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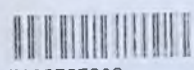


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Atheist Pride: increasing numbers are rallying in the US to support secularism



In the spring of this year, what was thought to be America's first Atheist Pride parade took place in Wisconsin, and hundreds turned out to support the event, organised by the Atheists, Humanists, & Agnostics of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Chris Calvey, Executive Director for the American Humanist Association, said that the Pride Parade was part of the student club's second annual Freethought Festival.

"Early on in the planning, I was inspired by the [LGBT] Wisconsin Capitol Pride Parade. I wondered if there had ever been an atheist version of a pride parade, and much to my surprise, it appears that no one has attempted anything like it before," said Calvey.

"We realised that we had the opportunity to do something groundbreaking, and that the Freethought Festival would be the perfect time to do it."

Dan Barker, co-President of the national atheist organisation Freedom From Religion Foundation, was one of the speakers at the rally, which culminated at the Wisconsin State Capitol.

The event drew a parallel with the 2012 Reason Rally, which was held in Washington, DC, and featured several famous atheist personalities. Ahead of the Atheist Pride march, Calvey compared and contrasted the two events. "The motivations and the goals of our event are essentially the same as the Reason Rally. Of course, the Reason Rally was the culmination of many years of planning with the combined efforts of all the national atheist organisations," said Calvey.

"What is unique about our Atheist Pride Parade is that it is a completely grassroots effort, organised by a handful of college students.

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Who opened that door?

OPHELIA BENSON ON LAST MONTH'S SHOCKING OHIO KIDNAPPING CASE

I keep thinking about John Fowles's novel *The Collector*. I haven't read it for decades but I have read it several times in the past. It's about a socially isolated young man who collects butterflies as a hobby; he inherits some money and has the bright idea of collecting a young woman. He buys an isolated rural house and builds a bunker in the basement, then collects the art student he's been stalking and locks her up in it.

Much of the novel is her prison diary, which gives a rich picture of her inner life, her plans and dreams and her memories of life before the bunker, in contrast to the shallow view of her the kidnapper has. It also gives a blood chilling sense of the agony of confinement and being at the mercy of the sort of person who would do such a thing. After about a year she gets ill, her captor refuses her pleas to summon a doctor, and she dies. The novel ends with him stalking a new candidate.

It's a terrific novel in many ways. Just for



A police photograph of Ohio kidnapper Ariel Castro

one thing, it's a male novelist portraying a young woman as fully dimensional, complicated, thoughtful, and *interesting*, which is something one *still* can't take for granted in male novelists even after some four decades of outspoken feminism.

What I didn't realize when I read it, though, is that it's also horribly realistic. At the time I thought it was a kind of horror story made plausible with a wealth of quotidian detail – Hampstead, grocery shopping, that kind of thing. An allegory about dominance and brutality, an exaggeration of female-male conflicts of interest, a thriller like *Psycho* – but not a realist novel such as Margaret Drabble or Mary McCarthy might have written.

Well now I know better, don't I?

A I write this, a few of the horrible details are emerging about the Ohio kidnapping case. Yesterday it was ropes and chains found in the house on Seymour Avenue, Cleveland. Today it's what Ariel Castro is alleged to have done about Michelle Knight's five pregnancies: he starved her for two weeks and then repeatedly punched her in the stomach until she miscarried. The three girls/women were allowed to go outside only twice in the ten years (eleven for Knight). *Ten years* confined to a room in a house, with no prospect of ever getting out, your life in the hands of a man horrible enough to do that.

Amanda Berry was allowed (or forced) to have a baby, a daughter who is now six. (What's up with that? Making Knight abort but not Berry? Did Castro think Knight wasn't hot enough to be a brood mare for him? Was it a beauty contest? Personality? Sexual skill?) I've been thinking about that daughter – born into a world where there's only a room in a house, and only four people. It appears that she's been out a little lately, in the back garden and to the park

with her (it chokes me to type it) "father", but what can her view of the world be? Does she think it's just normal for women to be captives and men to be free?

And with all this, people are still invoking and thanking God.

All right, I can see that people want to vent their joy about the escape and rescue and reunion; I can see that they want to express gratitude and that "God" is what comes first to mind for most people as the address to which gratitude is sent. But all the same I wish they would think it through – it only takes a second – and remember that if God allowed the escape now then God could have allowed it ten years ago. If God allowed the escape now why didn't God just abort the kidnapping ten years ago, and spare everyone all that misery?

Gina DeJesus's father Felix told reporters, "I have a high and mighty God to give me the strength to fight and see this day." Again, I get what he means and why it was comforting during those ten horrible years, but all the same, I wish people would connect the dots and realize that being grateful to god is indistinguishable from being grateful to Ariel Castro himself. A high and mighty god could just as easily give Ariel Castro the strength to refrain from kidnapping and torturing women as it could give their parents the strength to bear it.

So let's not keep thanking "God" for tiny mercies, ok? Amanda Berry found the courage to get the front door open a crack and scream her lungs out even though she was terrified that Castro was "testing" them. Charles Ramsey and Angel Cordero found the courage to help her get out and to shelter her and her daughter when she did. The police arrived and found the other two women, who had been too intimidated to follow Berry. No god had anything to do with it, or if a god did have anything to do with it, it had to do with *all* of it. Nobody would (I hope) be thanking Ariel Castro if he had simply opened the front door on May 5 and told the four captives they were free. We need to keep these things sorted.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights
with God

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IoM zealot blasted for 'ugly and outdated' prejudice

THE Isle of Man's Chief Minister Allan Bell last month lashed out at "ugly outdated prejudice" after a Methodist minister refused a house tenancy to a lesbian couple. Bell then vowed to speed-up the progress of a Manx equality bill, currently in the drafting stage.

As the law stands, Keith Price, minister at the Ramsey Independent Methodist Church, was within his rights to refuse to let his property to Kira Izzard and Laura Cull, but Bell insisted the rights of minorities must be respected on the island after years of effort to create an inclusive society.

He said: "I am extremely disappointed that this type of ugly, outdated prejudice survives after all the work that has been done over the past 20 years or so to make the island a more tolerant place.

"I do believe our society today is generally much more tolerant than it used to be. But this incident shows there are still isolated pockets of bigotry that can only be tackled through legislation.

"An Equality Bill, based on the UK Equality Act 2010, is already in the drafting process and will deal with discrimination of this kind. I have asked that preparation of this legislation be accelerated."

Price said his decision was guided by his religious beliefs based on scripture: "We are not homophobic but we do have a stance on sexuality. We understood that they [Ms Izzard and Ms Cull] were not a family so we said we couldn't proceed [with the rental agreement]. We believe that God has a plan for our lives within the context of marriage, the scripture is quite clear in its teaching on this."

Izzard said she was relieved to hear about Bell's reaction. "I am over the moon to know that people are taking this seriously – the Chief Minister has said he will move the legislation on and we believe him, we have no reason not to."

However, an on-line poll carried out on May 15 by IOM.co.im showed that a worrying number of respondents – 55 percent – believed that "it should not be against the law for a landlord to discriminate against potential tenants on the grounds of race, religion, disability or sexuality."

Just 33 percent said such legislation should have been passed on the Isle of Man years ago. On a more positive note, more than



Kira Izzard and Laura Cull launched a successful in-line petition to have the law changed on the Isle of Man

1,400 people in a single week signed an on-line petition launched by the couple calling for equality legislation.

Laura, 29, and Kira, 26, live in Governor's Hill, Douglas, and are due to enter into a civil partnership later this year.

Earlier in May, Tory peer Lord Fowler outraged fundamentalists when he addressed Christian concerns about gay marriage by saying: "An opinion poll in this country suggested that many Christians in Britain believed that they were a persecuted minority. I can only say that if anyone wants to see a

persecuted minority they should look at the plight of gay, lesbian and transgender people around the world.

"As you travel you go to countries where homosexuality is a criminal offence and where people who are suspected of being homosexual are persecuted and even forced to leave their family homes."

He added: "You can go to countries where the most popular political cause is to toughen up the laws against homosexuality rather than to modify them. Action of that kind has been taken in Russia, while in Kampala a Private Member's Bill promised capital punishment – now generously reduced to long imprisonment – for aggravated homosexuality and a penalty of imprisonment for those who suspected that someone was homosexual but failed to report it. You may feel that that kind of Bill would be thrown out. Not at all; the common view is that it will be passed."

Lord Fowler told fellow peers that they should support equal marriage because "Parliament should value people equally in the law, and that enabling same-sex couples to marry removes the current inequity."

The Tory peer reflected on his experiences at visiting HIV and AIDS programmes in the Ukraine and Russia and his shock at the "widespread intolerance and prejudice towards gay and lesbian people".

Priest jailed

AN Anglican priest who abused children in the 1960s and '70s has been jailed for 10 years. Canon Gordon Rideout, 74, from East Sussex, who is now retired, was found guilty of 36 separate sex offences by a jury at Lewes Crown Court last month.

The attacks took place between 1962 and 1973 in Hampshire and Sussex.

Most of them were carried out at Ifield Hall children's home in Crawley, when he was an assistant curate. The charges related to 16 different children.



Secularism on the rise in the US

We hope that our event will inspire other collegiate and local atheist groups to create pride parades in their own communities.”

Last November, AHA of UW-Madison received \$67,000 from the Student Services Finance Committee, reportedly the largest sum any atheist student group has received in any college in the United States. While the Wisconsin rally was a purely secularist event, increasing numbers of American atheists, humanists and sceptics are turning out at bigger, longer-established gay pride celebrations. The photo above, for example, shows non-believers who joined the Ashley Rukes gay pride parade, one of the largest of its kind in the Upper Midwest and the largest in Minneapolis, in 2011.

Increasing numbers of courageous young individuals have been raising their heads above the parapet to publicly challenge the mostly unconstitutional presence of religion in places of learning.

Most recent of these was Gage Pulliam, who attends Muldrow High School in Oklahoma. An atheist, Pulliam objected to the fact that Ten Commandment plaques are mounted in every classroom in the school. He contacted the Freedom From Religion Foundation and the FFRF immediately told the school that the plaques were in violation of the US Constitution (at the time of the FT going to press, it looked as if they were to be scrapped).

But they weren't coming down without a fight. Josh Moore, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Muldrow, described Pulliam's whistleblowing as "Christianity under attack within our own country".

Immediately after Pulliam alerted the FFRF to the violation, Pulliam told the media that, as a result of his complaint, his younger sister had suffered verbal harassment over the issue and some students had threatened violence against him. He said: "I want people to know this isn't me trying to attack religion. This is me trying to create an environment for kids where they can feel equal."

Earlier, a Louisiana student Zack Kopplin – now a history major at Rice University – was in the news when it emerged that he had a hand in a challenge to the state's school voucher programme that allowed taxpayers' money to be used to pay for private and religious school tuition, and effectively threw open the doors to creation-

(Continued from p1)

ist propaganda via the ludicrously-named Louisiana Science Education Act. This permits teachers in science classrooms to use creationism as a weapon against evolutionary theory. Kopplin decided to challenge the Act, and persuaded 78 Nobel laureates to join his campaign. Later he expanded his efforts to expose creationist private schools that receive public money through school vouchers, and his work earned him the first ever \$10,000 "Troublemaker of the Year" given by an entrepreneur who wanted to honour young people "who make a lot of noise fighting for a good cause".

Kopplin's campaign included the creation of a database with information about schools

scientists. He added: "The problem with this law is that there is no scientific controversy over evolution, only a political one. And the only real purpose to have a law like this is to sneak pseudo-science like creationism into classrooms. It gets even more clear that this law was meant for creationism, because it's legislative sponsor, Senator Ben Nevers publicly stated that it was meant to put creationism into the classroom. I'm fundamentally opposed to compromising students science education by teaching creationism. I believe science is vital to the future of our species."

Asked how he became involved in a campaign to expose the creationism taught in voucher schools, he replied: "Last summer, Alternet published a piece on a voucher school in Louisiana that taught the Loch

Ness Monster was real and disproved evolution. These schools were receiving public money and this seemed to be relevant to my campaign against the Louisiana Science Education Act and for accurate science to be taught with public money.

"I began to investigate Louisiana's program and eventually the programs nationally and found that the public funding of creationism through vouchers was a widespread phenomenon."

The Supreme Court of Louisiana's ruling means that public money now being used to pay private and religious school tuition should instead be going to

public schools. The Louisiana School Boards Association was cock-a-hoop over the decision, saying: "We are pleased that the Louisiana Supreme Court has reaffirmed a basic tenet of the state Constitution – that taxpayer money should go to public schools that are open to all students. We hope all state residents can understand the dangerous precedent that a voucher scheme has set and how such a programme undermines our local community schools. LSBA will continue to work towards its mission of service, support and leadership for local school boards and to ensure a quality public education for all students."

Less than happy with the decision is State Governor Bobby Jindal, a Hindu-turned-Catholic who fancies himself as a future US president.

He says he's determined to press on with the voucher scheme, albeit it in a different way, so that the schools involved can continue filling kids' heads with creationist propaganda.



Gage Pulliam, left, and Zack Kopplin

involved in voucher programmes, and the nonsense they were foisting on pupils.

For example, one Louisiana school calls scientists "sinful men", and a school in Florida branded evolution "the way of the heathen". Some schools in Indiana even take their kids to a creationism museum.

In a March interview with the Washington Post, Kopplin explained that the Louisiana Science Education Act was passed back in his sophomore year of high school.

This law allows creationism to be snuck into public school science classrooms through the use of supplemental materials to 'critique' evolution. It's a so-called 'academic freedom' bill which was drafted by the intelligent design creationism think tank, the Discovery Institute, and promoted locally by the religious right lobbying group, the Louisiana Family Forum, to teach the controversy over evolution. I got involved with this campaign [to repeal the act] my senior year of high school... So far we've gathered the support of 78 Nobel laureate

Young Moroccan forced into hiding after creating an organisation for ex-Muslims

EARLY in May *Al Jazeera* reported that a 22-year-old atheist student and blogger Imad Iddine Habib had gone into hiding a month after he created the Council of Ex-Muslims of Morocco, the country's first public atheist organisation.

The news service said that Habib had been forced to hide after Casablanca police launched an investigation into his activities, and that there were "conflicting reports" of a pending fatwa which would "condemn to death" Moroccans who renounce Islam.

Habib expressed concern for his safety in a Facebook statement, which said: "Whatever my fate will be in the next hours, the next days, the next weeks; killed, beaten, jailed, or anything else, I am not sorry for what I have done since I became an activist few years ago. I have shared with many people here thoughts and ideas, and have so many awesome memories.

"Both police and people are looking for me, I have nowhere to go, my life is at high risk ... However, I am happy, because I am not the only one fighting for a better world, I hope I will be the last man persecuted because of dogmatism, religions, or myths.

Shortly after, Maryam Namazie, spokesperson for a number of secular organisations in the UK, including the One Law for All Campaign against Sharia Law in Britain and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, revealed on her blog that Morocco's High Council of Ulemas (the highest government religious institution headed by the King) had in fact issued a fatwa decreeing the death penalty for Moroccans who leave Islam.

Currently, under Morocco's penal code, those who "impede or prevent worship" face imprisonment and fines.

She said: "The threats continue to escalate. Recently, Imad's father has been interrogated by the secret service. He was told to tell Imad to stop his activities and that this would be the 'last warning before they react'. Imad's registered address has also been raided by security forces."

She then called for an International Imad Day to take place on May 15, and invited supporters of the young atheist to sign a declaration calling on the Moroccan government "to guarantee his security and respect freedom of expression and thought."

The last email the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain received from Habib spoke of



Imad Iddine Habib

more threats and a final warning from the Moroccan government.

In the email, he said: "My Father has been interviewed by secret agents at work, they asked him about my activities, my beliefs, my relations and if some foreigners visit me, and they told him that I have to stop, and that I am considered an enemy of the country by showing bad things about it ... and [that] it is the last warning before they react."

Namazie said: "The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain unequivocally condemns efforts of the Moroccan government to silence Imad. Rather, the government should be prosecuting those who threaten

Imad and apostates with death, including members of Morocco's High Council of Ulemas who recently issued a fatwa decreeing the death penalty for Moroccans leaving Islam.

"This is our final warning to the Moroccan Government. Hands off Imad, prosecute those who threaten and incite murder, and respect freedom of expression and thought."

Among the first to sign Namazie's declaration were Peter Tatchell, Director of the Peter Tatchell Foundation, British philosopher A C Grayling, Professor Richard Dawkins, and David Silverman, President, American Atheists.

Archbishop admits abuse cover-up in Australia

MELBOURNE'S most senior catholic last month admitted that the Church had covered up child sexual abuse, was slow to act against abusing priests and placed its own interests ahead of victims.

Archbishop Denis Hart said a knighted former archbishop – Sir Thomas Francis "Frank" Little – kept reports of sexual abuse to himself and that the Church was keen to look after itself when addressing complaints, placing its reputation ahead of victims.

He described the sexual abuse scandal as "one of the darkest periods" in the Church's history and conceded that victims had committed suicide.

Hart told the ongoing Victorian parliamentary inquiry into clerical abuse that "archbishop Little kept all these things to himself and there were no records" Pressed on whether there had been a cover-up he said: "Well, I have to agree with that. The only person who's ultimately responsible is the archbishop at the time," he said.

"We were too slow to realise what was going on."

Archbishop Hart, who has been the Melbourne archbishop since 2001, agreed the crimes should have been revealed to the police.

Vulnerable white girls targeted by Oxford Muslim paedophile ring

AS we were going to press, seven members of a sadistic Muslim paedophile ring in Oxford were due to receive heavy prison sentences after they were found guilty in the Old Bailey last month of a catalogue of offences including conspiracy to rape, child prostitution and trafficking over an eight-year period.

Their victims – vulnerable school-girls – were plucked from the streets and care homes to be drugged, raped and sold into prostitution in Oxford.

Judge Peter Rook warned them: “You have been convicted of the most serious offences. Long custodial sentences are inevitable.” Two sets of brothers, Akhtar Dogar, 32, and Anjum Dogar, 31, and Mohammed Karrar, 38, and Bassam Karrar, 33, were convicted along with Kamar Jamil, 27, Assad Hussain, 32, and Zeeshan Ahmed, 27.

Fighting broke out in the dock at the



Old Bailey after two other defendants – Mohammed Hussain, 25, and a man who cannot be named for legal reasons – were cleared. Zeeshan Ahmed struck out at Mohammed Hussain before being bundled out of the dock by officers.

After the verdict, former Labour MP Ann Cryer faced criticism for blaming the Oxford paedophile ring on “cultural practices imported” from Pakistan. Thames Valley Police Chief Constable Sara Thornton warned about making generalisations about the men’s background, saying similar abuse can

happen “across the community”. But Cryer, who has campaigned on child grooming issues, said: “It’s cultural practices that have been imported into this country from Pakistan and we must not lose sight of that fact. We can’t just turn a blind eye to it. Speaking on a BBC Five Live phone-in, Cryer claimed there was a “very paternalistic culture in Pakistan”, saying not many women had voted in the recent elections there. She went on

to claim that Pakistani communities in the north of England had “imported the view that women are not worth much and therefore they do not care too much about what happens to them.”

Her views were criticised by the next caller, who said: “It’s shocking that you could demonise an entire culture with the behaviour of a few evil individuals from that culture.”

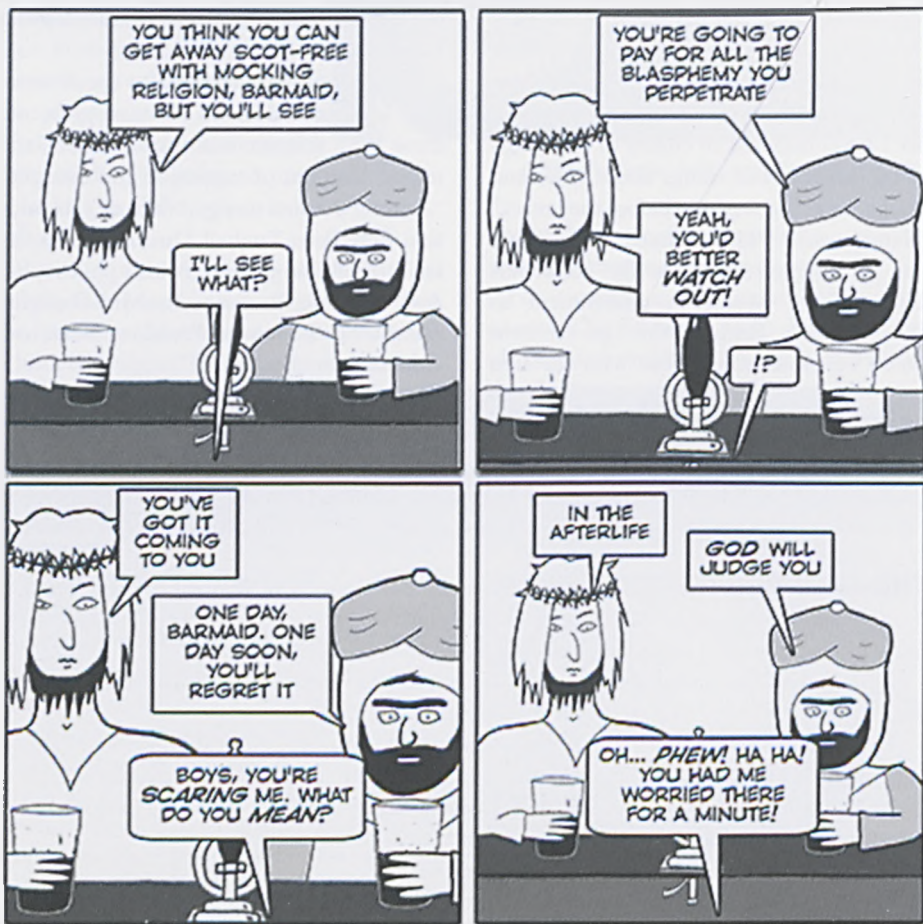
But the most damning indictment of Islam’s role in this horrible case came from Dr Taj Hargey, imam at the Oxford Islamic Congregation. Writing in the *Daily Mail*, he said: “The fact is that the vicious activities of the Oxford ring are bound up with religion and race: religion, because all the perpetrators, though they had different nationalities, were Muslim; and race, because they deliberately targeted vulnerable white girls, whom they appeared to regard as ‘easy meat’, to use one of their revealing, racist phrases.

“Indeed, one of the victims who bravely gave evidence in court told a newspaper afterwards that ‘the men exclusively wanted white girls to abuse’. “But as so often in fearful, politically correct modern Britain, there is a craven unwillingness to face up to this reality.” He added: “Moreover, reputable studies show that around 26 percent of those involved in grooming and exploitation rings are Muslims, which is around five times higher than the proportion of Muslims in the adult male population.

“To pretend that this is not an issue for the Islamic community is to fall into a state of ideological denial.

“But then part of the reason this scandal happened at all is precisely because of such politically correct thinking. All the agencies of the state, including the police, the social services and the care system, seemed eager to ignore the sickening exploitation that was happening before their eyes.”

Jesus & Mo



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The alternatives to religion

PAUL KARAFFA reflects on the choices

Over the last decade the New Atheism movement has given a new voice and face to atheists, freethinkers, and humanists, and it has been embraced by most giving much needed consensus among atheist thought, philosophy, science, and human rights. It has attracted brilliant minds such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and late Christopher Hitchens, among several others. The movement seems to have given some New Atheist leaders pause because not all want to simply dethrone religion, but to find an alternative to it.

Religionists constantly bombard atheists with unintelligible questions; one question often heard is “If there is no god and religion, what is the point of living?” Of course, no intelligent person derives truth from religion based on what that religion defines as purpose. Many would claim that there is no point or purpose at all, that we live as a random consequence like, as Richard Dawkins says, “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference.”

But there is a sincerity in the question since religionists, like most people, search for a purpose for their life. The question could be thought of as “If my purpose in life is wrong, what is yours?” or, perhaps better, “If I wish to have purpose for my life without religion, what alternatives are there?”

Purpose can be broken down into two types: human purpose and humanity’s purpose. The latter is typically consistent among atheists, claiming that humanity came into being randomly, moves through time randomly, and will end once the Earth is no longer inhabitable. However, human purpose is another question entirely, and atheists are not yet united on whether or not there is or can be individual human purpose. Traditionally, the opinion that there can be no purpose has been the consensus among atheists, but two other equally valuable opinions are beginning to rise to the surface.

On April 7, 2013, the Center for Inquiry’s Washington, DC chapter put on an event hosting A C Grayling, the Master of the New College of the Humanities in the United Kingdom, and author of a huge selection of books including *The Refutation of Scepticism* (1985), *The Future of Moral Values* (1997), *The Meaning of Things* (2001), *The Good Book* (2011), and recently published *The God Argument* (2013).



The Center for Inquiry’s Executive Director Melody Hensley pictured with A C Grayling

Grayling spoke about his recent book and answered questions about his alternative to religion. Grayling focuses the first half of *The God Argument* book re-evaluating the arguments for and against the belief in God. The latter half of the book focuses on humanism and how it could be used as a viable substitute for religion. Humanism, in its purest form, relates to the evaluation and embrace of human ethics and social justice through reason; it rejects dogma as a viable source for human understanding in these matters.

Grayling’s book highlights humanism as the preferred option when faced with religion as the alternative, and highlights the large and concerning influence of non-humanist individuals in education and law around the world.

Grayling’s opinion is a growing one, but the underlying message of humanism is based off of free choice, and therefore, in an evolutionary sense, that which is most desirable to the individual. So, why should humanism be the answer versus religion?

The 18th century philosopher Paul-Henri Thiry, baron d’Holbach, explained that death should not be a source of anxiety for humans since by definition a human cannot be there to experience it and therefore it should hold no significance. The idea is that the ego is all that matters in terms of reality. Many atheists subscribe to this way of thinking when it comes to death. But it also can be translated to an individual’s purpose. Meaning, since an individual only experiences one point of reference during their entire lifetime, individual purpose is completely customized to the individual. Therefore, the individual creates his or her own purpose.

This approach nicely fits into contemporary thinking, since it doesn’t state that one person’s purpose translates to another after their death, and still grants the liberties of individual thought and action to the individual without the restraints from predefined assumptions which have plagued religionists since the advent of theism.

Grayling’s offering – humanism instead of religion – is a good one, but it will not bring fulfillment for every individual.

Much like the diversity on the planet, humans can be very diverse with regard to ideas and desires. Humanism, then, seems like less of an organic option for those atheists that wish to stay away from a predefined assumption of what purpose should be for the individual.

In the end, the religionists have misrepresented their question. Believing your life to have purpose does not mean that your assumptions are true, but believing your assumptions are true could give your life purpose. Or as Christopher Hitchens said “It could be that all existence is a pointless joke, but it is not in fact possible to live one’s everyday life as if this were so.”

What separates the religionist from the atheist, or even humanist on the topic of individual purpose, is, then, no more than the basis of the assumption about what we consider to be true. And where we derive truth – through science or faith – ultimately sculpts our point of reference and our purpose.

As the world changes, and humans struggle to find direction in a world with less and less religion, it is hopeful that the world may discover an array of beautiful purpose-driven individuals as diverse and as beautiful as the life that springs here.

The Compassion Peak: Does atheism have an ‘animal problem’?

DALE DEBAKCSY poses the question

On a purely personal level, my two cats are trouble enough. Over the six years I’ve had them, my definition of “nice” furniture has devolved to “a chair that hasn’t visibly been vomited or urinated on in the past couple of days.” Every once in a while, when I see them lounging in the sun with a smile of pure bliss beneath their whiskers, I am seized with a sudden existential terror that I have lived my life guided by entirely the wrong stars. But that is nothing next to the professional trouble these balls of fuzz and ill-concealed contempt get me into. To hear theists talk about it, there is nothing that speaks against atheists so much as our opinions about and treatment of our brethren in the animal kingdom.

It’s the oddest argument, one that takes up two entirely contradictory positions at the same time and attempts to rout atheist ethics in the rhetorical confusion. The first half of the thesis is that atheists, through our focus on comparative DNA studies and evolutionary theory, want to bring animals up to the level of humans. As such, we are acting out of pure hypocrisy whenever we choose to save humans at the expense of other species. “How can you believe that we are descended from other life forms and still approve of things like mosquito eradication programs? Why aren’t you as indignant about pest control companies, who kill millions of living beings every day, as you are about the Crusades or Pol Pot?” Self-congratulatory chortling ensues and, if it were socially acceptable to perform wild hip thrusts of victory in a public debate forum, those would almost assuredly follow.

I admit to not understanding how theists see this line of reasoning as so unassailably ironclad. We are animals, and in particular mammals, which have survived as a clade on the principle of forming tight social units held together by clear distinctions between Clan and Not Clan. It has been an act of collective philosophical willpower to overcome that to form an embryonic idea of world peace among humans, and will take something more than that to cobble together the notion of an equitable sharing

of the planet with other animal life forms.

Atheists, in tossing aside the idea that God gave us soulless animals to satisfy our whims, have made some progress towards that notion. We’re working on it, and that we haven’t managed, in the half-century or so that we have been tolerated to publicly exist, to solve the problem of worldwide species integration isn’t a case of hypocrisy. Albert Einstein wasn’t a hypocrite when he recognized the need for a grand unified theory but didn’t then proceed to create one. It was a really hard problem that stumped him. We tend to give him credit for honestly pointing out the problem and trying his best to solve it. Had he stomped up and down and insisted, “Relativity explains everything, now deal with it” he would be a slightly less admirable figure in world history.

And yet, this is precisely the position that theists take so much pride in. “We have a soul, we’re the superior species, so there’s no contradiction between philosophy and action to worry about,” isn’t so much a solution to the problem of the man-animal dynamic as a clumsy dodge of the entire issue. I find it more worthwhile, and certainly more laudable, to admit that we have trouble living up to our highest ideals than to downgrade our ideals to the point that they cause no tension with our everyday desires. “Our book tells us to be awful to animals, and we are, whereas you guys try to be good, but sometimes can’t,” isn’t quite the slam-dunk that theists think it is, and it is decidedly curious that they have skated along on it for so long. Consistency in the name of cruelty is no virtue, and stumbling in the face of complexity is no vice.

But that is only half the argument. Remember there are two sides to this thing, each of which completely contradicts the assumptions made by the other. We have just seen the accusation that atheists are hypocrites because they overvalue animals philosophically but practically often side with humanity. The other argument is the photonegative of this one. Namely, it says that atheists, by removing the soul from the equation, have denigrated all life to the level of mere brute matter, and are therefore paving the way for a society

where people kill each other with as little thought as they pick a weed or slap a bottlefly. The first argument is that we love too much and too generally, and the second that we have no capacity for love at all.

We’ve seen this argument before. Every time our inclusion parameters have been broadened, there have always been those shaking their heads, proclaiming the downfall of society should we allow our sacred and traditional definitions to suffer such expansion. It’s going on right now here in the United States as a decreasing but shrill section of the country insists that allowing gay people to marry is going to denigrate the entire institution of marriage. It has happened every time a new racial or religious minority has been given civil rights. Always the same rhetoric that one can’t include others in a group without destroying the cohesion of that group, and always the same result: after a bit of settling in, everybody gets along just fine.

When I bring up this point, I usually get, “Well, but atheism’s philosophical underpinnings are so radical that it’s hardly the same. To include animals in our sphere of existence, you have to rewrite what it is to be alive in a way that devalues all life.” So very odd. What a strange view of the purpose of existence, that it hangs not on what we do and whom we help, but on what life forms we are existentially *better* than. What a perverse notion of humanity that its value is entirely in what it dominates, and that if you take away that right to domination, it is worth nothing. If this is all that’s holding your notion of your own humanity together, the fault lies in your self definition, and it is grossly unfair to make other living beings suffer because your definition is crap but you’re too lazy to fix it.

This is the Meat Shield school of ethics. Rather than facing up to what you are, and attempting to create new goals for your life in consonance with that reality, you continue in the fable that you happen to like, and throw the rest of existence in front of you as a shield, shrugging indifferently as they get ground up in the name of preserving your own delusions. What matter that tens of thousands of little lives get thrown under the bus, so long as you

can hold onto the idea of being a member of God's special species?

Again, I can't help but find that the theist position comes off the worse in this, its own argument. It says, "You, with your banishment of the soul and strict materialism, have the potential to devalue life. We purposely devalue all life but our own, and so are up by one species on you." It's that "potential" part that's worrisome. There are those who take materialism and run that direction with it, but they mainly exist in 19th century Russian novels.

For the most part, materialism is an inclusive and constructive project that aims at finding broader commonalities that in-

form how we got to this point in history and how we can sensibly move forward. There is a destructive potential there, but it works against the nature of our species, against the drive of our genes and our own broader best interests. In short, it stands no chance of becoming The Rule for secular society.

To blithely insist upon the devaluing of 99 percent of existence in order to guard against the vague possibility of a negative interpretation of materialism getting the upper hand is pure moral cowardice. It is letting others suffer to maintain the status quo in so far as it favors you.

What started, then, as a double-pronged

assault assured of its own victory has ground itself into something of a philosophical Fredericksburg.

In spite of having the distinct advantage of feeling no qualms about arguing from diametrically opposed starting premises, what we end up with tells far more against the selfish fragility of theist taxonomy than our own ethical hypocrisy or inhumanity. Which is great news for all of you who were about to give your significant furred one a vigorous chin scratch but were holding back for fear of what the Christians would say about it. Go ahead, have at it.

A purr is worth a thousand sermons.

The Bonobo and the Atheist

Frans de Waal, a Dutch researcher living in the US, has authored a book about biological roots in human fairness. *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* synthesises evidence that there are biological roots in human fairness, and explores what that means for the role of religion in human societies.

In an interview with CNN's Kelly Murray De Waal, Director of Emory University's Living Links Center at the Yerkes National Primate Research Center in Lawrenceville, Georgia, explained the book's intriguing title. "When I bring up the origins of morality, it revolves around God, or comes from religion, and I wanted to address the issue that I think morality is actually older than religion."

He added: I find it very hard to believe that 100,000 or 200,000 years ago, our ancestors did not believe in right and wrong, and did not punish bad behaviour, did not care about fairness. Very long ago our ancestors had moral systems. Our current institutions are only a couple of thousand years old, which is really not old in the eyes of a biologist. So I think religion came after morality. Religion may have become a codification of morality, and it may fortify it, but it's not the origin of it.

Asked why people need religion, De Waal said: Well, that's a good question. I'm struggling with that. I'm personally a non-believer. I'm from the Netherlands, where 60 percent of the people are non-believers. So in northern Europe, there are actually experiments going on now with societies that are more secular, to see if we can maintain a moral society that way, and for the moment I would say that experiment is going pretty well. ... Personally I think it



is possible to build a society that is moral on a non-religious basis, but the jury is still out on that.

De Waal, who has been at the center for more than 20 years, has made a career out of finding links between primate and human behavior, particularly in the areas of morality and empathy.

You might think of "morality" as special for humans, but there are elements of it that are found in the animal kingdom, says de Waal – namely, fairness and reciprocity.

In primate behaviour, he says, we can see they have a sense of fairness. They

have empathy; they enforce rules among themselves, they can delay gratification and they can control their impulses. So many of these tendencies that go into our moralities can be found in other animals, but instead of them coming from logic and reasoning, they actually come from our primate psychology most of the time.

De Waal isn't sure that his monkeys have what a philosopher would call a "concept of justice" in an intellectual sense. But the emotional reactions researchers have observed indicate that there is, at a more basic level, a sense of justice among them.

Karlheinz Deschner deserves

BARRY DUKE wonders why this leading German atheist's prolific books

A man was having a pair of pants made by a Jewish tailor. He grew impatient over the time it was taking the tailor to finish the job, and he complained "It only took God six days to make the world, but it's taken you over a month to make the trousers I ordered." The tailor then produced the pants with pride and said: "Dat may be so, but take a look at the world ... den take a look at dees pants!"

That joke was told at the end of a lecture entitled "Cretinism or Evilution" (or "There is no joy in Eden, for creationism has struck out") given in Atlanta in 1996 by Edward T Babinski, an American who was once a passionate faith-head but now describes himself as "agnostic".

He warned his audience at the start of the lecture that "the following presentation will cover mature subject matter, like God's invention of the penis. The name of 'Darwin' will be spoken aloud, and it will be assumed that the books of the Bible were written by a pre-scientific people who believed their god *reeeeeeeeally* loved to sniff burnt goat flesh (Gen. 8:20 "and the Lord smelled the soothing aroma"; see also, Num. 15:24 & 29:28), a common divine addiction back then.

Before launching into his lecture, he revealed that during his high school and college and a few years afterwards "I was a Bible banging, born again, baptised as a believer, dyed-in-the-bloody-wool-of-the-Lamb Christian. I was elected president of the most evangelical group on my campus. And I lectured my fellow biology students and professors on the errors of EVILution".

In the part of presentation that dealt with disease he read this gem from Barbara Smoker's *Good God*:

The Bible doesn't teach irrigation, medication, vaccination.

As a means of education, Scripture is a loss.

The substance of its "revelation"

is just that God's the boss.

But this article is not about Babinski, who, incidentally, is the author of *Leaving the Fold: Testimonies of Former Fundamentalists*. (He also authored the chapter "The Cosmology of the Bible" in *The Christian Delusion*. It is about Karlheinz Deschner.



Edward T Babinsky

I just happened to stumble across Babinski after I received an indignant email from a *Freethinker* reader in Luxembourg, Nellie Moia, who wanted to know why virtually no mention is ever made in the English media about the German atheist, and why his work has never been fully translated into English.

Good questions. I vaguely knew of Deschner's existence and was aware that the Bavarian-born researcher and writer who is fiercely critical of Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular, is a highly regarded academic in Germany. I also remember reading that, in 2007, Deschner met Professor Richard Dawkins for the first time in Frankfurt, where Dawkins was handed the Deschner Prize at an award ceremony organised by the Giordano Bruno Foundation.

What I did not know was that 2013 marked the publication of the *tenth* volume of his opus *Christianity's Criminal History* (*Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*).

Wikipedia informed me that in 1971 Deschner, who turned 89 last month, was brought before a court in Nuremberg, charged with "insulting the Church". He was acquitted, but his works remained largely unpublished until the 1980s, when they were translated and published in Spain, Switzerland, Italy and Poland.

In an effort to discover why Deschner's impressive body of work – he is the author or editor of almost 50 books including nov-

els, literary criticism, essays, and aphorisms – remains virtually unknown in the English-speaking world (all but a few paragraphs have been translated into English) I began digging for further information and found a comprehensive examination of Deschner on Babinski's blog.

In March 2010, Babinski posted a lengthy piece about Deschner's *Christianity's Criminal History*, which included the following, written about Deschner by Catholic theologian Hans Kung after the sixth volume of the monumental work was published

During the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) the Catholic Church enjoyed a generally high public standing. At the beginning of the third millennium after Christ, however, it is being attacked more than ever in some quarters. Granted, Rome has recently been asking for forgiveness for the monstrous errors and atrocities of the past – but in the meantime, the present-day church administration and Inquisition are producing still more victims.

Scarcely any of the great institutions in our democratic age deal in such a despicable way with critics and those of other views in their own ranks, nor does any discriminate so much against women – by prohibiting contraceptives, the marriage of priests, and the ordination of women. None polarises society and politics worldwide to such a degree by rigid positions in matters of abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia, positions always invested with an aura of infallibility, as if they were the will of God himself.

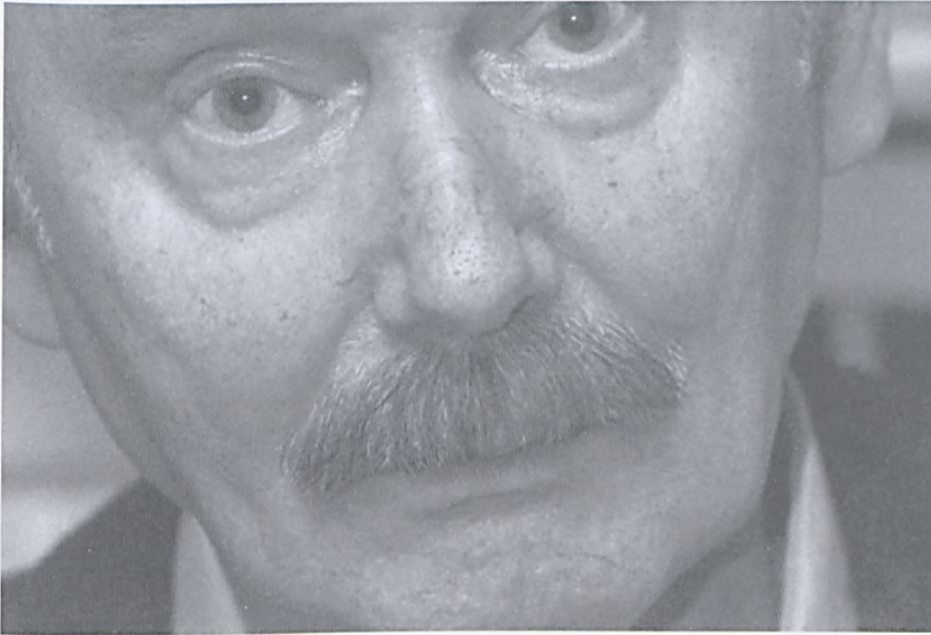
In view of the apparent inability on the part of the Catholic Church to correct and reform itself, is it not understandable that at the beginning of the third Christian millennium the more or less benevolent indifference widely shown to the church around fifty years ago has turned into hatred, indeed, public hostility?

Antagonistic church historians and critics are of the opinion that in the church's two-thousand-year history no organic process of maturing [of doctrines and dogmas] can be detected, but rather something more like a criminal history.

A once-Catholic author, Karlheinz Deschner, has devoted his life and so far six volumes to such a history. In it he describes every possible form of criminality in the church's foreign policy and in policies relating to trade, finance, and education; in the dissemination of igno-

erves far wider recognition

olific body of work is not better known in the English-speaking world



Karlheinz Deschner

rance and superstition; in the unscrupulous exploitation of sexual morality, marriage laws, and penal justice ... and so on, for hundreds [now 8,000] of pages.

After publishing some excerpts from *Criminal History*, Babinski ran a number of reviews of the then nine-volume opus.

This is what Heinz Schönfeldt, of the German newspaper *Mannheimer Morgen*, wrote:

A shocking panorama of fraud and deceit, blood and murder under the sign of the Cross ... The author recounts conscientiously, even in pedantic detail, the multitude of clerical, Christian crimes dating back to the earliest days of the Church. He demolishes with crushing blows monumental figures such as the great Constantine ... The venerable doctors of the Church such as Athanasius, Ambrose,

and Augustine lose their halos entirely ... Of course there is another side to the story ... But that does not negate Deschner's account. He brings to light what has been diligently suppressed, falsified, and played down through two Christian millennia.

And this from professor Horst Herrmann, writing in *Der Spiegel*:

I am reminded of 18th Century proponents of the Enlightenment such as the Frenchmen Pierre Bayle, Claude Helvetius, and Voltaire or the German poet Heinrich Heine. Now the 20th Century also has its book, Deschner's Christianity's Criminal History ... Thanks to Deschner's back-breaking research, the suspicion that Christianity has skeletons in its closet becomes an absolutely certainty. Widely known facts are beginning to replace mere sus-

picious, and what we learn about reality exceeds even the products of our fantasy.

Rolf Gawrich, writing for *Frankfurter Rundschau*, added:

Deschner is not a modern Don Quixote, nor a Michael Kohlhaas. He is a modern proponent of the Enlightenment who still believes in the power of reason. He does not perceive the necessity of a new myth to replace a demystified Christianity no longer able to offer salvation. This fact distinguishes him from some modern critics of the Church who still feel allegiance to some interpretation of primitive Christianity. Deschner is without compromise in this regard.

That Deschner's work remains largely unknown to English readers must be of considerable relief to the Roman Catholic Church, but I share Nellie Moia's outrage that his achievement in exposing its crimes over the centuries remains untranslated.

But here is some good news: later this year, in August, Prometheus Books will publish the first English translation of Deschner's *God and Fascists: The Vatican Alliance with Mussolini, Franco, Hitler and Pavelic*, a controversial work that indicts the Vatican for its actions before and during World War II.

According to the publisher, "in the decade preceding the outbreak of World War II, the Vatican made a devil's bargain with fascist leaders. Anticipating that their regimes would eliminate a common enemy – namely Marxist-Leninist communism – two popes essentially collaborated with Hitler, Mussolini, and the fascist dictators in Spain (Franco) and Croatia (Pavelic).

"This is the damning indictment of this well-researched polemic, which for almost five decades in Germany has sparked controversy, outrage, and furious debate. Now it is available in English for the first time."

Prometheus adds: "Many will dismiss Deschner – who himself was raised and educated in a pious Catholic tradition – as someone who is obsessed with exposing the failings of the church of his upbringing. But he has marshalled so many facts and presented them with such painstaking care that his accusations cannot easily be ignored. The sheer weight of the evidence that he has brought together in this book raises a host of questions about a powerful institution that continues to exercise political influence to this day."

Deschner quotes

- At first your religious beliefs are those which were foisted upon you; gradually your religious beliefs become those you deserve.
- Definition of "theologian": the only kind of scholar who has no knowledge whatsoever of his supposed object of study.
- I think, therefore I am ... not a Christian.
- "I would rather err with the majority than in my own way." So thought St Augustine. I am of the reverse opinion.
- Many things between Heaven and Earth fill me with wonder; but of all of these, the least wondrous to me are the wonders of Religion.
- I can live with the Mysteries; it is the Explanations I cannot bear.

Are we born to believe?

JOHN RADFORD reviews *Cognitive Science, Religion and Theology: From Human Minds to Divine Minds*, by Justin L Barrett, and *The God Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life*, by Jesse Bering.

Here are two books tackling much the same problems from much the same angle, but coming to opposite conclusions. The problems are whether religious beliefs are true, and whether human beings have built-in tendencies to hold them. The angle is that of cognitive science, particularly some relatively new developments. Barrett, for his part, starts by explaining what is meant by “cognitive science”: “an interdisciplinary area of scholarship that considers what the human mind is and how it functions”. It is not to be equated with neuroscience which is the study of how the brain works.

Sometimes, but rarely, “the physical structures of the brain do play a role in illuminating why we think the way we do” (“we” refers to humans in general). Barrett regards the brain and the mind as two different things, though he does not assert that the mind can necessarily exist without a brain. Bering, on the other hand, takes it as more or less axiomatic that a mind cannot exist without a brain, or to put it another way though not in his words, a human being is a functioning totality of body, mind and behaviour. When functioning ceases, no person is left. I agree. To ask, as religious people do, where do you go when you die, is like asking where does the flame go when a candle is put out.

But to return to our authors. Bering’s main theme is concerned with “Theory of

Mind”. This is the ability, which humans have, and other species do not, or only in rudimentary form, to conceive of what other individuals think. Social relationships, beyond an elementary level, depend on this, and it can be taken to a degree of complexity, such as “Peter thinks that Sarah believes that Tom dislikes Jane”. About seven steps seem to be the maximum that can be handled. Bering’s argument is essentially, first that this ability is, so to say, built-in. The expression “hard-wired” has become popular for this and other traits.

Bering does not use this, and Barrett dislikes it, as do I. It suggests an automatic mechanism. I prefer “propensity”, a *tendency* to act or think in a certain way. Such tendencies vary between individuals, and different propensities are variously affected by the environment (social and physical). All humans have a strong propensity to eat, and to choose that which is edible, but diet varies widely (and can be charged with emotion, as with religious laws, or the recent furore over horse meat in the UK). Bering then argues, second, that Theory of Mind underlies religious beliefs, in particular in such basics as supernatural beings and survival of death. The propensity is so strong that it is over-extended. I won’t try to summarise the many experiments and observations in the book, or indeed those in Barrett’s. They both base themselves on science, not speculation.

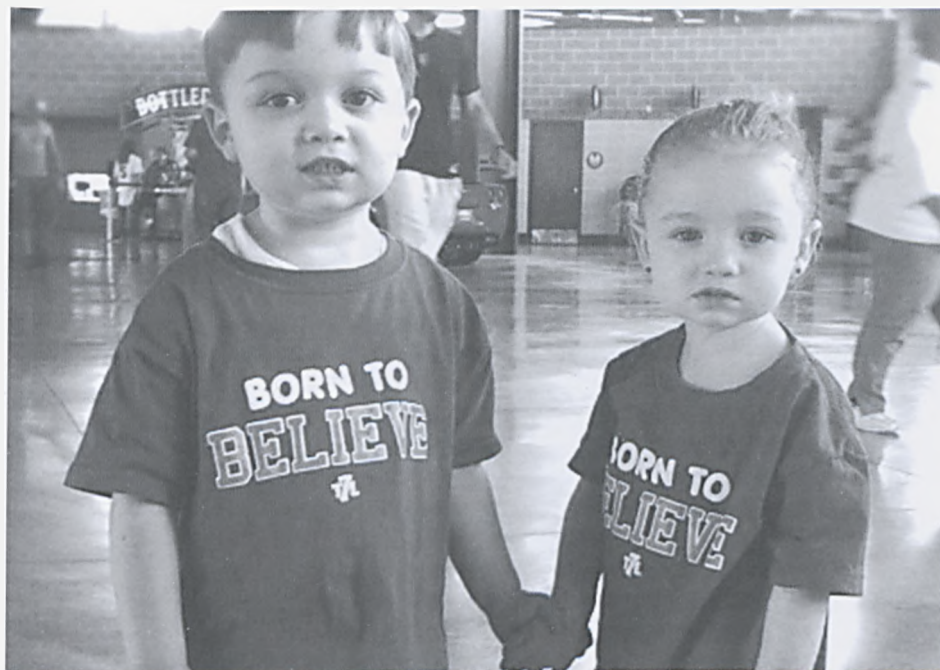
Well-controlled studies show that cognitive patterns show themselves very early in life and persist strongly in adults. They can be modified by experience and reason. Theory of Mind, Bering suggests, underlies our tendency to seek, and see, motivation behind events. We often think and behave as if *someone* were responsible, even when this is not the case: for example, in natural disasters, illness, good or bad fortune and so on – a person or persons unknown, one might say in legal phrase. One need only look at responses to say Hurricane Katrina to see this illustrated. The “someone” can be a deity, in the Judaeo-Christian tradition God (and there are various aspects of cognition that make this likely). Similarly, there is a strong, almost irresistible, tendency to believe that something of a person survives bodily death. It is extremely difficult to conceive of a state of non-existence. (I read somewhere a correspondent’s remark “If I die, and then find I don’t exist, I shall be most surprised!” which rather sums it up.)

Barrett’s approach is wider. He describes cognitive propensities in the way we think about the natural world, people, and deities. For example the tendency to take ourselves as the point of reference. Watching the sun pass across the sky, it is almost impossible to experience the reality that the sun is stationary, and we are standing on a revolving globe. Such propensities underlie religious belief, in his view, thus far agreeing in principle with Bering. As mentioned he argues that except in rare cases “brain” cannot explain “mind” or *vice versa*. I think this is misleading. It seems to me that a total account of any human behaviour must involve three levels, an idea which goes back to Thomas Hobbes. For example, a player potting a snooker ball. At the physical level this is a matter of angles, forces, surfaces etc. At a psychological level it is a matter of practice, skill, motivation, self-control, and indeed beliefs, and so on. And at a social level it is the nature of games and entertainments, opportunities and rewards, etc. All are necessary for a complete account, though one may provide an explanation in a particular case. A speck of chalk might cause a miss-hit, as might a momentary lapse of concentration.

Religion is far more complex than snook-



Justin L Barrett, left, and Jesse Bering



Modelling 'Born to Believe' T-shirts, these youngsters are making a sporting, rather than a religious statement. The shirts were designed to promote the famous New York Mets baseball team

er and involves all kinds of factors at all three levels. Barrett is particularly concerned with religious belief. He defines belief as “mentally representing something as being the case in the generation of further thought and action”, and again as “similar to thinking something is the case”. He says this is a “narrow” definition of belief. But it is clearly an extraordinarily wide one. A belief thus defined may vary from a momentary opinion to the most dogmatic conviction. The basis for it may range from incontrovertible evidence to mere speculation to a personal feeling of certainty. Barrett’s reason for taking this actually very wide view is presumably that he wants to show that religious beliefs are just as reasonable as any others. Here he brings in the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (1710–1796), who formulated a *principle of credulity*. This is somewhat misleading because he meant what we would call *credibility*.

Reid held firmly that reason is a sound basis for beliefs, but that sometimes we have to rely on what he termed “common sense”, lumping together several mental operations other than reason. He argued that “a person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it”. It makes sense in general (not his example) to believe what people tell us, unless we have good reason to doubt it. Without such an assumption social interaction could not function.

Thus, as we possess cognitive propensities leading us towards religious belief, it is reasonable to hold those beliefs unless there is cause not to. Barrett argues that cognitive science does not provide such cause. First,

explicating the mechanism that underlies a belief does not, in itself, tell us anything about the truth of the belief. It may tell us how the belief came about, but that is another matter, just as (not his example), one might solve a puzzle by logic, or trial and error, or mere chance: it would not affect the correctness of the solution. Second, “explaining” is not the same as “explaining away”. “A scientific explanation of how human cognition systems form beliefs in gods only ‘explains away’ gods if you already believe they don’t exist. For believers, such explanations just specify the means by which actual gods are perceived and understood (or misunderstood).”

A third argument is that if belief in gods (etc) were universal, and if cognitive science showed that this was due to some fixed mechanism, that would cast doubt on whether the gods were real. But neither of these is so. I confess I don’t follow this. Belief in the existence of food is, I should think, universal, and it appears to be built-in: babies need no teaching to suck (they may need a stimulus to start). There can’t be any doubt that food exists, as if it did not we would all be dead.

Barrett’s argument seems correct in two ways. One is that whatever scientific (or other) explanation is advanced for anything, one can always add God. The Big Bang is how the universe began, or evolution accounts for different species: ah, but it is God that makes these things work. It is like adding zero to an equation; atheists might say that God is indeed equivalent to zero. The other way is that cognitive science may well not disprove religious beliefs.

It is concerned with the nature, origins and persistence of beliefs, not with testing their objective truth as such, although true and false beliefs may have to be understood in different ways. But, I would argue, psychological (and other) science more generally does cast doubt on religious beliefs. The two primary beliefs in question here are those in God or gods, and in life after death. It is notoriously difficult to prove or disprove the existence of God. As far as I know neither has ever been conclusively done. But it can be argued that the absence of any positive evidence after millennia of searching, and the logical contradictions in many concepts of god, are “adequate reasons” as Reid has it, for not believing.

Survival of death is shown by science to be so improbable as to be dismissed. As far as knowledge extends at present, there is simply no way in which an individual personality could exist without a physical substrate: a brain and body. (There are always religious answers, such as that we will be somehow reconstructed in an after-life.) Bering for his part does not mention the principle of credulity; he prefers that of parsimony, and for him God is “both unnecessary and highly unlikely”.

Barrett and Bering end with different outlooks. Barrett wants to show that religion has nothing to fear from big bad cognitive science. On the contrary, it helps religion if we understand how belief works, and how we can encourage it. We can build on the natural tendency of children to believe, which God has, perhaps, implanted in us to lead us towards him.

It is only a tendency because God is so far beyond our grasp that he has to lead us gradually, not reveal himself all at once. Bering on the other hand thinks that for the first time in history, we can see that religious (and similar) beliefs are not based on reality but on our peculiar evolved mental dispositions. We cannot free ourselves from these, but by being aware of them we are better able to distinguish truths from falsehoods, among which are those of religions. Thus we can develop ways of living based on the world as it really is, rather than on fantasies.

You pay your money and you take your choice. Whatever one’s views as to the conclusions, the two books taken together offer a wide-ranging and stimulating introduction to a rapidly developing area of science. It offers new insights into some aspects of religion, but by no means all, such as the intensity of personal experience and commitment, the social and historical functions, or the complexities of religious ritual and doctrine.

• John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London.

Paul Kurtz's *The Turbulent Universe*

The late Paul Kurtz, who was Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo as well as chairman of the Institute for Science and Human Values, had no stomach for what's commonly known as "The New Atheism".

Writing in the December 2009/January 2010 issue of *Free Inquiry*, the magazine he founded, Kurtz declared "militant atheism is often truncated and narrow-minded ... it is not concerned with the humanist values that ought to accompany the rejection of theism. The New Atheists, in my view, have made an important contribution to the contemporary cultural scene because they have opened religious claims

to public examination ... What I object to are the militant atheists who are narrow-minded about religious persons and will have nothing to do with agnostics, skeptics, or those who are indifferent to religion, dismissing them as cowardly."

Kurtz added: "While I certainly don't believe that we ought to abandon our criticism of religious fanaticism or allow religious doctrine to dictate public policy, the future of the secular humanist and scientific rationalist movements depends upon appealing to a wider base of support. Some 16 percent of the American population is not affiliated with any church, temple, or mosque – approximately 50 million Americans – whereas only two to three percent are estimated to be out-and-out atheists. Hence, Neo-Humanism wishes to address its message to a broader public who we believe should be sympathetic."

Kurtz, who had just produced a new "Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Values and Principles", said that it was intended to advance a new form of humanism that is not anti-religious *per se*, nor avowedly atheist. "There are various forms of religious and non-religious beliefs in the world. On the one end of the spectrum are traditional religious beliefs; on the other 'the New Atheism'. Not enough attention is paid to humanism as an alternative," declared the statement, which "aims to be more inclusive by appealing to both non-religious and religious humanists and to moderate religious believers who share common goals. It seeks to foster moderation rather than divisiveness and to spark a genuine conversation



Paul Kurtz, pictured in 2004. Photo: Washington Post/AP

about meaning and value and the common problems that confront us all as a nation and inhabitants of planet Earth."

Having published his statement, Kurtz moved on to complete what turned out to be his last book, *The Turbulent Universe*. Ahead of its publication by Prometheus Books, a company he chaired, Kurtz wrote:

"In *The Turbulent Universe*, my reflections are based on what we have discovered about the physical universe, the biosphere, and the human sphere – upon the scientific accounts of nature that are now available. This is drawn from interdisciplinary scientific fields; they rely upon the methods of science for establishing their truth claims. It is a synoptic view of the universe, a cosmic outlook at this stage in the development of human knowledge. It is, if you will, a conceptual landscape of some of the main features of what we know about nature; and it includes the human species and human civilizations in the schema.

"In a more technical sense I am attempting to develop a set of basic categories, the generic traits or generalizations of our knowledge about nature. I am seeking to describe the conceptual framework and its basic presuppositions."

He then asked: "What are the generic traits of the universe? Can we fathom its meaning and structure, or is it beyond human comprehension?" My answer is yes and no. Yes, we can expand our understanding of the universe, but there are no easy answers. Can we develop a unified theory in which everything is reduced to a limited number of basic laws, rooted in their physical-

chemical sources? An ambitious goal, but whether it can ever be attained either way is difficult to ascertain *a priori*.

He added: "The modern age of science ultimately spelled "the twilight of the gods." Does it also portend the dawn of a new age in which humans are finally on their own, dependent on their own creative intelligence and courage for sustenance and survival? Or will this lead to new depths of pessimism and nihilism?"

"Is the 'New Atheism', so-called, an abortive resurgence of a crude and rude denunciation and immolation of the gods, or can it help to usher in the flowering of the human spirit in all of its grandeur? Will the new secularism,

which is rapidly growing in Europe, Asia, and America, lead to a new Humanism? There are at least three possible scenarios:

"First, the New Atheism may eventually penetrate social awareness – and belief in God declines. God is sentenced to death and a stake driven through his heart.

"Second, this may lead to an age of despair and hopelessness, receptive to new mythological theologies of escape.

"Or third, a powerful new secularism may prevail in a world where humans concentrate on the things of this world rather than the next. A new Humanism may be ushered in, in which humans are at last liberated from the constraints of ancient fears and cowardice and a new flowering of the highest human potentialities and aspirations is made possible.

"Interestingly, Marx proclaimed a new atheism for the 19th century. It focused on secularism, the things of this world, and building a more just society. Yet it enshrined the ideology of communism which became tyrannical and dogmatic, and in which the ethics of freedom was abandoned. "Today we need a new approach, which uncompromisingly affirms neo-Humanism. This emphasizes individual freedom, human rights, a new morality, the empathetic imperative, and the realization of human dignity, lives of joyful creativity and exuberance for all persons on the planet.

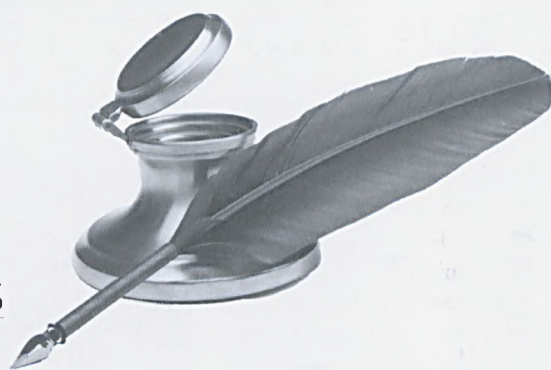
• Paul Kurtz died aged 86 on October 20, 2012. *The Turbulent Universe* was published in April (paperback, 259 pages, \$20.00. ISBN 978-1-61614-735-8. The "Neo-Humanist Statement of Secular Values and Principles" is available online at www.paulkurtz.us.

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK.

CONTEMPT FOR INDIA'S POLITICAL ATHEISTS



I HAVE always had an issue with the so-called “atheists” most visible in India – the politicians. While a mainstream atheist movement is mostly absent from the Indian socio-cultural spheres barring some tiny, but wonderful, organisations, the politicians are more visible in the absence of any other sources of recognition for the irreligious.

More often than not, these political atheists stem from two primary branches, the Communist Party of India and the Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu.

The Dravida movement is a political rebellion that consumed the southern tip of India in the post-independence period when non-Brahmin Tamils uprooted Brahmin families from their seats of privilege, a few through legal means but for the most part through aggressive anti-Brahmin legislation.

It comes as no surprise that most atheists you read of in the Indian political circles usually hail from the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala or West Bengal, the traditional bastions of communist philosophies and, in the case of Tamil Nadu, sectarian Dravida/Non-Dravida strife. Karunanidhi, P Chidambaram and Jyoti Basu are a few bigwigs that come to mind almost immediately.

The Dravida movement is particularly noteworthy in its original form for comprising vast swathes of irreligious leadership who merely used the anti-Brahmin sentiments then commonly prevalent to usurp power. It makes for interesting reading to note that for the entire span since the inception of Tamil Nadu state (created from the British Madras Presidency), 15 state elections have yielded 15 periods of rule for the Dravida movement, though ironically, one of the current leaders happens to be a Brahmin woman who is politically more Imelda Marcos than Angela Merkel.

I view religion to be an extreme source of tyranny that has always been of disdainful of other powerful ideological entities. Leninist and Maoist Communism have often exhibited these very characteristics. What is an observable trend is that supplanting religious lunatics with other tyrannical forms of rule such as communism or a racially hate-filled Dravida movement benefits no one in India, especially not the Tamil people.

So, however deep my sense of disrespect for organised religion, I share a deeper contempt for political atheists.

Atheism is an ideology of freethought, of rationale, of interchanging superstitions and blind belief with logic and reason. Following this strain of thought, it quickly becomes evident that rigid political ideologies of fascist persuasions belong in the same bracket, and they rightly deserve to be mentioned in the same breath.

It is seldom that, in Indian political circles, you come across an atheist who cannot be classified under one of these three following categories – Ex-Dalit who detests Hinduism, Communist Party of India or Commu-

nist Party of India (Marxist) cadre, and/or from Tamil Nadu and hates Brahmins.

Is this really freethought? I do not think so. The last parliamentary elections in India heralded a new crop of Indian atheists who made it to the Lok Sabha (the Indian House of Commons). Almost all of them fit into the aforementioned categories, and this served to strengthen my longstanding contempt for political atheists.

But I still hope for a better tomorrow. For now, though, political thought and atheism in India stay mutually inclusive.

Hari S
(Full name and
address supplied)

FREETHINKER COVERAGE OF THATCHER'S FUNERAL

AS A long-standing subscriber to the *Freethinker*, I am appalled that you have taken the opportunity to promote your clearly left-wing ideology via the leading story in last month's magazine. All you have served to do is confirm the myth that religion and conservatism are intertwined, which is simply not the case. For the record, it is possible to recognise the sheer lunacy of religion, whilst simultaneously not subscribing to socialist ideology; whilst Thatcher was admittedly Christian, that was clearly not the focal point of your piece, rather it was to mock and make a cheap political jibe (written, no doubt, whilst whistling “the witch is dead”).

This was cheap and unnecessary journalism in a magazine that should know better.

Peter Lawson
Macclesfield

FROM “Thatcher ‘passes into glory’” (*Freethinker*, May) I note that her interpretation of scripture suggests it gives a proper attitude to work.

I remember in my schooldays at Hendon Grammar School in the assembly, before the Jewish pupils entered, the Headmaster sometimes read this sermon by Jesus: “Consider the lilies of the field, they toil not neither do the spin. Yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

How does that agree with the Protestant work ethic? I once thought of using it as an excuse for not completing my homework, but I didn't have the *chutzpah!*

Robert Tee
Calverley



“Privatise her funeral. Put it out to competitive tender and accept the lowest bid. It's what she would have wanted.”

– acclaimed British film
director Ken Loach

Atheist shoes go walkies in the US

EPILOGUE

We're no longer using **ATHEIST** packing-tape on our shipments to the USA and delivery times are already improving – so, please order with confidence, our god-less American friends!



The image above is taken from the Atheist Shoes website (www.atheistberlin.com) where the Berlin-based company is claiming that its products – “hand-made, ridiculously comfortable Bauhaus-inspired shoes for people who don’t believe in god(s) – have run up against anti-atheist bias in the US.

The recently formed enterprise, which we reported on in the April 2013 issue, claims that “we have lots of customers in the USA, but sometimes the shoes we send them take longer than they should to arrive, or even go missing. And when some of our customers asked us not to use atheist-branded packing tape on their shipments, we started to wonder if the delays were caused by the US Postal Service taking offence at our overt godlessness”

So the company launched an experiment. It sent 178 packages to 89 people in 49 US states. Each person was sent two packages – one sealed with atheist brand tape, the other with neutral tape.

The result: the atheist-branded packages took on average three days longer to reach their destinations and nine atheist packages went missing. Just one non-branded package failed to reach its destination. Atheist packages, the company found, were ten times more likely to disappear. The company said that it had run a series of control tests in Germany and other parts of Europe and that they “demonstrate no such bias”.

“The problem appears to lie in the USA

and is likely explained by the differential handling of packages by employees of the US Postal Service. Interestingly, this seems to be a national problem – traditionally less religious and more liberal states also saw high levels of delay and disappearance. Sadly, many of our customers who took part in this experiment were not surprised by our findings, even though tampering with post is a federal offence. The company concluded: “We are no longer using atheist-brand packing-tape on our shipments to the USA and delivery times are already improving – so please order with confidence, our godless American friends.

Commenting on the company’s research, one American customer wrote: “Congratulations on a great experiment! The findings are disappointing, but not surprising – prejudices against atheists are widely held in the US and it’s inevitable that an organisation like USPS will have some employees with untoward attitudes and behaviour. The unfortunate thing is that a small minority in a privileged position can have a major impact. I think your conclusion of a “likelihood of discrimination” is sound, though I would look forward to the follow-up as it would be interesting to know more about the nature and extent of any bias.”



One of several amusing graphics on the Atheist Shoe company’s website