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# the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

£1.25 MAY 2013 VOLUME 133 NO 5

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK

## Margaret Thatcher: the last British Prime Minister to 'do God' seriously

**A**head of Margaret Thatcher's ceremonial, celebrity-studded funeral on April 17, the *Guardian* estimated that the costs involved in this jingoistic jamboree would be in the region of £10 million, making it "the most expensive in British history." It added: "As well as the large numbers of armed forces already being drawn in to the ceremony, it's likely that given anti-Thatcher protests have already required riot police, considerable security enforcement will probably be needed. Some of the expense will be covered by the estate of Lady Thatcher, though the Government is not forthcoming on the proportion and the size of Thatcher's estate remains a closely guarded secret." Shortly afterward, *The Telegraph* reported that Commander John Muxworthy, a Lt Commander on the SS Canberra during the Falklands conflict, called for a statue commemorating Thatcher to be placed in Trafalgar Square. His call for a public memorial "at the heart of the nation" to honour was echoed by Lord Tebbit, who served in her cabinet, and UKIP leader Nigel Farage. But rather than Trafalgar Square Farage called for the statue to be placed somewhere in Westminster "to show the outside world that we view her as an important political figure".



REPORT: BARRY DUKE

Curiously, in March, a Tory-led group of councillors voted against a proposal to erect a Thatcher statue in her hometown of Grantham. The idea to immortalise her was backed by Labour councillors, but a full South Kesteven District Council meeting overwhelmingly voted against the proposal for a statue in the market town, which only has a small plaque adorning the wall of the store where Thatcher grew up. Fears were voiced that any memorial erected to Thatcher in Grantham would be vandalised. On July 3, 2002, Paul Kelleher decapitated a £150,000, eight-foot marble statue of the former British

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on display at the Guildhall Art Gallery in central London. This act of vandalism earned him a three-month jail sentence.

On April 11, *The Telegraph* reported on another controversy, saying that the BBC had been put in a tough spot over what it dubbed the "Margaret Thatcher Death Song."

*Ding Dong the Witch is Dead*, from *The Wizard of Oz*, had sold 20,000 copies in the week after anti-Thatcher campaigners encouraged people to buy it to celebrate her death, and the BBC was under pressure to air it. Friends of Thatcher reacted angrily, saying that the corporation would be guilty of a "serious dereliction of duty" if it played the song. In the end

the BBC buckled under the pressure and it was not played.

Interesting though they were, these reports – and scores more that simply added to the mountain of nauseating, suffocating Thatcher eulogies – served only to distract me from my main mission, which was to find out what the media and the blogosphere were saying about the woman's faith, and the impact it had on the country at large.

Among the first to hone in specifically on the woman's godliness was Archbishop Cranmer, a cleric who operates a popular conservative Christian blog. He said that that Thatcher's Christianity "was grounded in the Protestant nonconformity of devout and evangelical Methodism ... Her writings and speeches are unequivocal in the provenance of her theo-political worldview. In *Statecraft*, she wrote: 'I believe in what are often referred to as Judaeo-Christian values: indeed my whole political philosophy is based on them'.

"In the second volume *The Path to Power* she went further: 'Although I have always resisted the argument that a Christian has to be a Conservative, I have never lost my conviction that there is a deep

(Continued on page 6)



# Simply a question of law?

**OPHELIA BENSON IS HORRIFIED BY TESTIMONY GIVEN AT SAVITA HALIPPANAVAR'S INQUEST**

**T**he inquest into the death of Savita Halippanavar at University Hospital Galway last October has resumed after preliminary hearings in January. The third day of testimony has ended as I write this.

In case you don't remember, Savita Halippanavar was 17 weeks pregnant when she went to the hospital with back pain on Sunday October 21, 2012, and was found to be miscarrying, with no hope for the survival of the fetus. She and her husband Praveen requested a termination three times over the next three days, and were refused. Savita developed a massive infection, and died on October 28. Praveen went to the media with this appalling story, and Ireland erupted in protest.

The *Irish Times* reported on the testimony of the consultant obstetrician who was treating Savita.

*Savita Halippanavar's consultant obstetrician has told the inquest into her death there were a number of systems*

*failures at Galway University Hospital in her treatment.*

*Dr Katherine Astbury agreed with coroner Dr Ciaran McLoughlin there were systems failure at the hospital in relation to the monitoring of Ms Halippanavar and the processing of blood tests.*

*Asked about her decision to refuse Ms Halippanavar's request for a termination, she said that under Irish law there had to be a 'real and substantial risk' to the life of the patient before this could happen.*

What's frightening about that statement is that medically it's just wrong. The fetus cannot survive at 17 weeks, and the chance of infection for the mother is 30 to 40 percent. The standard of care is prompt delivery, to prevent infection in the mother. There was a real and substantial risk ... but legally, the risk may not measure up to the 8th Amendment to the Irish constitution. This is apparently how Dr Astbury understands the law, as reported in the *Irish Times* again:

*Dr McLoughlin quoted from Medical Council guidelines on obstetric complications, which state that it may be necessary to intervene to protect the life of the mother while making every effort to save the baby's life.*

*Asked if she felt she had scope to intervene under these guidelines, the witness said she didn't believe she could. Her understanding was that these guidelines applied to situation where a mother had been diagnosed with cancer or another life-threatening illness not related to her pregnancy. In that situation, intervention would be justified, Dr Astbury said. The issue was that there was no law to tell someone what was permitted or not. It was a question of law.*

The law is unclear, and so, horrifyingly, doctors err on the side of risking the lives of women.

There is much outrage about this, as there should be, but few people realize it can happen in the US just as easily as in Ireland.

A commenter on my blog reported one such experience.

*I can attest that termination is not a standard of care I received, even when requested, during a protracted miscarriage. When my water broke on a Friday night at 16 weeks and I started bleeding heavily, I went to the ER. No hope for the*

*fetus. I requested termination, and they said they couldn't because it still had a heartbeat. (30 beats per minute. C'mon!). They kept me overnight, sent me home in the morning with a dead fetus inside me with instruction to call my OB on Monday to schedule a D&E at some outpatient surgery center. The next day, Sunday, I delivered a boy without warning. Cut the cord, wrapped him in a cloth diaper and put him in a child's shoebox. Back to the ER where I eventually had a D&C to remove the very stubborn placenta. Baby Boy was buried in a mass grave.*

*So, all that to say, I had 2.5 days of slow-motion second trimester miscarriage in which I requested a termination, was denied, was told they could not even perform the D&E after the fetus had died (I can't remember why...) and some seriously traumatizing moments. I did not get an infection, fortunately. This was in Austin [Texas], where even the public hospital is run by the Catholics...*

And another one, on a later post:

*I can pitch in another "Catholic hospitals don't do the miscarriage-termination thing" tale. My wife had a miscarriage about 10 weeks into her pregnancy. The Catholic hospital we wound up at (it was the closest, we were in a blind panic about her pain, so yeah) not only would not do anything that would speed up the process; they also refused to do aggressive pain-management because that might incidentally terminate the pregnancy (which they'd already acknowledged was doomed).*

*I have a bit of an ongoing guilt about that night, frankly – I SHOULD have been the one to be clear-headed enough to insist on taking the extra time to locate and go to a non-Catholic hospital. I can guarantee it's not a mistake I'd be likely to make again.*

The situation in both Ireland and the US is an absolute outrage, and many people aren't aware of it. Spread the word.



**OPHELIA BENSON**  
Picking fights with God

**the freethinker**  
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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.



# Irish Government accused of ‘Nazi tactics’ over planned Catholic school handover

A GOVERNMENT plan to reduce the Catholic Church’s dominance in primary school education in Ireland, and to give greater choice of schools to parents, means that the Church will have to hand some of its primary schools to other patron bodies.

In terms of the Department of Education’s plan, 29 of the RC’s 3,000 primary schools will be handed over to different patrons. Education Minister Ruairi Quinn wants Catholic bishops to provide the names of schools to be transferred by the end of this year, to allow time for arrangements for them to open under new patronage in September 2014.

The report of an expert group of educationists set out a roadmap for the handover process, which is designed to create a greater choice to reflect the changing social mix in Ireland. The Forum of Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, chaired by leading educationalist Professor John Coolahan, deliberated for six months last year. It held public hearings and also received 247 submissions.

As well as recommending a process for the handover of the schools, the advisory group suggested ways in which all schools should cater for children of different religious beliefs. Its findings were welcomed by Quinn, who said “We live in a changed and changing nation. Primary school provision needs to reflect this changed society and provide for increased diversity. Parental choice should be our main concern”

Although the Church stands to lose only a handful of schools, the plan has set alarm bells ringing among the Church hierarchy. According to various reports in the Irish media, they fear that the inclusivity and diversity the Department of Education wants to achieve in Irish education may “infect” their existing schools.

The Irish *Independent* reported back in January that Professor Eamonn Conway – head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, and a priest of the Tuam archdiocese – said that no Catholic primary schools should be handed over without firm guarantees from the authorities that the ethos of the remaining Catholic schools would be



Education Minister Ruairi Quinn

respected. He pointed out that that under one proposal, Catholic schools would be forced to display *all* religious symbols along with their own and to vet hymns and prayers to ensure they were sufficiently “inclusive”.

He also challenged the proposal to delete Rule 68, which obliges national schools to ensure that a religious spirit underpins all their work.

He is also unhappy with proposals to weaken Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act, which protects the right of religious organisations, including schools, to employ only individuals who will respect the ethos of their employer.

Conway further attacked a proposed new programme for primary schools, “Education about Religion and Beliefs” (ERB), saying it should not be made mandatory because it “could teach pupils a secularist view of religion”.

But the most hysterical reaction to the plan appeared in the Catholic blog, “The Eponymous Flower.”

The author of this “polemical Catholic Royalist blog” described the move as a “confiscation” of Catholic schools, and said: “Some may recall how this sort of oppressive behavior is preceded by a hate campaign against the Church, in order to justify the confiscation of the Church’s wealth, and the diminishment of its position in society.

“This tactic was also undertaken by the Nazis in the 30s as Goebbels used charges

of sexual indecency and child molestation against the Catholic Clergy then to build public support for closing Catholic Schools. The Irish State is using the same playbook here, which is not to say that they are Nazis, *per se*. Just goes to show that you really can’t trust Republicans no matter how Catholic they pretend to be.”

The author added: “Of course, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin hasn’t been much help here. He’s basically helping the other side achieve their goals.”

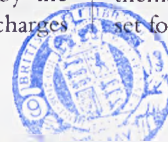
Reacting to this development in Ireland, National Secular Society President Terry Sanderson said on the the NSS website that it was a pity that Ireland has Ruairi Quinn as an education minister, and we are stuck with Michael Gove.

Sanderson pointed out that “of course, the Catholic Church has always put huge emphasis on its influence in education.

“It realised centuries ago that you need to get at children before they are at an age when they might be able to resist religious indoctrination.

“They need to be told that they are Catholics at a very early stage in their lives and the message must be reinforced relentlessly. School – particularly primary school – is the perfect place for this brainwashing to be accomplished.

“For the rest of their lives they will regard themselves as “Catholic”, even if they never set foot inside a church again.





# Dying author Iain Banks describes religion as 'bananas' and 'bollocks'

WHEN Scots author Iain Banks announced last month that he was suffering terminal cancer and had just a few months to live, the media covered the story extensively and were effusive in their praise of the 59-year-old author of 26 outstanding novels.

Oddly, though, they studiously avoided mentioning Banks' atheism, and even *Wikipedia* is shy about this aspect of his life, saying only that "Banks is an Honorary Associate of the National Secular Society and a Distinguished Supporter of the Humanist Society of Scotland".

In 1996, Banks, in an interview with the *New Humanist*, described himself as an "evangelical atheist". Six years on – in July 2012 – he told the magazine that his view of religion had not altered a jot. "Nope. In these trying, troubled times, I think it's even more important to keep on making a proper fuss about refusing to buy into all this 'religion' bollocks"

Asked whether he would describe himself as a secularist, atheist, agnostic, freethinker, or rationalist, he replied: "I am happy to sign up to all of them; the only caveat is with the 'agnostic'. I've always felt that one ought to retain just the tiniest, sliveriest wee bit of agnosticism to season what is basically outright atheism, on the grounds that – in the end, after all – each of us is just a solitary smart ape on a piffing little planet in an ungraspably big universe, and the sheer bleeding obviousness of there being no supreme deity could itself be a huge cosmic joke on the part of a particularly annoying and mischievous god. It's an admission that, well, you never entirely know. I maintain that this is close enough to absolute atheism as to make no damn difference."

Earlier, in a BBC interview in 2010, he described religion as "basically bananas".

At the beginning of April, in a personal statement, Banks stunned the literary world and his many thousands of fans by revealing he is battling cancer.

"I am officially very poorly. After a couple of surgical procedures, I am gradually recovering from jaundice caused by a blocked bile duct, but that – it turns out – is the least of my problems.

"I first thought something might be wrong when I developed a sore back in late January, but put this down to the fact I'd started writing at the beginning of the month and so was crouched over a keyboard all day. When it hadn't gone away by mid-February, I went



to my GP, who spotted that I had jaundice. Blood tests, an ultrasound scan and then a CT scan revealed the full extent of the grisly truth by the start of March.

"I have cancer. It started in my gall bladder, has infected both lobes of my liver and probably also my pancreas and some lymph nodes, plus one tumour is massed around a group of major blood vessels in the same volume, effectively ruling out any chance of surgery to remove the tumours either in the short or long term.

"The bottom line, now, I'm afraid, is that as a late stage gall bladder cancer patient, I'm expected to live for 'several months' and it's extremely unlikely I'll live beyond a year. So it looks like my latest novel, *The Quarry*, will be my last.

"As a result, I've withdrawn from all planned public engagements and I've asked my partner Adele if she will do me the honour of becoming my widow (sorry – but we find ghoulish humour helps). By the time this goes out we'll be married and on a short honeymoon. We intend to spend however much quality time I have left seeing friends and relations and visiting places that have meant a lot to us. Meanwhile my heroic publishers are doing all they can to bring the publication date of my new novel forward by as much as four months, to give me a better chance of being around when it hits the shelves."

Banks' novels include *Espedair Street*, *Complicity* and *The Crow Road*, which variously were adapted for radio, television and film. He writes highly praised science fiction, under the name of Iain M Banks, and was recently named as one of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945.

His *Culture* novels, the first of which, *Consider Phlebas*, was published in 1987, are considered among the best works of modern science fiction.

Reacting to the news, Scotland's First Minister Alex Salmond said: "Iain Banks is a remarkable writer who has made a lasting contribution to Scottish literature and culture, inspiring and enthralling readers for 30 years. My thoughts are very much with Iain, his wife and family and his friends at this very difficult time."

Fellow atheist Stephen Fry, the writer and actor, said: "So devastated by the sad sad news about Iain Banks – he and Iain M Banks, his sci-fi alter ego, are two of my favourite living writers."

Irvine Welsh, the Scottish author, added: "Very, very sad to hear this. Amazing writer and excellent guy."

Banks' statement was reposted on a new website called "Banksophilia: Friends of Iain Banks", which has been set up for friends, family and fans to leave messages and check his progress.



# Religion in Scotland is on a dramatic downward spiral

SCOTLAND, once one of the more pious parts of the UK, is rapidly becoming secularised according to a poll commissioned for the Sunday Times and Real Radio Scotland.

Over the past decade the number of Scots saying they belong to a Christian faith has fallen from almost two-thirds (65 percent), as recorded in the 2001 census, to 55 percent today.

Over the same period, the number of those who follow no religion has risen from 28 percent to 39 percent.

While 70 percent of men aged 55 and over, and 78 percent of women in the same group, call themselves Christian in the poll, only 34 percent of men aged 18–34 and 33 percent of women of this age do so. This is the first time we have seen that women have been shown to be less religious than men, and may be the first signs of the emergence of an important trend. Similar trends are expected in the results of the 2011 census to be published later this year.

The drop in support for the Church of Scotland, once regarded as the national church, is particularly acute. While 42 percent said they belonged to the kirk in the 2001 census, only 32 percent do so in the latest survey of 1,002 Scottish adults.

Whereas those describing themselves as Roman Catholic in 2001 stood at 16 percent, the poll found 13 percent doing so now, a smaller proportionate drop than the Church of Scotland.

The poll found that only 8 percent of the Scottish population attend church once a week, compared with a finding of 14 percent by the Scottish social attitudes survey in 1999.

Less than a third (30 percent) have been to church within the past year except for special ceremonies such as weddings and christenings, while just over a third (34 percent) say it has been more than a year since they attended and a further 31 percent “never or practically never” go.

The poll shows that there would be widespread support for the new Pope to make some radical changes to the Catholic Church.

A total of 54 percent say Pope Francis should allow priests to marry, while 41 percent say he should be more accepting of ho-

mosexuality. In addition, 61 percent say the Catholic Church should be more tolerant of condom use, while 40 percent believe it should be more accepting of abortion and 63 percent want it to be tougher with abusers.

Even among those professing to be Christian, there is a lack of faith in the Bible. Of those who belong to the Church of Scotland, only 37 percent say they believe Jesus was God’s son and came back to life after being crucified, while 23 percent consider the account false and 35 percent say they don’t know. The Easter story is more widely believed among Catholics (67 percent) and other Christians (61 percent).

Commenting on this trend, Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Society, said: “These figures indicate a growing national trend towards secularisation. And even then the results of the Scottish poll are likely to be underestimates of the extent of it. When the Scottish census figures are released later this year, we expect to see similar levels of decline in religious identity.”

Sanderson referred to the well-established phenomenon of people overstating their religious beliefs and loyalties; a recent poll in England showed implied attendance double the actual figures taken from church statistics. He also pointed to the response to another poll conducted on behalf of the Chef and Brewer pub chain about how people spent their Sundays. Fifteen percent claimed that they “usually went to a place of worship”. Sanderson said: “Even the churches wouldn’t try to claim that. Their own head counts show less than half of that number actually show up at church on a normal Sunday.”

He continues to be puzzled by the way people still often felt the need to exaggerate their religious adherence when questioned by pollsters. “So why do people feel the need to say they go to church when they don’t? It seems to be another indication of the religious indoctrination we have all undergone, which leaves many of us still feeling guilty about admitting we couldn’t really care less about the church and are bored by it.”

## Meanwhile, the demand for humanist weddings is escalating

SECULAR humanist weddings are on the rise, according to figures issued last month by the Humanist Society of Scotland. It revealed that its celebrants had officiated at about 3,000 weddings last year – and it predicts they will become more popular than Church of Scotland weddings in as little as two years.

A similar trend would be on the cards for the rest of the UK if only the ceremonies were legally recognised, says the British Humanist Association (BHA). That happened in Scotland in 2005, when there were fewer than 100 ceremonies, but the country is now one of few in the world where non-religious weddings are allowed. The others are Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway and certain states of the USA.

Said Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of the BHA: “It’s a great shame because people want them and there’s no real argument against them.”

He hopes the law will soon change. In the meantime, humanist couples may marry at a registry office and then have a humanist ceremony some time afterwards (or just have the ceremony and forget the legal recognition). About 800 couples do this a year in England and Wales.

A humanist wedding – like a funeral – can be anything the folk involved want it to be – but without any religious claptrap. There are no prescribed rituals.

Explained Copson: “Ceremonies are designed to be extremely personalised and meaningful. They’re a celebration of a relationship in front of family and friends. They’re not religious but look for meaning instead in people.”



# Thatcher 'passes into glory'

and providential harmony between the kind of political economy I favour and the insights of Christianity”.

Cranmer added that a speech she made at the zenith of her power was perhaps the most illuminating of all her statements with regard to her theology, and it is worth looking at it in some detail because she began it by saying that she spoke “personally as a Christian, as well as a politician”.

“It was a speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988, in which she outlined what she identified as the ‘distinctive marks of Christianity’ which ‘stem not from the social but from the spiritual side of our lives’. And perhaps in a swipe at those ‘meddlesome priests’ who were critical of some of her policies throughout the 1980s, she declared that ‘we must not profess the Christian faith and go to church simply because we want social reforms and benefits or a better standard of behaviour; but because we accept the sanctity of life, the responsibility that comes with freedom and the supreme sacrifice of Christ’.”

That speech, reportedly to Thatcher’s profound annoyance, became known as the “Sermon on the Mound”. The Margaret Thatcher Foundation branded it as “distasteful”.

In her “sermon”, Thatcher was unwavering in her interpretation of scripture, sug-

gesting it gives “a view of the universe, a proper attitude to work, and principles to shape economic and social life”; of how the theological “is” translates into the political “ought”; how Christianity remains relevant to public policy. She emphasised the traditional conservative view of the family which is “at the heart of our society and the very nursery of civic virtue. And it is on the family that we in government build our own policies for welfare, education and care”. And with an appeal to the Apostle Paul, she reminded her audience that “anyone who neglects to provide for his own house (family) has disowned the faith and is “worse than an infidel”. Yet, Cranmer noted, she was not deluded by the biblical ideal, recognising that “modern society is infinitely more complex” and that “new occasions teach new duties”.

Cranmer added: “To dispel any notion that Margaret Thatcher was simply exploiting Christianity for electoral purposes, it is possible to trace this golden thread in speeches she made prior even to becoming Leader of the Opposition: there is a distinct and consistent Nonconformist leitmotif running through all of her political writings. Her government essentially constituted an applied theology; it was, she said, ‘engaged in the massive task of restoring confidence

and stability to our people’ because ‘unless the spirit of the nation which has hitherto sustained us is renewed, our national life will perish’. She reintroduced into British politics a missionary mood that reflected her provincial and Methodist origins.

“The ‘spirit’ of which she spoke was unequivocally and uncompromisingly Christian. She said: ‘I find it difficult to imagine that anything other than Christianity is likely to resupply most people in the West with the virtues necessary to remoralise society in the very practical ways which the solution of many present problems require’. Here, Margaret Thatcher comes as close as she can to identifying Christianity and Conservatism. One can speculate that for her any distinction between Christianity and Conservatism is a technical theological distinction, and that the values and principles associated with the two sets of beliefs were normally, temporally, indistinguishable.”

Cranmer ended his eulogy with the words: “The angels are today rejoicing in Heaven at a pilgrim who has come home. But the name of Margaret Thatcher - The Great Lady - is sure to endure on earth and reverberate throughout human history.”

The *Economist* later commented: “In religion, as in so much else, Mrs (later Lady) Thatcher was a bundle of paradoxes. She was



Spotted outside a newsagent in Spain: An ex-pat Brit's reaction to a headline in *The Daily Telegraph*. Photo: Barry Duke



the last British Prime Minister openly and emphatically to acknowledge the influence of Christianity on her thinking, in particular terms not fuzzy ones. Her fellow Tories, John Major and David Cameron, have presented themselves as loyal but lukewarm Anglicans. 'I don't pretend to understand all the complex parts of Christian theology,' Mr (later Sir John) Major once said, reassuringly. As for Labour's leaders, Gordon Brown inherited the ethos but not the zeal of his father, a Presbyterian minister. Tony Blair is passionately religious but was famously discouraged by his advisers from 'doing God' in public because of the fear that he might sound nutty."

The magazine pointed out that, having had a stormy relationship with then Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie, who irked her by commemorating the Argentine dead at a service following the Falklands war, and producing "Faith in the City", a left-wing tract on urban blight, she helped to ensure that Archbishop Runcie was succeeded by George Carey, "an unpretentious evangelical" who, after her death, described her as a person of "uncomplicated but very strong faith".

Thatcher later abandoned Methodism. "As she ascended firmly to the upper middle class," commented the *Economist*, "she

began attending Anglican church. Conspicuous consumption and debt-fuelled growth, often seen as legacies of the Thatcher era, could hardly be further from Methodist values. And in her native east Midlands, Methodist communities and ministers were active in defending coalminers during the strike which she defeated. Methodism has influenced Britain's centre-left far more than its political right."

In explaining her denominational switch, Thatcher said that Methodism was "a marvellous evangelical faith" with great music – but "you sometimes feel the need for a slightly more formal service" as well as for more formal theology. The magazine concluded: "In her religious origins, she was informed by a passion that was foreign to the English establishment. But as that puritan passion propelled her into high office, its sharp edges were blunted. The Ritz hotel is an unlikely place for a Methodist woman from the Midlands to end her days."

Writing in *The Independent* on April 9, atheist philosopher A C Grayling posed the question: "Do we owe the dead respect, even if we disagreed with them profoundly, even if we were harmed by them in some way, even if we think that their influence on their times was largely negative, and their legacy damaging?"

He added: "The standard trope is: *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* – 'Of the dead say nothing but good'. Why?"

"Why should one not speak as one did when the person was alive? The story of a prominent individual's life cannot be complete without the truth about what people felt at the moment of summing up, whether it is in mourning or rejoicing. Let us say what we think, and be frank about it: death does not confer privileges."

"An outburst of pleasure at the departure of someone who was deeply polarising and gave expression to callous attitudes is both perfectly understandable and justifiable. No quantity of apologetics about the good effects on the economy or the military situation in the world will satisfy someone who saw whole communities devastated by unemployment, livelihoods lost and neighbourhoods turned into wastelands: the felt quality of life is the final measure of the effect on individuals, and they have a right to their say."

He concluded: "The democratic value of frank expression of opinions about public figures and public matters should not be hostage to squeamishness or false ideas of respect – let us respect ourselves instead, and say what we truly feel."

Commenting on the *Freethinker* website's announcement of Thatcher's death, Andrew John did just that: "My mother told me only to speak good of the dead. Thatcher's dead. Good!"

## Two more babies infected with herpes after ritual circumcisions

TWO infants in the last three months in New York City's ultra-Orthodox Jewish community have been infected with herpes following a ritual circumcision, according to the health department. The boys were not identified.

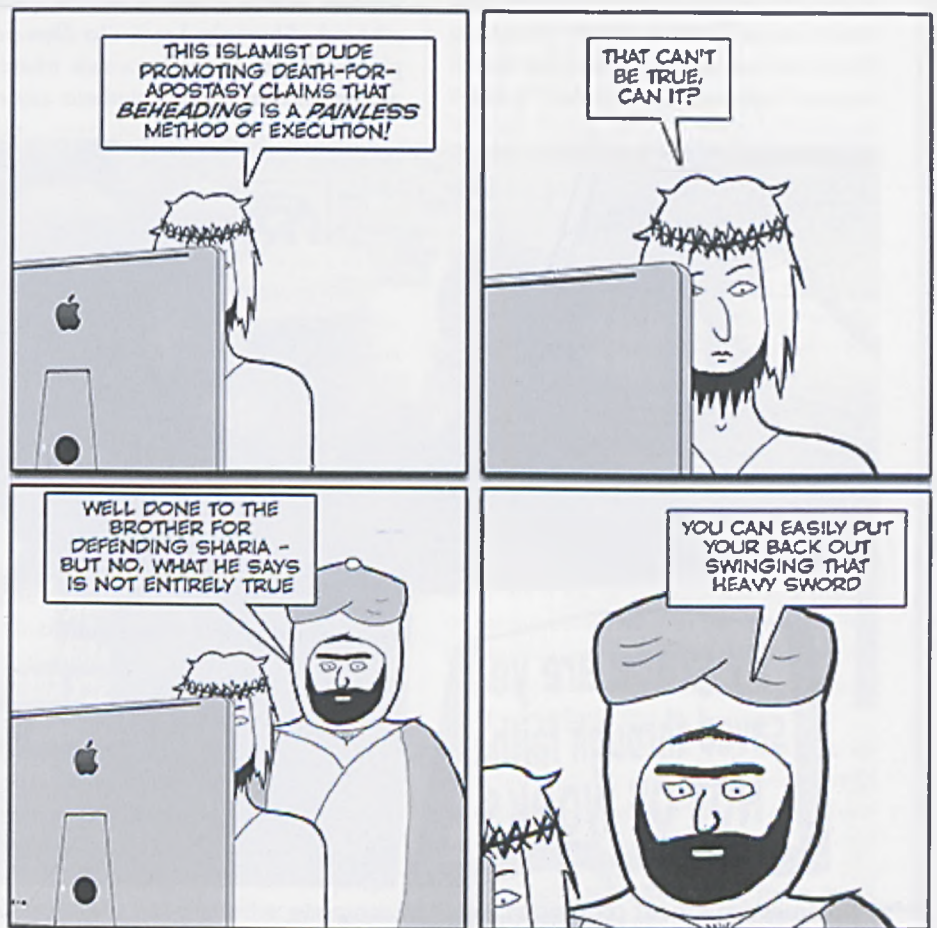
The babies were subjected to a form of ritual known as *metzitzah b'peh*. The practitioner, or *mohel*, places his mouth around the baby's penis to suck the blood to "cleanse" the wound.

One of the two infected babies developed a fever and lesion on its scrotum seven days after the circumcision, and tests for HSV-1 were positive.

Last year, the New York City Board of Health voted to require parents to sign a written consent that warns them of the risks of this practice. None of the parents of the two boys who were recently infected signed the form.

Since 2000, there have been 13 cases of herpes associated with the ritual, including two deaths and two other babies with brain damage.

## Jesus & Mo



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# Flavours of American atheism: Scenes from the 50th anniversary American Atheist Convention

DALE DEBAKCSY reports from a landmark event in Austin, Texas

"THE problem with you Yank atheists is that, for you, atheism is your whole identity, instead of just a part of your larger life." These words were spoken to me by a British acquaintance late at night over a collection of very large, very empty beer mugs. At the time, I had no way of really evaluating it as a fair generalization of the American atheist scene. I could count the number of atheists I had actually met in person on my left hand with enough digits left over to have a go at tallying The Beatles.

That all changed this last Easter weekend, when seven hundred members of American Atheists migrated to Austin, Texas, for a weekend of talks and shenanigans that left me in equal measures inspired and concerned.

Let me say at the start that I saw none of the talks or events. For ten hours a day, I sat at my booth theoretically promoting *The Vocate* and drawing whatever sketch requests happened to pop into people's

heads (one of my favorites was "Jesus Takes a Manatee to the Prom" though "Richard Dawkins as Han Solo" takes a close second).

Really, though, I talked to people. Hundreds of people who saw a guy at a booth wearing a purple colonial wig and decided, "That's a fellow I want to intimately chat with for a half hour or so." Over those three days, a few definite types of American atheist emerged, and just seeing them walk and talk and go about their business was more rewarding for me than any speech could possibly have been.

Or, it eventually was. For the first four hours of the show, I was chatting with the honored and grizzled veterans of the American atheist scene, contemporaries of Carl Sagan who could tell stories of the early days in the trenches with Madalyn Murray O'Hair. These were the people who risked home and career to allow people like me to say pretty much whatever we want about religion without any real

fear of reprisal.

There's something about sitting in the presence of a person who paved the way for you to publicly exist, a mixture of awe and sorrow and yes, a bit of shame too.

When I explained what I do as a webcomic writer and essayist, quite a few of them gave me this look which all but said, "We busted our asses to be taken seriously as a movement, and you're flouncing about drawing pictures and writing articles about cartoons on the internet? THAT'S how you're spending our legacy?" Others skipped the look and just walked away.

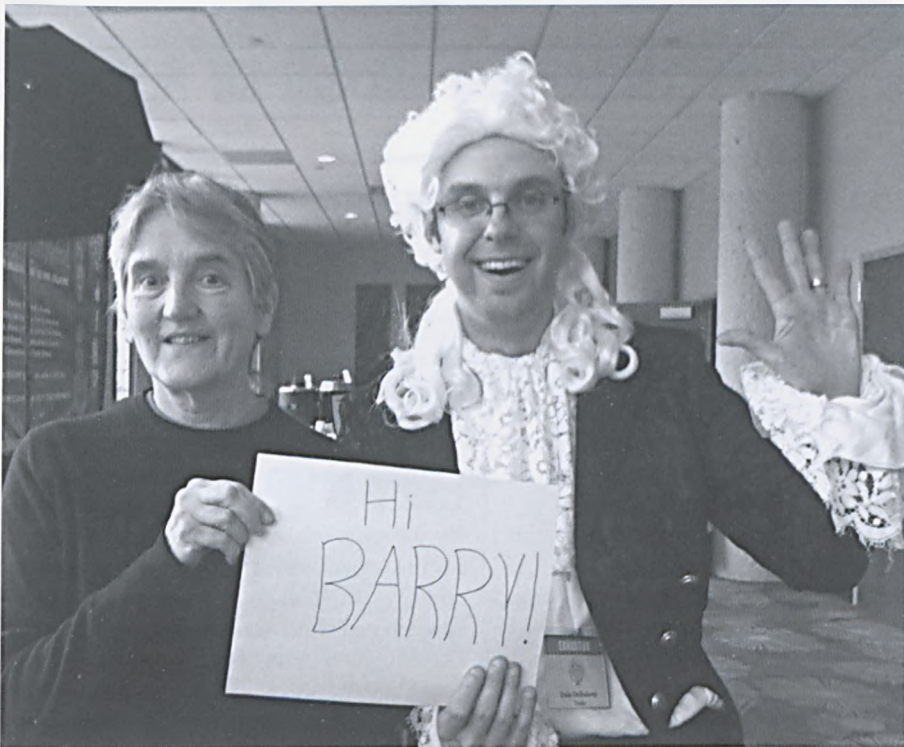
In those moments, I gained a new appreciation for the members of my parents' generation who looked in the eyes of their World War II veteran fathers and said, "I don't know, Dad, maybe I'll do something in interpretive dance. I've also got this friend in, like, a commune..."

It was a dispiriting four hours, in short. But just as I was ready to pack up my car-petbag and go home, a new wave poured



No American Atheist convention would be complete without a few Christian clowns turning up to provide a little light relief. This trio were pictured a couple of years back at the Des Moines convention.





Freethinker contributors Ophelia Benson and Dale Debakcsy sent a greeting to editor Barry Duke from the 2013 convention

forth – men and women in their fifties and sixties with boundless optimism for the future and terrific plans to make their vision of the future happen. Each had their own theory about what organized atheism ought to be doing in the country, and no two programs were alike.

They were united, however, in seeing the evolution of atheism as something to be approached collectively, the fight to be won or lost based on how the major atheist organizations of the country allocate their resources. Their focus was using organizational clout to gain for atheism some degree of influence in the political and judicial systems of the nation. They disagreed wildly on the apportioning of that clout, one stating firmly that American Atheists is wasting its time and resources pursuing court cases that can't possibly be won while the next laid it down as axiomatic that every time a fight can be joined by atheists collectively, it must be.

Put succinctly, these are people used to working with others on a massive, institutional scale to build the apparatus of societal change. They possess a set of skills that I, as an atheist who came of age at the dawn of the at turns boundless, at turns entirely solipsistic Internet Era, can barely fathom. These skills allow them to make a life cause out of an intellectual movement, to raise the instantiating of a philosophical principle to a *raison d'être*. To conceptualize and then realize such grand things requires that more and more of your life become colonized by the movement. And so per-

haps these are the people my British comrade had in mind when she spoke of Yanks with atheism forever on the brain.

When I had the chance to chat with people from roughly my own generation an entirely different version of atheism in America arose before me. These attendees would talk about atheism for a while, and then start veering into other interests: comics, classical music, cartoons, magic tricks ... even the rise and fall of the Habsburgs came up. Really, it's that ability to publicly demonstrate how one can be an atheist and still have a fun and balanced life that I think will be their great legacy in the evolving story of atheism in the country.

To continue the portrait, these were folks in their 20s and 30s bursting with ideas for bringing atheist messages into new media forms. Tombstone da Deadman who fuses hip-hop with humanist themes. Kate Fahr, who started a webcomic to explore issues of how men go about creating gods. And more podcasters than I can possibly recount, each bringing atheism to their own unique corners of the internet. These are dazzlingly talented people, acting individually or in specialized small groups, to craft new ways for the public to gain a purchase on atheist thought.

Their approach, as you might have gathered, is utterly different than the previous generation. Rather than using a block of influence to alter societal institutions and thereby exert an influence on public thought, their goal is to reach the people directly, and hope that the converted and

outraged eventually put pressure on political institutions by the sheer weight of their numbers. Not once did I hear fall from their lips an opinion about the merits of establishing a permanent atheist legal aid fund. Just as not once did I hear the previous generation bring up the problem of atheism's on-the-street image issue.

The young Internet atheists are clever and quick and can summon a howl of indignation with a single scathing blog post, but the question of Whither Now is one that we mostly don't know what to do with. The organizational atheists of the past generation can build whatever institutional machinery a person could want to accomplish a task, but are often brought up short when it comes to reaching out beyond the atheist community for hearts and minds. If ever two groups of people needed to talk to each other and teach each other things, it is these.

Kept separate, the result is the uneven and lumbering gait which many perceive in the American branch of atheism – the disconnect between how our resources are distributed and how we present ourselves creatively as individuals. But bring together the image and structure builders, and there's not much that can't get done.

So this is my personal plea from what I learned in Austin: if you know how to bring people together in real, physical space and get them to combine their talent and funds towards a tangible goal, please find people like me and tell us how you do it and what we can do to help you along with it. Bring us out from behind our computers – drag us if you have to – and make us do those things that don't bring the glory of podcasts or blogs or webcomics (such as that glory is) but that need to get done if atheism is going to survive as a force when it passes into our stewardship (not that we're trying to kill you off – but accidents happen). There are folks of this generation who are astoundingly good at organization (chatting with the volunteers from the Secular Student Alliance assured me of that), just as there are members of the organizational generation who are sublimely gifted bloggers and creators. But there are a lot of us who, just as a matter of having been raised in the '80s and '90s in America, are drop dead awful at talking to people face to face and getting them to make something that we require.

We need you, and, if you can put up with our endlessly ephemeral tweeting and tumbling, we might be able to craft some pretty neat stuff for you in return.

• Count Dolby von Luckner's *The Vocate* ([www.the-vocate.com](http://www.the-vocate.com)) is a web comic for non-believers created by Dale Debakcsy.



# 'Islamofascism': a real te

LEV LAFAYETTE and MATT BUSH SPELL OUT THE DANGERS OF CU

**E**xcuses for the abuse of universal rights are never acceptable, even if the abuses are carried out by religious or ethnic groups that they themselves can be subject to discrimination. It is ridiculous to describe a person as bigoted, or even more inaccurately and unscientifically as "racist", when the gross abuses of human rights committed under the name of Islam are noted, or when theocratic organisations of the same ilk are described as "Islamofascist".

Religious bigots of other denominations may abuse the use of the term. It may be abused by warmongers who desire access to a country's resources that are under the control of an Islamic dictatorship, or by bigots who assign all Muslims under the banner. But this does not address the main points of similarity where it does exist, such as those once illustrated by Christopher Hitchens; a glorification of death and murder, a hostility to modernity and nostalgia for a medieval

past, anti-Jewish paranoia, commitment to sexual and gender repression, and opposition to artistic expression. In short, a rejection of individual rights and civil liberties. It is no accident that such organisations and regimes are collectivist and organised through an elite vanguard.

None of this is to suggest that Islam is somehow special in this regard; among the other Abrahamic faiths it is noticeable that the biggest supporters of Israeli expansionism exists to establish a Greater Israel, *Eretz Yisrael Hashleimah*, "from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates" are fundamentalist Christian Zionists, a movement with a primary presence in the United States. Engaging in Dispensationalist predictions, they claim that the return of Jews to Israel is a precondition for the second coming, and end-times.

The Jerusalem Declaration on Christian Zionism of 2006, consisting of several regional Christian churches (and especially

deriving from Christian Arabs), makes the very blunt point: "The Christian Zionist programme provides a worldview where the Gospel is identified with the ideology of empire, colonialism and militarism. In its extreme form, it places an emphasis on apocalyptic events leading to the end of history..." By the same token, the Islamic fascists argue for the same, except from their religious perspective. Large and influential international fundamentalist Islamicist organisations such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, argue for a global caliphate where only Muslims can vote or hold office, for military conscription for the same, the complete implementation of Sharia law, and segregation of the sexes.

Bin Laden may have held Noam Chomsky in favourable regard but the feeling was not reciprocated. Chomsky may have rightly expressed his anger at how the United States completely ignored international law in the assassination of Bin Laden, how no attempt was made for capture, and how evidence

## 'New Atheists' accused of 'Islamophobia'

NATHAN Lean, a Washington DC native and Middle East specialist who has recently written a book entitled *The Islamophobia Industry*, last month launched a stinging attack on prominent contemporary atheists, including Professor Richard Dawkins.

"Muslims," Lean wrote of Dawkins on the Salon.com website, are "a group that have come to occupy a special place in his line of fire – and in the minds of a growing club of no-God naysayers who have fast rebranded atheism into a popular, cerebral and more bellicose version of its former self."

Lean, himself a non-believer, argued that few atheists in the Western world historically paid much attention to Islam, concentrating instead on debunking Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Judaism. But after the September 11 attacks, the New Atheists "found their calling". Criticism of all religion on an equal footing was one thing. But the New Atheists, he argued, have begun flirting with Islamophobes, using irrational hatred, as



Nathan Lean

opposed to rational critique, to attack an already deeply misunderstood and much maligned faith.

"Conversations about the practical impossibility of God's existence and the science-based irrationality of an after-life slid seamlessly into xenophobia over Muslim immigration or the practice of veiling," wrote Lean. "The New Atheists became the new Islamophobes, their in-

vectives against Muslims resembling the rowdy, uneducated ramblings of backwoods racists rather than appraisals based on intellect, rationality and reason."

Writing on Al Jazeera's website a few days later, Murtaza Hussain, a Toronto based Middle East analyst, penned an even more scathing critique. Hussain was particularly critical of Sam Harris, a neuroscientist by trade whose atheist books "The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation" have made him one of the leading anti-religious polemicists of his age.

Harris hit back, saying there was nothing remotely racist about his criticisms of Muslims: "I criticise white, Western converts in precisely the same terms," he said. "In fact, I am even more critical of them, because they weren't brainwashed into the faith from birth."

He added: "There is no such thing as 'Islamophobia'." This is a term of propaganda designed to protect Islam from the forces of secularism by conflating all criticism of it with racism and xenophobia.



# term for a real problem

S OF CULTURAL AND POLICAL RELATIVISM IN RELATION TO ISLAM



Muslims pictured demonstrating in London against the visit to the UK of Dutch MEP Geert Wilders in 2009. Wilders is an outspoken critic of Islam

of Bin Laden's own alleged crimes in 9/11 never made it to the light of a properly constituted court. Chomsky correctly points out: "We might ask ourselves how we would be reacting if Iraqi commandos landed at George W Bush's compound, assassinated him, and dumped his body in the Atlantic. Uncontroversially, his crimes vastly exceed bin Laden's ..." But it should be recognised that these are arguments of a principled secular liberal democracy, where the rule of law is applied equally to all. This is not the ideology of Islamicist terrorism espoused by Bin Laden.

As with any political organisation that does not incorporate the principles of secularism and liberal democracy the prospect of fascist collectivism remains close. Islamic organisations, even mainstream ones, can tend towards this. One only has to read the Hezbollah manifesto and the Hamas Covenant to see how such organisations fail at these basic tenets; even more moderate organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood include much of the same orientation, and even from their earliest days.

Whilst there are extremely good argu-

ments that their use of externally-orientated violence is a response to the violence inflicted upon them, especially from Israel and the United States, there should be little doubt with the acquisition of power that violence will also be performed internally to regions that they rule; when female rape victims are whipped for immorality, or when gay men stoned, or apostates beheaded – it is recognition that this is a political movement that considers the implementation of their interpretation of religious law higher than universal human rights.

The moral relativism and political expediency behind any nation's "right to autonomy" is foolish at best. No so-called right to national self-determination is an excuse for an autocratic, totalitarian regime to engage in widespread and systematic abuse of human rights. "Nations" as such don't have rights at all – only people have rights, for they are moral agents. The only sense in which national self-determination makes any sense whatsoever is when the people who inhabit a particular country are able to determine for themselves, through free and fair democratic elections, what government

and economy they should have and how their public sphere should be organised. But not their private lives, and with all citizens treated with equality. Do we remember the Iraqi Ba'athist genocidal Al-Anfal campaign against the Kurds, a deliberate attempt of ethnic extermination? Is this the sort of "national self-determination" that its advocates believe in?

Of course, imperialist nations like the United States preach self-determination when it suits them, and liberal-democratic rights when it suits them, depending on the circumstances. Their interventionist decisions, both when they are right and, more often, when they are wrong, are driven more by the influence of corporations seeking monopoly resource rights and special contracts, and the living reality of the military-industrial complex.

These are, however, indications of the need to strengthen the principles of internationalism rather than reject them. Moral hazards are solvable problems, and refusing to attempt to solve them makes the situation worse.

Political preferences also lead one to conclude that despite its colonialism, its apartheid (*hafka*) policies, its occupation, and messianic nationalism, Israel still offers a system that is closer than others in the region to the standards desired. It shows retrograde steps that mark the countdown of its society, whereas at the same time, the Arab Spring moves shakily towards understanding how to apply individual rights and democracy in societies that have deeply ingrained irrational religious conservatism.

The danger of cultural relativism, and the argument that religious practices must be tolerated suffers the damaging prospect that it leads into political relativism. It's also a genuinely imperialistic and racist pseudo-philosophy because it raises the value of culture over that of individuals, as a higher "enlightened" and ostensibly "tolerant" ideal. In short, it damns people to their "paradigms", which, by the way, are just as true as ours. It is not paternalistic to argue that some ideas are plainly wrong and others are superior. Theocracy falls into the "wrong" camp; secular and liberal democracy is superior to it.

• After posting this article on the [isocracy.org](http://isocracy.org) website, the authors requested that it be republished in the *Freethinker*, and we agreed to do so.



# Infinitesimal foundations of personhood

Extracted from the new novel *Ambiguous Embrace* by **ENVER CARIM**

**B**aldock is still here in the kitchen, gazing at me across the table. He is full of a crumbled, sterile wisdom in his buttoned-down shirt collar, dark suit and tie.

"Have you been inside a molecular biology lab?" I ask him.

"No," he says. "Never."

"You should visit one some time."

"Why should I do that?"

"Hel-lo. Welcome to the new millennium. Because that's where the secrets of life are being laid bare. That's where the code of life is being redeployed. There are no graven images in our labs, no icons on walls, nothing to induce people to debase themselves in front of idols – just Petrie dishes, gels, centrifuges, pipettes, electrophoresis apparatus, time-lapse microscopes, gene-sequencing machines, vats of liquid nitrogen. You'll see things which most people in the history of the world never knew existed because they were grossly ignorant."

"What things?"

"Things so tiny they are measured in millionths of a metre – blood cells, bone cells, chains of amino acids we call polypeptides. You'll see some of the hundred thousand different kinds of protein of which we humans are constituted and which our genes code for. And things infinitely smaller still, the membranes of cells whose dimensions we measure in nanometres – billionths of a metre. You'll see that genes don't exist in magical isolation, but depend crucially on their cellular environment, on the cytoplasmic fluid in which they are immersed, and on the catalysing enzymes with which they interact. Cells are tremendously busy places, Mister Baldock – they're chemical factories where the structures of our bodies and brains are made, repaired, bits killed off as necessary. Don't you think that your god can be known through human intellect, that Providence, if it exists at all, achieves its ends through human means? Has it ever occurred to you that our minds can, step by step, discover the infinitesimal foundations of personhood and perhaps recognise thereby traces of our own transcendence?"

Baldock doesn't reply. He just looks at me. It is he who has invaded my privacy, not I his, so I keep eye contact and tell him straight: "Researchers in labs like ours have no time for quacks who know next to nothing about the nature of life."

"That's not life – that's science. That's got nothing to do with life as God created it. It's the work of mad scientists running amok."

"In that case, I'm glad to be mad. Did your god give us brains, Baldock?"

"Of course God gave us brains," he says, looking askance at me. "He made us the highest form of life in his creation."

"Shouldn't we use the brains we have – to improve our lives, to improve our conditions, as people have always done – even if some say it's mad to do so?"

"Of course we should, but that's quite different from doing the Devil's work, trying to play God, changing human nature, cobbling monsters together in those temples of arrogance."

I don't respond. It seems pointless to do so, so there's a long pause in our conversation during which we keep gazing at each other. The purpose of his visit puts me in mind of the automobile manufacturer Henry Ford who, in 1913, when Lenin and his comrades in Russia were eulogising the workers of the world, ushered in a more enduring revolution in Detroit. Henry Ford used the time-and-motion studies of the 1890s to introduce the moving conveyer-belt assembly-line which boosted worker efficiency enormously and made industrial production soar.

Henry Ford famously said that history was a load of bunk.

History, after all, was when disease and ignorance reigned supreme despite entire populations praying to a plethora of supposedly powerful gods: god of fire, god of the sea, goddess of wisdom, god of war – you name it, there was a god for it.

Who but the incorrigibly dense today believe in a god of storms and winds? Or in a messenger god, whether it's called Hermes or Mercury? Or in a god of pain that has to be bribed with sacrifices to make the agony in stomach ulcers subside and go away? Probably, disease and ignorance held sway because people bowed their heads to gods instead of getting on with the job of being self-reliant, discovering the true causes of things, and improving their conditions.

It occurs to me during the pause in the conversation with Baldock that those impotent gods have merged over the centuries into a divine essence that makes extraordinary promises, which is why it is adored by so many millions of devotees on both sides of the Atlantic.

On the one hand, it promises to lift whole swathes of my fellow Americans, including officials at the highest levels of government, bodily right out of their clothes and, despite the laws of gravity and the principles of aer-

odynamics, let alone the total lack of oxygen and the high-energy cosmic rays that are lethal beyond Earth's magnetic field, waft them in a process called "the Rapture" up to a piece of real estate in the sky known as "heaven for born-again". This is to be their reward for resolutely despising homosexuals whom they regard as "abominations", for opposing or, better still, bombing, abortion clinics, for undermining the Constitution by forcing Bible discussion in schools, repealing habeas corpus in a de facto way which the Boston Globe described as "part of a larger slide toward tyranny", suppressing dissenting opinions, tapping the phone-calls of American citizens, monitoring the books that people read as happens in a police state, and for brain-washing women to refrain from sex no matter how old they are until their union with one particular man – until death do them part – has been ritually sanctified in a place of self-abasement.

Such are the criteria for being "saved". Such behaviour is what "goodness" connotes. This is the route to the Pearly Gates. In that exclusive place in the sky they shall dwell in unchanging bliss forever more, bliss characterised by their ability to continue eating, thanks to their unperished bodies, pizzas and burgers and freedom fries and huge tubs of popcorn and sugared water in endless supplies.

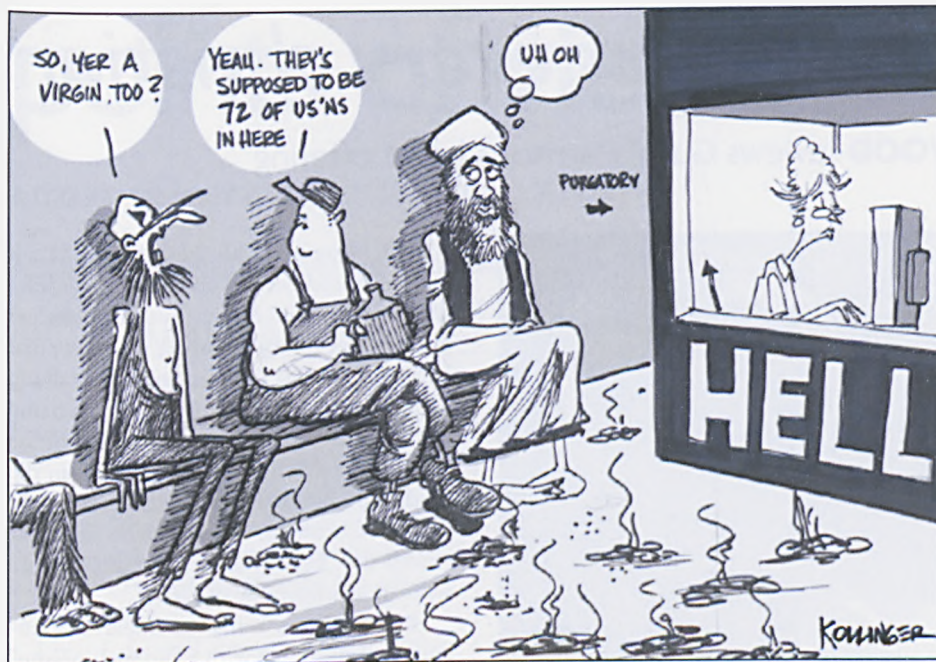
And as a consequence of this patriotic diet, it will be their honour, not only to use celestial lavatories where their celestial shit is flushed away down a celestial sanitation system (where to? back on Earth?), but also to waddle through eternity as they congratulate themselves on being part of the select cohort chosen for immortality.

On the other hand, this divine essence that goes by various names promises bearded men in the Middle East and their spiritual kin elsewhere on the planet sole sexual use in paradise of seventy-two virgins if they become martyrs and die while killing as many infidels as possible. Hence the attractions of suicide trucks laden with explosives. Hence the appeal of bombing commuter trains taking workers to their jobs and blowing up people on holiday eating in restaurants. Hence the fervour with which airliners full of shrieking passengers are crashed into skyscrapers.

It's all for religion. It's all for credit piled up in a ledger beyond the clouds, for the glorification of a demonic obsession.

The pull of religion's death wish is so





powerful that it instils zealots with a peculiar inventiveness: they come up again and again with ingenious ways to overcome apparently impregnable fortifications, though they aren't averse to bombing soft targets.

Their reward for departing this mortal coil in such grisly fashion – body parts blown on to roofs across the road, brains splattered on shards of shattered glass, blood and splintered bone everywhere – and for persecuting

women at every turn, frustrating them and smothering their potential, and for vilifying gays and lesbians to the nth degree just as their counterpart Taliban brandishing Bibles in America do – their reward includes not only doe-eyed hours whom no man or jimn has ever touched before and whose luscious breasts and pubic hair can be seen from afar through their diaphanous garments, and who never say no to your erection in that blessed

milieu, but also couches to recline on lined with silk brocade and green cushions on the finest carpets, and fruit trees near to hand, and date-palms and pomegranates, and a fountain sprinkling water until the cows come home no matter where in that circumcised Valhalla you happen to be located.

Wishful thinking: a kaleidoscope of comely outcomes for the terminally deluded. The rewards in paradise for female suicide bombers aren't specified, according to my wife Sophie who studied French and Arabic and lived for a while in France, Jordan and Egypt.

Perhaps women jihadis don't warrant rewards in a Bedouin, Wahhabi heaven, Sophie says, no matter how good they were on Earth, no matter how many bombs they planted. No handsome well-built studs, then, who can keep their cocks erect for all eternity.

Or are there rewards only for non-Arab non-Wahhabi Muslim women whose understandings of the Qur'an and Sunnah are by way of gentler interpretations, not so red in tooth and claw?

The credulity of so many of my fellow Americans and so many other people in every hemisphere puts me in mind of a sentence written 150 years ago by another American Henry, Henry David Thoreau, in his enduring book about self-reliance called *Walden*: "Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous."

## What is the meaning of life?

**PETER SUTHERLAND** reviews *Philosophy: All that Matters*, an introduction to philosophy by Julian Baggini that includes valuable and witty links to original sources

JULIAN Baggini seems to be the current acceptable face of British humanism. In terms of stature and gravitas, however, he is but a pale shadow of his predecessors such as Bertrand Russell, Julian Huxley, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. He is not an original thinker; however he is a very clear explainer of other people's ideas and a clear writer. This is a major merit of his new introductory guide to philosophy.

This wee book is part of "All that Matters" series, but how can all that matters in over 2,000 years of world philosophy possibly be covered in 134 pages? The "Teach Yourself" series would have been a far more suitable series for it to belong in.

There are 11 chapters. Some deal with mainstream philosophical issues such as: What is truth? What is knowledge? What is moral? What is the best form of government: democracy or autocracy? However there are a few more offbeat issues such as the value of art which I didn't expect to find in a book on philosophy.

The mini-chapters are all interesting in

their limited way, dealing with the nature of truth in 16 pages. Baggini can't be comprehensive in his sources, so he relies largely on his three philosophical heroes: Plato, Aristotle and Hume. This leaves huge gaps. He discusses the nature of society without even mentioning Karl Marx!

I found the longer chapters more interesting: "Representing reality" (14 pages) and "Ultimate reality" (16 pages).

I am a retired freethinker who studied the social sciences, but not philosophy as such. All my adult life I have been trying to get into the basics of philosophy.

In the more substantial chapters Baggini helps me to do this by, for example, explaining the distinction between Plato's idealism and Aristotle's empiricism. I also found the chapter on the philosophy of science a helpful reminder of the basics: from Popper's thesis that a claim of scientific truth must be capable of being proved wrong to Kuhn's paradigm shift.

In the shorter chapters, however, there is little for the reader to get her teeth into. For

instance in the case of *Surveying the Heavens* he examines the nature of religious belief. Unlike many freethinkers he admits that there are basic needs that organised religion provides eg to belong in a community. However he does not push this further other than that we freethinkers need our own communities in which we care for each other and offer assistance, particularly as we get older.

The best section of the book is at the end where Baggini gives one hundred ideas/recommendations for further activities relating to philosophy: ten classics (for us really to get our teeth into) plus five good introductions; ten principles plus ten common fallacies; five philosophical films (*The Life of Brian* is one), plays and novels; five great paintings of philosophers; ten public philosophers worth listening to (he does not include himself); five sites of philosophical pilgrimage; ten quotes, and five podcasts plus websites.

Ten Common Fallacies is a particularly intriguing read.

(Continued on p14)



# 50 simple questions for every christian

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews Guy P Harrison's latest offering

In his chapter "Does Christianity make sense?" Guy Harrison cites perhaps the most senseless dogma Western god-worshippers have ever concocted, the concept of one god in three persons. Not being a biblical scholar, he is unaware that it is, like most male-god theology, simply a masculinization of the matriarchal religion of the ancient Greeks, specifically the triple-goddess who was simultaneously virgin, mother and hag. "If true, it means that God sent himself to earth, sacrificed himself to himself, and then returned to be with himself. ... Temporary pain aside, if Jesus was God and knew that he would return to Heaven, where is the big sacrifice? ... There seems to be a very serious problem with the claim that God sent his son to Earth as a sacrifice for us because God and Jesus are supposed to be the same being."

Since Christians recognize that there is no sane rationalization for such an absurdity, they instead claim that it is unacceptably rude of the skeptic to ask.

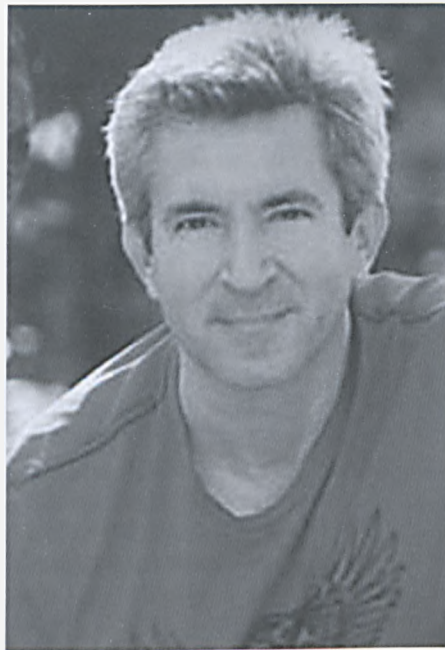
It is even considered rude to ask about religion in circumstances that logically warrant doing so. For example: What effect would his Mormonism have on his attitude toward the First Amendment if Mitt Romney became President of the United States? "Imagine if a reporter were to ask the President for specific views on the Bible. ... It wouldn't matter if the President had just finished quoting the Bible ... There is little doubt that the reporter would be run over and left for dead on the one-way street of religion."

In the chapter, "What is atheism?" Harrison explains "If you do not think that at least one god is real, then you are an atheist." Atheism is not a dogma, any more than not collecting stamps is a hobby.

He asks, "Why hasn't the Bible convinced more people?" He answers "For the Christian, the Bible often is exhibit A in the case for Christ. For many skeptics it is exhibit A in the case against Christ."

The explanation for Christians citing the book Isaac Asimov identified as "the most potent force for atheism ever conceived" is that "Very few seem to have actually read the Bible." If they did read it, they would recognize the character mistranslated as "God" in English as the most sadistic, evil, insane mass murderer in all fiction.

"What do prophecies prove?" Answer: "Another problem with prophecies in the Bible about Jesus is that they are in the Bible.



Guy P Harrison

... Imagine if someone showed you a book ... in which there was a prediction of an alien spaceship landing on Earth in one chapter and then confirmation that it happened in another chapter. Would that be enough to convince you?"

"What do evil atheist dictators prove?" Answer: "It is also fair to speculate about how many more people Stalin, Mao, or Pol Pot might have abused and killed if they had sincerely believed in God and felt their efforts were part of some divine plan ... Imagine if those men were driven not only by a lust for power and control but also to fulfill some divine plan they sincerely believed in," the way Hitler sincerely believed that his extermination of an opposition religion constituted "doing the Lord's work."

"Does Jesus heal the sick?" Comment: "If Jesus is real, why wouldn't he cure, say, every Christian child with a life-threatening disease or injury?"

"Why do people go to Hell?" Comment: "Maybe it's just me, but I don't like a justice system that might place a Catholic Hitler in Heaven and a Jewish Ann Frank in Hell."

He does clarify that only a minority of Christians believe that deathbed repentance guarantees a Christian eternity in Heaven, or that non-Christians are automatically consigned to Hell.

On the question on which biblical scholars are divided, whether there was ever a historical Jesus onto whose biography the Christian fairy tales were posthumously

grafted, he agrees with the majority: "I am not convinced beyond all doubt that a Jewish preacher named Jesus lived in Palestine in the first century. However, I suspect that he probably did. To be clear, I am talking here about a non-supernatural human being named Jesus who inspired a religion, not the god who performed miracles, rose from the dead, and now involves himself in the daily lives of Christians. Scholars who are convinced that Jesus lived far outnumber those who are confident he did not."

That brings to mind an unpleasant encounter I once had with a "no such person" dogmatist who, even though one of us is a historian and the other is not, accused me of embarrassing myself by agreeing with the majority of biblical scholars instead of with him. Harrison's endorsement of my own conclusion on a question for which there may never be sufficient evidence to provide a definitive answer does not prove that he is right. But it does help incline me to view him favorably. For anyone looking for ways to respond to curable believers, this is an extremely useful book.

*50 simple questions for every christian*, Guy P Harrison, 2013, is published by Prometheus Books, 59 John Glenn Drive, Amherst NY 14228-2119, ISBN 978-1-61614-727-3, 350 pp, ppb, \$18.00.

## Philosophy: All that Matters

(Continued from p13)

He ends with the five most intractable philosophical questions of all time and the five best philosophical one-liners. I'll share one of them with you: Seventy-seven-year old Freddie Ayer intervened to stop Mike Tyson harassing the model Naomi Campbell. Tyson said "Do you know who the fuck I am? I'm the heavyweight champion of the world". To which the humanist professor replied "And I am the former Wykeham Professor of Logic. We are both pre-eminent in our field. I suggest we talk about this in a rational manner." It worked.

This compact book has grown on me as I have read it. I recommend that you read it if you wish to get a basic introduction to a few core concepts and to amuse yourself.

*Philosophy: All That Matters*, 2012; publisher: Hodder Education; price: £7.99; format: paperback; length: 149 pages.



# points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO [BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK](mailto:BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK).

## MARGARET THATCHER: NOT ALL BAD



I AM writing this after learning from the editor that the *Freethinker* was planning to run a piece in the May issue about the late Margaret Thatcher. Am I alone in finding the polarised reaction to her death – almost a quarter of a century after she left office – extraordinary?

While I detested the woman at the time (the 1980s were a seamless succession of protests and demos for me, as for so many), a more objective appraisal, with the benefit of hindsight, might be that some of what she did was inevitable (there was, indeed, “no alternative” at the time), and that she actually did some good – as well as an awful lot of bad.

At the end of the 1970s Britain was in a cycle of terminal decline. Painful though it was, Thatcher remade Britain’s obsolete economic base (sorry, miners), and tamed bolshie trade union barons who were paralysing our country at every turn. It needed doing. There is a theory, that through a process of “appellation”, history calls into being leaders who are required at a particular time, to do a particular job. In 1979, desperate times required desperate measures, so it’s no surprise that the savvy British electorate repeatedly voted for a “conviction” politician who could get things done.

She was also, to her credit, a patriot. Recently released Government papers show that while weak Tory ministers were prepared to wash their hands of the Falkland Islanders when the Argentinean junta invaded, it was Thatcher who provided the backbone to reclaim British sovereignty (she didn’t always support dodgy right-wing regimes, although she supported and emulated most of them). Lucky she may have been to win that war, but in just four years, Britain’s pride, confidence and international standing was well on the way to recovery.

And although it came at a high price, the arms race, she did provide the resolve to bring down Communism once and for all, thus liberating many millions of people from socialist oppression, snooping and micro-meddling in their lives. Nearer home, she also faced down SinnFein-IRA and INLA terrorists. To emerge from the rubble of Brighton’s Grand Hotel, in which friends and colleagues had just been killed, then go

on to deliver a defiant, word-perfect, keynote speech – wow!

By allowing the sale of council homes, she provided many working class people with their first taste of independence, mobility, and freedom from the tyranny of *Guardian*-reading apparatchiks who had, hitherto, revelled in running and controlling their lives. This was the key to her repeated electoral success. She went too far in saying “There’s no such thing as society” (thus giving the green light to unbridled greed and corroding any sense of social responsibility), but she was, in many ways, an enabler, a liberator. If you didn’t make the most of those opportunities, then more fool you.

In spite of cosy teatime chats with Mary Whitehouse, she was also instrumental in setting up Channel 4 (the left-wing TV presenter and critic, Paul Ross, has described this as her major bequest to the nation), a radical TV channel known for pushing boundaries politically, culturally and sexually. She may have identified strongly as a Christian, but how much substance was there to it? She brazenly ignored senior clerics who repeatedly admonished her for her lack of compassion and care. Even the awful Section 28 wasn’t central to her mission – senior Tories have admitted this was just “red meat” to the Christian wolves in the party.

Britain’s standing in the world today owes

much to Margaret Thatcher. She helped put Britain back on the road to the kind of self-belief that ultimately found expression in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Olympics and Paralympics in 2012. We can now punch far above our weight in the international arena and we are well placed to do much good in the world.

Yes, much of what she did laid the foundations for the social and economic malaise we face today, but at least these are new problems, not the same old problems we faced in 1979. In the wake of Thatcherism, modern Conservatives have fashioned themselves in deliberate contrast to her uncaring, divisive, strident style. Nonetheless, we are all, partly, inevitably, made in her image.

As freethinkers, we shouldn’t join in with the mindless eulogies that conveniently air-brushed out Thatcher’s failings, but neither should we go along with the leftie-losers whose lives, they claim, have been irredeemably blighted by a Prime Minister who left office 23 years ago! There have been four serving Prime Ministers since, one of whom also achieved three election victories.

So don’t mourn her passing and don’t celebrate her demise. Be admiring and admonishing, where appropriate, then move on. Everybody else has.

**Diesel Balaam**  
London

## HARWOOD’S BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

FOLLOWING Michael Levin’s letter (*Points of View*, April) I would like to draw his attention to the “Translator’s Introduction” in my *The Protestant Bible Correctly Translated*, available from Amazon.co.uk: “There has long been a need for a translation of the Judaeo-Christian Bible that did not deliberately mistranslate certain words for the purpose of concealing that the biblical authors’ beliefs were quite different from those of modern Jews, Christians and Muslims ... Where I could do so without falsifying the Hebrew [or Greek], I deliberately chose a connotative translation that would force the reader to evaluate the behavior of a biblical hero more critically than he may have done in the past.”

Now let me quote from Frank Zindler’s review of my two-volume translation, from *American Atheist*, May/June 2006: “In all of Western history, I know of only four men who have managed to translate the entire Judeo-Christian Bible ... Dr Harwood has surpassed all his predecessors ... Harwood has rendered serious students and critics of the Christian scriptures a magnificent further service: he has scrupulously avoided the deliberate mistranslations that have prevented readers from perceiving the true nature of the documents underlying the English prose ... It is a complete education in all things biblical. We can only wait with amusement to see what the Bible colleges will be able to do about it.”

**William Harwood, PhD**  
Canada



# Barbarity in paradise



Muslim protesters in the Maldives express their anger in 2011 over being told by UN representative Navi Pillay that aspects of their sharia law were barbaric

Some 900,000 visitors a year travel to the Indian Ocean paradise resort of the Republic of the Maldives. But until 2011, most tourists were unaware that this island nation – a British protectorate from 1887 until 1965 – had fallen under the influence of radical Islam and that human rights were increasingly being abused.

Towards the end of 2011 UN human rights chief Navi Pillay visited the Maldives to deliver a scathing attack on these abuses, in particular the flogging of women convicted of pre- or extra-marital sex.

In 2009 alone, the courts sentenced over 180 people for flogging for the “crime” of fornication. Almost 90 per cent of them were women. However, under the international human rights laws and standards, to which the Maldives is a signatory, “fornication” is not a recognised offence and member states must not criminalise or punish people who engage in consensual sexual activity, or are victims of abuse.

On November 24, 2011, Pillay told Maldivian parliamentarians that they were to cease the “barbaric” practice, saying it was one of the most inhumane forms of violence against women. She called all for “much needed” public debate on the issue.

A day later, at a press conference at the United Nations Building in Maldives’ capital and largest city Malé, she called on Maldivian authorities to remove the “discriminatory” constitutional provision that requires every citizen in the Maldives to be a

Muslim. This did not go down well with the locals. Protesters gathered to demonstrate against her remarks, and Foreign Minister Ahmed Naseem made it clear that his government would not allow debates to be held in the Maldives on issues that ran contrary to the fundamentals of Islam.

Outrage over the flogging of women erupted once again in February this year when a juvenile court found a 15-year-old girl from the island of Feydhoo in Shaviyani Atoll guilty premarital sex, and sentenced her to 100 lashes and eight months of house arrest. The girl’s stepfather raped her for years and then murdered the baby she bore.

The sentence sparked international fury, and the authorities were forced to back down, saying that they recognised that the girl, in this instance, was a victim, not a criminal. Not satisfied with this climb-down, the human rights organisation Avaaz, which has 20 million members in 194 countries, launched a petition in March calling on President Mohammed Waheed Hassan “to do more to protect vulnerable women and children. We welcome your government’s initial intervention in the case of the 15-year-old rape victim, but real justice will only be delivered when you end the practice of flogging in the Maldives, and change the law so that it better protects the victims of rape and sexual abuse.” By mid-April, the petition had over two million signatures.

When the girl was originally sentenced, Avaaz said on its website: “It’s hard to be-

lieve, but a 15-year-old rape survivor has been sentenced to be whipped 100 times by a court in the Maldives! Let’s put an end to this lunacy by hitting the government where it hurts: their tourism industry.”

Avaaz also threatened to sabotage the Maldivian tourist industry “through hard-hitting advertisements in travel magazines and online until he [the President] abolishes this outrageous law”.

But the former secretary general of the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI), Mohamed Ibrahim Sim, told *Mini-van News* that he doubted a tourism boycott would “change the government’s position on religious issues”.

He said that “the religious faction [in the government] is stronger than ever before. It will not affect government policy in any way – it will just attract negative publicity”.

Sim added that “exclusive resorts will still be exclusive. [Tourists] have no idea what is going on in the real Maldives and they probably don’t want to know. They come here for a relaxing, stress-free holiday”.

In the wake of international censure and the launch of its bid for re-election to the Vice Presidency of the UN Human Rights Council – on a platform of women, child and disabled rights – the Maldives Government expressed its concern over the sentencing, pledged to support the victim’s legal appeal, and announced the formation of a committee to review existing child protection mechanisms.