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Former Lib-Dem councillor denies threats against Muslim apostate

The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB) has described as "wholly unacceptable" an investigation that cleared a prominent Liberal Democrat, Salah Al Bander, of any wrongdoing in relation to threats made against secular campaigner Nahla Mahmoud, a leading figure in the council.



Nahla Mahmloud, the woman Salah al Bander is accused of threatening

Al Bander, who represented Trumpington on Cambridge City Council until 2011, was accused by the CEMB of being one of several Islamists who issued death threats against Mahmoud after she spoke out against sharia law in a recent Channel 4 TV interview. She was branded a "kafira" and "murtada" who had offended Islam by bringing "fitnah" to the religion.

In a statement issued last month, the CEMB said that Spencer Hagard, chairman of the Cambridge Liberal Democrats, had initiated an investigation into the allegations against al Bander and subsequently found them "groundless".

The CEMB added that instead Hagard said the enquiry "increased previously high esteem" held for al Bander. "This despite the fact that an independent translation was not carried out by the Lib Dems to verify the threats made nor was any of the documented threats made against Nahla Mahmoud addressed other than to say that the quotes were a "gross distortion", and "utterly misrepresented".

"Kafir(a) and murtad(a) are well known derogatory terms meaning infidel and apostate; moreover, 'fitnah' is another derogatory term against disobedient women who are seen to be the source of chaos or affliction in society. Given that apostasy is punishable by death in ten countries including Sudan, and a prosecutable offence in many more, the terms can hardly be considered positive and open to distortion.

"Rather than addressing the specific threats made against Nahla Mahmoud, al Bander mentions his 'dedicat to individual human rights', including his membership of bodies like the Sudan Organisation Against Torture (SOAT).

"The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain finds this wholly unacceptable and calls on the Lib Dems to provide a detailed response with regards to the complaint against al Bander. His questionable 'human rights' record is irrelevant and can hardly be used in his defence.

"SOAT, the group al Bander cites as proof of his commitment to human rights, has in fact had problems with him. Founding members of the organisation wrote a letter in September 2008 saying that the board of trustees headed by al Bander was acting 'opposite to its vision and values'. They went on to say: 'We have serious concerns and doubts about the constituency and legitimacy of the current board of trustees of the organisation. We believe that the election procedure

of the board was inappropriate, lacked transparency and equal opportunities to participate. In fact it has been manipulated. As a result, we have explained and informed the UK Charity Commission of the current situation'.

"In another open letter to Salah al Bandar in August 2008, a number of human rights organisations and activists wrote about the 'distressing attempts to undermine organisations and activists' in Sudan, including actions 'not in line with the values of the human rights movement'."

The CEMB also pointed out that Liz Hodgkin, former head of Amnesty International's Sudan section, refused to accept an award from SOAT in August 2008, for reasons explained in a letter to al Bandar. She wrote that she initially felt very honoured when she learned of the award but turned it down when she discovered "that there are deep problems within the organisation among the Board of Trustees and the workers and activists on the ground in the Khartoum Centre for Human Rights and Environmental Development in Khartoum". She added: "A human rights organisation has to be

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Boys gone wild

OPHELIA BENSON WONDERS WHEN MEN WHO OUGHT TO KNOW BETTER WILL OUTGROW THEIR SEXISM

In business news last month was the sacking of *Business Insider's* Chief Technology Officer, Pax Dickinson. *Business Insider's* CEO issued a short statement:

A Business Insider executive has made some comments on Twitter that do not reflect our values and have no place at our company. The executive has left the company, effective immediately.

Business Insider's team is composed of more than 100 talented men and women of many backgrounds, and we highly value this diversity.

If you look at Pax Dickinson's Twitter account you find that last month he tweeted (among other things):

feminism in tech remains the champion topic for my block list. my finger is getting tired.

A tweet from last year was even more blunt:

Tech managers spend as much time worrying about how to hire talented female developers as they do worrying about how

to hire a unicorn.

The problem seems obvious. It's well known that there's a shortage of women in tech fields, and that most tech companies would like to do better in this area. Having a tech executive tweeting his contempt for the very idea is not likely to help draw more women to the field.

I like to keep a fresh, dewy-eyed, hopeful view of the world; maybe that's why it keeps surprising me that everybody doesn't already know this. But everybody doesn't. The place is crawling with unrepentant sexists and creepers and get-her-drunk-ers, who somehow were all out sick the day everyone learned about sexual harassment on the job and what "hostile work environment" means.

Take the philosopher Colin McGinn as another example. He resigned from the University of Miami in the wake of allegations of sexually harassing emails. McGinn insists it was all a misunderstanding and he left simply because he didn't want to deal with the fuss, but then he *will* keep blogging about it.

The item that has probably done the most to make him a joke in philosophy departments everywhere is his explanation of a "hand job" reference. It was a play on words, you see.

Similarly, a professional glass blower might remark to his co-worker with a lopsided grin: "Will you do a blow job for me while I eat this sandwich?" The co-worker will interpret the speaker as indulging in crude glass blower's humor and might reply: "Sure, but I'll need you to do a blow job for me in return."

McGinn explains: "These reflections take care of certain false allegations that have been made about me recently (graduate students are not what they used to be)."

This is a grown man, a professor of philosophy and author of many books, yet he thought it was a good idea to write that. How does this happen? How do people who are apparently intelligent and educated manage to treat underlings with such contempt and then make such terrible justifications for doing so?

One answer lies in dissonance theory: that our pressing need to continue to think well of ourselves, no matter what we do, motivates us to find self-serving explanations for actions that to onlookers are obviously selfish or brutal. Carol Tavris and Elliott Aron-

son, in their book *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*, explain how that works with aggression:

Children learn to justify their aggressive actions early. They hit a younger sibling, who starts to cry, and immediately claim, "But he started it! He deserved it!" Most parents find these childish self-justifications to be of no great consequence, and usually they aren't. But it is sobering to realize that the same mechanism underlies the behavior of gangs who bully weaker children, employers who mistreat workers, lovers who abuse each other, police officers who continue beating a suspect who has surrendered, tyrants who imprison and torture ethnic minorities, and soldiers who commit atrocities against civilians. In all these cases, a vicious circle is created: Aggression begets self-justification, which begets more aggression.

There's another factor at work in these two cases and in many others we read of in science fiction, gaming, computer science – and, alas, in atheism and skepticism: a self-image as rebellious and contrarian and heroically non-conformist. McGinn wrote another blog post that made this embarrassingly clear in his case.

My cultural heroes are: Oscar Wilde, Bertrand Russell, Vladimir Nabokov, Jean-Paul Sartre, Philip Larkin, Kingsley and Martin Amis, Peter Cook, John Lennon, and Larry David (among many others). What they all have in common is the quality captured by the French phrase "épater les bourgeois", which the OED defines as "shock people regarded as conventional or complacent". We might paraphrase this in a number of ways: taunt the prudish and prim, ridicule the conventional and boring, outrage the pious and conformist.

Naughty Boys versus The Prudish Prim Lay-deez. The appeal is obvious, but so is the fact that it's crude and simplistic, as well as sexist, and that one *ought* to outgrow it.

That, however, is clearly going to take a long, long time. Climate change may sweep us all off the board before that happens.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

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Atheism in action: Texas student scores a victory over preachy economics teacher

SARA Sheppard, of Katy in Texas, last month delivered a message to students annoyed by teachers who bring religion into the classroom: Don't be afraid to action against them.

She did just that when her high school economics teacher began spending a lot of time speaking about Christianity in the classroom. She said: "As the semester went by I realized that his passion for passing on his knowledge was not focused on economics but focused on religion, prayer, and spirituality. Instead of teaching economics he would teach us that certain historical people were among the greatest because of their spiritual enlightenment.

"He also expressed to the students that it was human nature to have a spiritual and religious component, therefore making atheists unnatural and against human nature. This teacher went so far with this idea to even compare atheism to smoking and how the body originally rejects smoking just like 'the mind rejects the concept of atheism'.

Even though she called him out on that last statement, explaining that he shouldn't say things like that in the classroom, it didn't change anything.

Reporting his conduct didn't seem like a safe option – it could have made her a target of students and other teachers. So Sara did the next best thing. She recorded the lectures on her iPhone, then she passed them to the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Foundation attorney Stephanie Schmitt reacted immediately and penned a letter to the district's superintendent. This remedied the problem ... the teacher stopped discussing faith in the classroom.

Sara wrote about the aftermath on her website:

"I had a few friends in the same class that were angry with me and said I destroyed his freedom to religion, but in reality his actions were unconstitutional and were not related to economics at all. This was economics class, not Sunday school."

Commenting on her action, Hemant Mehta, who runs The Friendly Atheist website,



Sara Sheppard

said: "How's that for bravery? She did what no other student had the courage to do. In fact, in a short speech she gave to the Humanists of Houston group [in September], she explained that the teacher told another student (a friend of Sara's) the following semester that Sara 'had taken away his right to talk about Jesus'. A right that public school teachers don't actually have when they're in front of students in the classroom.

"Sara later earned a \$500 scholarship from the FFRF for her activism. It's just another example of how one student, willing to speak up against proselytizing teachers, can actually cause change to happen. The teacher may have known more about economics, but Sara knew more about the Constitution.

"By the way, Sara earned an 'A' in the Economics class. I spoke with Sara. She had one important piece of advice to other students who may be in her situation: Don't be afraid. If you witness a teacher trying to push religion on you, let a group like FFRF know about it. Or let a trusted teacher or administrator know about it. If you don't say something, the proselytizing will go on for years to come."

Mehta added: "Incidentally, in 2006, Matthew LaClair also recorded his teacher, a creationist, preaching in the classroom, saying 'all the biblical prophecies have come true, dinosaurs were on Noah's ark and all non-Christians belong in Hell'.

"Once he made those recordings public, the teacher learned his lesson the hard way (though he, like Sara's teacher, never lost his job over the incident)."

'Nightmare' B&B owners forced to sell up

A PAIR of fundamentalist Christians who gained notoriety for refusing accommodation to a gay couple at their Cornish B&B is being forced to sell up – but not, it seems, as a result of guests finding their bigotry hard to stomach, but because they are simply not cut out for the hospitality business.

One Christian reviewer on the Trip Advisor website had this to say of Peter and Hazelmary Bull's Chymorvah Hotel: "Awful! Simply Awful. I am Christian but that's not the reason I went there. But I felt the place had a terrible atmosphere. I am vegetarian and there was a very limited menu. I felt like I committed a crime when I mentioned I was vegetarian. The look I received from woman could kill you. The room was cramped, not particularly clean and smelled strange, it was also cold and damp."

The reviewer added: "I really don't like the thought of religion being forced down my throat whilst on holiday/taking a short break. I wanted to enjoy my time but I felt like I was a burden to this hotel not a guest." Another even more damning review was headed "Avoid Chymorvah – dirty unsafe hotel and a religious nightmare."

The Bulls operated a strict policy of letting only married couples share a bed. But they fell foul of the law in 2008 when they refused to allow civil partners Martyn Hall and Steven Preddy to stay in one of their double bedrooms. This was judged to be a violation of the 2007 Equalities Act, for which the hoteliers were forced to pay £3,600 in damages.



Friends and colleagues gather in Brighton for Bill McIlroy's funeral

THE funeral of Bill McIlroy, former editor of the *Freethinker* and a past secretary of the National Secular Society, took place in Brighton at the end of September.

Among those in attendance was the NSS's Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, who reminded the packed crematorium of Bill's "wonderful sense of humour".

He said: "With instant repartee delivered with a mischievous grin, he will be remembered affectionately by all who knew him. The perfect friend: the epitome of integrity and discretion, and – above all – he was so kind and helpful. And so knowledgeable, particularly about historical matters.

"His father going to the war made him, aged 11, the head of the house; the eldest child of six. Like the NSS's founder Charles Bradlaugh, he was from a grindingly poor family and self taught – and probably the better for it.

"That was in Northern Ireland, and he hated religious bigotry; he told me that he couldn't move to England fast enough. Maybe no surprise then he devoted his life to secularism and freethinking.

"Few if any have done more, certainly in the latter half of the 20th century, for the movement. He would stop at nothing to prevent anyone doing it harm.

"And what energy. He edited the *Freethinker*, initially when it was weekly, correcting the proofs on the train to the printers in Kent. Later, he did what is now my job at the same time.

"In the 1960s he teamed up with the then President, David Tribe. David is very sorry not to be here, but we can forgive him; he lives in Australia. He stressed what a pleasure and privilege it had been to work with someone of such loyalty and ability.

"Together, they made the NSS a force to be reckoned with and played a significant role in achieving the huge advances of that decade which did so much to shape the world we know today. They tackled the laws on male homosexuality, abortion, stage censorship, Sunday observance and the last remaining blasphemy statute. A certain W J McIlroy was the Secretary for the Committee against the Blasphemy Law when living in Brighton, at 32 Over Street. He so loved Brighton.

"We are all very much the poorer at his passing. And as they say in Sheffield where he spent so many happy years, 'They don't make them like that anymore'. Now it's our



Bill McIlroy (July 4, 1928 – August 22, 2013)

turn to say 'cheery-bye' to Bill."

In a tribute penned for the *Freethinker*, David Tribe said he had worked closely with Bill from 1960 to 1972 on both the National Secular Society Executive Committee (Council) and on the *Freethinker* Board "and found him to be a dedicated, talented and loyal colleague".

"During that period the NSS faced a range of adverse educational, legal, libertarian, moral, social and cultural positions fiercely defended by obscurantist opponents, and had significant victories.

"Internally, for the first few years, we struggled against dissidents who opposed transformation of the society into something of contemporary relevance or who wanted Bill's job. At this juncture there was a need for strategies and tactics so sensitive they were formulated only between ourselves. Naturally, they were then submitted to the EC and general membership.

"For a time after my return to Australia for family reasons in 1972, I was too busy settling into unfamiliar Sydney to follow NSS affairs. Bill was one of the few English friends I stayed in contact with, at first casually but later, as storm clouds coalesced again, with the old analysis and confidentiality till just before his tragic death from tonsillar cancer. Throughout, our sole concern was to defend atheism and secularism.

"As a confirmed bachelor and humanist writer, I've always been dispassionately interested in the sociology of families. Christians like to say the family that prays together stays together. Secularists hope the family that parents raise together stays together.

"In London I knew Margaret and Bill's devoted daughters Ruth and Helen socially. The girls were never indoctrinated and, de-

spite Bill's implacable hatred of the Northern Ireland Presbyterian regime, Ruth became an evangelical Christian. Helen opted for freethought.

"Margaret loyally supported Bill by helping to overcome his doubts over becoming *Freethinker* editor because of his limited formal education and by keeping secret a burgeoning sexual orientation which she accepted, no doubt regretfully.

"The girls were kept in ignorance till adulthood. When she developed multiple sclerosis he reciprocated her loyalty by looking after her for several years till forced to hand over this growing responsibility to Helen and husband Brian in Sheffield.

"Bill lived there for some time before relocating to Hove, near Brighton, where the 'action' is. About a year ago, unable to cope alone, he moved to a 'granny flat' in the home of Ruth, a trained palliative-care nurse, her evangelical husband Stephen and grandson Jim, who all took good care of him.

"When he told me of his cancer I urged him to stay active, think positively and not dwell on death. In fact, Ruth tells me that, although a supporter of voluntary euthanasia, he never considered it for himself and had always refused to discuss death. Life had enough challenges. She testifies that he was "firmly, firmly atheistic to the very end".

In its "Been and Gone" section covering the deaths of "significant – but lesser-reported – people," the BBC said this of Bill:

"It was Bill McIlroy's upbringing in the fiercely sectarian Northern Ireland of the 1930s which helped drive him towards the concept of secularism. He became Secretary of the National Secular Society in 1963 and found himself at the forefront of the campaign to overturn laws which banned many sporting activities as well as the opening of shops and places of entertainment on a Sunday.

"It brought him into conflict with the Lord's Day Observance Society, now known as Day One, which fought to maintain Sunday restrictions. He was a prominent campaigner against the laws on blasphemy which had been used in 1977 by the campaigner Mary Whitehouse, to prosecute the editor of *Gay News*.

"He was also active in promoting the 1967 Act which legalised homosexual activity between consenting males and campaigned against theatre censorship."

NSS reacts to judge's veil ruling, saying that defendants faces should be visible at all times

THE National Secular Society made clear last month that it would be pressing for an official ruling that would make it mandatory for defendants in court to have their faces visible at all times. The Society spoke out after a London judge decided to allow a Muslim woman to stand trial wearing a full-face veil, only needing to remove it while giving evidence.

Responding to the ruling, NSS Executive Director Keith Porteous Wood, said: "In the interest of justice, we consider it vital that defendants' faces are visible at all times, including while others are giving evidence. We therefore regret the judge's decision not to require this, despite making the case for it in his ruling. We will now be calling for visibility of defendants throughout court hearings to be made mandatory, and not subject to judges' discretion."

The case involves Rebekah Dawson, 22, who is accused of intimidating a witness in a separate case. The woman had previously been allowed to enter her plea after she agreed to lift her veil in front of a female police officer, in a room next to the court.

Ruling at Blackfriars Crown Court on how the case should proceed, Judge Peter Murphy said he proposed to adopt "the least restrictive approach" consistent with what he saw as the necessity of enabling the Court to conduct the proceedings fairly and effectively in the interests of all parties.

He said: "It is unfair to ask a juror to pass judgment on a person whom she cannot see. It is unfair to expect that juror to try to evaluate the evidence given by a person whom she cannot see, deprived of an essential tool for doing so: namely, being able to observe the demeanour of the witness; her reaction to being questioned; her reaction to other evidence as it is given. These are not trivial or superficial invasions of the procedure of the adversarial trial. At best, they require a compromise of the quality of criminal justice delivered by the trial process. At worst, they go to its very essence, and they may render it altogether impotent to deliver a fair and just outcome. They drive a coach and horses through the way in which justice has been administered in the courts of England and Wales for centuries."

However, Judge Murphy later then went



Rebekah Dawson Photo: REX FEATURES

on to conclude:

"While it remains true that juries scrutinise defendants throughout the proceedings, and take note of a defendant's reaction to the evidence as it is given throughout the trial, I am not persuaded that this is of sufficient importance to require a restriction on the defendant's right to wear the niqab."

He said he hoped that parliament or a higher court would review the issue "sooner rather than later" and provide a "definitive statement of law".

At around the same Birmingham Metropolitan College, where 43 percent of the 35,000 students are from non-white ethnic groups, reversed an eight-year ban on niqabs and burkas. A complaint by a prospective student led to an online petition that attracted over 9,000 signatures – and the college reversed its ban to allow facial coverings worn to preserve "cultural values".

This immediately sparked an intense political debate which saw a Home Office minister calling for the consideration of an outright ban of veils in schools.

The future of the veil, Liberal Democrat minister Jeremy Browne told the *Telegraph*, must be urgently reconsidered. "There is genuine debate about whether girls should feel a compulsion to wear a veil. We should be very cautious about imposing religious conformity on a society which has always valued freedom of expression."

And Philip Hollobone, Tory MP for Kettering, has proposed a private member's bill that would make it an offence for a person to wear "a garment or other object" intend-

ed to obscure their face. Backing his proposal is Dr Sarah Wollaston, MP for Totnes. Writing in the *Telegraph*, she described veils as "deeply offensive".

Sarah Rainey, reporting in the *Telegraph* last month, wrote that the controversy is compounded by the rise in young people in Britain who wear the niqab, burqa or hijab (headscarf).

"Ballooning immigration has combined with the increasing prominence of Islamic culture. Muslim commentators have noted that the wearing of the veil, which originated in the Byzantine Empire and spread throughout the Arab world after the rise of Islam in the seventh century, declined in the Forties and Fifties. Its resurgence in the Eighties coincided with the rise of Western feminism, and the same ideas – of taking control of their body and appearance – inspired Muslim women to cover their faces.

"Religious experts also point out worrying evidence that some young British Muslims have lost touch with Islamic scholarship, coming under the influence of extremist imams, who enforce the wearing of veils. In response to the threat posed by such extremism, France became the first European country to ban the burka in public in 2011, and was closely followed by Belgium. Italy, Switzerland and the Netherlands plan to follow suit.

"Now public opinion in Britain is swinging. A recent YouGov poll of 2,205 adults found that 67 per cent supported a complete sanction on wearing the burqa."

Lib-Dems clear Al Bander of in row over death threats

(Continued from front page)

especially careful to maintain the human rights of those who work for it and with it.”

Another organisation, the Sudanese Communist Party/UK and Ireland branch, of which Al Bander was a member, issued a statement on January 17, 2012, accusing him of “lying, spying, manipulating, blackmailing, and bringing into doubt the credibility and commitment of many members of the Communist Party”.

The CEMB added: “Al Bander may think that the usual double-speak of saying one thing to an Arabic-speaking audience and another to an English-speaking one will suffice as a defence as it clearly has for Hagarad. Nonetheless, we insist on a proper investigation.

“Moreover, when approached by Nahla Mahmoud, the police said that nothing could be done and that Nahla should try not to ‘anger’ al Bander any further. The CEMB reiterates its call on the police to take the matter of threats against Nahla Mahmoud and ex-Muslims seriously and to take action



Salah Al Bander, left, pictured with David Howarth MP

to protect her.”

On August 30, *Cambridge News* carried a report saying that al Bander “totally refutes” the allegations against him.

The report said that “hundreds of people have signed an online petition condemning al Bander following several posts about Nahla Mahmoud on a Sudanese website”.

“Ms Mahmoud, who like Dr Al Bander is

of Sudanese heritage, is an atheist who criticised her upbringing under sharia law and became a leading figure in a group called the British Council of Ex-Muslims.

“She said she faced intimidation after she was criticised in posts by Dr Al Bander, which were picked up in media and mosques in Sudan. Afterwards, her brother was allegedly attacked.”

GUEST COMMENTARY: Making sca

By JOHN STEPHENSON

FOLLOWING the furore surrounding Richard Dawkins’ tweets, it would have been reasonable to expect the confused haters of free speech to take a breather. But they’re hard-workers and of all the outspoken targets to choose from, the much-loved comedian Stephen Fry was next on their list. His crime? Stepping out of the pecking order in defending Dawkins and brazenly noting his own observations on Islam, tweeting “have a look around the world and see them slaughtering each other, let alone others. So charming to women too ...” This sent atheist-botherers into a frenzy, prompting Fry to quell any accusations of bigotry with a firmly-worded blog outlining his views. Why Fry is an “Islamophobe” is anyone’s guess. He certainly has the knowledge to support such an observation and a quick scour of the world’s media is enough to convince anyone that militant Islam remains a problem. Woolwich, the Boston

bombings, pre-election suicide attacks in Pakistan ring any bells?

This is not the first time Fry’s been subjected to such attacks. In 2010 he provoked outrage for his condemnation of the Pope’s state visit to the UK, citing the Vatican’s record in areas such as gay rights and abortion as reason enough for the British to abandon such an engagement. Again, while this was a view clearly based on research and the Church’s prior conduct as an institution, it still saw him accused by columnists such as Amanda Platell of “Catholic-hate” and self-important bigotry. A similar attack was carried out on Richard Dawkins by the *Independent* journalist Owen Jones, claiming Dawkins’ attacks on Islam act as a mask for unseen prejudice. Yet reason for why talk on religion should be seen as so scandalous is seriously lacking, even amidst the persistent persecution of secularists willing to speak out against acts of violence and cruelty.

Columnists such as Jones and Platell appear fully aware that certain religions are more hostile to criticism than others. Their

ignorance becomes apparent however, when they start asking their readers to condemn attacks on a religion on the basis that “you wouldn’t be able to say that about Islam”. Platell employed such a tactic, saying “imagine the outrage if the world’s most senior Imam was accused of being a leering criminal who encouraged the spread of sexually transmitted disease” in response to Dawkins opinion that the pope’s catholic teachings are detri (CEMB) mental to sexual health.

The idea that to have an opinion on an ideology equates to having an opinion on people is flawed by virtue of the fact that ideas are open to change. Yet this misunderstanding remains extraordinarily pervasive, even in light of the fact that such stupidity can be done away with after just two minutes of rational thought. Theology is not an inherent trait like skin colour, height or sex and the fact figures such as Stephen Fry and Richard Dawkins are so open in attacking the ideas within Islam shows that, aside from the few who act on its more abhorrent teachings, they differentiate between the

But al Bander said he had been “utterly misrepresented”. He told *Cambridge News*: “I totally refute these allegations made against me.

“These allegations stem from a gross distortion of my writing which has been utterly misrepresented and I will work to secure a retraction and full apology.

“I have dedicated my life to individual human rights, challenging, countering and campaigning against the very behaviour of which I am being accused. I was founder of the Sudan Human Rights Campaign and a founder member of the Sudan Organisation Against Torture.

“I abhor and condemn the persecution of both religious believers and non-believers, and consider that individuals have an absolute right to change their beliefs or non-beliefs, as they personally see fit and without outside interference.”

One suggestion is that al Bander’s words were mistaken during translation from Arabic to English.

Spencer Hagard said: “Having looked as fully as possible into the background of the complaints and accusations made against Dr Salah Al Bander at great length and in the greatest possible depth and having examined extensive material he has provided to me, I believe these allegations are groundless.”

Dr Al Bander came to Britain after he was arrested and deported from Bahrain when he exposed a political scandal in 2006.

Pope Francis wants a less dogmatic Church – then blasts abortion

CATHOLIC traditionalists were stunned last month when Pope Francis warned that the Catholic Church’s “moral edifice” might “fall like a house of cards” if it doesn’t balance its divisive rules about abortion, women, homosexuality and contraception with the greater need to make the Church a merciful, more welcoming place for all.

But it was back to basics a day later when Francis denounced abortion as a symptom of today’s “throw-away culture”. He issued his strong anti-abortion message and cited Vatican teaching on the need to defend the unborn during an audience with Catholic gynaecologists.

Earlier, in an incredibly frank interview with the Italian Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the Pope described his new vision for the Church saying: “We have to find a new balance,” saying it should be a “home for all” and not a “small chapel.”

He told the gynaecologists that “every child that isn’t born, but is unjustly condemned to be aborted, has the face of Jesus Christ, has the face of the Lord”.

Expanding on the explosive comments he made about homosexuality in July when he was returning to Rome from Rio de Janeiro, where he had celebrated World Youth Day, the Pope said he had no right to judge anyone from the LGBT community.

“A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality,” he said in the interview. “I replied with another question: ‘Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?’ We must always consider the person.”

He admits he has faced criticism for remarks that are totally at odds with those of his predecessor, Pope Ratzinger, but determinedly insisted that the Church’s priorities must change to incorporate more “progressive” views.



scapegoats of atheists and secularists

faith and its people.

In failing to realise this, supposed liberals attach too much weight to faith-based stereotypes and form an identity based on these prior assumption. From then on, anyone who speaks out about a religion is a labelled a “bigot” and the fact that they are criticising an ideology and small minority as distinct from a larger community of believers goes unseen.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong with speaking out against one religion in particular. In fact, the hostility of Islam towards criticism is noted within the wider faith-based community. Jonathan Sacks, the UK’s recently departed Chief Rabbi claimed that a book, equivalent to Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* would have been welcomed “with open arms” in the Jewish population. Yet when it was first published over two decades ago, Rushdie’s experience was not so warm. The familiar voices of stupidity were heard, condemning the book as “offensive” and sympathising with Muslims committing acts of violence

all over the world amid a refusal to defend its author.

Perhaps Stephen Fry’s use of the Internet was what provoked such anger? As Ophelia Benson noted in last month’s *Freethinker*, Twitter may not be the best medium on which to conduct a rational debate, as the 140 character limit has the propensity to make statements bold and punchy. But attacks on peaceful secularists are not constrained to social networking.

Similar waves of idiocy and sympathy towards Islamist violence swept the world in 2005 following the drawings of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper and the literature of prominent secularists such as Sam Harris has been libellously associated with far-right politics and “scientific racism” by journalists whose columns aren’t worth the paper they’re written on.

An aversion to a faith is not an aversion to the faithful. So long as there is credible evidence to support an assertion, we have every right to voice an opinion on religious belief. This is all Fry was doing in defend-

ing Dawkins, yet he too fell victim to the usual rag-tag group of offended persons. At the very worst he is mistaken, but bigoted, racist and intrinsically prejudiced he is not.



• **JOHN STEPHENSON** is originally from Woodbridge in Suffolk and describes himself as “an atheistic, humanist, secularist in my final year of a politics degree at Lancaster university. I’m an amateur blogger with an aversion to ‘hocum’ and religion in most forms.”

Redefining disbelief

JEFF T HALEY argues that we need better terms than ‘naturalist’, ‘skeptic’ or ‘bright’ to effectively market a rationalistic world view

For the last three hundred years, cultural evolution has been advanced by the development and advocacy of a scientific worldview characterized by the ideals of the Enlightenment: that one should rely only on sources of knowledge that have been verified through scientific confirmation and one should reject as valid sources of knowledge tradition, dogma, superstition, religion, faith, revelation, charisma, conventional wisdom, intuition, and inspiration.

Of course, one must make decisions every day based on intuition, inspiration or tradition with no scientifically supported basis, but a person with the new worldview remains ready to amend such decisions upon receipt of valid evidence. Although there has been progress, this new worldview consistent with scientific evidence has not yet become dominant in any region of the world larger than a university town.

Spreading the new worldview would likely increase human happiness by three mechanisms:

1. Increasing levels of education and abilities of people to understand each other's viewpoints has reduced conflict, and spreading acceptance of the new worldview is likely to increase abilities for people to understand each other's viewpoints.
2. Differing religions/worldviews have caused conflict; adoption of a common worldview by an increasing number of people would likely reduce future conflict; and the new worldview is the only worldview that has a chance of achieving wide adoption.
3. Individuals become happier when they have a more correct understanding of the dividing lines between reality and fantasy and are not confused about whether there is truth or whether people can ever know truth, which frequently results from being taught falsehoods of worldviews that are inconsistent with science and reason.

It would help spread the new worldview if we had words for referring to it in a way that people with a modest intellectual inclination can easily learn and understand. Presently used terms for it and its adherents – “naturalist”, “bright”, “skeptic”, and “scientism” – are ineffective choices for widening its acceptance.

This essay characterizes the new and old worldviews, criticizes the previously used terminology, proposes better terminology, and solicits comment and criticism.

Relationship to religious concepts

The new worldview accepts scientific validation as the only adequately reliable way to draw a line between reality and wishful thinking. There are some who claim they accept the findings of science but also claim they have scientifically valid evidence that justifies including various religious concepts within reality. To be clear, generally accepted scientific theories hold that, to date, insufficient evidence has been found to support a significant probability of a god, a creator, spirits, a soul, an afterlife, reincarnation, a mind or thoughts separate from the physical brain, or any objective source of human values or morality outside of humans.

Anyone who does not accept each of these points disagrees with generally accepted scientific theories and does not hold the new worldview discussed herein.

As most traditional religions rely on elements listed above, the new worldview undermines most of them. However, there are religious leaders and congregation members who hold the new worldview, which is not inherently inconsistent with religion. A person can hold the new worldview as an overriding amendment to their preferred religious or values affiliation whether it is humanist, Unitarian Universalist, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Confucian, vegan, environmentalist, new age, pacifist, socialist or other.

Needed terminology

We need terminology to label the new worldview that can be easily understood and used by everyone, not just academics. And we need complementary inoffensive terminology to label the older worldviews so that we can talk to people who hold these views and cause a minimum of emotionally distracting insult. The new terms that are needed include: (1) person-categorizing nouns for adherents of each of the old and new worldviews – words that typically end in -ist or -ian or -an; (2) adjectives for characterizing each worldview – words that typically end in -ic or -istic or -ial or -al; and (3) school of thought labeling nouns to

identify each worldview – words that typically end in -ism.

Some argue that an “ism” noun is not needed for the new worldview and is counter-productive because it is misleading as to the true nature of the new worldview which, they say, is not and should not be a theory or “ism” because theories become bound with dogma – attempts to characterize the theory with a particular set of words – which is inconsistent with the self-correcting nature of the scientific spirit.

I do not here discount those arguments. However, “ism” type nouns for the new worldview have already been coined by some who think we need them (“naturalism” and “scientism”). If our meme spreading is to be effective, we must provide these people with preferred terminology that they will be persuaded to use.

Characterizing the old, naturally evolved worldviews

As pre-humans first developed a thinking brain, the brain evolved intuitive ways of assembling and retaining beliefs about everything relevant to making decisions affecting survival or thriving. This is a naturally evolved, intuitive worldview or epistemic method – a method for assembling knowledge. Before the advent of language, using individual intuition, each person assembled on their own a set of beliefs on which to base decisions, which must have varied widely from person to person. We can observe an example of this process as we watch a dog assemble a set of beliefs on which it acts. Unfortunately, evolution gave our brains intuitions that, if unchecked by education, lead us to believe in false sources of knowledge.

As early humans began to develop language, beliefs could be passed from one person to another, particularly from older people to younger. As humans developed more complex cultures, this passing of beliefs provided “knowledge” to each person in many forms, including tested truths based on good evidence as well as untested intuition, inspiration, tradition, dogma, superstition, and religion. The leading theory among anthropologists is that, more than 10,000 years ago, all humans believed that spirits cause all events, including human

actions when a spirit infects a person. This universal, natural worldview then evolved in separated cultures into the various mutually contradictory religions.

In addition to beliefs passed on by religions, the naturally evolved worldviews encompass many other beliefs that are formed and passed on without adequate scientific review, such as belief in ghosts, other spirits, witches, fate, destiny, providence, karma, spells, curses, astrology, homeopathy, lucky and unlucky numbers or objects or events, unwarranted fear of vaccines, unwarranted fear of fluoridation of water supplies, beliefs about special days such as Day of the Dead, and effects of amulets and similar objects.

From the perspective of educated people today, many naturally evolved forms of “knowledge”, both religious and non-religious, appear illusory and ill-founded. However, before the development of scientific methods, these were the only available sources of knowledge on many topics. As humans evolved, children were vulnerable to predation or injury and it was naturally selected that they believe what their elders tell them. This prescientific, naturally evolved, intuitive worldview, in its various forms, has dominated human culture since its beginning and continues to do so in all cultures today.

Characterizing the new worldview that is consistent with science

People can get beyond the natural tendencies of their minds to be self deluded and to believe what their elders tell them – the intuitive, traditional worldviews – only through education consistent with reason and good evidence, particularly as determined by scientific methods. Preferably, the education includes epistemology – the study of sources of knowledge – how we can know what to believe. While learning science and how to interpret evidence is entirely rational, it requires study and is not intuitive for humans.

Once a person fully understands and integrates this worldview that is fully consistent with generally accepted scientific theories, they cross a bright line and do not slip back into a natural or intuitive worldview. However, if education levels fall in a culture, young people can hold onto the intuitive ways of viewing the world that they are born with, and the culture as a whole can slip back.

No person can assemble on their own enough valid knowledge to acquire the new, scientific worldview. We all must learn

from others who shared their contributions through writing and correcting each other's contributions to reach a scientific consensus. By soaking up knowledge from appropriate sources, individuals can move their thinking toward the new worldview without being explicitly aware of the differ-

thing can be known to be true.

By requiring consistency with generally accepted scientific theories, the new worldview does not dismiss contributions from the “humanities” as contrasted with the “sciences”. There is no clear boundary between scientific and humanistic scholarship. What we call the sciences and what we call the humanities is largely a matter of pedagogical practicality. All the methods used by either are available to both.

The new worldview facilitates good decisions on the important and difficult issues of values, morality, and ethics because people stop trying to base these decisions on false beliefs that answers are provided by a deity or a source outside of humanity.

Presently used labels are inadequate

1. Naturalist/Naturalistic. Some suggest we should use the adjective “naturalistic” to identify the new worldview because the view is based only on good evidence from nature. Quoting one of these authors: “The basic epistemic commitment undergirding naturalism is that we should stick with science, in partnership with philosophy, as the arbiter of what fundamentally exists.” Those who like the label “naturalism” advocate using “naturalist” for the associated

person-categorizing noun. This meaning of “naturalism” has decades of momentum but has not yet made significant progress outside of academic philosophy.

To most people, the word “naturalist” refers to a person who studies life forms or explains nature to public audiences. To re-educate all speakers of the English language and lead them to understand the new definition of “naturalist” would be an impossible task.

Some object to use of the term “naturalistic” because they say it implies reliance on only the “natural” sciences and discounting of all other epistemologically valid sources of knowledge from other fields that emphasize values like curiosity, honesty, accuracy, precision and rigor, including mathematics and history. The elevation of the “natural” sciences over other valid sources of knowledge implicit in these terms is offensive to academics in other fields. This connotational baggage associated with the words “naturalistic” and “naturalist” is an insurmountable impediment to achieving agreement on this terminology.

There are confusing, inconsistent mean-

IMAGINE



NO RELIGION

the brights

ence between the old and new worldviews.

With education in epistemology and in current, generally accepted scientific theories explaining everything that matters to each person – and limited teaching of theories for which there is no scientific consensus, such as traditional religion, astrology and homeopathy – each person can be given the mental tools to adopt this new worldview. With these tools, they can avoid reliance on unworthy theories of truth that they invent by intuition or inspiration or that are presented to them from unreliable sources. Note that what should be taught is not just the subjects of science that are common in the schools but also generally accepted scientific theories for understanding whatever each person is interested in – what they care about in their daily lives – including religions, spirituality, and superstition.

Unlike atheism and skepticism, the new worldview is not merely a negation of invalid sources of knowledge. It is a positive stance that affirms valid sources of knowledge on all topics. It exults in the prospect that there is no part of reality that cannot be discovered through inquiry consistent with science. It is the opposite of epistemological nihilism which is the negation that any-

(Continued on p10)

ings of the word “naturalistic” in scientific/philosophical writing. Some authors use the word to denote the new worldview that is fully consistent with generally accepted scientific theories. Others use the word to denote a philosophy that includes no supernatural concepts but that draws supposedly objective conclusions about values from observations of “nature.” Using a single word to refer to two conflicting theories makes it more difficult to teach either theory. In addition, the word has still more inconsistent meanings outside of philosophy. It would be best to choose new labels that have as few inconsistent meanings as possible.

This proposed terminology is confusing because the word “nature” is useful in describing both the old and the new worldviews. “Natural” connotes the essence of the old worldviews much more than the essence of the new worldview because the old worldviews evolved naturally. The word “natural” has effective connotations for the new worldview only when contrasted with the word “supernatural”.

If “supernatural” were the best label for the old worldviews, “naturalistic” might be the best label for the new worldview, but “supernatural” is a poor label for the old worldviews because, for examples, the proponents of homeopathy and religious naturalism claim that they are describing nature and there is nothing supernatural about their theories. We can tell them that they are wrong and that their theories invoke supernatural forces, but they will not accept this characterization. If they will not accept the label we apply to them, the label loses most if not all of its utility. The problem is that the proponents of these theories do not view generally accepted scientific methods as valid for testing their theories.

The dichotomous labels of “supernatural” and “naturalistic” were chosen from a perspective that places too much emphasis on ending the influence of belief in a god or spirits and not enough emphasis on ending other beliefs that are inconsistent with generally accepted scientific theories. This choice of terminology grew out of the conflict between theism and atheism which is losing importance as theism begins to fade. While belief in gods may still be the strongest restraint on the adoption of a shared worldview in human culture, it is not the only restraint. Adopting a worldview that includes no gods but still does not reflect the importance of relying on generally accepted scientific theories in all aspects of one’s worldview fails to take people across the bright line into the new worldview. Thus, the labels “supernatural” and “naturalistic” would only be temporarily effective (until theism is no longer a problem) and would miss the opportunity to cast helpful light on other failings of the prescientific, intuitive, traditional, natural worldviews.

To summarize, the terminology of “natu-

ralism”, “naturalistic”, and “naturalist” is presently too ambiguous, has established inconsistent meanings, and will never be adopted by large numbers of people to identify the new worldview based on generally accepted scientific theories. It is time to give up using these labels and move to labels that are selected to be more effective.

2. Bright/Naturalistic. An association of people whose worldviews are free of supernatural or mystical elements organized through a website in 2003. They coined the noun “bright” to identify such people, and suggested the contrasting label “super” to identify people who maintain beliefs in supernatural or mystical entities or agency. They use the word “bright” to denote the new worldview that is fully consistent with generally accepted scientific theories.

“Bright” has advantages of being short, easy to say, easy to spell, upbeat, and memorable.

Unfortunately, the word “super” will never be widely accepted by those it is intended to characterize, and such acceptance is important to making progress. In addition, the word “bright” will not be widely accepted until the “brights” dominate a culture because the word is too self-congratulatory, presenting an insurmountable chicken and egg problem. Furthermore, “bright” has no adjective form so “naturalistic” is used as the adjective. The lack of a common root between “bright” and “naturalistic”, makes the terminology difficult to learn.

While the effort of the “brights” is a laudable attempt to solve the same marketing problem that this essay addresses, and the effort was mounted for the same reasons, the failure of this terminology to gain serious traction shows that it is time to give up on this terminology and try again. Perhaps the works generated by these efforts can be modified to keep as much of the “brights” momentum as possible while adopting new, better terminology.

3. Skeptic / Skeptical. Apparently due to their dissatisfaction with “naturalist” and “bright”, many people are currently using the words “skeptical” and “skeptical” to identify the new worldview. I concur that “skeptical” is better than “naturalist” or “bright” and the best of the terms now in use.

“Skeptical” is misleading to audiences because it seems to mean merely doubting of questionable assertions. The word “skeptical” only conveys negativism toward views expressed by others and inadequately conveys the affirmative sense that there is no part of reality that cannot be discovered through inquiry consistent with science. A person who calls themselves a “skeptical” might also be an epistemological nihilist and that is inconsistent with the new worldview.

“Skeptical” is inadequate for our purposes because there are several meanings and some of these meanings are inconsistent with the

new worldview. We need a short, single word so that, in response to an assertion, people can say “I am a _____. If the listener has heard what _____ means, the response will be correctly understood. If the listener has not heard what _____ means, they will inquire. “Skeptical” will not work for this purpose. Until the new meaning is widely disseminated and other meanings disappear from lack of use, people will assume the speaker merely means to say they are skeptical of the assertion just made, not that they are trying to convey something more.

The word “skeptical” is seriously flawed for our marketing purposes. We will never be able to adequately eliminate the ambiguous meanings of “skeptical” from the language. Hopefully, if we find and adopt a new word, the new word will replace “skeptical” in the current references to the new worldview.

4. Scientist / Scientific. We could call this new worldview the “scientific” (or “scientistic”) worldview. The “ism” would be “scientism”. These words have suitable connotations for the new worldview and there are advocates for this terminology.

It is important to also have a person-categorizing noun and there is no suitable matching candidate. The matching person-categorizing noun would be “scientist” or “Scientist” with a capital S. This terminology faces a major weakness because the word “scientist”, in present common usage, means a person who makes a profession of work using scientific methods or a person with a degree in higher education from a select list of degrees. We would need to change the understood meaning of “Scientist” to refer to a worldview that anyone can have, not just those who practice scientific methods in their professional lives or have a college degree.

In the US, as tested with a focus group, there are people, including some with advanced degrees from prestigious universities in fields not labeled as “science,” who are not at all willing to call themselves “scientists” even though they hold the new worldview. As the word “science” is understood in English, it excludes fields such as mathematics and history which are also valid sources of knowledge. This connotational burden for redefining what it means to be a “scientist” is insurmountable. In the same focus group, these people rejected the word “bright” but they were comfortable calling themselves “evidentialists”.

In addition, some of the people who self identify as “scientists” and are accepted by all sectors of society as “scientists” employ the new worldview only in their work and not in their personal thoughts and lives 24/7. For examples, Francis Collins, head of the National Institutes of Health, says he believes in a god, and Steven J Gould argued that science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria”. It would be risible to claim these

men are not scientists, but indisputable to say their expressed views are not consistent with the new worldview.

5. **Atheist/Atheistic.** Some people use the words “atheist” and “atheistic” to identify the new worldview. This use is confusing to audiences because it seems to mean merely no belief in a god, yet the speakers often intend to convey much more than this, including the entire affirmative epistemology of the new worldview. The word “atheist” inadequately conveys this affirmative sense and it would torture the language to try to redefine what “atheist” means to fill the need. The word “atheist” is useful to contrast with theism and it would diminish the usefulness of this word to try to stretch it to refer to all aspects of the new worldview.

Furthermore, there are atheists who hold beliefs that are inconsistent with generally accepted scientific theories, beliefs such as homeopathy, or astrology, or that nature (all life on earth) is a valid source of objective values, or that objective values can be derived from a source outside of humanity.

Criteria for selecting new terminology

To help the thinking of people who are already skeptical of the traditional worldviews, whether they call themselves naturalists, brights, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, secular humanists, or other labels, new terminology is not important. These people can use any of the existing labels to fully explore the issues. We need more marketable terminology for spreading the ideals of the Enlightenment to people who are not yet engaged with this way of thinking.

One of our targets for marketing the new worldview should be people who are causing harm to others and using false beliefs for their motivation or justification, such as religious fundamentalists. As we choose better labels, we should keep in mind whether the labels will be optimally effective for reaching these people.

The target where we may achieve the most success and therefore make the biggest difference for the evolution of culture is the “Nones”, as well as the religionists who might switch to Nones with a little help. Researchers report that large numbers of Nones have no interest in either theism or atheism. The new terminology should make no implicit reference to the long-standing theism/atheism debate. The day will come when this issue is considered by most to be inconsequential. We need terminology that will be useful for making progress on the rest of what’s important in each person’s worldview.

The three words we choose should work well in translation to all important languages. In English and Latin based languages, the three words should have a single root with

three varied endings to make them easy to learn. The root should have an appropriate connotation to convey desired meanings and therefore require less effort to teach the words. If we choose a root that is Latin or Greek, the same root is likely to work in many languages. Ideally, the root would require no spelling change for other languages. It would be best if a connotation of the root helps people distinguish between conclusions based on generally accepted scientific theories and conclusions based on values or fringe theories. Perhaps the best root would create a mental association with “science” or “evidence” or “reason” or “reality”.

An important question is whether we should use a word that already has a suitable general meaning, such as “scientific” or “evidential,” and educate the world to a new, more specific meaning for this word, or whether we should coin a new word.

Here is a strong argument against using an existing word with a suitable general meaning: Any person or group who applies the imprimatur of this word to their worldview will cause confusion as to what the word means. For example, if we choose “scientific” or “evidential” or “naturalistic” or “skeptical”, a person promoting a view that is inconsistent with the new worldview might, without being obviously wrong, say that their view is also “scientific” or “evidential” or “naturalistic” or “skeptical” and confusion would ensue.

To avoid this problem of others co-opting our terminology, we need to (1) coin a new word, (2) articulate a simple test for what is and is not within the new worldview, and (3) overpower with public speaking and publications any effort by others to change the meaning of the new word in a wrong direction.

To coin a new word, we can compose a root that is a novel string of letters with a novel sound or we can select an existing word with no related meaning such as “apple” or “bright”. Selecting an existing word with no related meaning will make the education task more difficult than composing a novel string of letters that creates a helpful mental association.

The best balance of considerations is to compose a new root that sounds like a root with desired connotations and does not have any undesirable associations with existing words. Perhaps we can compose a new root that sounds like one of the roots in the commonly used words “science”, “evidence”, “knowledge”, “reason”, or “reality”. Other than the coined root proposed below, I have been unable to compose such a root that does not create unhelpful mental associations. Perhaps someone else can.

Proposed new labels: Evidist/Evidism

The analysis above shows that the founders of the Brights were right to coin a new word. Unfortunately, the word they chose has seri-

ous flaws. To try again, it is important that we move cautiously and obtain extensive criticism before settling on a new word (triplet of words).

In the new worldview, beliefs are consistent with evidence and reason validated through the peer reviewed scientific process. Referring to the new worldview with the adjective “evidential” has appropriate connotations. Unfortunately, as explained above, if we choose this word which has a suitable general meaning, people with other worldviews can, without being obviously wrong, also claim that their worldview is “evidential”.

We can use the sound of “evidence” to coin a new root and make the needed new words. I propose “evidist”, “evidism”, and “evidal” or “evidistic”. I do not claim these are excellent choices; merely the best so far given the above considerations.

In English, these words trigger an appropriate association with “evidence”. I do not believe they will trigger undesirable associations for speakers of English. Because “eviden” is a Latin root, it is likely that “evidist” will have the same association in all Latin based languages that it has in English. It would be best if the same spelling of “evidist” will also work in all other languages that use the Latin alphabet.

I invite fluent speakers of other languages to publish or send me their opinions (1) whether “evidist” will trigger undesirable associations in another language, (2) whether the same spelling of “evidist” will also work in the other language, and (3) whether “evidal” or “evidistic” works better as an adjective in the other language.

If we use the term “evidist”, this would imply we are accusing anyone who does not adhere to the new worldview of not respecting the importance of evidence, and they might find this denigrating. It is undesirable to select a word that others might perceive as denigrating, but it probably cannot be avoided. Insulting people over their failure to understand what is good evidence may be worth the drawback because this is exactly the point we most want to make.

Proposed new test: “generally accepted scientific theories”

To easily explain the core concept of the new worldview and prevent the triplet of coined words from being co-opted to change their meaning in a wrong direction, the analysis above shows that we need a simple test of what assertions about reality may be characterized as “evidist”. It is not critical that we choose a perfect first articulation of this test. As science is a self-correcting process that works by collaboration and no single expression of any concept is fixed as the best expression, the test may be articulated in other ways.

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The Purloined Thesis

DALE DEBAKCSY identifies Reza Aslan's 'crimes' against Hermann Reimarus – but insists we can forgive him

As a species, we've been beating our heads against the wall trying to find new things to say about Jesus Christ for the better part of two millennia. And for most of that time, we did little more than compile variations upon the theme of "How Perfect Was Jesus? *Very perfect!*" Two and a half centuries ago, however, a very brave and respected academic named Hermann Reimarus started privately setting down his thoughts about Jesus not as a religious or intellectual figure, but rather as a failed political revolutionary. When fragments of this work were finally published posthumously by Gotthold Lessing in the 1770s, they ignited a full-scale intellectual war ended only when Lessing was forced to hand over Reimarus's manuscript to the authorities to prevent any future publication of such scandalous ideas.

And now Reimarus finds himself inexplicably in the midst of another travesty of justice in the form of Reza Aslan's recent *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*. Aslan has a simple thesis which, he informs us, is going to rock our world: "This book is an attempt to reclaim, as much as possible, the Jesus of history, the Jesus before Christianity: the politically conscious Jewish revolutionary who, two thousand years ago, walked across the Galilean countryside, gathering followers for a messianic movement with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God but whose mission failed when, after a provocative entry into Jerusalem and a brazen attack on the Temple, he was arrested and executed by Rome for the crime of sedition. It is also about how, in the aftermath of Jesus's failure to establish God's reign on earth, his followers reinterpreted not only Jesus's mission and identity, but also the very nature and definition of the Jewish messiah."

Reading these words the first time, I all but flew to my bookshelf on the wings of trembling memory as this central thesis, so boldly proclaimed as an original departure in the field of Jesus scholarship, sounded EERILY familiar. And, indeed, pulling down my copy of *Reimarus: Fragments*, I quickly found this: "Thus the existing history of Jesus enlightens us more and more upon the object of his conduct and teaching, which entirely corresponds with the first idea entertained of him by his apostles, that is, that he was a worldly deliverer ... It also shows

that the master, and how much more his disciples, found themselves mistaken and deceived by the condemnation and death [of Jesus], and that the new system of a suffering spiritual savior, which no one had ever known or thought of before, was invented after the death of Jesus, and invented only because the first hopes had failed."

The more you read Reimarus and Aslan side by side, the more you note the former's ideas creeping up in the latter. "Maybe he somehow never read Reimarus and all of this is just coincidence," I thought to myself, and flipped to the bibliography to find *Reimarus: Fragments* quite definitely present. Hmm.

Swallowing indignation, I pushed forward, waiting for Aslan to at long last give Reimarus his due as the originator of the Jesus as Reinterpreted Revolutionary theory. No such luck. Throughout the entirety of the book, the man who anticipated his own thesis, sentence for sentence, two and a half centuries ago, only merits two toss-away mentions buried in the endnotes.

Not cool.

However, if you can get past the atmospheric hum of ingratitude that hangs about the book, it's actually very enjoyable. I think all of us are willing to accept a re-hash of an old idea so long as it is well done, and in terms of which book I would recommend for learning about Jesus's failed mission, I wouldn't hesitate a moment in picking Aslan. Reimarus is a brave and admirable thinker, and undoubtedly the originator (along with the English deists Thomas Chubb and Anthony Collins) of some of the best ideas in Aslan, but his sentences have all the dynamism of a stack of pancakes. Aslan, by contrast, is an engaging writer with a free and exciting style that makes up for a lot of his less savory academic tendencies.

Ironically, the best parts of this book about Jesus are the ones that feature him the least. Part I is a routinely engrossing account of the relations between the Jews and the Roman Empire in the century before and after Jesus's death. In it, Jesus is almost lost among a string of similar messianic figures who rose, hearts full of zeal to throw off the yoke of Roman control by any means necessary, and fell having accomplished none of their goals. The true story here is not the individual failed messiahs but the recursive

loop of bumbled Roman administration and blood-soaked Jewish banditry that finally culminated in the utter destruction of Jerusalem several decades after Jesus's death. It was that destruction, and the retreat away from messianic zealotry and towards Roman universalism that it ushered in, that drove the mythmaking behind the Gospels. By drawing our attention to the ruthlessness of both sides and the centrality of the razing of Jerusalem, Aslan (as did Reimarus before him) provides us with our best chance at understanding the early evolution of Christology.

The book stumbles once Jesus takes center stage in Part II, and for the good reason that, lacking the historical data that gave heft to the first section, Aslan has to resort to rooting through the Gospels for his claims about Jesus, and the material there is notoriously tricky to tame. Still, some inspired portraits emerge, particularly in his sketches of John the Baptist and Pontius Pilate, which show how much violence the Gospel writers were willing to do to history in order to make Jesus the Jewish Peasant into Jesus the Universal Christ. But chapters nine through eleven, which are exclusively about Jesus, stagger all about, unsure of what they want to do and why. The best parts are second and third (and, in one case, fourth) repetitions of things established earlier, and the new material flails about for pages trying to suck particularism from stock phrases of oral tradition and come to terms with, say, the difference between magic and miracle in the ancient world. There is a maybeness to these sections, a great amount of energy and space devoted to sorting out things that might or might not be true, but that don't really shine light on the central argument either way. All in all, not much would have been lost by retitling the book *Zealots* and jumping from chapter eight straight to chapter twelve.

But part III finds its feet again with Jesus shuffled off the mortal coil, allowing Aslan to comfortably settle himself in the historical record again. It is about the evolution of the other-worldly Messiah myth as it elaborated itself under the total collapse of every one of Jesus's promises. Instead of establishing an imminent and revitalized independent nation of Israel, all that Jesus managed to do was die ignominiously on the eve of Jerusalem's total destruction and subjugation. Reviving the reputation of a messiah who



Reza Aslan

failed to such a spectacular degree took an elaborate and decades-long process of pilfering prophetic texts, cleansing them of their

Jewish particularity, and recasting them in in super-natural rather than terrestrial terms, a PR whitewashing effort of such spectacular ballsiness that it has kept the world in thrall for millennia. In particular, Paul's bitter self-aggrandizing letters preaching a Jesus without Judaic Law were roundly rejected by the Jewish Diaspora prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, but became the basis of all Christian theology in the years after. His focus on gentile conversion, his abandonment of the rituals of Judaic Law, and his philosophical focus on the role of faith and the divinity of Jesus were all perfectly adapted to a Christianity seeking to rebuild itself in the face of total disaster, with consequences for Christianity's self-conception that ring down to the present.

Aslan sees his book as a work of rehabilitation – the saving of a noble earthly figure from the trappings of divine misappropriation. Disregarding the fact that this revolutionary conception is over two centuries old, I would also add that the Jesus who emerges isn't particularly more likeable than the one being replaced. Faced with a political situation he didn't like, Jesus decided to follow

in the footsteps of a group of zealot messiahs whose solution was ever to shed blood first and think about big questions later (if you're having trouble picturing that, just think of the "What have the Romans ever done for us?" bit from Monty Python's *Life of Brian* and you won't err far). Jesus's first act upon entering Jerusalem was one grounded in violence and ended in his death. I don't find any of that particularly admirable, but rather see in it the real seeds of all the worst aspects of historical Christianity, particularly its haughty disdain for considering problems from multiple angles and willingness to default to the tropes of divine wrath when describing terrestrial opponents.

Jesus carved out a hackneyed identity for himself by cobbling together the most effective bits from previous messiahs, failed spectacularly on his first confrontation with actual authority, and was saved by imaginative publicity after the fact. He is perhaps the most likeable of the failed gore-soaked messiahs, but put against the rich intellectual atmosphere of his time, he's a footnote graced posthumously by fortune, and that's about it.

To match and emphasize the affirmative aspect of the evidist worldview, it would be best to have a positive test for what is consistent with the worldview rather than a negative test for what is not. For the test, I propose: "consistent with generally accepted scientific theories." This articulation of the test restates that our understanding of reality is a set of theories, not facts. It is good for development of scientific literacy to frequently remind people of this aspect of scientific understanding.

If a person says they are an "evidist" and they articulate a belief that does not meet the above test, we can say unequivocally that they are not an evidist and, short of debating what views are consistent with generally accepted scientific theories and citing peer reviewed scientific publications, no-one can disagree.

People will always publish bad science, and science that once looked good will become outdated and wrong, but using a standard of what is generally accepted at any time seems to be the best test we can devise. "Generally accepted" does not mean accepted by a majority of some quorum. It means accepted by the most respected authors of scientific analysis.

Labeling the old, dominant worldview

From the perspective of the new worldview, all the other worldviews are sufficiently like each other that it would be effective to lump them together under a single label. Perhaps it would be best to call the old, naturally evolved worldviews based on human nature "traditional" worldviews or "intuitive" worldviews or "prescientific" worldviews.

It would be a fitting use of the language to call the old worldviews "natural" worldviews,

Redefining disbelief

(continued from p11)

but this would conflict with terminology ("naturalist", "naturalistic", and "naturalism") that already has some traction, and it would cause confusion for many decades until people stop reading the writings that use this terminology to refer to evidism.

Others have called the old, naturally evolved worldviews "supernatural" worldviews, because they include belief in supernatural spirits. However, the term "supernatural" is too narrow because the word fails to clearly encompass beliefs that are equally unreliable as supernatural beliefs where the proponents of these beliefs do not agree that they are based on anything supernatural. There are many people today who claim to have no beliefs in spirits or anything supernatural or mystical, yet they have beliefs in false theories such as fate, karma (in the strong sense), new-ageism, homeopathy, astrology, unlucky days, or values from a source other than humans, which shows that their worldview is still inconsistent with generally accepted scientific theories.

For an effective noun for a person who follows any of the naturally evolved worldviews, perhaps we could call them an "intuitivist" or a "traditionalist" to correspond with their intuitive, traditional worldview. Those who fol-

low any variation of the intuitive, traditional worldview might find each of these labels helpfully inoffensive.

Summary conclusion:

Previously used labels for the new worldview based on the ideals of the Enlightenment are insufficiently effective for advancing the new worldview. This essay proposes that we urge everyone who gives no weight to sources of knowledge that are inconsistent with generally accepted scientific theories to self-identify as an "evidist". On the topic of knowledge, in contrast to values, they should assert that they hold an "evidist" (or "evidistic" or "evidal") worldview. All others we would refer to as "traditionalists" or "intuitivists" who hold a "traditional" or "intuitive" worldview.

For the sake of positive evolution of human culture, we need to select the best terminology for the new worldview and move forward with consistent usage by as many authors and speakers as possible.

As a next step, I invite others to publish or send me critiques of these proposed terms, suggest any terms they think might be better, and publish or send me criticisms of the "generally accepted scientific theories" test.

JEFF T HALEY is a US-based naturalist/bright/evidist, inventor, entrepreneur, chemist, clinical researcher, patent lawyer, and public interest advocate. He is the founder and co-sponsor of Washington's successful medical marijuana initiative campaign. He can be reached at jeff@haley.net.

The Silence of Animals

DAVID JAMES reviews
John Gray's latest book

JOHN Gray maintains that science and myth are simply the human animal's way of dealing with chaos. His latest book strips away the comforts of science and religion, mere shelters from a world we can never know. In his latest book, Gray attacks the very notion of progress, a doctrine that cannot but fail to delude. As our forefathers put their faith in gods, modern man clings to science and technology. He cites a range of authors, from Conrad to Ballard who present worlds where chaos dominates over civilisation. If civilisation is natural, then so is barbarism.

Gray refuses to believe in so-called scientific advance, his mentors being Freud rather than Darwin, and Llewelyn Powys rather than Richard Dawkins.

He quotes extensively from the little-known Powys, an atheist "adamant that rejecting religion meant renouncing any idea of order in the world". Gray's bleak and nihilistic viewpoint echoes that of Beckett: God is a man-made phantom, a bastard who doesn't exist. Gray ends with a clarion call from Powys: "It is not only belief in God that must be abandoned, not only all hope of life after death, but all trust in an ordained order."

This is a fascinating and wide-ranging account of myth in the comprehensive sense of the word.

Gray cites a range of philosophers, economists, poets, theologians, anthropologists and social commentators, all of whom have found shelter in certainties. The fact is that man's dreams of progress are but makeshifts, stages in a perpetual cycle that has no purpose or meaning.



John Gray is a political philosopher whose academic career included professorships at the London School of Economics, Oxford, Harvard and Yale. He is a critic of the neo-liberal philosophy that proposes that advances in human scientific knowledge will necessarily be accompanied by equivalent progress in ethics and politics.

points of view...

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

DANIEL GREENFIELD'S 'CRUDE FEAR-MONGERING' DEPLORED

IN his article "Muslims are not a minority" in the September 2013 issue of the *Freethinker*, Daniel Greenfield provides an array of statistics without any sources. It is, in fact, no more than crude fear-mongering. Whilst it is true that the numbers of Muslims in the West have risen sharply in recent decades, they still comprise a small minority – and will continue to be so given that the era of mass primary immigration is over and that it is very difficult for non-EU citizens to migrate to the EU.

So what are the actual numbers? In Britain (England and Wales) census figures show that the percentage of Muslims increased from 3 percent in 2001 to 4.8 percent in 2011. In the three other European countries with the highest Muslim population, Pew Forum estimates (for 2010) the percentages as 5.7 percent in France, 5.5 percent in the Netherlands and 5 percent in Germany; whilst it estimates the population of Muslims in the USA as a mere 0.6 percent (that is, less than 1 percent).

So the idea that Muslims are not a minority in the West is simply preposterous. There

is not sufficient space to tackle the various spurious claims made by Greenfield but, suffice to say, the article is so absurd that it is not worthy of the *Freethinker*.

There are very serious debates about the integration of Muslims in the West; about the rise of Islamism; the granting of privileges to religions in general, and their harmful and divisive nature – the sorts of profoundly important issues that ought to concern secularists. However, the paranoia exhibited by Greenfield – of the sort that often comes from Israelis obsessed with their own "demographic threat" – is distinctly unhelpful to these debates.

Rumy Hasan

Brighton

(Author of *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths* (2010) and *Dangerous Liaisons: The Clash between Islamism and Zionism* (2013).

IT IS disappointing that you should print such an attack on Muslims as David Greenfield's article. He suggests that they should not be regarded as a "minority" (though why

this should really be significant, I am not sure), but they comprise only about one and a half million in the UK (out of about 63 million), about two and a half percent only. Even by the wildest stretch of the imagination they could not become a majority in the foreseeable future.

They may be misguided in their views, but many, probably most, are moderate in their opinions and they have the same rights as anyone else to hold them and are unlikely to welcome the introduction of sharia law. Whatever we think of their religion, Muslims need to be defended against racists like the English Defence League and the damage to mosques after the appalling murder of Lee Rigby, in the same way that any minority (or majority) has the right to go about their lawful activities.

It is a great shame that this and the previous government have encouraged the formation of separate religious schools, which discourages exchange of views and understanding of how much all communities have in common.

It is essential that we don't stereotype



whole populations because of the actions of a few. I doubt if David Greenfield would welcome an assumption that, as an Israeli, he supports the extreme views of ultra-orthodox Jews or, for that matter, the oppression of Arabs by the Israeli government.

Martin Wright
Sale

THESE days the topic of immigration is openly talked about which I think is a positive development. As an ex-Muslim I am especially interested in the future numbers of Muslims in Europe.

I like to know what evidence David Greenfield has for these statements: "And Europe's future is a Muslim majority. Most European governments have accepted that and are acting on it".

To me it smacks of nothing more than the scare-mongering of the type represented by the notion of "Eurabia".

I suggest that you seek contributions from reputable demographers from institutions like the LSE to give informed opinion about their estimates of what the figures for Muslims for 2025 and 2050 are likely to be. You could also invite MigrationWatch so that all strands of opinion are represented.

I think it was highly irresponsible of you to publish this article containing statements with political policy implications and incitement. The writer is an Israeli who is clearly a Muslimophobic and anyone should be able to see has an axe to grind. I cannot imagine that you would publish a contribution from a Gaza resident which alerted people to some obviously silly Jewish conspiracy theory.

Asad Abbas
London

BILL MCILROY

BILL McIlroy brought me on board the *Freethinker* in 1974, when he assigned me to summarise my pamphlet, *Religious Roots of the Taboo on Homosexuality*. He helped me by having it sold through G W Foote & Co.

I remember Bill as a fine editor and writer, whose wit and pungent concision inspired all of us. He was a fighter, who received a police summons in 1977 for mailing copies of the poem, *The Love That Dares To Speak Its Name* – subject of the blasphemy trial of Denis Lemon and *Gay News*.

He wrote: "It is an outrage that the criminal court can be used to test matters of opinion, that a prisoner sitting under threat of sentence should have to listen to what amounted at times to antediluvian sermons, and that a jury should have to decide guilty or not guilty on an offence the meaning of which even expert lawyers would dispute." (*Freedom on Trial at the Old Bailey*, August 1977 *Freethinker*).

Bill fought against all attacks on freedom of thought and expression, includ-

ing attempts of self-proclaimed feminists to smuggle in censorship under the guise of protecting women. My article, *Feminism and Censorship in the United States*, appeared in the December 1985 *Freethinker*. An article by Antony Grey, *Linda: What Sticks in My Gullet*, later appeared, and a 1972 talk by Brigid Brophy, "The Longford Threat To Freedom" was printed as an NSS pamphlet. We took some flak from readers, but stood our ground. My *Religious Roots* pamphlet, as well as the pieces by Brophy and Grey, are now in the Freethought section of my website: <http://paganpressbooks.com/jpl/FREETHOT.HTM>

John Lauritsen
USA

BILL McIlroy has given great service to the secular movement over many years. One omission in the obituaries has been his years as an officiant at non-religious secular/humanist funerals at many venues around the country and over a long period.

In the 1970s he conducted the funeral of Joe Brett, a First World War absolutist conscientious objector who spent time in prison. Bill suggested that the courage and bravery of conscientious objectors should be commemorated just as those who fought were named on memorial stones.

From this grew an idea in the mind of Edna Mathieson, niece of Joe Brett, to set

up a group for the Right to Refuse to Kill (RRK). Ms Mathieson is former Vice Chair of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA)

After many years she succeeded in getting a commemorative stone placed in Tavistock Square, London, in 1994 to record this right. Every year on International Conscientious Objectors' Day (May 15) an event is held to honour COs over time and place.

Bill attended this event several times; the National Secular Society is always represented. Bill did much in his life; but in this action he was unique.

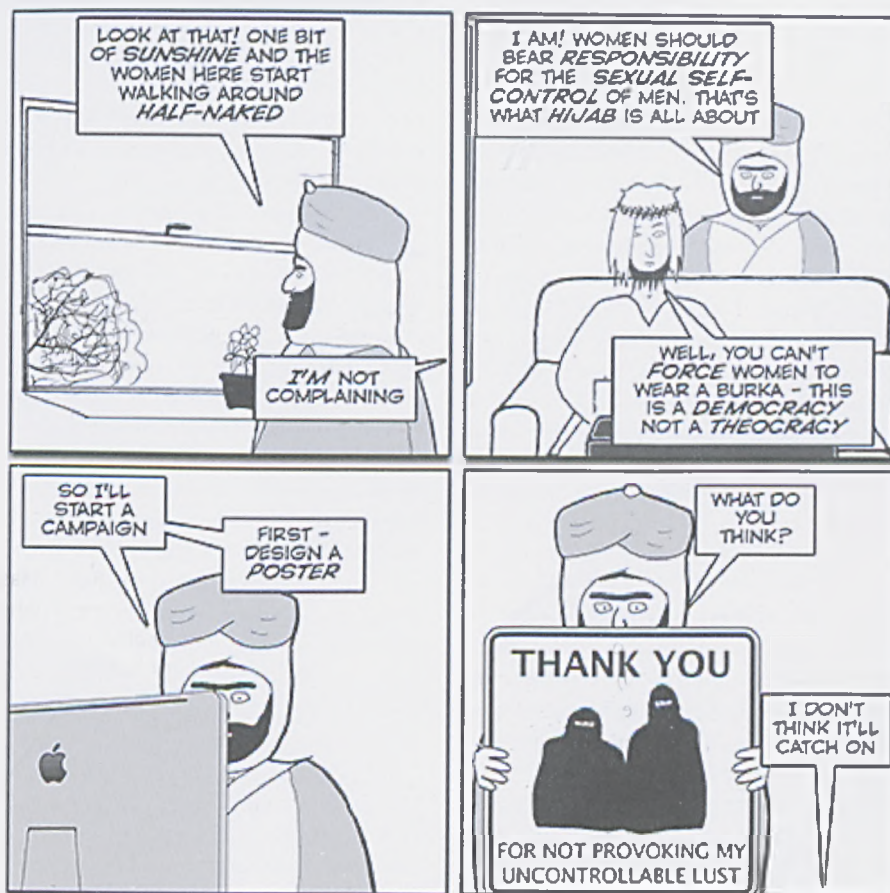
Denis Cobell
London



Barbara Smoker pictured laying a white carnation at the memorial in May 2013.

Photo Luis R

JESUS & MO



Catholic bishops removed from the Dominican Republic and Peru after child abuse allegations



Archbishop Josef Wesolowski, left, and auxiliary bishop Gambino Miranda were removed from their posts last month

AMIDST “rumours” that Archbishop Josef Wesolowski had been abusing youngsters, the Catholic Church has speedily removed their nuncio from the Dominican Republic early last month and Vatican spokesman, the Rev Federico Lombardi, confirmed that that Church was conducting an investigation. But he declined to provide any details about the accusations against the Polish-born prelate.

Later in the month, the Vatican was compelled to remove an auxiliary bishop from his post in a Peruvian province because of allegations that he sexually abused children. Luis Bambaren, the former President of Peru’s bishops’ conference and bishop emeritus of Chimbote, told local media that Gabino Miranda was dismissed as auxiliary bishop in the dioceses of Ayacucho, a poor Andean region in southern Peru, after he was accused of having sexual relations with minors.

He said the dismissal was in line with Pope Francis’s new “zero tolerance” policy towards sexually abusive priests, Bambaren said on RPP radio. “Those are very serious crimes, especially when it has to do with a bishop.”

A Church official confirmed to Reuters that Miranda, 53, had resigned from Peru’s bishops’ conference but declined to say why. The Attorney General’s office said that it was investigating Miranda and would announce actions soon.

Reuters was not able to reach Miranda for comment, but conservative Catholic group Opus Dei said that Miranda has denied the abuse allegations. The group said that while

Miranda had received “spiritual assistance” from an organisation closely linked to Opus Dei – the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross – Miranda is not a member of Opus Dei.

Shortly after becoming Pope in March, Francis directed the Vatican to act quickly when clergymen are suspected of sexually abusing children, and vowed to punish paedophiles in the Church.

Meanwhile, authorities in the Dominican Republic said they are investigating allegations of child sex abuse against the papal envoy to the Caribbean country, Archbishop Josef Wesolowski.

Attorney General Francisco Dominguez Brito was careful to note that his office was aware only of “rumours” about the papal nuncio and has not received any accusations.

A nuncio is the pope’s ambassador to a country and such an abrupt removal is rare.

The Attorney General told reporters at a news conference that the investigation was in its initial stages and largely in response to media reports of allegations of sexual misconduct by Wesolowski as well as a friend and fellow priest. He said that he had designated a senior official to lead the investigation and coordinate with the Vatican. He said: “We will not allow anyone to use the Catholic Church or other religious institutions as a shield to commit illegal acts, especially against children.”

Wesolowski’s sudden departure from the Dominican Republic had been the cause of feverish speculation in local media. Dominican television network NCDN, citing a statement from the director of a community

group, reported that Wesolowski had slept in the same room as several altar boys at his beach house.

Shortly before his removal, several residents of the mountain town of Juncalito made allegations of sexual abuse against the Rev Alberto Gil Wojciech, also a Polish priest and a friend of Wesolowski. The community leader, Pedro Espinal, told reporters that Wojciech took altar boys to the home of Wesolowski.

Wojciech was in Poland on vacation when the allegations surfaced and has not returned to the Dominican Republic.

The fact that the Vatican took such a significant move as to recall him and relieve Wesolowski of his duties indicated that the Vatican, at least, found there was enough weight to the rumours to warrant further investigation.

The whereabouts of the 65-year-old Wesolowski were unknown at the time of us going to press.

Pope Ratzinger had put Wesolowski in the post in 2008. He had previously served as papal nuncio in Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and before that, Bolivia. He was ordained a priest in 1972 and entered into the Vatican’s diplomatic service in 1980, serving in Vatican embassies in Africa, Costa Rica, Japan, Switzerland, India and Denmark, the Catholic news agency Zenit reported when he was named Dominican nuncio in 2008. In addition to being the Vatican’s ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Wesolowski was also apostolic delegate to Puerto Rico.