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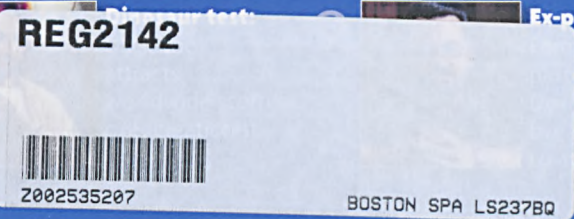
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Atheist 'church' finds international favour

Godless Sunday Assembly concept gets the thumbs-up in Melbourne

By **BARRY DUKE**

Many believers and sceptics expressed doubt that it would ever work, but the Sunday Assembly, which staged its first godless "service" at The Nave, a deconsecrated church in North London at the beginning of the year, proved an instant hit – and the concept is now being embraced in other centres, including Melbourne, Australia.

The Sunday Assembly is the brainchild of comedians Sanderson Jones, of *The Comedy Sale*, and Pippa Evans from *The Showstoppers*. They identified a need for disillusioned former believers, nostalgic atheists and anybody searching for a sense of community to meet and "turn good intentions into action".

The Sunday Assembly's motto is "live better, help often, wonder more" and it aims to provoke laughter and kindness and encourage people to volunteer in their local communities.

The inaugural gathering in January focused on the subject of "Beginnings", marking the New Year and its first meeting with musings on how to "start things" and avoid "mental booby traps".

Reporting on the launch, Liam O'Brien of the *Independent* wrote that "it is surely the only church in Britain where use of the F-word is positively encouraged. The reverend jokes about using the collections for a personal holiday and the hymn 'Dear Lord and Father of Mankind' is swapped for a rendition of 'Don't Look Back in Anger'."

He added: "Yet at its first 'service' this morning, the Sunday Assembly – self-styled as 'the UK's first atheist church' – secured a congregation that many decidedly more traditional operations would kill (metaphorically, being Christians) for. The 200 worshippers crammed into The Nave, a performance venue housed in a beautiful North London church building, had dressed in their Sunday best to hear what would turn out to be a mixture of good comedy and dreadful motivational claptrap."

Sanderson Jones, who acted the compere and professed to coming up with the idea for the Assembly in a car on the way to Brighton one day, gave a bravura performance at the altar.

O'Brien concluded: "Not everyone left the Sunday Assembly a true believer, but with monthly services planned and more comedi-



Founders of the Sunday Assembly comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans

ans including Josie Long scheduled to appear, they might soon need a bigger venue."

O'Brien's prediction was spot on. *TimeOut* later reported that the Sunday Assembly was attracting far too many people to be comfortably accommodated in The Nave, which is owned by St Paul's Steiner School. Gary Bridgewood, trustee of the St Paul's Steiner Project, was quoted as saying that "the Nave was thrilled to play host to Sanderson Jones' Sunday Assembly meetings. Sanderson is a wonderful and inspirational person and we are truly regretful that they have so swiftly outgrown The Nave. We wish Sanderson and the Sunday Assembly every success as indeed we do to all the Sunday Assemblies that he has inspired around the world".

(Continued on page 4

Leaning the other way

OPHELIA BENSON REPORTS ON A RECENT GATHERING OF SECULARIST WOMEN IN THE US

Three weeks ago I took part in the second Women in Secularism conference organized by the Center for Inquiry in Washington DC. It was an exhilarating, content-rich event, with talks by Katha Pollitt, Susan Jacoby, Rebecca Goldstein, Jennifer Michael Hecht, and my friend Maryam Namazie, to name only a few. Maryam blew everyone away, as she always does. At the end she asked us all to write signs for a group picture in solidarity with the persecuted atheist bloggers in Bangladesh. (You'll be wondering what I wrote for my sign. I said: WE ARE ATHEIST. WE ARE WITH YOU.)

It sounds brilliant, doesn't it, yet there are people who are sharply critical of the very idea of such conferences. (Many of those people don't stop at questioning, but fill out their objections with personal insults and even threats aimed at some participants, which seems to me to demonstrate that such conferences are indeed needed.) They claim there is no need for them, that-

they are "divisive" and even that they insult women by specifying "the correct genitalia" (yes that's a real claim) instead of relying on gender-blind merit.

It would be nice if we lived in a world where we didn't have to correct for unconscious biases and stereotypes, and everyone could simply recognize and quantify merit with the straightforward exactitude of measuring a length of road or volume of water. But we don't. Merit doesn't come neatly labeled and measured.

It's a judgment, an evaluation, and it gets muddled up with all sorts of irrelevant markers – looks, height, accent, race, age, resemblance to loved or hated people – you name it. Gender is one such irrelevant marker, one of the biggest and maybe one of the hardest to shift.

We don't have to blame particular people for that. We can blame history and the way it shapes our expectations, instead. Think "authority" – what rises to the surface of the mind? Warlords, soldiers, judges, clerics, scholars, heads of state, news readers – who throughout all but the most recent history have been men, and who still are mostly men. There's a pattern in our heads that we can't second-guess if we're not aware of it, and most people, still, aren't aware of it. That's why such conferences are needed.

They are needed because it's not the case that people putting together a conference and choosing The Best will think to choose Katha Pollitt, Maryam Namazie, Rebecca Goldstein, Susan Jacoby, and Soraya Chemaly. It's not that they think of them and decide "no, not her, she's a woman"; it's that they forget to think of them at all. They think of previous conferences and chat shows, and invite the people who come to mind that way ... who are all men. You have to break the pattern in order to break the pattern.

This is because we're not all that clever, we people. (Now we are blaming people, though still not particular people. We blame history, which is made by people, and we also blame people.) We don't look at all relevant data, we look at what we mistakenly take to be all relevant data.

If we've grown up seeing mostly men explaining what's what (and we all have), then we think it's men who are supposed to do that, and we think it without even

realizing we think it. We assume it. How can you correct assumptions of that kind except by correcting them? Make a point of inviting more women, so that over time the assumption will wither away. (The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to other under-represented groups.) (I love saying *mutatis mutandis*, no doubt because I was so bad at Latin in school.)

That's only one reason, of course. There's also the fact that women's experience of theocratic oppression is important and needs to be a conspicuous part of the secular project.

One of my favorite panels at the conference was on leaving religion, with Maryam, Vyckie Garrison, Jamila Bey, and Teresa MacBain: four women with deep experience of the consequences of leaving a religion. Maryam gets hate mail and threats. Teresa MacBain also get hate mail, some of it from people who had been close friends – she was a Methodist pastor for 15 years, and she made headlines last year when she came out as an atheist at the American Atheists national convention.

It was a wrenching, upsetting process, which is still happening. Vyckie turned herself into a very fundamentalist Christian as an adult, part of the "Quiverfull" movement to produce many children as arrows for God. Now she tells the rest of us what that was like. Jamila is an anomaly as a non-religious black woman, and was disowned by her parents over it (though she is "undisowned" now).

That panel wouldn't have happened if that conference hadn't happened. If a panel like that happened at another conference it would still be a matter of deciding to hear from women in particular. When conference organizers (and publishers, and universities, and foundations) don't decide to hear from women in particular, they tend to hear from men in particular instead. To correct an imbalance, sometimes it's necessary to lean in the opposite direction for some period of time. Eventually, balance is achieved.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights
with God

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'Pro-lifers' accuse Irish PM of being a murderer over proposed abortion reform

THE Irish Government's response to the death of Savita Halappanavar, 31, an Indian-born dentist who was refused an abortion last October, was to announce in June that it intended to reform the country's abortion laws.

Abortion is currently illegal in Ireland except if there is a substantial risk to the mother's life, but there has been much confusion about implementing it.

The new legislation is aimed at clarifying the rules that legalise abortions in exceptional cases where doctors deem it necessary to save a woman's life.

But when the Government published a draft abortion bill aimed at ensuring that the horrifying Halappanavar incident is never repeated, hysterical anti-abortionists turned their fury on Prime Minister Enda Kenny, who revealed in Parliament that he had received plastic fetuses and letters written in blood claiming he is a murderer.

He said: "I am now being branded by personnel around the country as being a murderer, and that I am going to have on my soul the death of 20 million babies."

Kenny said he was a Catholic but he was proud to be a Taoiseach, or prime minister, for *all* the Irish people.

Meanwhile, an Irish Health Service Executive review into the death of Savita Halappanavar has identified failings in her health care. It concluded that staff did not adequately monitor her deteriorating condition and failed to "offer all management options to a patient experiencing inevitable miscarriage".

The report also said existing clinical guidelines related to the management of sepsis and staff did not correctly adhere to septic shock. The review team stated: "There was a lack of recognition of the gravity of the situation and of the increasing risk to the mother which led to passive approaches and delays in aggressive treatment. This appears to have been either due to the way the law was interpreted in dealing with the case or the lack of appreciation of the increasing risk to the mother and the earlier need for delivery of the foetus."

The HSE review added that there was "an apparent over-emphasis on the need not to intervene until the foetal heart stopped to-



Savita Halappanavar,

gether with an under-emphasis on the need to focus appropriate attention on monitoring for and managing the risk of infection and sepsis in the mother".

The investigation team's report also said: "The interpretation of the law related to lawful termination in Ireland, and particularly the lack of clear clinical guidelines and training is considered to have been a material contributory factor in this regard."

The review team added that "similar incidents with a similar clinical context could happen again" unless there was "clarity as to the application of the law in a situation where it may be necessary for a doctor to consider, in the exercise of their clinical professional judgement, the termination of a pregnancy in the clinical welfare interest

of their patient". The report also said there could be a repeat of the Halappanavar case in the absence of appropriate national clinical guidelines on the clinical management of inevitable miscarriage.

In its recommendations, the review team stated: "There is an immediate and urgent requirement for a clear statement of the legal context in which clinical professional judgement can be exercised in the best medical welfare interests of patients."

In its call for new guidelines for doctors, the team added: "We recognise that such guidelines must be consistent with applicable law and that the guidance so urged may require legal change."

In April, an inquest into Halappanavar's death recorded a verdict of medical misadventure.

The eight-day hearing, held in Galway, concluded there had been failures in her health care at the hospital, but did not apportion individual blame.

The inquest found there had been poor communication between staff members, inadequate assessment and monitoring and a failure to follow up blood test results that would have indicated the presence of infection.

Following worldwide controversy over Mrs Halappanavar's death, which reopened the debate about the Irish Republic's abortion law, the HSE launched its clinical review of her health care last November.

C of E accepts defeat over gay marriage

THE Church of England last month effectively accepted defeat over gay marriage, signalling that it will no longer fight against a change in the law. In a short statement, it said that the scale of the majorities in both the Commons and Lords made clear that it is the will of Parliament that same sex couples "should" be allowed to marry.

The Bishop of Leicester, who leads the bishops in the House of Lords, said they would now concentrate their efforts on "improving" rather than halting an historic redefinition of marriage.

This climb-down represents a dramatic change of tack in the year since the Church insisted that gay marriage posed one of the biggest threats of disestablishment of the Church of England since the reign of Henry VIII.

And it comes despite a warning from the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, that the redefinition of marriage would undermine the "cornerstone" of society.

Barbara Smoker at 90: 'There will never be another like her'

REPORT: BARRY DUKE

ONE of my great delights each December is to receive Barbara Smoker's *Annual Egotistical Newsletter*, a brief round-robin sent to her many friends in lieu of a Christmas card.

Each edition details what the former president of the National Secular Society has managed to cram into each year, and is a testimony to her unflagging optimism, humour and energy.

Her latest, received a few months before she celebrated her 90th birthday in June, declared: "I have yet to decide what I want to be when I grow up", and she went on: "In my early teens I knew: I was going to be a nun – not a 'half-nun', as one of my Catholic aunts called the sisters who were responsible for my education, but a member of a proper contemplative order.

"Fast forward to my wartime late teens, when, serving king and country as a wireless telegraphist with the Eastern fleet, I was not so sure. I thought I would be a great writer; then, in my early twenties, flattered by rave notices for acting in amateur dramatics, I became stage-struck. I got a job with a touring company, but backed out on realising what a hard life it would be.



George Bernard Shaw's biographer, the writer Michael Holroyd with Barbara Smoker. He gave the keynote speech at her 90th birthday celebration. Photo: Camden New Journal

"In my mid-twenties I began writing polemical articles, especially on religion – but they hardly qualified as great writing. I joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and then Bertrand Russell's Committee of a Hundred, dedicated to direct action. I often found myself in criminal courts, and took part in a memorable adventure in Yugoslavia. I made a corner in transcribing Bernard Shaw's shorthand drafts for scholars, manuscript dealers, and others, and am still

active in the Shaw Society – but that hardly constitutes a career. For 25 years I was elected president of the National Secular Society, which opened a lot of doors to me, including radio, TV, and speaking tours of America and India.

"In 1970 I began officiating at religious funerals and I must have done some two thousand in the next forty years."

She added that in 1972 Ward Lock Educational Ltd commissioned her to write a paperback book on humanism for secondary schools. *Humanism* is still in print and in its fifth edition. This, she said, "must be my most successful endeavour, along with my series of irreverent greeting cards, which for the past forty-odd years have at least made people laugh – and possibly

think. In 1981 I was elected chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (now euphemistically re-named Dignity in Dying, with, sadly, weakened aims), and I held that office five years. But I have yet to embark on my life's work."

Well, the indefatigable champion of British atheism shows no sign of slowing down, and nowhere was this more apparent than at her *two* birthday parties in June.

The first was a private family bash arranged by her sister Janet for members of their large extended family, and the following day 150 guests gathered at the Conway Hall London.

Barbara was reported in the *Camden New Journal* as saying that the event felt "like a memorial but with the corpse in attendance". John Gulliver, reporting for the *CNJ*, said that "when speakers extolled Barbara's features as a woman who had defined humanism far better than anyone else, and someone who was outspoken and 'her own woman' I never quite knew what that meant – until I interviewed her over the phone. Then I knew she was a free-thinking and free-talking phenomenon."

He added: "At her party on Sunday you could feel the warmth of all admirers – and the feeling that perhaps there will never be another Barbara Smoker."



Barbara pictured with Libby Oakdene of the South East London Humanist Group at her Conway Hall birthday celebration. Photo: Colin Swinburn

Islamists' war against women's education escalates in Pakistan

FOURTEEN students and teachers at Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University, located close to a Shiite Hazara neighbourhood in Quetta, southwestern Pakistan, were killed last month when a female Islamist suicide bomber blew up a bus. Militant Islamists then struck a hospital – the Bolan medical complex – where more than 20 survivors were taken for treatment.

Twenty-eight people, including four militants, were killed in a siege at the hospital. The gunmen killed four security force members, a medical administrator, and the deputy commissioner of Quetta. Four nurses died in the crossfire, police said. Two of the attackers blew themselves up, and two more died in a shootout.

Reports that emerged in the aftermath of the horror suggested the attacks were prompted by a deep-held conviction in the province of Balochistan that women should not be educated.

In condemning the atrocity, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said "violence against women and educators has

increased in recent years, the aim being to keep girls from attaining a basic right to education." He called on Pakistan's new leader, Nawaz Sharif, to do "all possible to bring the perpetrators to justice."

The bus was parked at the university when the attack occurred in mid-June. According to Pakistan's *The Nation*, there was no immediate claim of responsibility. But Pervez

Rasheed, the country's information minister, said, "We do not think there is any foreign involvement in these attacks – this looks like homegrown terrorists".

In the same week in the town of Sibi in Balochistan, gunmen targeted a brothel and shot dead four prostitutes. A taxi driver was also killed in the attack and two other women were seriously wounded.



Pakistani authorities examine the burned-out bus

Teenage girl dies after illegal circumcision in Egypt



A 13-year-old Egyptian girl died last month after undergoing circumcision at a village in the Daqahliya governorate northeast of Cairo

The father of Suhair al-Bata'a was reported in the Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm* as saying; "We left our daughter with the doctor and the nurse. Fifteen minutes later, the nurse took my daughter out of the operation room to a nearby room, along with three other girls whom the doctor was circumcising",

Mohammed Ibrahim, a farmer added: "I waited half an hour, hoping that my daughter would wake up, but, unfortunately, unlike the rest of the girls, she did not," he said.

The doctor who circumcised Suhair had previously circumcised her elder sister two years ago.

"I want nothing but to hold the doctor accountable and to have justice for my daughter," Suhair's mother, Hasanat Naeem Fawzy, told the newspaper.

The police ordered an autopsy and summoned the doctor to find the cause of the young girl's death.

A health inspector report said the cause of the death was due to "a sharp drop in blood pressure resulting from shock trauma," the family's lawyer, Abdel Salam, told *al-Masry al-Youm*.

Egypt's National Council for Women branded the girl's death as "a criminal act", one that reflected the "extreme savagery" of female genital mutilation, and called on the government to investigate the issue and punish those responsible.

UNICEF Egypt has also condemned the incident, saying female circumcision has neither medical nor religious justification.

Abdel Wahab Suleiman, undersecretary of the Ministry of Health in Daqahliya said that the Health Directorate had not yet been notified of the incident and described female genital mutilation as being against the law.

In 1996, Egypt criminalised female genital mutilation; however, many families still illegally circumcise their daughters. In 2009, Egyptian authorities arrested a man for illegally circumcising an 11-year-old girl, the first time since the ban was introduced.



The Dinosaur Test

PAUL KARAFFA reflects on the choice of answers in a creationist quiz

On December 21, 2006, Neil de-Grasse Tyson wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* stating, “People cited violation of the First Amendment when a New Jersey schoolteacher asserted that evolution and the Big Bang are not scientific and that Noah’s ark carried dinosaurs. This case is not about the need to separate church and state; it’s about the need to separate ignorant, scientifically illiterate people from the ranks of teachers”.

Recently, fourth-graders at Blue Ridge Christian Academy, a private religious school in South Carolina, were given a science quiz to test their knowledge of dinosaurs. The quiz was fairly simple, asking questions like “True or False: The earth is billions of years old”. Unfortunately, the “correct” answer to this question was *false*. The quiz tested children on the existence of dinosaurs from the perspective of the Book of Genesis and the Gospels of the New Testament. According to the “science” lesson, all people and

animals originally ate plants, dinosaurs were the size of sheep and existed on Earth less than 4,000 years ago – and were more or less buddy-buddy with humans. The quiz was based on a DVD produced by the group Answer in Genesis aligning with the view of the Creationist Museum in Kentucky. A picture of the quiz paper was posted on Internet and it quickly went viral.

A parent of one of the children at the school was gravely displeased and now plans to remove her daughter from the school at the end of the year. The parent specifically wrote to Snopes, the online urban legend investigator, “I didn’t know that this was being taught to her [my daughter] until we heard a radio commercial together about the Discover the Dinosaurs exhibit coming [to our area]. The commercial starts out, ‘After 65 million years, the dinosaurs have returned ...’ She [my daughter] commented immediately that it was only 4,000 years ago. When I correct her, she snapped back, ‘Were you there?’ I have since taught my daughter differently, but I am sure she is confused now. The test showed up [at] home a day later to

my disgust.” Other children from the nearly 150 other students have yet to be removed from the school. However, since the institution is private, the responsibility inevitably falls on the parents.

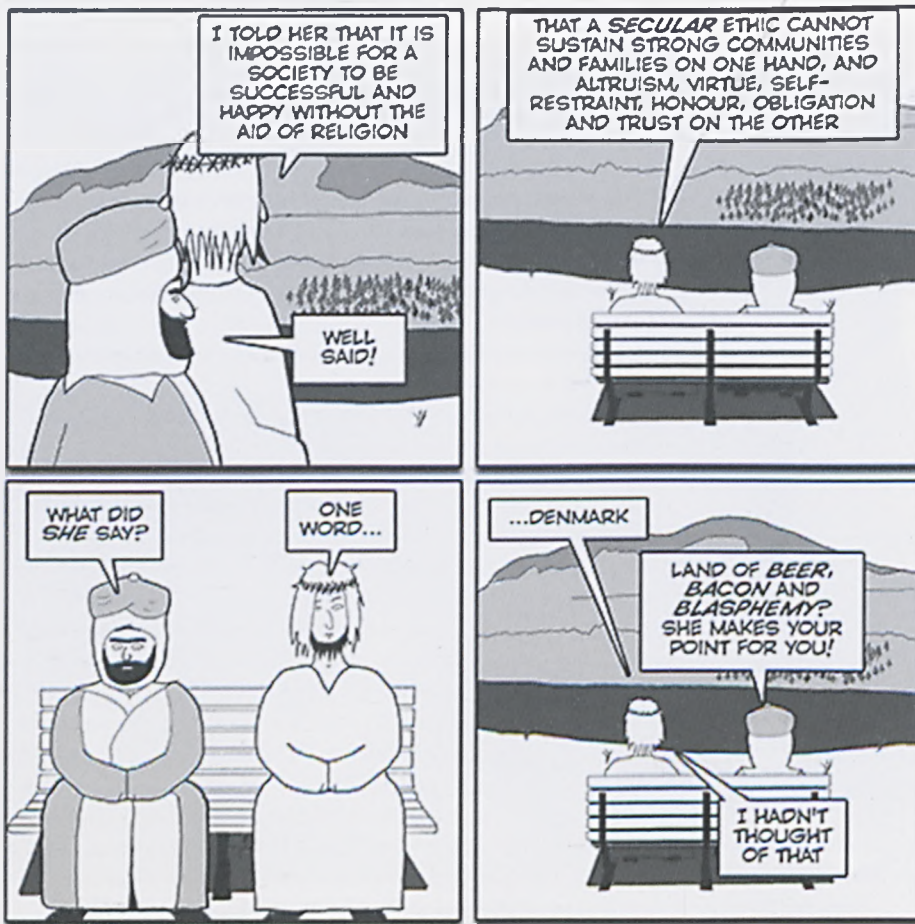
Once the quiz hit the Reddit site, it quickly went viral on Facebook and Twitter. Atheists and non-believers were appalled, sparking tens of thousands of comments on the subject, including “Surely there’s some limit to how far private schools can go? Or can I just charge \$10k/year to lock some kids in a dark room while their parents go to work” and “This should be criminal”.

Private schools in the US have been allowed to breed non-science and pseudo-science for years, hiding themselves under the umbrella of the First Amendment which prohibits the making of any law impeding the free exercise of religion. But it could be argued that science education does not fall under the “free exercise of religion” as a qualification for the position of “science teacher” should most undoubtedly include an understanding of the subject. No non-believer in the US is holding their breath, as it may be years before private religious schools are forced to remove religious material from their science curriculum.

The most disturbing aspect of the quiz was not the pseudo-science and non-science but the last question, “The next time someone says the earth is billions (or millions) of years old, what can you say?” The answer: “Were you there?” The quiz, then, goes far beyond religious indoctrination, pushing an anti-science agenda by encouraging a youth culture that refuses to ask questions, investigate, or consider differing points-of-view. The school is teaching children not only to reject science, but to reject free inquiry and shut down the inquisitive part of them.

It should come as no surprise that the school is struggling to stay afloat. In fact, the school was scheduled to shut down on May 31, 2013 with \$2.8 million debt. They need \$200,000 to stay open next fall, as the founder and major donor will no longer make up the loss in operating costs. It is currently unknown why these funding sources have ceased. The religious in the US have been relatively sympathetic to the school’s cause, supporting their interpretation of science. In fact, of the \$200,000, about \$10,000 has been received by the school to help them stay open. It is currently unknown whether or not the funds will miraculously appear via an angel or other celestial entity, but realists are relatively certain they

Jesus & Mo



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will not. It is hard to call institutes like Blue Ridge Christian Academy a school. Religious indoctrination and propaganda have no place in a learning environment. The real victims are the children, who have little to no understanding of context in which they are learning information. For them learning

about God and science is all part of the same educational path. They are not. Understanding God as a concept is part of history and mythology, and nothing more.

When summing up the inconvenience of the scientifically illiterate, Neil deGrasse Tyson says it best: "The problem in society is

not kids not knowing science. The problem is adults not knowing science. They outnumber kids five to one, they wield power, they write legislation. When you have scientifically illiterate adults, you have undermined the very fabric of what makes a nation wealthy and strong."

Atheism and evil

TREVOR BLAKE wonders why atheists tend to shy away from the use of the word 'evil'

We atheists insist that theists clean their own house. When some Muslims make *all* Muslims look bad, we ask that they consider the sort of reformation that secular thought forced on Christianity centuries ago.

When some Christians pine for the good old days of their power when a clergyman might be free to rape children without penalty, we ask that they hold themselves to the law of the land rather than the *Criminal Solicitas* of the Bishop of Rome.

When mystics and snake oil salesman use the vocabulary of rationality without its grammar, we point out their contradictions – or laugh and point. Just so, when atheists confuse the tool of rationality with an anointment of Rationality™, we are compelled to clean our own house.

Atheists hesitate too much to use the word evil. Atheists shy away from calling men or their actions evil when evil is the proper term to use. Somewhere along the line of casting out our demons we thought we could keep our angels. There are many convincing arguments that a person can be good without God. Why we thought a person could not be evil without a devil is less clear. I hope to convince you that secular moral is a two-headed coin.

I have never heard an atheist argue that we should not say "goodbye" to each other when we part. The etymology of the English word goodbye is "God be with you", but whatever the word might have meant in the past it is today a simple recognition that an encounter has ended.

I have heard a few atheists say they refrain from wishing someone good luck because there is no luck in the universe, only cause and effect (or chance). Most atheists, however, are comfortable using the phrase "good luck" instead of "if you are successful in your endeavours then I will be content because our value systems are similar and therefore your happiness has some influence upon my

own". Atheists are generally fine with using the words of good, along with the claim that secular humanism is a valid moral stance. Less so with the words of evil, and the claim that secular humanism can include evil.

When a surgeon removes a cancerous tumor, he does not replace it with a benign or benevolent tumor. When atheists remove God from morality, they do not replace him with other imaginary monsters that live in the sky. But when it comes to evil, most atheist do have a stand-in for what is more reasonably called evil: insanity.

Like you, I lack psychic powers. At the same time, I can guarantee that in another essay or report in this issue of the *Freethinker* as well as ten times over at the *Freethinker* website you will see non-atheists being called insane. The choice seems to be between atheism and rationality on the one hand and insanity on the other. Rationality is self-evident and atheism flows from it, therefore to not be an atheist is to be anti-rational by choice, to be insane. It doesn't help the non-atheist cause that many theist actions are anti-rational. But what you won't find in atheist literature is much talk of non-atheists being *evil*.

While atheists will make clear arguments about being good without God, evil is con-

Quotes on evil

- A Sunday school is a prison in which children do penance for the evil conscience of their parents – *H L Mencken*.
- SINCE boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads. This can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored; therefore they created human beings – *Soren Kierkegaard*.
- IF God listened to the prayers of men, all men would quickly have perished: for they are forever praying for evil against one another – *Epicurus*.

cause atheists lack an objective moral authority, we cannot be moral. While an atheist might disagree that they cannot know what is good in thought and deed, we often agree that we cannot know what is evil. Evil is shunned as a value judgement, such as xenophobia. Evil is considered, well, evil, and judgement is judged to be judgemental.

Critics of atheism sometimes point to what we should all agree are acts of evil, such as fascism in Germany or communism in Russia and China, and claim that since these acts of evil were carried out by atheists then atheism is evil. This claim ignores, first, that Adolf Hitler was a life-long Christian and was never excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church (something to keep in mind next time you read about the excommunication of members today – is what they did worse than what Hitler did?). Second, while atheism is a component of socialism is it not true that socialism is a component of atheism.

Critics of atheism generally fail to bring up the excesses of the French Revolution, which is the (singular) historic instance of mass murders carried out in the name of rationality. This is an evil that atheism must never repeat.

It is not healthy to dwell on the evil of the world. But among a few examples of what I, an atheist, think of as evil were the Islamic terrorist attacks against the US on September 11, 2001, against Spain on March 11, 2004 and against England on July 7, 2005.

Atheists should not refrain from speaking of evil. Atheists influenced by Ayn Rand and objectivism can identify evil as that which goes against the lives of people and against rationality. Atheists influenced by Max Stirner and egoism can identify evil as that which goes against the will (and the whim) of the individual. Atheists influenced by Anton LaVey and the Church of Satan can identify evil as a part of life that can never be avoided but which can be used to pleasurable ends (or at least to tweak the nose of the overly sensitive).

From minister to atheist in five simple steps

In this exclusive article for the *Freethinker*, JERRY DEWITT – a former preacher in DeRidder, Louisiana, a small town in the heart of America’s Bible belt – charts his conversion to atheism

“THEIST: n. Belief in the existence of a god or gods, especially belief in a personal God as creator and ruler of the world” (thefreedictionary.com).

My story inevitably provokes this question and it’s almost always phrased the same way: “How in the world does a Pentecostal preacher become an atheist?”

It’s a simple question, but as you would expect, there’s no simple answer. The answer took a lifetime to live and it has taken an entire book – *Hope After Faith* – to detail. As I travelled the country explaining it to people, I’ve realized that the only way my journey from believer to ardent non-believer can be explained is through a series of steps.

I don’t have much space here, so I will keep those steps brief. (I was gratified that the prominent philosopher Daniel Dennett worked my steps into his presentation at the Global Atheist convention in Australia.)

The understanding gained through the following steps ultimately led to a confident theist becoming a humble atheist at the age 42:

1 God loves everyone:

Influential person – My Pentecostal grandmother. Despite the fact that the Pentecostal doctrine is judgmental and exclusionary, my grandmother was an example of inclusion and unconditional love very early in my life.

She set an example that few people ever lived up to. Because of her, I joined a church, ministry, and mission that came closest to the lofty goals she set for me. The church and its message were simply called Grace. And it wasn’t until I became actively engaged in the ministry that I realized being “Christ-like” doesn’t mean the same thing to everyone.

Influential reference – biblical verses,

such as John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Theological view – Grace. God’s Righteousness at Christ’s expense.

Unlike most of my fellow Pentecostals, I was starting to believe that our good works weren’t good enough and that instead Jesus’ death had completely paid the price for our sins ... not just the sins of the believer but the sins (actually “sin”, singular) of the whole world, if only the whole world would believe it!

Transitional concept – Eternal punishment. Whatever comfort I derived from believing that God loved the whole world was challenged by this question: if he loves everyone, why doesn’t he save them? And for that matter, why allow them to be “lost” in the first place?

During one of my more insecure childhood experiences, I was overcome with jealousy when my dog answered my friend’s beckoning and not mine. Could the creator of the universe be as pettily jealous as an eight-year-old boy?

2 God saves everyone

Influential person – William Morrison Branham. A cassette tape I heard containing one of the late Brother Branham’s messages was the very first time I’d encountered a minister challenge the idea of Hell – and it wouldn’t be the last.

Though Branham didn’t teach that God ultimately saves all souls, he did do away with the notion of eternal punishment, and did so while remaining the foremost Pentecostal of his day.

There were numerous versions of the concept of eternal punishment, but almost all of them were proposed by non-Pentecostals. This voided their relevance to me in the earliest days of my ministry. Later, I would grow out of my prejudices and

would allow myself to be exposed to the works of universalists of every stripe.

Influential reference – biblical verses, such as 2 Corinthians 5:19 “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.”

Theological view – Universalism. The idea that every person who ever lived would ultimately share in and enjoy the bliss of a heavenly residence seemed to muffle, and, in some small way, justify the suffering contained in the Bible and evident in the real world. Admittedly, it was a stretch, but it was the best and most humane explanation I had at the time.

Transitional concept – Sonship. “Sonship” is a doctrinal expression referencing the family-like union between God the Father and the saved individual. The sinner’s justification is so complete that his standing in God’s eyes is equal to that of Christ’s, the only begotten “son” of God. Thus the use of the positional title, Sonship.

The original questions, though now somewhat shelved by Universalism, still remained but were temporarily eclipsed by more technical questions. Questions such as how and when does God “save” everyone? Are they saved at death or were they saved before they were even born? Will they get a second chance for salvation in Heaven or were they simply saved when Jesus died on the cross? What about those who died before Jesus’ crucifixion? When does Sonship technically begin?

3 God is in everyone

Influential person – Bishop Carlton Pearson. Much like Brother Branham, Bishop Pearson is not only a theological renegade rejected by mainstream Christianity, he’s also very much a full-blooded Pentecostal. During the course of Pearson’s lifelong endeavors, he built a world-class



Jerry DeWitt pictured in a church where he once preached in DeRidder, La.
Photo: Julie Glassberg, The New York Times

ministry only to watch it disintegrate after publicly renouncing the doctrine of Hell. Bishop Pearson didn't stop with moving beyond the traditional view of external punishment, he eventually left much of traditional Christianity far behind.

Influential reference – biblical verses, such as Acts 17:22-28: "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things; And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."

Theological view – Inclusion. The doctrine of Inclusion in Bishop Pearson's own words: "The Gospel of Inclusion is the exciting and liberating news that in the finished work of the cross, Jesus redeemed the entire world to God from the cosmic and organic sin imposed upon it by Adam, the original man. In effect, the world is already saved, they just don't know it; and, unfortunately, most Christians don't believe it."

Timothy 4:9-10 says: "...we have put our trust in the living God who is the Savior of all men, and especially those who believe."

Jesus did not just die for Christians, he

died to redeem, reconcile, and ultimately save the Cosmos.

Jesus was not a Christian, He was a Jew. God, however, is spirit and cannot be confined exclusively to any particular religion including Christianity. He is not Jewish or Christian or Hindu or Buddhist; yet, he is all of that if we want or need him to be, while at the same time, none of it conclusively, because he can't be and, in fact, is not limited to a person's or culture's perception of him.

He loves everybody. He understands everybody, and he has a covenant with everybody – again, whether they know it or not.

Every human being in the history of the planet was created in the image and likeness of God. Anything else is an impersonation. God sees himself in everybody, in every belief system, in every icon, perhaps even the Devil. "The Devil can't subsist on his own. He came from God, has a specific assignment, and carries it out well." – beliefnet.com

Once I had moved as far from mainstream Christian Inclusion as it was possible, everything became questionable. What I was soon to learn was that once you outgrow your religious traditions, your superstitions may soon follow.

Transitional concept – The gospel of Inclusion turned most of my investigations

inward. No longer burdened with making sense of God, the Bible and religious contradictions, I became interested in the nature of reality – and human nature in particular.

4 God is everyone's internal dialogue

Influential person – Joseph Campbell. While reading everything I could find that dealt with the nexus of religion and human nature, I came across Joseph Campbell. I found Campbell's teachings on comparative religion to be both refreshing and explanatory. For the first time in my studies, questions were actually being answered without the creation of more questions.

Influential reference – Campbell's *The Power of Myth* and *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*.

Theological View – Deism, moving towards agnosticism.

Transitional concept – Biological evolution and evolutionary psychology.

5 God is a delusion

Influential persons – "The Four Horsemen": Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and the late, great Christopher Hitchens.

Influential References – *The God Delusion*, *Breaking the Spell*, *The End of Faith* and *God is not Great*.

Theological View – agnosticism/atheism.

Transitional Concept – secular communities and how to build them.

Conclusion

As you can see, I didn't suddenly wake up as a non-believer. In fact, the seeds of my atheism were inherent in my religion from the beginning. I was pulled – or drawn – along my transformation by exploring the knowledge and boundaries of each step.

No one book or article or lecture is ever likely to shake a person's faith. It is a gradual awakening. It is, in some ways, like a graduation.

I know that many believers are plagued with doubt right now and I wish them the best. We're each at different steps and I look forward to meeting with some of them when they make the final transition from belief to non-belief.

IN August, 2012, DeWitt was profiled in *The New York Times* by Robert F Worth, who wrote that the former pastor "refuses to leave DeRidder, a place where religion, politics and family pride are indivisible. Six months after he was 'outed' as an atheist he lost his job and his wife – both, he says, as a direct consequence. Only a handful of his 100-plus relatives from DeRidder still speak to him. When I visited him, in late June, his house was in foreclosure, and he was contemplating moving into his 2007 Chrysler PT Cruiser. This is the kind of environment where godlessness remains a real struggle ..."

DeWitt's *Hope after Faith: An Ex-Pastor's Journey from Belief to Atheism* (hard-cover) was published last month, and is available from Amazon.

Faith and the moral agency

OLLY LENNARD argues that faith effectively absolves the devout from holding their deity to account for its immoral behaviour

Faith is touted as a virtue and often a necessary cornerstone of religion by those who sell it and live by it. Readers who have debated, formally or informally, with believers will no doubt have encountered the faith defence at some point, or its fraternal twin, the “It’s-beyond-our-understanding” defence. Rather than add to the expanding pile of literature on the rational merits or demerits of faith, I’d like to put that business on one side and make a moral assessment.

The injunction to have faith in the face of scientific evidence is one affair, and the worst thing anybody might call those who heed that commandment is intellectually myopic (or perhaps some something less polite). But the evidence of science and reason isn’t the only challenge to faith: there is the problem of evil to consider.

It is largely – though not completely, as Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Scientists will be quick to object – accepted that the existence of evil in the world is difficult to reconcile with the existence of a loving god, which, if it were as powerful and beneficent as its adherents claim, would presumably do something about it. (Attentive readers will just have noted my use of the neuter pronoun to refer to God. If we are going to posit the existence of a supreme being we can avoid alienating half the population by calling it a ‘he’.)

Some might prefer to think of evil as a “mystery” rather than a problem, but for those who accept it as a genuine concern the faith defence is the staple response. “Father, why does God not prevent natural disasters if it loves us?”

“I’m not sure, but have faith in its goodness, my child.”

But this is an injunction to look the other way, so to speak, in God’s case. If a person had the power to prevent a disaster but failed to do so, we would think them morally deficient, but the faith defence demands we overlook God’s apparent callousness, not just on the natural disaster scale but wherever preventable evil is found. In actual fact it isn’t a command to avoid trying to bring God to justice – since standard prison cells aren’t roomy enough for three persons inhabiting one divine essence anyway – but a

command not to morally condemn God, even in thought. This is surely a wicked preaching.

I say surely, but those with their sceptical hats on might still need some persuading, particularly if their hats happen to be gold and pointy. Why is abandoning moral agency in God’s case a bad thing? Simply because it surrenders the universality of moral prescriptions.

For example, suppose you discovered that your local chief of police was corrupt. The supervising sergeant entreats you to look the other way, just this once, and not report the chief to the higher authorities.

“Look at the good things the chief does when she isn’t being corrupt,” they say; “though it might not look that way, the chief really has a heart of gold.” It would be immoral of the sergeant to attempt to persuade you from trying to get justice done, or morally condemning the chief. No matter how many criminals the chief has stopped – and remember you haven’t seen those heroic deeds yourself either – that doesn’t exculpate her from moral responsibility for her corruption, and neither does her position of authority. (Note, however, that the sergeant could of course try to show why the chief’s actions were not as bad as you think, or that she was not really corrupt.)

Here the parallel to God is clear enough: the injunction to have faith in the face of the problem of evil is the injunction to abandon moral agency.

I can think of two likely responses from the advocates of faith. The first is to admit that yes, faith does require some suspension of moral judgement, but moral agency isn’t needed when it comes to God since God is all-good. Not only can we point to the problem of evil as evidence to the contrary, but to know the proposition “God is all-good” to be true would require the exact same faculty of moral discernment that the faith defence tells us not to employ. The faithful can’t have it both ways here: either we use our moral agency to judge God, in which case it will be subject to that judgement, or we don’t, in which case we can’t positively say that God is good.

The second would be to confront the problem of evil by saying yes, it looks bad, but God plays by different moral rules from us. This old chestnut is really just a variation on the “It’s-beyond-our-understanding” defence. God is so “other” and crazy and “out there”, or sees such a much a bigger picture of what’s really going on that its morality is different from ours.

If we were particularly Kantian we might deny this and say that morality needs to be the sort of thing that holds for all rational beings; whether you’re the police chief or not, you still have the same moral obligations as everybody else. Or we might allow the faithful this one point, in which case any attempt to use God as a moral exemplar – I’m thinking of the chilling couplet from *Once in Royal David’s City*: “Christian children all must be/mild, obedient, good as he” – would be void. If God only plays golf then Jesus isn’t in a position to show us how to play rugby.

(I say Jesus, and earlier I mentioned three persons in one divine essence, but there’s no reason why this naked villainy need be clothed with old odd ends from specifically Christian holy writ: these arguments apply just as much to other deities that claim omnibenevolence.)

I mentioned Kant a moment ago, and I have a need to mention him again in concluding. He was of the opinion that



Have Faith!

we can have moral duties to ourselves ie that our moral obligations can refer not only to others but also to our own person. If this were the case (and it is only fair to point out that it is not obviously so) then to have faith privately would be a wrong action, since it involves surrendering moral agency. If Kant

was incorrect and there are no duties to ourselves then private faith is fine, but to entreat someone else to have faith – to abdicate the faculty of judgement in the face of the problem of evil – is wicked, a deep problem for clergy, converters and religious parents.

• Olly Lennard is a UK student. He has been



acting since the age of three and began writing for his local newspaper when he was 13. He discovered stand-up comedy at university and has since performed in places as distant as Auckland, New Zealand. He is also a member of his university's sketch comedy troupe.

Interfering with the anguished

STUART HARTILL wants the religious to stop praying for (and preying on) our grief

I was – I hope – as saddened as anyone by the recent widely reported murder of a small girl in a seemingly idyllic Welsh village. But as both an atheist and a former local newspaper reporter I was also appalled by an aspect of the coverage that nobody seems to be talking about. To be precise, the prominence given to local church activity, and the pretence that this was important – even to the villagers.

It follows an irritating pattern which, as a journalist, I find lazy and actually quite irresponsible, and as an atheist extremely insulting. The practice seriously affects the public impression given of atheists and the non-religious social majority in general, so maybe it is time to start challenging it.

I first started noticing it enough to study the phenomena during that terrible shooting rampage in Cumbria on June 2, 2010, in which a lone gunman – Derrick Bird – killed 12 people and injured 11 others before finally killing himself

Freethinker readers, like other “committed non-religionists”, must have noticed not only a national media emphasis on how churches were “helping” but the seemingly endless sequence of “memorial services”. As Cumbria is almost on my doorstep I began to look further and quickly started noticing odd anomalies.

Almost immediately I found a list of tributes to the victims that a local radio station had invited friends and relatives to compile, and from this identified only one married couple – Jennifer and James Jackson – who could be fairly described as devout Christians or even regular churchgoers. To the rest, religion simply did not seem that important.

And I then made a more interesting discovery from those tributes. One victim – Michael Pike – was a committed humanist, and his family tried to tell the world that. On digging further, I discovered local TV interviews with his daughter (which sadly never made national TV) in which she eloquently explained this.

Furthermore, the family explicitly told various church bodies that they did not want Michael mentioned in their showy television “memorial services” as he would have found the idea of them praying for him inappropriate – even hilarious. I then heard his name prominently read out in at least two separate services featured on both regional and national television. So the churches not only totally ignored the family but lied – blatantly – in pretending that this man (and possibly other victims whose families felt less able to protest) were part of some fictitious Christian “normality” which we dissident atheists are trying to disrupt.

Thinking back further, this fits in with a pattern I have seen whenever the national media descends on a small community following a tragedy. In my local newspaper career this happened twice – in both cases quite horrific murders which, to the national media, were perfect examples of “idyllic village rocked by senseless crime”.

In fact, in both cases the community had long predicted that such things would happen when local government services were farmed out to religious amateurs. In both cases, when national reporters asked help from local media they were told this but chose to ignore it.

From my own experience, I just know that when the reporters from the nationals, TV, and radio get parachuted in there is some unimaginative by-the-book editor instructing them to get the standard interviews with the local police and council leader and also “find a vicar – any vicar” in order to “find out how the community is coping”. There are several reasons for this.

First, the immediate families and neighbours of small town victims do not want to talk to nosy reporters – especially ones from outside the community. Second, even if they do they can say things that may not fit the required stereotype. Third, clergy are used to talking in public and easily available, so make easy interviews; to be brutally honest most (being so used to preaching to single figure

congregations each week) are also desperate for the publicity.

To aid a serious look at the phenomena one useful study is Stan Cohen’s classic study of the “moral panic” around mods and rockers in the early 1960s. This gave the world not only his PhD thesis but a very readable book, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, which explains some dense social theory in a straightforward way and puts forward some very useful ideas.

Cohen extensively researched newspaper reports and local government body records to get an extraordinary amount of minute detail – from which it soon emerged that there was very little factual detail in the media reporting. At a “common sense” level, of course, we have “known” that for years. Interestingly though, we still fail to spot it in contemporary reports when it should be as plain as the noses on our faces. But in comparing that to the actual records he also showed how what we later learnt to call an “urban folk myth” had developed.

He also cross-matched this to US research that had been done into how government deals with natural or industrial disasters. Then, to some extent, he drew on another social theorist – Erving Goffman – in using the idea of the disaster as a sort of theatrical performance in which, as events unfold, everyone involved falls into a “role” and finds they cannot “act” otherwise.

At the simplest level then, Cohen offers us an example of the way that the media stories of such events rarely fit the hard facts, and some encouragement to start looking for such facts ourselves instead of just going along with tabloid nonsense. At another level, he offers a model to understand how this myth is created and hangs together.

I’d argue that this – and not just the exhortation to get fact checking – is his important gift to so-called sceptical atheists. Because while we endlessly regurgitate and repackage old arguments about the “truth”

(Continued on p12)

The insufficient self:

The cult of meditation and its spiritual offspring

DALE DEBAKCSY gets to grips with explorations of the 'Inner Self'

If you were to ask a stormtrooper how the Death Star works, he'd probably say, "Well, it's big and round and I keep my blaster in a cabinet over there." The part is rarely a reliable expositor of the whole. And yet, so much religious practice which styles itself as enlightened is based on an unshakeable faith in the potential omnipotence of the part. From the over-confident musings of meditation-driven philosophy to the crude reliance of New Age Spirituality on *feelings* for determining questions of existence, we're given to understand that, by turning inward, we can discover everything about ourselves there is to know.

It's hard to fault this approach to knowledge of the self. For millennia, such techniques were all we had. If you wanted to figure out where the border between consciousness and unconsciousness lay, or why sometimes you felt compelled to do things that were so entirely against your self-interest, there was nothing to do except sit on a rock and Think Hard about it. We came up with a lot of promising guesses that way –

notions about what constitutes identity and volition that are very okay. One might even say outstandingly passable. Granted, there was also a lot of metaphysical phantom conjuring that consisted of little more than elegantly garbed wishful thinking, a sort of necromancy of childhood hopes rendered weighty by being in Greek or German. But, on the whole, something like progress was being made.

And then a few people got the genuinely wonderful idea that, instead of continually running aground by pinning one's hopes entirely on the ability of the conscious self to describe the content of the complete self, maybe one could investigate the parts of that entity from without, determine the mechanisms of each manifestation of selfhood and see what commonalities might be found between them. The romantic lone human sitting on the rock was replaced by small teams of dedicated but effectively anonymous men and women electrocuting slugs and getting mice drunk while making countless tallies of the results.

The lone humans were made understandably uncomfortable by all of this. They dug their heels in and tried to pass off incompleteness as profundity. "What need for the mere mechanics of neurons when you can go on a deep voyage of inner discovery and find out your *true* nature?" they whispered in hushed tones and mocked the slug shockers for their mechanistic accountancy. Never mind that their methods still hadn't moved on from a reliance on the part being able to account for the whole that had made the methods of the slug shockers so necessary in the first place. "Inner Voyage" *sounds* like it should get you somewhere impressive, right?

Unfortunately, giving something an awesome name doesn't guarantee its greatness, otherwise I'd be watching *Snakes On a Plane* right now instead of writing this article. The techniques of meditative inquiry have natural boundaries, and on the other side of those boundaries lay vast plains and continents of self-knowledge that those techniques simply cannot access. Attempts to do so come off as little more than educated guesses draped in

or otherwise of 2,000-year-old codswallop we are allowing brand new myths to develop before our eyes.

More importantly, we do nothing as these new myths inform the way our communities handle disaster and in the process entrench religious privilege, as the "natural" place of the church in "comforting" (and sometimes "fleecing") the victims is further established with each new crisis.

As I hope I've shown, a rigorous analysis of facts reveals how far the media and religious storytelling around such unfortunate events veers from the hard truth, which is that most people neither need nor want the church to get them through times we hope we will never have to experience.

Fair enough, there are some who genuinely do – and we should neither mock nor seek to prevent that. Certainly, many conscientious small town vicars get out to check if anyone wants counselling (and again fair play that they do) but when asked directly clergy I speak to admit most people do not seek religious consolation. Many must get annoyed at the butting in of churches, but their objections are not recorded and count-

Interfering with the anguished

less good stories of ordinary folk helping to keep a community together simply go untold.

That is the level at which we need to change things. We need to speak up, like Michael Pike's family, and we need to be on the lookout for those that do, and to amplify those views however we can.

We also need to question, for example, the way local authority disaster plans automatically involve the church. Not just, say, in commandeering the church hall as a shelter for refugees or a first aid post, but in assuming that the local clergy are so important that they should have the emergency powers granted to police or military personnel or, if they request, be prioritised for medicine, food and power supplies.

You may laugh at that, but while part of a local committee on medical ethics during the swine flu epidemic a few years back I

spent an hour trying to counter an arch-deacon who thought that he and his colleagues should get first dabs with the doctors on any scarce antidote.

I also spent about that time arguing that Mothers Union volunteers in a meals-on-wheels van did not need semi-automatic rifles to see off looters.

Yes, seriously!

To return to my original point – we can and need to do more than mutter at the TV about this. Not just as some abstract, vaguely academic argument but because people in disasters have not got (and will not get) a fair chance to grieve without useless clergy crashing in, running things with government approval, and passing the hat around in the process.

As I hope my Cumbrian example shows, with just a little effort such stories can be told and such myth stripped away, I cannot honestly say if my example is the norm or an interesting exception, because I simply do not know of other efforts to find out, and lack the time to do it alone. But I *would* like to find out, and would be happy to join with others in doing so.

metaphor. When consciousness comes face to face with a mental process, it necessarily interprets it through a conscious filter and vocabulary that is qualitatively unequal to the task of sensibly reporting what it's witnessing.

Consciousness in this instance is like a rhinoceros seeing a giraffe for the first time – it might try very gamely to describe the giraffe in rhinoceros terms, and even construct some very neat extended metaphors that try and twist rhino words to fit giraffe attributes. But the fact remains that that brave fellow isn't, nor will he ever be, our best source for figuring out what that giraffe is all about. And to put your foot down and insist, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that his grasping metaphors are the result of deep insight instead of a fundamental failure to Interpret The Other is to invite philosophical stagnation.

This is what's happened to those religions that took the bold move in eschewing theology in favor of a focus on developing the potential of introspection, Buddhism and its spiritual cousins being the most notable. The great irony is that what started in freedom from dogma has become itself so dogmatic in the face of alternate approaches to investigating the conscious self.

Buddhist apologists insist that their methods have privileged insight into the mind, and when it is pointed out that Necessarily Limited is a more apt term than Privileged, they seek the sure security of "It's an Eastern thing, you wouldn't understand." That response served them in good stead a century ago, when it was still an open question whether the conscious mind didn't after all have access to the full self. Since then we've come to see that it doesn't, and that so much of the self and construction is beyond any possibility of even being witnessed by conscious self-reflection, let alone interpreted thereby, that the Eastern Defense has more of the tinny crinkle of denial and desperation about it than the authoritative heft of just rebuke.

"But I like meditating – I find it a good and centering practice," you might say. Great. I like flailing around like an idiot to "Jump For My Love" on *Just Dance 3*. I find it a good and centering practice, and every once in a while have a good idea while doing it. But I'm not going to recommend that it replace neurological research as a truth-seeking method. To make the extreme claim that meditation and its variants are the only source of profoundly true ideas about the self is, at this stage in history, merely an obstructive act born of reactive fear and dogmatic zealotry.

Even the relatively benign claim that meditative insight and scientific research ought to work together to plumb the depths of the self strikes me as a proposal on the order of



Eh. It's when you wanted to go to a PG-13 rated movie as a kid but you couldn't because you had to bring your five-year-old brother with you, and so you ended up having to watch *The Care Bears* movie instead so he wouldn't get scared. It's a nice thing to do, but it also means you're going to have to wait *years* for him to grow up before you can get where you wanted to go. The difference being that kids, given time, will grow up, while religions, given time, are not guaranteed to grow wise.

Really, though, it's not the methodological orthodoxy of Buddhism that troubles me over much. Every once in a while you'll see an until-then promising neuroscientist tumble into its grasp and flop about vaguely (but oh how financially profitably) therein for the rest of his career. It's sad to watch, but we're hardly *hemorrhaging* scientists this way. What I find rather more insidious, or if not insidious at least tedious, are the pop culture descendants of this stubbornness about the priority of introspective insights.

"It's true because I *feel* it's true."

For Christians, this way of solving ontological dilemmas reared its head in the 16th century, established itself as a standard theological approach in the 19th, and really hasn't looked back since. The proof of Jesus' divinity wasn't in the logical conjurations of Aquinas, but in the heart and what it seemed to tell you was true. What's amazing is how much this evaluative mode has penetrated the non-Christian community. People who were immune to its crass subjectivity when coming from Christian mouths and pens somehow found it entirely persuasive when coming from the more philosophical religions, or perhaps one should say religious philosophies.

If, as some Buddhist practice would have it, the real deep truths about existence are available exclusively through properly performed meditative practice, then it's but a small (though irresponsible) step to the notion that how we *feel* about something determines how it is. If our conscious mind is uniquely capable of grasping reality that can't be determined through merely scientific methods, why shouldn't our subjective feelings about something inform what pos-

sibly exists and what doesn't?

One feels that death just can't be the end, so it isn't. One feels that there's a grand something out there looking out for us, so there is. One feels so good performing certain rituals, so those rituals must be connected somehow to the truths of the universe. Again, there are entirely good reasons for having started down this line of evaluation. Feelings are great things – they push us towards stuff that is generally good for us and away from things that stand a chance of hurting us. They are the chemical reigns by which our DNA orients us towards self-preservation. But again, it's a question of spheres of influence.

Just as the conscious self isn't guaranteed exclusive insight into unconscious matters of the self (or indeed into the mechanisms behind its own conscious acts), so do feelings naturally have their limits. They are a control mechanism directed survival, not a matchless arbiter of truth. When they are working properly, they are tools employed to compel us to move in the direction that our internal neural calculus has determined is best.

That calculus is based on genetic predisposition and experience, and the further from experience it is asked to render judgment, the more suspect its decisions. We feel fear at the sight of a massive snarling dog. Well and good. We feel that our spirit is incorporeal and will survive death to rejoin the universe's energy. Little bit dodgy.

Meditation can be a good practice. Feelings are fine things. Obviously. But to claim for them the universal power of insight into anything they happen to touch is obtuse and frankly insulting to the people who are giving their lives over, one slug neuron at a time, to figuring out how the self is *actually* constituted. To denigrate that work because the oracular proclamations of hilltop monks and inner voices are easier to grasp and sexier is an act of petulant adolescence. They have their place, and that place is severely limited. For the rest, we must rely on the glorious but sure footed blandness of scientific rigor married to boundless curiosity. And it will take time but, after all, God didn't create the universe in a day ...

Margaret Atwood: a strict agnostic

By **BARRY DUKE**



Margaret Atwood

Rather late in life — just six months ago, to be precise — I discovered the extraordinary talent of Canadian author Margaret Atwood, probably best known for the *Handmaid Tale*, a science fiction novel first published in 1985. It is set in the near future in a totalitarian Christian theocracy which has overthrown the US government.

Having devoured that novel, I set about reading four more novels, and am now well into my fifth: *Robber Bride*. *Handmaid's Tale* made me suspect that Atwood was an atheist, but it was not until I read her non-fiction *Payback: Debt and the Shadow Side of Wealth* — a study of the nature of debt written for the 2008 Massey Lectures — that I became convinced that she was an ardent non-believer.

The content examines, in a thoroughly readable and often humorous manner, borrowing and lending from financial, psychological, theological, literary, and ecological points of view. Here is a delicious extract in the section dealing with the religious aspect of the subject:

Christ is called the Redeemer, a term drawn directly from the language of debt and pawning or pledging, and thus also from that of substitute sacrifice. In fact, the whole theology of Christianity rests on the notion of spiritual debts and what must be done to repay them, and how you might get out of paying by having someone else pay instead. And it rests, too, on a long pre-Christian history of scapegoat figures — including human sacrifices — who take your sins away for you.

Here's the condensed version, and I apologize if through having squashed it into so short a form I don't do it full justice:

God gave Man life and was therefore owed a debt of absolute gratitude and obedience. Man, however, did not repay this debt as he should have done, but reneged on it through an act of disobedience. In this way he put himself and his descendants permanently in hock — for, as we know if we've ever dealt with wills, a person's debts devolve on the heirs and assigns of the debtor. As regards the built-in debt of sin, the creditor is sometimes thought to be Death, sometimes the Devil: this entity collects either (a) your life or (b) your soul — or both — as payment for the debt you yourself still owe due to your rascally distant ancestor.

The debt load of sin you've inherited from Adam — “Original Sin,” as it's known — which has been added to through your own probably not very original sins — can never be repaid by you, because the sum total is too large. So unless someone steps forward on your behalf, your soul will become (a) extinct or (b) a slave of the

Devil in Hell, to be disposed of in some unpleasant way. Various of these ways are described by Dante, where Hell is ruled over by a really horrible version of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*, ingeniously bent on making the punishment fit the crime. If that's too medieval for you, a shorter rendition can be had in the sermon on Hell incorporated into James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

During their lifetimes, all souls not in a state of grace or actually sold to the Devil fully and finally are believed to be in an intermediate condition: in peril, but not fully damned as yet. Christ is thought to have redeemed all souls, in theory at least, by having acted as a cosmic Sin Eater — he took everyone else's sins upon himself at the Crucifixion, where, with Geshtinanna-like selflessness, he offered himself up as the substitute human sacrifice to end all substitute human sacrifices — thereby redeeming the huge Original Sin debt. But individuals must also participate in this drama: in effect, you must redeem yourself by allowing yourself to be redeemed.

Thus all the souls of the living can be thought of as residing in a pawnshop of the soul, neither entirely slaves nor entirely free. Time is running out. Will you be redeemed before the clock strikes midnight and the Grim Reaper arrives — or, worse, Old Nick in his red suit, ready to pop you into his infernal collecting sack? Hang by your fingertips! It's never over till it's over!

This is what gives the Christian life its dramatic tension: you never know. You never know, that is, unless you're a believer in the Antinomian Heresy. If you are, you're so certain of your own salvation that even the most despicable things you do are right, because it's you doing them. Here's a summation of this position, taken from a 2006 article [March 25] in the *Telegraph* in which the author, Sam Leith, suggests that Tony Blair, the ex-Prime Minister of Britain, was in the grip of this heresy:

“Roughly put, antinomianism — and this will have to be roughly put, since I make no claim to be a theologian — is the idea that justification by faith liberates you from

the need to do good works. Righteousness overrides the law — which was, arguably, the PM's position on Iraq.

It can be seen, in some way, as the squaring of a tricky theological circle: the Calvinist idea that the Elect have been singled out for salvation as part of the divine scheme long before any of them were twinkles in the twinkles in their ancestors' eyes. If justification by faith, rather than by works, is the high road to heaven, the logical extreme of the position is that works don't matter at all.

Divine grace, over which we have no control, brings about faith. Faith brings about salvation. Ergo, if you're not touched by grace, there's nothing much you can do about it except look forward to an immensely long retirement having your toes warmed by the devil in the pitchfork hotel.

If, on the other hand, you are one of the Elect, whoop de doo: Jesus wants you for a sunbeam and no amount of bad behaviour is going to prevent him seeing you right. This is a pretty crazy view to take, most of us would agree, and historically it has tended to be discouraged by both civic and religious authorities for rather obvious reasons. But there it is.”

But surprisingly, Atwood claims not to be an atheist, rather a “strict agnostic”. Even more surprisingly, she dismisses as atheism as “dogmatic” and brands it “a religion”.

In an interview with the USTV presenter in 2006, Atwood said atheism “makes an absolute stand about something that cannot be proven”.

She added: “A strict agnostic says, you cannot pronounce, as knowledge, anything you cannot demonstrate. In other words if you're going to call it knowledge you have to be able to run an experiment on it that's repeatable. You can't run an experiment on whether God exists or not, therefore you can't say anything about it as knowledge.”

Reacting angrily to that interview, the American atheist blogger Austin Cline wrote: “It should be noted that Atwood isn't the first or only person to say such things and, in particular, to say such things in an attempt to justify agnosticism as a superior and more rational position than either theism or atheism.

“That's why I call this the ‘Arrogance of Agnosticism’. It's an arrogant attempt by someone to pretend that they are much better, much more sensible, and much more rational than just about everyone else in the world because they have managed to hit upon the one defensible position on the question of gods' existence.

“Unfortunately, this is only achieved by seriously misrepresenting just about every issue and concept involved.”

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

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RELUCTANCE TO IDENTIFY THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF TERRORISM

THE goriness of the latest terrorist atrocity in London – the raised bloodied hand of a wild-eyed jihadist while the other hand grasps the meat cleaver he'd just used, alongside a machete-wielding colleague, to hack a writhing soldier to death on a Woolwich street – is a shocking indictment of what indoctrination can do to the minds of men.

In the immediate aftermath, the media evaded any criticism that went beyond the criminal act itself, repeatedly using “terrorists” without qualification. That the murderers yelled “Allahu akhbar” as they tried to decapitate the soldier, and proclaimed, “We swear by almighty Allah we will never stop fighting you,” apparently has nothing to do with religion.

Since 9/11 awoke Westerners to the full horrors of suicidal jihadist attacks, the political and media establishment have played down the religious and cultural motives behind these despicable acts. “Batling terrorism” or “war on terror” is meaningless without identity and context.

Another blood-spattered limb-strewn city site, more broken bodies and screams and cries of survivors. No, that's not Islam, the public is told. Killing in the name of Allah is a perversion of the Koran, the very antithesis of Islam – the religion of peace. This is the mantra that forestalls any public criticism of Islam or discussion about the psychological roots of fanaticism and the violence endemic in the Islamic world, with its persecution of non-Muslims and gays, abuse of women and cruel punishments mandated by sharia, which extremists want to incrementally introduce into Britain.

Allowing such alien Islamist views free reign – not just on hate-mongering websites, but intimidated in mosques, universities and prisons – is in my opinion wrong and foolish. As is allowing indoctrination of children in Islamic schools that can, by enforcing in-group dogma, only fuel extremism and demands for more separateness. That's the arrogance of proselytising religion. Only by a reasoning evidence-based education for all children will interfaith intercultural conflict eventually wane. No more favours. No more irrational faith-driven worldviews. Religion should be relegated wholly to the private sphere of life: gods should be left at home.

Not only tolerating religio-cultural dissidence, but forgiving its evildoers can be misplaced. The Holocaust writer Cynthia Ozick, quoted by the polymath Raymond Tallis when reviewing *Evil Men* in *Prospect* magazine (June), said: “The face of forgiveness is mild, but how stony to the slaughtered,” and, “Whoever is merciful to the cruel will end by being indifferent to the innocent.” By appeasing, or willfully denying, political Islam's ambitions in the UK, isn't that what's being done – to future victims?

Graham Newbery
Southampton

ISLAMOPHOBIA

NATHAN Lean, in his condemnation of Islamophobia (*Freethinker*, May) seems to consider the Islamic veiling of women a minor matter, not worth criticising Islam because of it. Such a pity one cannot change Mr Lean and his likes into females for a year (or more) and send them to enjoy life in, say, Iran or Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, in today's Egypt.

I also wish to express my total agreement with Sam Harris regarding the term “Islamophobia”. It is indeed a term of Islamist propaganda designed to shut up all critics of Islam as racists, neurotics and such.

Once more: “phobia” is not simply another word for “fear”, a mere synonym. A phobia is a morbid, pathological, irrational, excessive fear. As there are, however, plenty of perfectly sound, valid, rational reasons justifying fear of and aversion to Islam, the term “Islamophobia” is as meaningless as “Naziphobia” would have been in the 1930s and '40s.

Nelly Moia
Luxembourg

MARGARET THATCHER

I FIND it odd that Peter Lawson attacks the lead story on Thatcher's Christianity in the May issue of the *Freethinker*, calling it a “cheap political jibe” when most of the article dealt with how her politics and religion were intertwined, quoting a number of interesting points of view.

Also, he does not mention that virtually the entire reader's letters page of the same issue was devoted to Diesel Balaam's spirited and

detailed defence of her. While not agreeing with Mr Balaam's viewpoint, it hardly seems to me that both sides of the argument were not well represented. I would like to add that one major factor which seems to have been almost totally forgotten by Thatcher's admirers is that she was eventually deposed, not by some Marxist/Leninist conspirators, but by the Conservative MPs.

Graham Livingstone
London

'WRONG' GENES

FURTHER to the article “The Bonobo and the Atheist” (*Freethinker*, June) the following from Carl Zimmer's book *Evolution* may be of interest: “Science tells us that humans have 99% of genes in common with chimpanzees. Barely distinguishable on the genetic scale ... Chimpanzee nature is not pleasant. They (the males) have all the power; they bond with other males making alliances that help them climb their way through the hierarchy ... Chimpanzee society is horribly patriarchal and horribly brutal. A male dominated life in which females have to cope with violent attacks and infanticide. They will be hit to coerce them into having sex. (Sounds familiar!).”

Zimmer also points out: “By contrast Bonobos (pigmy chimps) live in a tranquil society that is dominated by females.

“Chimpanzees mate like dogs (again familiar), Bonobos face to face. Male Bonobos stay in the communities where they are born but a female must leave to find a new community when she reaches adulthood but does not face a gang of bullying males ready to kill her baby and force her into sex.

“In Bonobo society the females dominate ... the females eat first. As a result infanticide is unknown. The male groups, when they meet up, have sex rather than fight.”

It looks as though we have inherited the wrong genes – hence dominant male gods, religions and societies and the demotion of female goddesses and power.

It is time for a change, but it may be too late. Gaia has been violated for too long by dominant males.

WK Harper
Stoke-on-Trent

Big demand for Sunday Assemblies

The Sunday Assembly's May 5 meeting took place instead at the Conway Hall in London. Earlier, on April 21, the first meeting of the Sunday Assembly outside the UK took place in Australia at South Melbourne Commons, part of an old Catholic church precinct which had been leased to the Friends of the Earth.

In the "congregation" numbering around 60 was Sophie Timothy, who, writing for *Eternity*, a Christian publication, reported: "Yes, this feels like church. There's just one thing missing – God."

She added: "The bunch behind the Sunday Assembly seem to be the 'always look on the bright side of life' variety of atheist – they're much more likely to call people to find joy and hope in life without God, than to directly criticise Christianity. It's a disarming approach, and as a Christian, there were very few moments of squirming in my seat during the service; I genuinely had a good time. There were rollicking tunes, a heart-warming story of a guy who's lived through cancer twice and an interesting talk on the value of philosophy. It did inspire and as promised, provided a 'foot-stomping' Sunday morning. Of course, it's not for all atheists. My atheist brother thought it sounded like a 'dumb idea'."

Sophie Timothy said that the experience "left me wanting more, because at the end of the day, the message of the morning – 'when life gives you lemons, make lemonade' — is essentially cold comfort. This particular brand of atheism says we don't need God to have a good time and make the most of life. It's an upbeat-sounding message, but one with an empty centre."

Others share her brother's feelings. When the Sunday Assembly was first launched, it came under attack from both atheists and the religious. Aside from accusations that the comedians are merely publicity seeking, some criticised the concept of an 'atheist church', saying that the comedians were at risk of turning atheism into a sort of religion.

Revd Saviour Grech of Saint Peter and Saint Paul Roman Catholic Church in Clerkenwell was quoted in the *Islington Gazette* as saying: "How can you be an atheist and worship in a church? Surely it's a contradiction of terms. Who will they be singing to? It is important to debate and engage with atheists but for them to establish a church like any other religious denomination is going too far. I'm cautious about it."

Rhys Bezzant, a lecturer in Theology at Ridley Melbourne, and author of books on



the theology of church says it's not surprising a group like this would arise.

"It is an old Augustinian idea that human beings are made to love, so our passions need to be bent, or channelled, or structured so that our longings have an outlet and a shape." The Sunday Assembly is providing that outlet, but, he says, by nature, it won't satisfy.

"I say, good on them for wanting more than a shopping mall or a football game can provide. I just don't know how deep the well is that they want to drink from. Only Jesus can quench our thirst forever."

A former church youth group attendee, Pippa Evans told the Melbourne gathering that she stopped believing in God at the age of 17. "It was just like a phase in my life, like Santa or the tooth fairy."

But there was something missing when she gave up her faith: "When I stopped believing in God, it wasn't God I missed, but church, the community. I couldn't find an equivalent that didn't involve partying or joining what felt like a cult."

She missed having a place to belong. And it turns out, her friends were looking for something similar. "I spoke to my friends and they too were actively jealous of their

friends who had a religion because they had an automatic friendship group and support network," she told the crowd.

In March the Sunday Assembly announced Sunday Assembly Everywhere – an initiative designed to help groups of non-believers to set up "godless congregations" outside London. Soon after, Sanderson Jones reported: "We are delighted to announce that the programme is bearing fruit and the first ever Sunday Assembly Everywhere service will be held in Exeter on Sunday, June 16."

Plans are now being made to hold Sunday Assemblies in Brighton, Bristol, and Southend-on-Sea.

"These locations were chosen," said Jones, "because the folk there were so passionate about having a godless congregation of their own. We have been working with these pilot towns to help us design the framework for Sunday Assembly Everywhere."

"We're still in consultation on the precise form that the guidelines will take, but there is a consensus that a clear set of flexible rules will allow the greatest amount of people the opportunity to start having a Sunday Assembly of their own."