people of intellect. Nonetheless, all of the gay individuals named by George Broadhead in his letter have devoted considerably more of their time to non-gay secular causes – they are not the self-obsessed, one-trick ponies Graham implies.

I am sorry that Graham has been the focus of unwanted gay attention in "public places", but that is nothing compared to losing one's job, one's home, access to one's children, in-

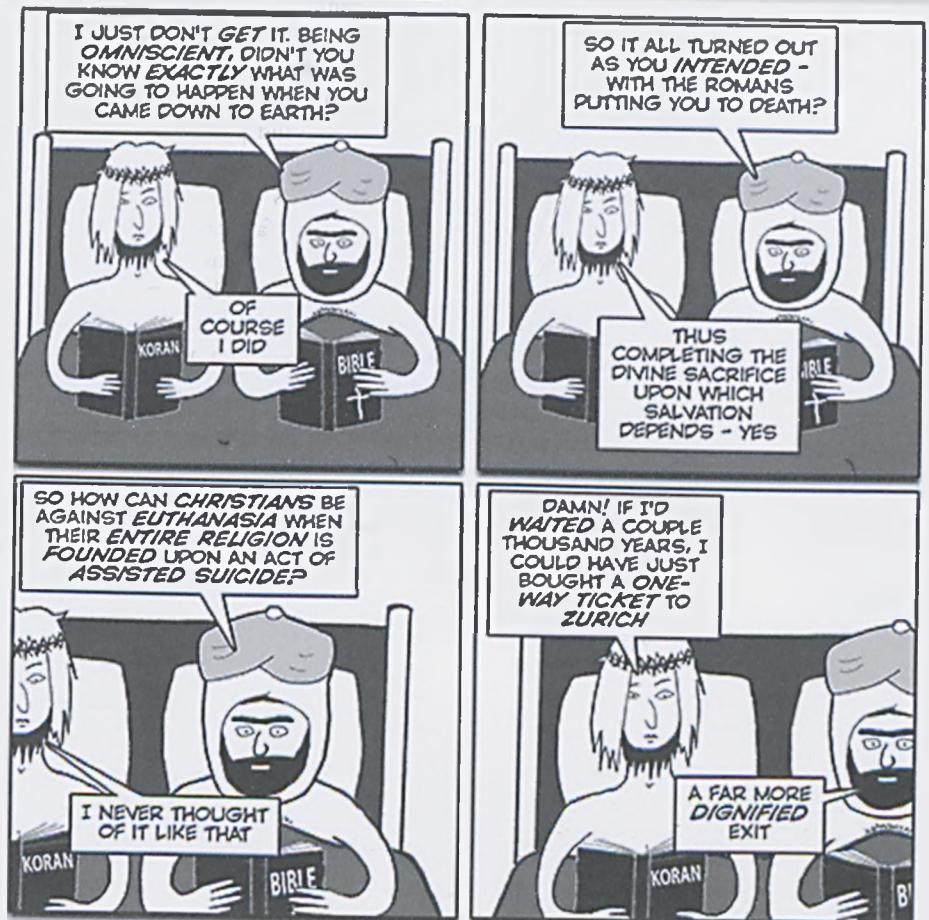
heriting your partner's worldly possessions, or being denied access to the funeral of the partner you have just nursed through a terminal illness. Just for being gay. All of these things – and occasionally worse – have happened regularly, with most religionists either indifferent, or implicated in some way. It's time to come down off the fence, Graham, and help sweep them aside.

Diesel Balaam
London

BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONS

ONCE again I note that you allow William Harwood (March *Freethinker*, p 13) to come up with translations of the Bible significant-

JESUS & MO



ly different from those in standard versions.

I don't think this does our common cause any good.

Michael Levin
London

Freethinker correspondence

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But if you need to send us a letter, book or magazine by post, please address it to the editor at the following address:

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Secularist of the Year

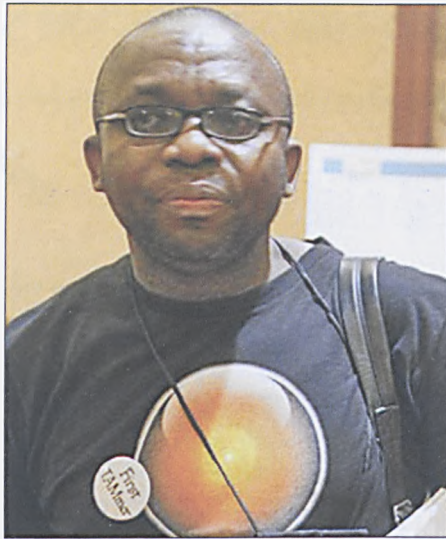
teenager. But although apostasy carries the death sentence according to Islamic law, he insisted he was not calling for Malala's death.

"It's not a death sentence. It's about what is the reality of what's taking place and how she is being used as a tool for propaganda by the US and Pakistan, and for the crimes they are committing," the zealot said.

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said of the charity: "Plan UK does fantastic work campaigning for girls' education so we are delighted to be able to offer this award. It is also important to honour the incredibly inspiring Malala Yousafzai, who risked everything to stand up for her, and others', right to an education. "Secularism will always champion human rights above religious discrimination and oppression – which is precisely why secularism offers hope to oppressed women and minorities everywhere."

A special achievement award was also presented to the Nigerian Human Rights campaigner Leo Igwe.

Igwe has campaigned at great risk to himself against the branding of children as "witches" and "warlocks" by manipulative and fanatical evangelical churches. Children branded in this way are often abandoned by



Leading African humanist Leo Igwe clinched a Special Achievements award at the NSS ceremony last month

their parents or become the subject of mistreatment or even violence.

Sanderson said: "Leo Igwe is an incredibly brave and tenacious fighter for human rights in very difficult circumstances. He has been harassed and threatened by those he has opposed, and so has his family. We were very honoured to have him at this occasion and

to honour him in this way. Few people deserve it more."

An award will also be presented to Queen Mary University of London Atheism, Secularism & Humanism Society for their efforts to promote secularism on campus and in particular their defiant and robust response to attempts to close down free expression on campus.

The Irwin Prize for Secularist of the Year award is sponsored by NSS honorary associate Dr Michael Irwin and is presented annually in recognition of an individual or an organisation considered to have made an outstanding contribution to the secular cause.

Previous winners include Peter Tatchell, Sophie in't Veld MEP, Southall Black Sisters, Maryam Namazie, Professor Steve Jones, Mina Ahadi, and Evan Harris MP with Lord Avebury.

Plan UK is the UK branch of the global children's charity Plan International. It is a registered charity in the UK (number 276035) and has no religious or political affiliations. As part of its "Because I am a Girl" campaign, Plan UK's Girls Fund helps girls to claim their rights and access life-changing education.

Generous souls: atheists help fund a godless shoe enterprise



LAST year a group of designers, headed by Dubliner David Bonney, hit on the idea of creating a top quality, retro-styled range of footwear that would appeal to atheists. Imprinted on the soles would be "Ich Bin Atheist" and "Darwin Loves".

The response they got after floating the idea on the Web was so positive that they then used an Internet-based funding platform for creative projects to call for investors.

Amazingly, in just under a month, they raised over £37,000, which enabled The Meaningful Shoe Company to immediately start production from their base in Berlin and start selling their products via a delightful website simply called **AtheistBerlin.com**.

The website says: "We're lucky to live in Berlin, a city where roughly two thirds of the population are atheists, but we're conscious there are still places where it's difficult to be godless." The site is far more than just a sales platform. It's a joyful, well-written celebration of godlessness. For example, under the heading "We don't believe in any God", it declares: "We enjoy happy, full lives without god(s) and we don't often think about religion. But, when we do, we find it a bit weird and depressing; like a silly game of make-believe that's gone too far, threatening the things we hold most dear, like independence, reason and love." It adds: "The number of atheists is rapidly growing, yet we're often passive or isolated, facing 'god' with just an apathetic shrug, whilst religion is organised, in your face... with symbols, rituals, community ... all of which give it more power to make more of a mess."