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Giving voice to hatred

Muslim broadcasters fall foul of broadcasting watchdog Ofcom

A Muslim cleric who is said to be "recognised globally as one of the great thinkers of Islam" has landed a UK TV station with a substantial fine by advocating the killing of apostates and those who insult the "prophet" Mohammed.

Abdul Qadir Jilani appeared as a guest on *Mercy unto the Worlds*, a programme on the UK TV station DM Digital in October 2011. During the broadcast, Jilani made comments with reference to the fatal shooting in early 2011 of the Punjab governor Salmaan Taseer.

Following a complaint, the UK broadcast watchdog Ofcom ruled that by broadcasting the comments, DM Digital had breached Rule 3.1 of the Broadcasting Code, which states: "Material likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime or to lead to disorder must not be included in television or radio services."

Ofcom ruled: "...on a reasonable interpretation of the scholar's remarks, he was personally advocating that all Muslims had a duty to attack or kill apostates or those perceived to have insulted the Prophet. We considered that the broadcast of the various statements made by the Islamic scholar outlined above was likely to encourage or incite the commission of crime."

As a result of this breach, DM Digital has been fined £85,000 by Ofcom. The TV channel was also fined an additional £20,000 for other breaches of Ofcom's broadcasting rules pertaining to political impartiality in a second programme. This programme featured comments by Dr Liaquat Malik, DM Digital's chief executive, which breached Ofcom's views on political statements and impartiality, leading to a £20,000 penalty.

Earlier this year Malik said that he was dissatisfied with Ofcom's ruling because there were "cultural differences that Ofcom does not understand". He said that the regulator's adjudicating committee should have members picked from the Muslim community.



Abdul Qadir Jilani

DM Digital stated on their website: "The channel management do not understand why such a speech was made by Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani as he has been giving regular lectures on DM Digital for the past three years."

During the programme Jilani "who is a renowned Brelvi Sufi scholar" said: "The matter of insulting the Prophet does not fall in the category of terrorism. Those who cannot kill such men have no faith. It is your duty, the duty of those who recite the holy verse, to kill those who insult Prophet Mohammed. Under the guidance from Islamic texts it is evident that if a

Muslim apostatises, then it is not right to wait for the authorised courts; anyone may kill him. An apostate deserves to be killed and any man may kill him."

A spokesperson for Ofcom said: "This code breach was particularly serious and, taking account of all the circumstances, decided therefore that a financial penalty of £85,000 should be imposed on the licensee DM Digital."

President of the National Secular Society, Terry Sanderson said: "Inciting murder is against the law. Why aren't the police knocking on Mr Jilani's door? Why is he not under arrest? Surely he cannot be allowed to get away with such blatant call to kill innocent people?"

DM Digital, which is based in Manchester, was the first Asian channel in the UK to broadcast in six regional languages, which include English, Punjabi, Urdu, Sindhi, Kashmiri and Hindi. It is thought to have a combined viewership of millions across the UK, Middle East and the Asian subcontinent.

The channel claims it "has effectively brought the Asian and English cultures closer by integrating its people, the cultural diversity, communities and the economy."

In response to Ofcom's fine and the comments made by Mr Jilani,

(Continued on back page)

Holier than thou?

OPHELIA BENSON ON YET ANOTHER SQUALID CHAPTER IN THE LIFE OF THE RCC

Timothy Dolan is in the news again – Timothy Dolan Archbishop of New York Timothy Dolan Cardinal Timothy Dolan President of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Timothy Dolan, former Archbishop of Milwaukee.

Cardinal Dolan is in the news this time because files released by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee reveal that in 2007, when he was Archbishop there, Dolan asked the Vatican for permission to move nearly \$57 million into a cemetery trust fund to protect the money from victims of clerical rape who were demanding compensation. Dolan has always denied trying to hide money from the victims, so this release of files puts him in the news in a way no archbishop wants to be put in the news. According to the *New York Times*, “the files contain a 2007 letter to the Vatican in which he explains that by transferring the assets, ‘I foresee an improved protection of these funds from any legal claim and liability.’ The Vatican approved the request in five weeks, the files show.”

So things are hot for Timothy Dolan right now. The release of files shows that his denials were not strictly truthful. Even more, the release shows that the Church doesn’t care about anyone or anything except the Church

and its priests. The release shows a cynical and selfish concern with arse-covering and bank account-protection that would make a gangster blush.

A few weeks ago a US public radio show talked to a nun, Sister Sally Butler, who is part of a group of nuns and priests who formed a group called Whistleblowers to hold the church accountable for child sexual abuse. Butler reports trying for years to talk to the bishop but never even getting to meet him. Instead she talked to the bishop’s chancellor and lawyers, who were interested in nothing but the statute of limitations. “All they cared about,” Butler told the reporter, “the dates. And that was a shock to us, we couldn’t believe it.” All they cared about was their own self-preservation; nothing at all about the victims.

Ok, these guys are callous and self-interested and ruthless. Big whoop. *Everyone* is callous and self-interested and ruthless, or at least most people are capable of being all those, especially when their jobs require it. So priests are no different from anyone else that way; so what?

The “so what” is that that is not what they tell us. That’s not how they present their organization or themselves. They consider their organization and themselves *better* than everyone else. They consider themselves our moral leaders – all of us, not just Catholics. They presume to know better than all of us, and to tell all of us what to do, and to interfere with the political process that affects all of us. They don’t present themselves as self-seeking and cowardly and indifferent just like anyone else. They claim to have a direct connection to “God” and thus to be in a position to set everyone straight.

They cite “Church teachings” when they want to discriminate against same-sex couples and prevent women from having abortions or using contraception. They don’t treat those “Church teachings” as provisional and contingent and based on our best contemporary understanding, they treat them as absolute and timeless and something everyone ought to obey without question. They claim to know, with great confidence and certainty, what “Church teachings” are and that they have the right and indeed the duty to impose those teachings on all of us. Well, how very odd then that Church teachings apparently don’t include items such as “don’t rape children” or “don’t conceal child-rape by priests from law enforcement” or “don’t send child-raping priests to different parishes where they

will be able to continue raping children”.

Cardinal Dolan is in fact so morally obtuse that in March 2010 he wrote a blog post – yes, the cardinal has a blog – complaining about the news coverage of the Church’s way with sexual predators:

“So Friday’s headline, only the most recent, stings us again: ‘Doctor Asserts Church Ignored Abuse Warnings’, as the psychiatrist who treated the criminal, Dr Werner Huth, blames the Church for not heeding his recommendations.

“What adds to our anger over the nauseating abuse and the awful misjudgment in reassigning such a dangerous man, though, is the glaring fact that we never see similar headlines that would actually be ‘news’: How about these, for example?

– ‘Doctor Asserts *He Ignored Abuse Warnings*’, since Dr Huth admits in the article that he, in fact, told the archdiocese the abusing priest could be reassigned under certain restrictions, a prescription today recognized as terribly wrong;

– ‘Doctor Asserts *Public Schools Ignored Abuse Warnings*’, since the data of Dr Carol Shakeshaft concludes that the number of cases of abuse of minors by teachers, coaches, counsellors, and staff in government schools is much, much worse than by priests;

– ‘Doctor Asserts *Judges (or Police, Lawyers, District Attorneys, Therapists, Parole Officers) Ignored Abuse Warnings*’, since we now know the sober fact that no one in the healing and law enforcement professions knew back then the depth of the scourge of abuse, or the now-taken-for-granted conclusion that abusers of young people can never safely work closely with them again.

“What causes us Catholics to bristle is not only the latest revelations of sickening sexual abuse by priests, and blindness on the part of some who wrongly reassigned them – such stories, unending though they appear to be, are fair enough – *but also that the sexual abuse of minors is presented as a tragedy unique to the Church alone.*”

The vanity, self-pity and indifference to the real victims stand revealed in all their squalor. Dolan and his Church deserve each other.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

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Ultra-Orthodox Jewish school hit with \$380-million abuse lawsuit

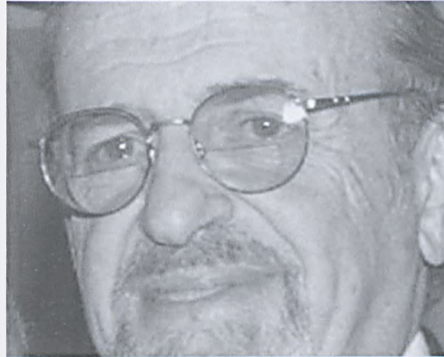
JUST days after 19 Yeshiva University High School students in New York filed a \$380 million lawsuit that claims the school had covered up decades of sexual and physical abuse, five more former students came forward in mid-July to say they had been molested by staff at the prestigious Jewish institution.

Attorney J Michael Reck said he has been unable to reach a suitable settlement with Yeshiva University officials and that he is preparing to file a lawsuit on behalf of the five men.

"Institutions like Yeshiva University failed to put the safety of children ahead of their reputations," Reck said. Reck is also representing a woman who says she was assaulted by a former YUHS principal, Rabbi George Finkelstein, during the 1990s after he became the dean of her Florida school.

Reck said the woman would not have been sexually abused by Finkelstein if Yeshiva University officials had notified police after students reported that he had abused them during the 1970s and 1980s.

The 19 former students filed a 148-page lawsuit in US District Court in White Plains last month claiming that Yeshiva University



Rabbi Lamm

High School officials covered up decades of sexual abuse by Finkelstein and Rabbi Macy Gordon, a former Judaic studies teacher.

The suit also claims that officials allowed former YU student Richard Andron to visit the high school dorm despite the fact that officials knew Andron was a sexual predator.

Reck said Finkelstein had molested some of his other clients and that his lawsuit, if filed, may identify three other Yeshiva University High School faculty as child molesters. A Yeshiva University spokesman declined comment.

Kevin Mulhearn, the Orangeburg, NY attorney who filed the suit on behalf of the

19 former Yeshiva students, said he is looking forward "to finding out the facts related to Mr. Reck's clients claims". He added: "I suspect they will strengthen and buttress the claims filed in our case."

The £380 million suit was filed shortly after Rabbi Norman Lamm, 85 the chancellor and head of the Yeshiva seminary, resigned. Lamm, who was president of the university when the abuse took place in the 1970s and 1980s, said in a resignation letter that he was doing penance for mishandling allegations against staff members.

One victim alleged that a rabbi sodomised him with a toothbrush while others say they were fondled and abused in other ways. They say that those boys who reported the assaults were told to keep their allegations quiet.

Mulhearn said: "Yeshiva University High School held itself out as an exemplary Jewish secondary school when in fact it was allowing known sexual predators to roam the school at will seeking other victims. Childhood sexual abuse in the Orthodox Jewish community can no longer be condoned and excused."

Each of the 19 victims is seeking \$20 million in damages, for a total of \$380 million.

Irish Government votes to ease abortion law

THE Catholic Church is reportedly "dismayed" over last month's 127 to 31 vote in Ireland's parliament to legalise abortion in certain circumstances.

The new bill satisfies a 1992 Supreme Court judgement known as the "X Case", when a suicidal 14-year-old was raped and refused travel to Britain to have an abortion. The new bill will allow doctors to carry out abortions if the mother's life is at risk, including the risk of suicide.

Following the vote the Associated Press reported that Catholic conservatives vowed to drive Fine Gael, the leading party in Irish Government, out of office for violating their 2011 election campaign pledge not to legislate on abortion.

Bishop Bill Leahy, of Limerick, said people should challenge the new bill.

He told Vatican Radio "People of course will say [the bill] is limited, but we know from the experiences of countries around the world that even with the most restrictive regimes of abortion once it is introduced it tends to expand dramatically.

"That is our concern. We are very concerned, naturally, with the unborn.

"Apart from legal issues or specific political moves in this or that country, and we have it here now in Ireland, we [the bishops

are still promoters of life and I think that, for us, is always going to be a priority.

"After that we will have to see what course this law will take, and I noted already this morning politicians already raising the point that the constitutionality of this legislation is probably in question, so that will be something that I think all people in Ireland will be interested in, in seeing how that plays out."

Speaking about the so called "suicide clause" he said "There is now some medical evidence to say that if a person who is suicidal is told to go and have an abortion that it is even more detrimental to their personal health."

Others against the bill believe that the legislation "fails women". The New York-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) told Reuters that the new law "neither reforms nor adds grounds for legal abortion, nor does it address other rights issues women in need of abortion in Ireland face.

"A woman pregnant as a result of rape, for example, or whose pregnancy is not viable, still can't get a legal abortion in Ireland."

Mara Clarke, director of the London-based Abortion Support Network told the *Guardian* newspaper "Even if this law is enacted, only a very, very small percentage of women who need abortions will be able to access them in Ireland."



Nigerian Islamist group calls for more attacks on schools

THE leader of Nigeria's Islamist militant group Boko Haram has called for more attacks against schools, describing Western education as a "plot against Islam" in a video released days after his fighters killed 46 students in an assault on a school dormitory.

The group has been blamed torching 14 schools in 2012 in Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in northern Nigeria, forcing over 7,000 children out of formal education and pushing down enrolment rates in an already ill-educated region.

In the 15-minute recording released in mid-July after the latest atrocity, Abubakar Shekau said schools would continue to be targeted "until our last breath".

Just after dawn on July 6, a school dormitory was doused in petrol and set alight in northeastern Yobe. Those trying to flee the flames were shot. The attack left 46 dead, mostly students.

"Teachers who teach Western education? We will kill them! We will kill them in front of their students, and tell the students to henceforth study the Koran," Shekau said.

But he denied that his fighters killed chil-



Abubakar Shekau

dren. "Our religion does not permit us to touch small children and women, we don't kill children," he said, reading from sheets of paper as he cradled a Kalashnikov.

According to a *Guardian* report, the recent spate of attacks on schools is part of a two-pronged strategy that pits the extremists' ideology against Western institutions while also providing a stream of potential new recruits as frightened parents pull their children out of education.

Unschooling and unemployed children are increasingly being recruited – sometimes forcibly – to fill the ranks of Boko Haram

and unleash violence against their peers. Witnesses say many are plied with dates stuffed with tramadol – a narcotic used to tranquilise horses – before being sent on missions.

Hundreds of families have fled the region. "This really shook us up. Students being attacked in their sleep is too disgusting for us to even imagine," said Adam Mohammed, a textiles trader visiting neighbouring northern Kano state, where he relocated his family for safety reasons. "It was hard, but I feel I made the right decision to leave Yobe. I'm a father of

three and when I think of what those parents must be going through ..."

In June 16 students were gunned down in consecutive strikes on a secondary comprehensive in Yobe and another school in Borno, Boko Haram's spiritual home. In April two attacks on a university left 16 dead.

A state of emergency has been in place for three months in three northeastern states. Soldiers pouring into Yobe and Borno have dismantled urban cells, but Boko Haram has responded by changing tactics. Previously it had attempted to ignite a sectarian war by bombing packed churches.

Sharia courts in UK 'put women at risk

EARLIER this year, BBC's *Panorama* programme went undercover to investigate what is going on in Britain's Sharia Councils – and discovered fresh evidence that some of these religious courts are putting Muslim women "at risk" by pressuring them to stay in abusive marriages.

The programme opened with footage shot at the Leyton Islamic Sharia Council, where Dr Suhaib Hasan had to decide if a woman could have a divorce.

Her husband was refusing to grant her one and the couple had been going there for a year. She accused him of refusing to work, ignoring the children and verbally abusing her. He vehemently denied it.

When Dr Hasan orders the husband to leave the room, the woman breaks down in tears.

"I hate him, I can't even bear to look at him, he has ruined my life," she sobs. Hasan sends the couple away for another month to try to save their marriage – with the help of Allah.

The Government says domestic violence is a crime that should be reported to the police, but Hasan told the undercover reporter: "The police? That is the very, very last resort. If he becomes so aggressive, starts hitting you, punching you of course you have to report it to the police, that is not allowed."

He went on to tell her that reporting the abuse to the police would be a final blow and she would have to leave the house and go to a refuge. He said that was a very "bad option". Hasan's wife, a counsellor at Leyton Islamic Sharia Council, also told the under-

cover reporter that women should not go to the police but to involve the family instead. When Leyton Islamic Sharia Council were asked about the secret filming, they said it may be essential to involve the police and other authorities in cases of domestic violence but it can be a step with irrevocable consequences.

The BBC showed its secret footage from Leyton to Nazir Afzal, chief crown prosecutor for the North West. Afzal, himself a Muslim, said: "I'm disappointed but not surprised. Most of them [sharia councils] are fine but there are some clearly like this who are putting women at risk."

He described what he had seen as "dangerous" because if people were deterred from seeking help they could suffer significant harm.

Malala Yousafzai addresses the UN on her 16th birthday

On her 16th birthday last month, Malala Yousafzai – the Pakistani schoolgirl who was shot and gravely injured when she was targeted last October by the Taliban – stood up at United Nations to tell delegates that “I am not against anyone. Neither am I here to speak in terms of personal revenge against the Taliban or any other terrorist group.” She added: “The extremists are afraid of books and pens.

“The power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women. The power of the voice of women frightens them.” She cited last month’s attack on a hospital in Quetta, capital of Baluchistan, and killings of female teachers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. “That is why they are blasting schools every day – because they were and they are afraid of change, afraid of the equality that we will bring to our society.”

Earlier, she listened quietly as Ban Ki-moon, the UN secretary-general, described her as “our hero, our champion”, and as the former British PM and now UN education envoy Gordon Brown uttered what he called “the words the Taliban never wanted her to hear: happy 16th birthday, Malala”.

The event, dubbed Malala Day, was the culmination of an extraordinary four years for the girl from Mingora, in the troubled Swat valley of Pakistan. She was thrust into the public glare after she wrote a pseudonymous but later celebrated blog for the BBC Urdu service describing her experiences struggling to get an education under the rising power of Taliban militants.

By 11 she was showing exceptional determination, calling personally on the US special representative to Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, to use his influence to combat the Taliban’s drive against education for girls. By 14, she was on the radar of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who put her forward for the International Children’s Peace Prize, and by 15 she became the youngest Nobel Peace Prize nominee in history.

Death threats followed her growing recognition, and on October 9, 2012, a gunman was dispatched to remove what they called the “symbol of infidels and obscenity”.

Malala, who now has titanium plate at-



[sic] and I had advised you before,” he wrote.

The letter claimed that the schoolgirl was not targeted for her efforts to promote education, but because the Taliban believed she was running a “smearing campaign” against it.

“You have said in your speech yesterday that pen is mightier than sword,” Rasheed wrote, referring to Malala’s UN speech, “so they attacked you for your sword not

for your books or school.”

He admitted that the Taliban are “blowing up” schools, but justified the attacks on the grounds that the Pakistani army and the paramilitary Frontier Corps use schools as hideouts. The Taliban commander also justified recent attacks in Pakistan on health workers vaccinating children against polio by claiming the West was trying “to sterilise Muslims”. The letter was clearly intended to influence opinion in Pakistan. Although in much of the world Malala has been hailed as a symbol of courage, at home she has been the subject of intense criticism and vilification. Online commentators have described her as a “drama queen” and even accused her of spying for the CIA.

Gordon Brown commented: “Nobody will believe a word the Taliban say about the right of girls like Malala to go to school until they stop burning down schools and stop massacring pupils.”

attached to her left forehead, and a cochlear implant to restore her hearing, now lives with her family in Birmingham.

She gave her own opposing interpretation of Islam to the Taliban’s. “They think that God is a tiny, little conservative being who would send girls to hell just because of going to school. The terrorists are misusing the name of Islam and Pashtun society for their own personal benefits ... Islam says that it is not only each child’s right to get education, rather it is their duty and responsibility.”

Following her UN speech, a senior member of the Pakistani Taliban wrote an open letter to Malala expressing regret that he didn’t warn her before the attack, but claiming that she was targeted for maligning the insurgents. But Adnan Rasheed, who was convicted for his role in a 2003 assassination attempt on the country’s then-president Pervez Musharraf, did not apologise for the attack. “I wished it would never happened

‘Cultural bias’ alleged in pro-circumcision report

THE American Academy of Pediatrics last year released a new policy statement on male circumcision, concluding that current evidence indicates that the health benefits of newborn male circumcision outweigh the risks.

Appalled by the report, 38 physicians from across Europe responded with a paper alleging that “cultural bias” was behind the pro-circumcision stance of the AAP.

The European response states that “seen from the outside, cultural bias reflecting the normality of non-therapeutic male circumcision in the US seems obvious. The report’s conclusions are different from those

reached by physicians in other parts of the Western world.” The European physicians found only one argument put forward by the American Academy of Pediatrics to have “some theoretical relevance”: the possible protection circumcision offers against urinary tract infections in infant boys, but this “can easily be treated with antibiotics without tissue loss”.

About half of the physicians are from Scandinavian countries, where several political parties have stated their opposition to circumcision as a form of “child abuse”, or an unwanted phenomenon of immigration by Muslims.

TFTD: Do it the Manx way

STUART HARTILL on the BBC's continued refusal to air atheist opinions

On July 3, the National Secular Society published a report on a BBC document entitled *A BBC Trust Review of the Breadth of Opinion Reflected in the BBC's Output*. This was an independent review, commissioned by the BBC Trust and led by Stuart Prebble, a former ITV chief.

Of particular interest to the NSS was the BBC's response to Prebble's attempt to answer a longstanding request for non-religious voices to be included in *Thought For The Day*. It seems reasonable enough, especially when so many current contributors haven't managed an original thought in a decade – never mind daily. Certainly Prebble and most religious luminaries he asked seemed to think so.

Sadly though, not the Beeb.

The Executive Response, included in the *Review*, merely informed compulsory financial contributors to the antics of these overpaid navel-gazers that:

"This insight will inform an analysis of the BBC's explicit religious output and how it might better serve audiences. It will provide evidence to fuel decision-making around approach and mix for the BBC's religious output. But we do not propose to revisit the issue of atheists or humanists taking part in *Thought for the Day*."

So that's that then. Dogma as usual.

It is time BBC bigwigs learnt how such elementary change is achieved by the national broadcasters of smaller countries – broadcasters who are less publically subsidised and more likely to be on first name terms with their audiences.

In fact, as I live in such a country, where we have achieved it without anyone getting burnt at the stake, I can explain how easy it was.

The Isle of Man is a British dependency with a population of just over 80,000. In the early 1960s the island's independent status led to run-ins with the UK over Radio Caroline, the pirate radio pop music station that ran from a ship in the Irish Sea. This was just outside British territorial waters (so immune to prosecution there) and handily close enough to one of our fishing ports to pop in for supplies and a visit to the local pubs every so often.

The island has a bit of form for such nose thumbing. In the 18th century we were central to the smuggling industry (which we just called "the running trade"). At the beginning of the 20th century, when racing cars on public roads became illegal in the UK, we never followed, and from that came first a motor car race and later the internationally known Isle of Man TT motorcycle races. More recently, we also got involved in offshore finance.

So, no surprise that we let radio pirates get on with it for a few years. In a trade-off with the UK, we then acquired a right to establish our own radio broadcasting, but not to avoid paying the same BBC licence fees as UK residents. Considering the BBC cannot even manage a local TV stringer, this has been a bone of contention ever since. In fact, even as I write Manx nationalists are considering a boycott of the licencing fee.

Manx Radio duly became the "national station" – funded with a mix of government subsidy and advertising income. More recently we got a couple more purely commercial stations.

In 1999 the island also got an atheist group – Isle of Man Freethinkers – and by 2003 we felt bold enough to ask Manx Radio's predominantly voluntary religious broadcasting team if we could join in their version of *Thought For The Day*. Without so much as a raised eyebrow, they said "Fine, can you manage five two minute talks, come down next Thursday night and record for the week following?"

So, we did, and have done at least once a year ever since. As I recall, the first set was recorded by a full-time producer who also does PR for the local Catholic churches, the

next by an engineer who was an Anglican Non-Stipendiary Priest, then a Methodist minister who'd been trained up on a mixing desk ... and so on. All very amicable, and not a hint of censorship – apart from one tape that went "missing" when a contributor got over-critical of religious dogma rather than generally encouraging listeners to stay cheerful and do something useful that day.

Being a cheeky sod by nature, I have personally pushed the envelope further. I asked if I could come on with my Amnesty International group for the week around Human Rights Day in December, and in turn that led to an invite for any local organisation broadly intent on improving the world to use the spot if it was useful to them and demonstrably of public benefit.

Feedback from the clergy is generally positive too. In fact, a couple quietly admitted to me that we "militant atheists" forced religious professionals to up their game, which – for the genuine at least – is a reasonable challenge. No more lazy recycling of something they read in the paper. No more general platitudes passed off as "religious wisdom". If what they say is indistinguishable from a thought that any secular speaker might offer, then does their god come into it at all, or are they just bluffing?

I can see why (for the vested religious interests who inform the BBC policy at least) this might be a problem. But the problem should be for career religionists to cope with, and not the BBC.

I can offer another insight too. When my Amnesty group does its week of talks, typically there might be me, the Bishop's Advisor on Social Responsibility from the Anglicans, a Catholic or Quaker schoolteacher, a district nurse who goes to the local Baptists and maybe a Muslim or Hindu doctor ... and it works. This is cutting edge, top quality responsible community broadcasting, produced on a shoestring, mostly by non-professionals who never claim to be authorities on ethical issues.

We effortlessly produce a Premier League version of what *Thought For The Day* might be. In comparison, considering that Sunday kickabout the BBC churn out they have an almighty cheek asking for licence money.



Just a week after his took up his post of Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby was a guest on TFTD

Big Arabic backlash against Islamic zealotry predicted by US academic

Just four months before President Mohamed Morsi's Islamist government was toppled by the military last month, trouble was already brewing over the Muslim Brotherhood regime's failure on a number of fronts – the economy being at the forefront of people's concerns.

In March, among the demonstrators against the Morsi regime was a 12-year-old boy who captured the world's attention when he was interviewed for TV, and asked why he was protesting.

Without hesitation, he declared: "We didn't get rid of a military regime to replace it with a fascist theocracy". Asked what that was he replied "this is when you manipulate religion and enforce extremist regulations in the name of religion".

Asked how he came to think this way, the boy replied: "I listen to people a lot and use my own brain. Plus I read newspapers, watch TV and search the Internet."

Turning to the subject of women under control of the Islamists, he pointed out half of the population was female "so how come there are only seven ladies in the constitutional assembly?" And he emphasised that "six of these were Islamists".

"They [the Islamists] say, for example, that women are equal to men in all matters – except in matters that contradict Islamic law [which] allows men to discipline their wives. This can't work in society."

Asked "so what is the problem?" he said with some exasperation: "The problem is that it is outrageous. I can't beat up my wife and almost kill her and then tell you that this is discipline. This is not discipline, this is abuse and insanity."

By mid-July, the interview – which had been posted on YouTube by FreeArabs.com – had attracted over two million views. One viewer commented: "The Arab world needs a lot more kids like this" to which another replied: "why the Arab world? The whole world needs kids like this".

This lad's ability to think for himself, and his courage to express his views in public is symptomatic of what could well be what As'ad AbuKhalil describes as "a rejuvenation of Arab atheism".

In an article published on the English version of the Al-Akhbar website, AbuKhalil, a 73-year-old Lebanese-American professor of political science at California State University, Stanislaus, who describes himself as



"a former Marxist-Leninist, now an anarchist", a feminist, and an "atheist secularist", wrote: "It is unlikely that Western media will take note, but there seems to be a rejuvenation of Arab atheism. Western media never take note of Arab intellectual trends, especially if they deviate from the classical conventional assumptions about the theologocentric (as Maxime Rodinson called it in his *La Fascination de l'Islam*) impulses of all Arabs and all Muslims.

"Secular trends in the Arab world have been long ignored in Western media and even scholarship. Furthermore, Saudi and Qatari media, which dominate the bulk of pan-Arab media, will certainly suppress such news, but there is a new phenomenon. Arab atheist groups are spreading on the Internet and Facebook groups dedicated to Arab atheists are increasing in popularity. And the Egyptian newspaper *al-Wafd* even took note and published an article about "the secret world" of atheists. There are reasons for this phenomenon.

"To be sure, Arab atheism is not new: There is a long history of freethinking in Arab countries throughout Islamic history. Long before the appearance in the late 1990s of Sarah Stroumsa's fine book, *Freethinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn al-Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi and their Impact on Islamic Thought*, Arabs and Muslims were curious to learn about the history of atheists and freethinkers in Islamic history.

He added: "The era of the Arab uprising

has just begun and it is likely to introduce new philosophical trends into the Arab world."

When AbuKhalil wrote a brief observation in May on Facebook that the rule of the Islamists seems to "guarantee turning whole Arab populations towards atheism", an Egyptian activist responded by saying that "there is widespread popular disgust with religious people and even bearded people. There is also a rise in the demand for secular and communist books by young people.

"And it is noteworthy that peasants in my village all categorically agree to not vote for any bearded man or any religious man, and say that their roles should be confined to the mosques ... And an Internet site for Arab atheists announced that some 347 Egyptians have joined the group in one week only of last month."

There are similar reports in Iran that atheism has become a form of protest.

"This," asserts AbuKhalil, "could be a turning point in the intellectual and political history of the region. It, however, has to contend with the culture of religion imposed on it by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which insists on the exclusive domination of a very strict brand of religion over people's political and social lives.

"The battle by Arab atheists won't be easy, but it has just begun. The corruption, repression, and hypocrisy of the rule of Islamists seem to strengthen Arab atheism more than any other factor."

‘My son claims to be an atheist – what can I do?’



In 2010, the US-based website Circle of Moms published an anguished question from a woman who begged advice on how to put her 15-year-old – who ‘gave his heart to the Lord when he was four’, but later reclaimed it – back in the arms of Jesus. Over 90 moms responded, suggesting fervent prayer might be the answer. Some ventured that his atheism was probably ‘passing rebellious phase’. The discovery of Circle of Moms coincided with us receiving three articles about youngsters and religion – one by New York mum **CASSANDRA NEYENESCH**, the second by US university student **JASON SWAN** and the last by British writer and comic performer **RALPH JONES**

When my son was four, he began asking me what is arguably the second-hardest question for an atheist parent to answer, “Is God real?” As many atheist parents do, I waffled, afraid to bruise him with my comfortless reality, saying that I personally didn’t believe in God, but other people did, it was impossible to know for sure, etc.

One friend of mine, frozen in the headlights by this question, told me she answered, “God is love,” a pretty sentiment, but one that possibly just reframes the question for a small child.

This was around the time that my husband’s mother died very unexpectedly in Germany, an event that I was beginning to see had affected the kids more deeply than I’d realized. Even though their grandmother had lived far away, it was very hard for them to understand that they would never see her again. Could they handle a world where their Oma

Is God real?

By **CASSANDRA NEYENESCH**

Marion was neither in heaven, nor in Munich, but just gone?

One day, talking to a friend of mine about my feelings of inadequacy at tackling this subject – it was actually harder for me to talk about than sex – he responded, “Why do you feel the need to tell your child what everyone else believes? Just tell him what you believe. You’re confusing him.”

I thought about it a lot and about a year later when my son once again asked me in the car (we had all of our deepest discussions in the car) if there was a God, I

screwed up my courage and said, “No, I don’t think there is a God.”

“That’s what I think!” he cried, the rush of relief from the back seat so palpable that I knew that my friend had been onto something. Other people’s opinions be hanged! My son just wanted to know what I, his mother, thought.

Over the intervening years I’ve had the sense that this discussion bound my little skeptic to me more deeply because I had respected his intelligence. He knew he could talk to me openly about his thoughts and I would tell him the truth as I saw it.

Raising children as an atheist is not necessarily handing them a meaningless universe. This summer we all watched Richard Dawkins’ 1991 BBC Christmas Lectures on evolution, *Waking up in the Universe*, (which is available on YouTube and I highly recommend watching it with your children when they’re ready). The popular scientist and atheist poster boy puts my feeling about existence best: the

greatest miracle of all is to wake up every day on the planet teeming with life and beauty – a miracle of inconceivably small odds, and whatever each of us has to endure, we have each other and the blue sky over our heads.

(I often think about the children living on a garbage pile in India that Katherine Boo, the award-winning journalist and author known primarily for her accounts about poor and disadvantaged people, wrote about so arrestingly, and ask myself what they have: nothing at all but each other and the blue sky over their heads).

It's not my job to denigrate the beliefs of others but I now think that it's alright for me to stand for reason as unapologetically as others stand for faith; it's alright for gratitude and a clear-eyed rationality to be the values I teach my children, rather than

a wishy-washy relativism that isn't really what I think or believe.

Not all children are the same, though. My daughter, who is six, often says that she believes in God. I don't disagree with her; my strict atheism stops short of trying to argue people out of their cherished and, for many, deeply necessary beliefs. But if she asks my opinion, I do tell her what I think.

Of course, I've never been sure it's the right thing to do. One day, I passed by the bathroom and I saw her sitting on the toilet staring disconsolately at the towel rack.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"I don't really believe in God," she said, "I just want to."

Later that day, as I streamed a cartoon for her, she burst out, "I wish that things that aren't real were really real, like God and strawberry shortcake!"

I felt sad for her and that familiar parental conviction of having screwed things up. "But there are lots of great things that *are* real," I offered.

Her face brightened. "Like Helen?" she said, naming a friend who not only has the allure of being two years older, but is a kind of magical nature girl who taught my daughter to love snails and lady bugs and the tiny "treasures," acorns and cap gun cartridges they find everywhere they go, their faces bent down to the untold richness of the sidewalk.

Helen has always been sweet to my daughter when girls her own age sometimes were not.

I was about as satisfied with this interaction as I suppose I will ever be with something this hard. The existence of a Helen is, indeed, a wonder as great as any god or strawberry shortcake.

Children already have their own imaginary friends: why do they need yours too?

By JASON SWAN

I was raised in a quasi-religious household. I went to Sunday school every Sunday and to church intermittently.

Yet I am – and always have been – an atheist. I just didn't know it when I was younger. Allow me to explain – from birth, I was told that the doctrines of Christianity are true. For a few years, I was so young that I accepted anything my mother told me as fact without further consideration – I believed in the tooth fairy, Santa, that if I made an odd facial expression for long enough, my face would "stick that way"... why wouldn't I believe in God?

Yet Richard Dawkins has never been more correct than when he said "there is no such thing as a religious child; only a child with religious parents," which he expounds upon in *The God Delusion* by saying "Children are described as 'Catholic children' or 'Protestant children' etc from an early age, and certainly far too early for them to have made up their own minds on what they think about religion".

I considered myself a Lutheran because my mother was a Lutheran. I was indoctrinated in the Lutheran faith, taught Lutheranism as an absolute truth, and even believed it for the first year or so. This is the one and only grievance I have with my mother regarding my upbringing. I very strongly agree with Dawkins. I don't believe that religious children exist. I, along with Dawkins, go as far as to say that it's an

injustice to the child who is being indoctrinated. I argue that the intellectual sovereignty of the child demands to be respected; that children ought to not be taught religion at all until they are old enough to make their own decisions, until they are old enough to fully comprehend the gravitas of the choice they are making.

I'm not saying "instill your children with anti-theistic values," or "raise them as atheists." I would have just as much a problem with that as I do with instilling them with Christian or Hindu or Islamic values – that's just indoctrination in a different form.

This is what I propose to do should I ever have children: I will avoid the topic of religion as much as possible when they're younger, but when it becomes necessary, I will be careful to explain multiple religions, and stress that they are all equally valid, that none is better than the other, and that a lack of religion is just as acceptable. Then, if my child reaches an age when he or she is capable of understanding every facet of the matter and decides that he or she is a Christian, I'll take them to church. If he or she chooses Islam, I'll search for the nearest mosque. If Christianity is the first choice but falls through, I'll happily discuss further options. The point is that

I don't care what the decision is or how often it changes; Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, atheism, Zoroastrianism, whatever – I only care that it's their decision, not mine.

Many religions require induction or introduction early in life. Some forms of Christianity require baptism as an infant and circumcision of males, for example. Yet I assure you no infant has ever called a pastor and said "I'd like to be baptized! Does this Sunday work for you?" Infant baptism and other religious rituals that happen early in life take place solely at the request of the parents. Many find this acceptable and say it's the right of the parents to do this.

Why do we allow this? Is it because, as Christopher Hitchens suggests in *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, "If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in quite a different world"?

I'm an 18-year-old atheist with an agnostic mother – but were she to convert to Hinduism and call me one day, saying "Guess what! You're coming to meet the Brahmin with me this weekend; I've decided you're a Hindu now!" I can (and would) decide not to convert.

Why am I so anti-indoctrination? The answer is simple. I am because I have lived

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and seen the harm that come from it. I direct you to Pete Hautman's brilliant novel *Godless*, the story of Jason Bock, an agnostic-turned-atheist who, disappointed with his parents' religion, creates his own spoof religion – Chutengodianism, which centers on the worship of the town water tower.

He has a lengthy conversation with his highly religious parents, and comes out as an atheist. His thoughts say it all: "I envy my father, too. I envy his unshakable belief in the Catholic Church – his faith gives him power and contentment. I envy everyone who has a religion they can believe in. Me? I have Chutengodianism – a religion with no church, no money, and only one member. I have a religion, but I have no faith. Maybe one day I'll find a deity I can believe in. Until then, my god is made of steel and rust".

Jason was indoctrinated in Catholicism; when he found that he didn't believe in it, his realization had a definite, negative effect on him. The same can be said of me, but to a much lesser extent. I wasn't depressed by my rejection of religion – if anything, I felt freed by it. Rather, I was recalcitrant and depressed by the prospect of coming out of the proverbial closet, particularly to my mother.

I was lucky in that my mother is exceptionally open minded and accepting, yet even that didn't shield me from emotional turmoil at the prospect of "coming out." Imagine how severely the issue is compounded for those whose parents aren't as accepting as my mother, whose parents disown them and kick them out of the house. This could so easily be avoided if we discontinued the practice of indoctrinating children. That we continue do so, knowing the possible effects, is heartbreaking.

One of the many harms that religious indoctrination causes is cognitive dissonance. In one of his lectures, Frederick Rudolph defines cognitive dissonance as "an unpleasant psychological tension".

I was fortunate; I didn't have this problem. But Kurt Wise did, and it irrevocably changed him – many, including myself, contend it changed him for the worse. Dawkins recounts his tale in *The God Delusion*. Wise, a brilliant geologist, trained at the University of Chicago and Harvard, studying under the great Stephen Jay Gold. He had everything going for him and his dream to teach geology. Yet tragedy struck. Not from outside – his own mind turned on him, making it all the more tragic.

Wise didn't need his degrees from the University of Chicago and Harvard to realize the Bible and science are at odds over the age of the Earth. It has been proven the Earth is 4.54 billion years old; the Bible claims it to be less than 10,000 years old. Wise was afflicted with cognitive dissonance; and like any other person afflicted with such strong cognitive dissonance, he couldn't take the strain and snapped. He found a pair of scissors and cut every self-contradictory verse, every scientifically inaccurate passage, from the Bible. When he was done, it was so fragile that he wouldn't lift it, fearing it would fall apart.

He was faced with a decision; abandon science, or abandon religion. As Wise himself states in his contribution to *In Six Days*, "It was with there that night that I accepted the Word of God and rejected all that would ever counter it, including evolution. With that, in great sorrow, I tossed into the fire all my dreams and hopes in science". That is

why I am so against indoctrination of children. Wise was brought up in a fundamentalist household, told that nothing – absolutely nothing – can contradict the Bible and be true. Because of this, he went through unnecessary mental anguish and lost one of the things that he held most dear: science. And make no mistake, the world lost on that day as well. We lost what could have been one of the most brilliant geologists to ever enter the field.

I know that religion will eventually come up in conversation with small children who have not yet reached the age of reason. Perhaps it will be when a beloved pet dies, and they ask what happened to him or her. I doubt that even the best (or should I say worst?) of politicians could dance around that one without bringing up religion. I'm not asking that you say "You're not old enough for this talk" then ignore them (that excuse barely works for one talk, you're not going to fool anyone if you push the threshold to two).

I'm asking that you say something like "Well, there are many schools of thought, none of which is more correct or more incorrect than the other. Christians believe this, while according to Islam, this happens. Judaism says that this happens..." I don't ask that you abandon your religion; I ask that you allow your children to find theirs. I ask that we, as a society, acknowledge the harms done by indoctrinating children with religion. This emotional and psychological harm could easily be avoided, if we accept that children are not ours to mold as we please; that they are independent individuals who deserve the right to make their own decisions, whether we agree with those decisions or not.

We are all by ourselves

By RALPH JONES



There was a deafening chorus of scoffing from religious types of all shapes and sizes when the news emerged in June that the Brownies and Girl Guides were “dropping God” from their 103-year-old pledge. Tim Stanley, one of the more tiresomely conservative spokespersons for the religious right in Britain, cried to no avail, “I don’t want to live on this planet anymore”.

What replaced the revolting promise “to love my God” was, as was widely publicised, the promise to “be true to myself and develop my beliefs”. This terrified and continues to terrify those of a religious persuasion because it cedes responsibility from God over to the individual concerned. And one of the defining features of any religion is the compulsion to minimise autonomy, safe in the knowledge that God takes care of everything while we are alive and after we die.

The disposition toward worship can for many people be an intensely complex concoction of factors: upbringing; fear; social inclusion; a love of religious scripture. But impossible to ignore is the role that a need for stability plays: the yearning for there to be a perfect standard against which everything earthly is judged and, inevitably, falls short. The child-like connotations that this need evokes are justified: religion’s greatest strength – one onto which it clings with desperation – lies in the indoctrination of the young.

This indoctrination is most effectively applied at a point at which children are impressionable and instinctively attracted to security and to safety. It is, as we know, no coincidence that the great majority of adult believers adhere to a belief system identical to their parents. Many continue into adult life still needing this consistency, still unable to visualise a world without it, and others learn to recognise that our solidarity can only be with the humans around us.

One of the very valid predictions of commentators like Stanley is that, in removing

God from their pledge, young Brownies and Guides are less likely to grow up with a reverential attitude toward an existent or non-existent deity.

The point of course is that those of us with a secular outlook would consider this a very positive development; if they believe none exists, why on earth should children be forced to be told to love a God? It is difficult to think of an injunction that is more obviously divisive. We are, to the best of our knowledge, unsupervised on this planet and the only responsibilities we have are to ourselves and to the people around us. Even assuming the improbable existence of a deity, the duty to “love my God” seems totally vapid and meaningless anyway, in contrast to a faith in one’s convictions, which is a clear and admirable aim – and, crucially, one that can be adopted even if the child grows up to be a believer.

The servile impulse latent and indeed readily observable in religious dogma provides a valuable insight into those to whom the concept is appealing. It is a great deal easier, after all, to consistently assume the presence of a supreme judge, an ultimate referee, to whom no human system can hope to compare, because it makes redundant the attempts to grapple honestly with the difficult issues at stake.

What the religious simply assume is that asserting that, for example, morality must be grounded by some Ultimate Being, is sufficient in establishing this Ultimate Being’s existence. This line of argument has unfortunate implications for contentious issues like abortion because over and above the well-being and autonomy of the mother is prioritised the supposedly unchallengeable dogma that to take any life, no matter how primitive, or no matter what other factors are involved, is to incur the wrath of God.

Things are not in fact this simple in practice and it is morally correct to put at the forefront of one’s consideration the predicament of the humans directly affected.

If, for example, a woman has been raped, it is patently sadistic and absurd to force her to carry the unwanted child through to birth. But these are the contortions into which one gets oneself if one invokes an absolute and immovable moral yardstick; there remains no room for subtlety or nuance and, in the case of abortion, one is left not respecting but gruesomely disrespecting human life.

This notion of nuance gets right to heart of the difference in mindset between the religious and the non-religious: the need for and belief in fixed absolutes on the one hand, and the embracing of shifting complexity on the other. The point I would like to make is not that absolute truths do not exist – this is a separate argument – but, rather, that simply inventing then appealing to a God does not constitute a good enough argument to prove this contention: and thus that in practice all we can do is live in a relativist universe because even if a consistent morality exists it is forever judged and interpreted inconsistently by humans.

A great deal more problems arise than are solved as a result of the invocation of a God; the need to outsource our problems to a supposedly perfect deity highlights a laziness to which we ought not succumb as mature adults. As I stated previously, it is a childish urge, and one that has proven surprisingly immune to critical scrutiny; it is a socially acceptable version of the “Because I say so” parental riposte.

Children grow up believing that their parents have all the answers and are unchallengeable in their authority; it would be very satisfying to see more adults coming to terms with the sober realisation that our problems cannot be referred upward to entities endowed with the properties we would ourselves like to possess. The universe looks very much like one in which we are unsupervised; we therefore have every duty to act as if this is the case, until given evidence to the contrary.

Despite Pope's homily, we atheists are destined for hell

Eyebrows were raised by both atheists and the faithful when, in a homily earlier this year, Pope Francis appeared to suggest that goodness alone could gain the faithless a place in heaven. Catholics were nonplussed and not a little upset, given how much faith and effort is required of them to reach the same destination.

While most atheists simply said “what-ever” and moved on with their lives, there were some who welcomed the Pope’s comments, saying it signalled a new spirit of rapprochement between the Church and secular society.

For example, David Silverman, President of American Atheists, reacted positively to the Pope’s statement, saying: “While the concept of Jesus dying for atheists is wrong on many levels (especially given that Jesus himself promised hell for blasphemers), I can appreciate the Pope’s ‘good faith’ effort

to include atheists in the moral discussion. Atheists on the whole want no part in Catholicism, of course, but we are all interested in basic human rights.”

Frankie’s actual words were: “The Lord created us in His image and likeness, and we are the image of the Lord, and He does good and all of us have this commandment at heart: do good and do not do evil. All of us. ‘But, Father, this is not Catholic! He cannot do good.’ Yes, he can... The Lord has redeemed all of us, all of us, with the Blood of Christ: all of us, not just Catholics. Everyone! ‘Father, the atheists?’ Even the atheists? Everyone!... We must meet one another doing good. ‘But I don’t believe, Father, I am an atheist!’ But do good: we will meet one another there.”

Soon after, a Catholic theologian, Thomas Rosica, said that the world’s media, which ran headlines that read “Pope says atheists can get into heaven” and variations thereof, had got the wrong end of his holiness’s crozier. Rosica implied that the Pope did not

mean to say that atheists could go to heaven if they simply do good. According to CNN, in an “explanatory note on the meaning of salvation” issued by Rosica it was made clear that people cannot be saved if they are aware of the Catholic Church but “refuse to enter her or remain in her.” Simply put, atheists are going to hell if they do not become Catholics.

John Thomas Didymus, writing in *The Digital Journal*, asked: “Has Rosica corrected the infallible pontiff? Many would say yes, but Rosica appears to meander around this point by suggesting he was only clarifying the Pope’s words.”

Rosica said in the statement: “Every man or woman, whatever their situation, can be saved. Even non-Christians can respond to this saving action of the Spirit. No person is excluded from salvation simply because of so-called original sin.”

Rosica stressed that Pope Francis had “no intention of provoking a theological debate on the nature of salvation.”

CNN added that experts in Catholic theology embraced Rosica’s exposition, saying that Francis had merely “expressed a tenet of the Catholic faith”. Reverend John Zuhlsdorf, a conservative Catholic priest, wrote: “Francis was clear that whatever graces are offered to atheists (such that they may be saved) are from Christ. He was clear that salvation is only through Christ’s Sacrifice. In other words, he is not suggesting – and I think some are taking it this way – that you can be saved, get to heaven, without Christ.”

Didymus pointed out: “What these words from Catholic experts mean is that in spite of what the Pope’s words may have suggested, moral good is not good enough for those who are keen about making it to heaven.

“Rosica’s clarification also alerts us to the need to consult a dictionary of Catholic theology when next the Pope makes a concession that appears too good to be true, because some Catholic theologians are saying there is a distinction between “redemption” and “salvation.” Remember that Francis hadn’t said atheists are ‘saved’ but that they are ‘redeemed’.”

In Catholic theology, it appears that even Judas Iscariot was “redeemed” by the death of Christ on the cross but he was not “saved”.

“Every good Catholic believes Iscariot is burning in hell right now,” he concluded.

Jesus & Mo



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Atheist Book of the Month?

DALE DEBAKCSY says *Strange Gods* by **ELIZABETH SCALIA** aims at modernity but knocks out Jehovah

We are not spending enough time thinking about God. That is the central idea of Catholic blogger Elizabeth Scalia's new book, *Strange Gods: Unmasking the Idols of Everyday Life*. For that matter, it stands, quite proud of the fact, as the *only* idea in a book that just barely manages 160 pages by dint of a generous font size and a firm belief in the character-building value of incessant repetition.

That idea and its development through ten plodding and utterly predictable chapters are not, by themselves, just recompenses for the few hours one invests in reading the book. And yet, for reasons utterly unintended by the author, it is a fascinating read. It turns out that, in attempting to expose the psychological damage wrought by the "idols" of modernity, Scalia inadvertently wove a condemnation of Christianity and Jehovah so damning that it wouldn't surprise me in the least if the book turned out to be a stunt by an atheist in disguise.

Scalia's big thing is the clearing away of any belief, ritual, or possession that interferes with one's line-of-sight on God. Each chapter of the book is devoted to a detailing of a fresh idol. Chapter four is about wealth, five about technology, six a lamentably conceived chapter on coolness and sex, and without even reading the book, you already know everything that she is going to say on these topics and their relation to a life well lived.

By the fifth chapter, I was playing a game with myself of writing down what I thought her points and examples would be before reading each chapter, then checking them off as they thudded to ground with the inevitability of gravity on the page before me. Her advice is often good, though the monodimensional reasoning behind that advice rarely is (yes, we do feel diminishing returns in a life devoted to material consumption, but not so much because we are robbing ourselves of Jesus Time as because that's how neurochemical reward pathways work).

What I never expected, though, was that, with each definition she offered of a reigning idol, each laying out of its assumptions and flaws, she would precisely and unintentionally define the Judaeo-Christian God as the greatest and most false idol of them all. The first time she did it, in a chapter about



Elizabeth Scalia, left, pictured with Pat Gohn, author of a book for women, *Blessed, Beautiful, and Bodacious, Celebrating the Gift of Catholic Womanhood*.

how our ideas and expectations are idols, I thought it an oversight, an accident of ill-chosen vocabulary:

We cling to resentment or feed jealousy until it grows into something we burnish daily with our justifications. We get it to glitter in our minds like something alive, like a genuine force outside of ourselves. We go so far as to proselytize our grudges to others through spin, gossip, and even lies – see my anger, my resentment, my jealousy, and my spite! Acknowledge it with me; let us have communion in our shared umbrage!

This is a fair representation of rankling indignation, but how could any writer miss the fact that nothing benefits from these psychological motivations more than Christianity, and nothing instantiates them so much as the Judaeo-Christian God? How do you use the word "resentment" twice in three sentences and not realize that you are conjuring the ghost of Nietzsche's analysis of Christianity's genealogy in the process? Turning resentment and jealousy into a force outside of yourself (God the Judge on the Day of Reckoning), proselytizing that resentment to others to cudgel them into holding the same fears and loves that you do (Go Forth and Spread the Word), changing shared umbrage into a source of communion (It Will Be Easier for a Camel to Walk Through the Eye of a Needle...) – these are, phrase for phrase, a retelling of the negative side of Christianity's initial appeal and growth. Really, the very idea of Hell itself is nothing but group resentment and umbrage

given divine sanction.

I expected a follow-up, "Of course, one might say these things about Christianity too, and here's why one would be wrong" but it did not come. Scalia was apparently thoroughly unaware that, in describing the psychology of our enthrallment to our worst ideas, she had just neatly paraphrased Christianity itself. Everybody's entitled to one slip in self-awareness though, so I continued on, swallowing more sentences with phrases that make "burnish daily with our justifications" sound positively elegant (the winner, by the way, for ungainly imagery goes to this gem: "Justice and mercy are the right and left sides of the horizontal beam of the crucifix, upon which a constant tug of war ensues." I'll let you unpack that at your leisure).

But the inadvertent body blows to the gut of Christ kept coming.

In warning us against the Internet: "She [a friend of Scalia's who uses Facebook to keep up with the world] pushes away the real world and escapes to the illusions. She rejects what is sometimes dreary, like other people, to delight herself and bathe in the regard of the better, less-troublesome, hand-picked others of the Net."

The Internet is bad because it distracts us from reality and other people by holding out an illusory paradise filled just with those people we like. This, I shall remind you, in a book which says that we are too distract-

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Scalia's unwitting assault on her own Catholic beliefs

ed by reality and other people and should be focusing more on the paradise awaiting the elect few who choose God. So, ignoring reality is awful except when it's The Best Thing Ever.

In bemoaning trendiness, we are told that, "its only membership requirement is that one be immediately and unquestionably in tune with the conventional wisdom of the day (or the week), and against the establishment, as it is continually redefined."

Defining one's self adversarially ... the only requirement for joining being that you unquestionably believe whatever person is pulling the strings at the moment ... if this doesn't bring the history of Catholicism rushing to mind, it will when Scalia quotes, as she often does, from retired Pope Benedict's injunctions to mistrust the offerings of the secular world. Suffice to say, uncritically quoting the Catholic trendsetter *par excellence* while bewailing uncritical trendiness is so blatantly self-contradictory that I can't help but suspect Scalia is batting for our side here.

Continuing on in that chapter: "There was a constant call for conformity, a continual demand to disdain, and a lessening of human feeling. She was not at liberty to betray simple excitement and enthusiasm, which, though human and true, were not considered to be cool emotions." Replace "cool emotions" with "sufficiently God-directed" and you have here Scalia outlining the central problem of her own book, with its constant call to Catholic conformity, to disdain anything, human or otherwise, that gets in the way of God, and a resultant lessening of

human feeling in the name of cultivating a feeling of oneness with the divine.

I am sure that she would respond that tending exclusively to one's connection with God makes you more in touch with humanity rather than less, but, using her own terminology, it seems rather the case that she is letting the idol of God block her access to authentic humanity so that the "idol" of authentic humanity doesn't block her access to God.

In warning us against the idol of "having plans" she tells us, "To be inflexible about deviating from the plan is to erect a roadblock, an encumbrance – an idol – and put it in the way of what the Spirit might be trying to do with us and for us." This bit about the dangers of inflexibility in the face of change is, of course, located smack in the middle of a book devoted to a rigid cultivation of commandment-aligned inflexibility in the face of modernity and its temptations. There is hardly anything less open to life's variation and potential than the willful crafting of knee-jerk execration in the face of the world's offerings.

But my absolute favorite, the most stunningly anti-Christian set piece ever written in a desperately pro-Christian work, is this sparkling treasure, which aims for putting us on our guard against group identity and ends by masterfully demonstrating precisely what is so sick at the core of Christianity:

"One thing that can hinder growth is our willingness to attach labels to ourselves and adopt identifications, particularly with groups, to whose ideas we've become at-

tached. In doing so, we cease to ponder, cease to wonder, cease to think ... When we over-identify with an idea or hermetically seal ourselves within the seemingly safe cocoon of groupthink, we stop knowing much at all. Everything we think we know is surrendered to the collective from which we gladly take our identities and our self-definitions."

Is that not beautiful? If my copy weren't from the library, I would tear that page out and frame it as a testament to humanity's exquisite capacity for doublethink.

Taken in sum, what Scalia's critique of the idols of modernity and the harm they do to the growth of the self really contains is a condemnation of Christianity in all of its facets. As defined by her, there is no more harmful idol to humanity than the Judaeo-Christian god, and so the entire effect of the book comes off as, "You have to abandon all of these false idols that are hurting you, so that you can fully engage yourself with this astoundingly false idol who will utterly gut you."

Scalia wants us to choose the self-harming idol that she happens to like best, and that's a very human thing to do. There are points in the book where she almost seems to turn the corner, as when she realizes that over-attachment to particular religious rituals or incantations can verge on the idolatrous. But she always stops short before the core of Catholicism and the person of Jehovah. That God is an instance of humanity pouring its resentment and hope into an illusory construct in order to make its own prejudices and insecurity divine, and that Catholicism is the groupthinkalicious, reality-hating vehicle of that act of deitiesmithing is quite beyond her willingness to consider. It is a truth unthinkable even as she watches her own pen lay out both the accusation and evidence. She is devoted to the notion that God's love is real and that it is worth subsuming all other aspects of humanity to.

It is her addiction, one that the analytical part of her brain is clearly rebelling against even as the chemistry of religious addiction forces her to deny all such insight.

As atheists, therefore, we have much to learn from this book, about how closely the die-hard Christian's worldview is predicated on beliefs that, with the slightest flick of self-realization, drive straight to the core of religion itself.

When David Silverman, President of American Atheists, went on *The O'Reilly Factor* and declared that everybody is an atheist waiting to happen, I was skeptical about the capacity for non-belief being that generally distributed, but upon reading this book I wonder. I wonder ...

Malasian couple jailed over spoof Ramadan ad



Two young Malaysians – Alvin Tan, 25 and Vivian Lee, 24 – were arrested last month for posting this humorous ad on Facebook, exhorting Muslims to break their Ramadan fast with *bah kuh teh*, a popular Chinese pork dish. If found guilty this month of 'sedition' and 'indecenty', the couple could be sentenced to eight years in prison.

points of view...



A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS
ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK

THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY: SOME SERIOUS RESERVATIONS

I NOTE with interest the recent report of The Sunday Assembly and its establishment in Melbourne, Australia (*Freethinker*, July). As a person who was going to be involved on the committee of said establishment, I am obviously supportive on the desire to create a non-theistic church which retains 'church-like' community. However I have had some serious reservations about The Sunday Assembly which led to my resignation from the organising committee.

Because the issue is a public one, rather than a personal one, I have a duty to bring the reasons for my resignation to public attention.

According to the working constitution proposed to The Sunday Assembly groups, such bodies are unincorporated associations. This means the volunteers who act for such bodies are personally liable for being sued or any debts associated with the group. An unincorporated association is unable to own its property, as it is not a legal person. It cannot sue or bring legal action against other organisations. It cannot receive gifts or donations in its own right.

Whilst not offering volunteers legal protections, rights, and responsibilities is bad enough in its own right, the constitution also requires that Sunday Assembly event guidelines are determined by an external, private, for-profit company that will receive income from the volunteers and congregation members.

This is, in my opinion, the worst possible organisational design possible for a body that wants to be a non-theistic church. In reality, it's a business with a volunteer network. Until The Sunday Assembly becomes an incorporated association and severs authority to a private company, I am afraid that I must warn people of the organisational structure chosen and suggest that they go elsewhere to find a non-theistic church-like community.

Lev Lafayette
Melbourne, Australia

MARGARET ATWOOD

I ENJOYED your article on the Canadian author Margaret Atwood (*Freethinker*, July), and was pleased that you quoted Austin Cline's response to the lady's views on agnosticism and atheism, as I am strongly in sympathy with Austin. The odd atheist can be dogmatic, but atheism as an idea is certainly not; nor is atheism a religion.

Margaret Atwood's claim that atheism

makes "an absolute stand about something that cannot be proven" is misrepresentation.

Atheism is the absence of belief in a god or deities, usually on the grounds that there is insufficient reason for believing.

Most atheists do not "believe in" things in the way religious people and political fanatics do (with strong emotional conviction). Atheists do not have to "know" that God does not exist, nor do they have to prove that "no god" exists.

Margaret Atwood's brand of "strict" agnosticism seems to be using the word "strict" as a euphemism for superior, as Austin Cline claims. It has an authoritarian ring to it, and, yes, it certainly sounds arrogant.

Nigel Sinnott
Melbourne, Australia

ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

OPHELIA Benson in the March 2013 edition of the *Freethinker* refers to the Armenian genocide as if it were an established fact and on a par with the Holocaust. This is far from being the case.

In the case of the Holocaust the Nazis made the conscious decision to exterminate the Jews who were a harmless and inoffensive minority and who had never taken up arms against Germany. By way of contrast, during the First World War, the Ottoman authorities, faced with an armed Armenian uprising backed by Tsarist Russia, took the decision to deport the Armenian population from Eastern Anatolia to the Middle East. Huge numbers of Armenians died as a result, both from starvation and from attacks by armed Turkish and Kurdish irregular forces, but there is no credible evidence that the Ottoman government intended to exterminate the Armenian community.

Indeed, those former Ottoman officials who were put on trial by the British in Malta for the crime of genocide were acquitted.

It is totally wrong for the Turkish authorities to prosecute those who claim that the Ottomans were guilty of genocide. However, what is equally worrying is the attempt by members of the Armenian community and their supporters to have the events in Anatolia during the First World War officially declared as genocide in Western countries with those who publicly disagree being liable to huge fines and imprisonment.

This is a gross infringement of free speech. People must be allowed to state their own

opinions about historical events without the threat of being fined or imprisoned just because someone happens not to like what they say.

I am shocked by the callous manner in which many of the supporters of the Armenian version of history dismiss the huge death toll among Turkish civilians, both during the Balkan wars of 1912-13 and during the following First World War. The Turkish community was subjected to widespread atrocities at the hands of the Balkan armies and the Armenian rebels. It seems that Turkish lives do not matter as much as Armenian ones. What was also shocking was the widespread support given by the Armenian community to Armenian terrorists who murdered many Turkish diplomats and in some cases members of their families during the 1970s and 80s. Most of the victim were not even born during the First World War and therefore bore no responsibility for the events whatsoever.

The events in Anatolia during the First World War were indeed horrific, but then many other events in that same period were equally horrific and sometimes even more so. King Leopold's savage exploitation of the Congo resulted in up to ten million deaths and yet does not receive the same publicity as the Armenian massacres and deportation. Could this be anything to do with the natives of the Congo being black pagans whereas the Armenians were white Christians?

Alec Toynton
Hampshire

ISLAMIC TERRORISM

GRAHAM Newbery (*Points of View*, July) is right to point out that Islamist terrorism has a religious root, but there is more to it.

The last big series of terrorist atrocities in Britain, perpetrated by Roman Catholics in the 1960s and 1970s, was mostly rooted in the perception that Catholics in Northern Ireland had fewer rights as citizens than their Protestant neighbours. With power-sharing, former terrorist leaders joined legislatures, and popular support for terrorism has declined, despite the continuation of faith schools and other divisive institutions.

Islamist violence may decline, like Romanist violence, if Muslims can be persuaded not to feel victimised.

Donald Room
London

Hate preachers fall foul of Ofcom

In response to Ofcom's fine and the comments made by Jilani, DM Digital said: "This was a live transmission and our management warn all channels not to give any live broadcast services to any religious scholars unless it is recorded and reviewed with the compliance team, otherwise you will be fined even though it is not the fault of the channel."

DM Digital believes the complaint was made by Ahmadiyyas, a sect considered outside the folds of Islam by mainstream Sunni and Shia Muslims.

Earlier this year, Ofcom made a series of fresh rulings against minority channels, which were disclosed for the first time in February.

In March 2012, Dr Zakir Naik, speaking on Peace TV's *Dare to Ask* programme, said: "One group of scholars, they say that if a Muslim, if he becomes a non-Muslim [inaudible] he should be put to death. There is another group of scholars who say that if a Muslim becomes a non-Muslim and propagates his new faith against Islam then he should be put to death.

"I tend to agree more with the second group of scholars, who say that a Muslim, if he becomes a non-Muslim and propagates his new faith against Islam, that is the time this penalty is applied."

Ofcom ruled: "In Ofcom's view it is potentially offensive for any service to broadcast comments suggesting that it is acceptable to apply a 'penalty' and kill any individual for renouncing their faith. Broadcasters must ensure that material which may cause offence is justified by the context."

Naik was banned from entering Britain in 2010 by Theresa May, the Home Secretary, after she ruled his presence was "not conducive to the public good".

He had been due to give a series of lectures at arenas in Wembley and Sheffield. May said

she was excluding him because his "numerous comments" were evidence of "unacceptable behaviour".

The decision, later upheld by the High Court, was based on a sermon the Mumbai-based preacher had posted on the Internet in 2006 which said "every Muslim should be a terrorist" and which went on: "Beware of Muslims saying Osama bin Laden is right or wrong. I reject them ... we don't know. But if you ask my view, if given the truth, if he is fighting the enemies of Islam, I am for him."

Dr Naik is the co-owner of Peace TV, a channel funded by a charity called the Islamic Research Foundation International. In March last year he said in a programme he was presenting that it was appropriate to crucify, dismember or exile those who "wage war against Allah" under sharia law. He also said it was correct to kill former Muslims who "propagate his new faith against Islam".

Ofcom ruled that Naik breached part of the code that states that offensive comments should be "justified by the context".

A spokesman for PeaceTV said: "We are disappointed by Ofcom's ruling, especially when the programme in question is an exposition of certain teachings from the Koran, which we felt were justified by the context, and didn't attract a single complaint from a viewer.

"That said, we take our responsibilities extremely seriously and the programme will not be broadcast again."

In May, 2012, Muhammad Farooq Nizami said in a programme called *Message of Mustafa* on Noor TV "there is absolutely no doubt about it that the punishment for the person who shows disrespect for the Prophet is death. No one disagrees about this.

"Whoever shows disrespect for Prophet Mohammed will be given [the] death penalty. In the whole world, there should be slaves

of Mustafa [Mohammed] everywhere, and disrespectful people should be eliminated.

"One has to choose one's own method. Our way is the peaceful way but when someone crosses the limits, faith-base emotions are instigated."

Ofcom ruled: "The breaches in this case ... are regarded by Ofcom as serious breaches of the code.

"Ofcom is very concerned that Al Ehya [Noor TV's parent company] still does not appear to recognise the very serious issues raised by the broadcast of Mr Nizami's comments."

In its ruling, Ofcom highlighted the Danish cartoon case from 2005, in which death threats were made after a newspaper published 12 images of Mohammed, and the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh in 2004 after his film *Submission* was condemned by Islamic clerics.

Ofcom told Noor TV's owners in December that it is considering imposing a fine.

A Noor TV spokesman said: "We have appointed some new directors and implemented a whole range of new training, including having the Ofcom rules translated into Urdu."

Al Ehya Digital Television Limited, the owner of Noor TV, said Ofcom was taking a "prejudiced view" of the programme.

Noor TV is also shown across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. In 2011, the channel was fined £75,000 by Ofcom for a number of breaches of the code, including soliciting £1,000 donations in exchange for prayers which it said would improve health and good fortune.

Dr Mohammed Iqbal, a pharmacist from Nottingham who is a director of Noor TV, said: "We are trying to get our house in order. We are sending out messages of peace. Anything else is unacceptable to anybody."

Anti-jihadist bloggers barred from entering the UK

IRONICALLY, two prominent US bloggers devoted to exposing the hateful messages of Muslim preachers and Islamic acts of terror worldwide were denied entry to the UK by Theresa May in June.

Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer received letters from the Home Secretary's office saying that their presence was "not conducive to the public good".

The Government's "Unacceptable Behaviour" policy states that the Government can expel/deport or deny entry to any non-UK national who violates the policy by engaging in one of the "behaviours" proscribed, including "running a website" that "foster[s] hatred which might lead to inter-community violence in the UK".

Spencer, who runs JihadWatch.org, and Geller, founder of

AtlasShrugs.com, were scheduled to attend an EDL rally on June 29, ending in Woolwich, south east London, where soldier drummer Lee Rigby was brutally killed in May.

Both posted identical replies to the ban on their websites. "In a striking blow against freedom, the British government has banned us from entering the country. Muhammad al-Arifi, who has advocated Jew-hatred, wife-beating, and jihad violence, entered the UK recently with no difficulty.

"In not allowing us into the country solely because of our true and accurate statements about Islam, the British government is behaving like a *de facto* Islamic state. The nation that gave the world the Magna Carta is dead."