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Abuse report in Australia has harsh words for Catholic George Cardinal Pell



4 Catholic cruelty:
New docu-drama focuses on the treatment meted out by nuns to a 'fallen' teen



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Faith Minister warns that persecution will drive Christianity to extinction

But Baroness Sayeeda Warsi avoids stating that the greatest threat to Christians is posed by Muslims and not by secularists

Central to Lady Warsi's speech last month at a "Faith in Politics" conference at the University of Cambridge Churchill Archives was the suggestion that Christians in the UK were being persecuted by aggressive secularists, and that her job was to put religion back where it belonged: at the heart of Government.

Warsi claimed that 78 per cent of the country "profess a religion", and that during the previous Labour governments "faith was being sidelined, even dismissed". This claim, said National Secular Society President Terry Sanderson "is based on the oft-quoted comment by Alistair Campbell that Tony Blair's government didn't 'do God'. But to claim that Tony Blair or Gordon Brown were 'anti-religious' is manifestly untrue."

He added that Campbell was saying that the Government was secular, not anti-religious – "which is what Warsi would have you believe. She now says that the Coalition is 'Giving religion a voice at the top table. Not a privileged position, but an equal informer of the debate'. This is further proof, as one commentator put it, that the Coalition is the most pro-faith government in the West'."

Warsi – a Muslim who has never won an election but was appointed Senior Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Minister for Faith and Communities last year – is correct in saying that Christians are being persecuted – not by militant atheists in the UK or anywhere in the West, but in *Muslim* countries.

Not surprisingly, she could not bring herself to come straight out



Lady Warsi pictured with Emitus Pope Ratzinger (Photo Parsons Media)

with this inconvenient truth when she was interviewed this morning on the BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme in mid-November. She said: "I'm concerned that the birthplace of Christianity, the parts of the world where Christianity first spread, is now seeing large sections of the Christian community leaving and those that are remaining feeling persecuted."

She added: "There are huge advantages to having pluralistic societies – everything from the economy to the way people develop educationally, and therefore we all have an interest in making sure that Christian communities do continue

to feel that they belong and are not persecuted in the places where this religion was born.

"One in 10 Christians live in a minority situation and large numbers of those who live in a minority situation around the world are persecuted.

In some cases, Christians are targeted for "collective punishment" by majority groups in retaliation for what they perceive as the injustices committed by Western powers, said Lady Warsi.

"Tragically, what's happening is they are being seen as newcomers, being portrayed as an 'other' within that society, even though they have existed there for many, many centuries. What we are seeing, sadly, is a sense of collective punishment meted out by local groups – sometimes states, sometimes extremists. They are seen as legitimate targets for what they perceive as actions of their co-religionists. This concept of collective punishment and them being seen as agents of

(Continued on p6)

Split the difference?

OPHELIA BENSON EXPLAINS WHY SHE DECLINES INVITATIONS TO CALL HERSELF 'AN AGNOSTIC ATHEIST'

Compromise is sometimes a good thing, but not always. If a stranger attacks you on the street you don't want bystanders urging both of you to compromise. If Hitler had offered to compromise in 1944, what could the Allies have agreed to? A promise to kill only *half* the Jews in Europe?

It isn't always the case that the truth lies somewhere in the middle, but it's a very popular bromide all the same. Journalism in particular notoriously likes to put vaccination and anti-vax quackery on the same footing, along with science and creationism, climate change and denialism, and similar issues on which there is "controversy" but by no means a balance of informed opinion.

There's also a version of this fake symmetry in atheism and skepticism, which starts with the incomplete truth that theists and atheists alike cannot know that "God" exists or doesn't exist. Francis Spufford, who wrote the book *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*, offered a version of this dodge in August 2012 on the website of the Rationalist Association.

The article, titled "Dear Atheists...", begins with the usual false equivalency.

Allow me to annoy you with the prospect of mutual respect between believers and atheists. The basis for it would be simple: that on both sides, we hold to positions for which by definition there cannot be any evidence. We believe there is a God. You believe there isn't one. Meanwhile, nobody knows, nobody can know, whether He exists or not, it not being a matter susceptible to proof or disproof. The most science can do is to demonstrate that God is not necessary as a physical explanation for anything, which is very much not the same thing as demonstrating that He isn't there. So the natural, neutral, temperate position here would be agnosticism: a calm, indifferent not-knowing.

No, it wouldn't. The reason for that is that the people who think they do know there is a god, along with many who don't quite think that but think they ought to, have a strong tendency to think they also know what that god's morality is, and that they should impose it on all of us.

So calm, indifferent not-knowing is right



Francis Spufford was quoted in the Guardian last year as saying that so many of the secular alternatives to Christianity only work because they 'depend on some tacky fantasy about ourselves'.

out, until the time when people universally realize that they can't force the putative rules of a putative supernatural being on other people.

But even setting that aside, Spufford's claim is frankly bullshit. He gives us a bogus symmetry and then tells us we should be calm and indifferent either way. (If he were all that indifferent himself he wouldn't have written this article, let alone a whole book.)

The symmetry is artificial and deceptive. It's not the case that there is nothing to choose between the two, and *knowing* isn't the only relevant verb – there is also thinking, believing, suspecting, reasoning, and the like. Atheists don't *know* there is not "a god" but we certainly do have an educated guess on the subject, and that educated guess is that there isn't one.

That's not just some random choice between flavors or arbitrary numbers, it's an opinion we have for reasons. The quality of our reasons for thinking there is not "a God" is better than the quality of theists' reasons for thinking there is one. That fact is far more relevant to which opinion we should choose than is the fact that nobody knows for certain that there is not "a God".

That's why I decline invitations to call myself an agnostic atheist. I don't feel agnostic about it. I take the "agnostic" in that phrase to mean having no opinion at all in either direction, and that's not remotely what my opinion about the existence of a god is like. I have quite a thick, detailed, reasons-studded opinion on the subject, which bears no resemblance to an indifferent shrug.

One of the many reasons I have is present in Spufford's claim itself. "God" is both specific and vague, sometimes in the same

sentence, so how can it even make sense to talk about knowing such a contradictory whatever exists? Spufford claims that nobody knows, yet at the same time he knows enough himself to call "God" "God" and also "He". Which "God" is it that atheists and theists both should indifferently have no clue about? The one that is omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent? The one that melts and shape-shifts with every paragraph in Karen Armstrong's writing? The benevolent liberal of the Unitarians? The predestinationist fiend of the Calvinists? The raging "fag-hater" of the Westboro Baptists? The ground of all being?

There are plenty of good reasons for rejecting this all-or-nothing take on the god question – this claim that there is either knowing or not knowing, and nothing else. One of them is that we can trace the recorded history of claims about God, and when we do we find that they originate with people who knew much, much less about the world and nature and causality than modern humans do. That right there, all by itself, is an excellent reason to think that "God" was a story told by humans who lacked knowledge and that therefore there's a good chance that the story they told had some factual errors.

In much the same way we think that Homer told terrific stories but that the character of Athena in the *Odyssey* for example is a bit of magic realism, not an accurate claim about a superhuman god figure. We're not agnostic about Athena, and we have good reasons to think that "God" originated as a character in a story just like Athena. We have good reasons to think that God didn't somehow become more real over time as humans developed some sophisticated ways of talking about God. We have good reasons to think that that's not how ontology works.

So, no. I don't consider God a 50/50 proposition and I'm not about to compromise on it.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

Scathing Australian report says Catholic Church should 'hang it's head in shame' over clerical child abuse

ALL Australian states are being urged to change laws that have so far prevented the Roman Catholic Church from being sued and to consider a compensation fund for victims of child sex abuse.

The Australian Lawyers Alliance (ALA), responding to a devastating report into clerical child abuse published last month by the Victorian parliament, said that all administrations should implement the Victorian inquiry's recommended reforms to make the Catholic Church immediately liable for child sex abuse.

The Church itself is calling for the establishment of a national compensation scheme, which it will partially fund, according to a report published in *The Australian* last month.

The Victorian report, tabled in mid-November made a number of recommendations, including a call to remove the barriers that prevent victims from suing the Catholic Church.

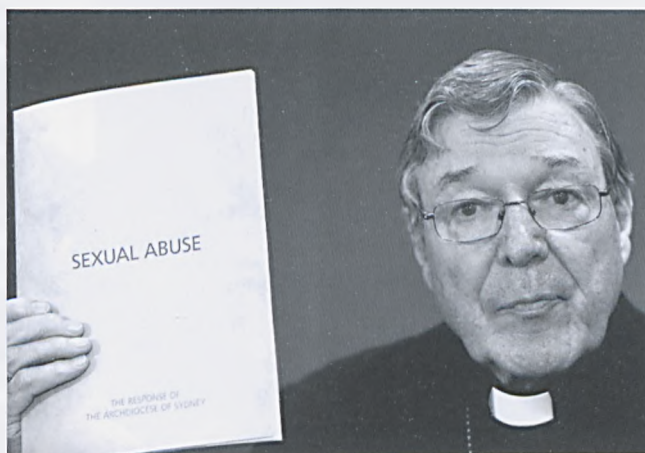
ALA spokesman Andrew Morrison said there had been enough delays. "The ALA calls upon state governments to urgently legislate in respect of the legal status of the Catholic Church to make it liable to apply its vast resources to compensate past and present victims".

The Catholic Church's Truth, Justice and Healing Council said all governments should start working on a national approach to compensation and justice.

Groups representing victims outside Victoria have praised the report, with a NSW group describing it as a "dream come true".

The day the report was tabled, Victoria's Premier Denis Napthine slammed the Catholic Church for its failure to protect the welfare of young children who had suffered at the hands of people they had every right to trust. He said: "The leaders of the Catholic Church should hang their heads in shame."

Napthine criticised the Catholic Church for decades of concealing abuse and not taking action against the perpetrators responsible. "The culture seemed to be putting the interests of the church and its priests ahead of the interests of children and victims, and that is totally and utterly wrong. I'm ashamed and embarrassed of the actions."



Australia's Cardinal Pell holds up his diocese's response to allegations of abuse

The Victorian government is due to respond to the report in six months. It will, however, commence drafting legislation immediately to implement the key recommendations, Napthine said:

"We have heard those voices and we will not let them down, we will act and act immediately to protect children in Victoria."

The report, entitled "Betrayal of Trust," was tabled by Victorian MP Georgie Crozier, who said that "children were betrayed by trusted figures in organisations of high standing and suffered unimaginable harm. Parents of these children experienced a betrayal beyond comprehension. And the community was betrayed by the failure of organisations to protect children in their care."

Opposition Leader Daniel Andrews said he would support the government to ensure the recommendations are acted upon swiftly.

"This is an opportunity for us to send a message in the strongest possible terms that we will not tolerate this sort of culture and cover up. This is a deeply sad chapter in our states history," he said.

One man who stands out as one of the most odious figures in this sorry affair is Cardinal George Pell, from the Catholic Archdiocese of Sydney. The inquiry excoriated him over his attempt to separate the Church as a whole from the actions of senior religious figures. It said he had "minimalised and trivialised" the issue.

The report said that following repeated questioning he agreed that some bishops and religious superiors had covered up the issue, but "that is quite different from the

whole Church ... the whole Church is not guilty of that."

The parliament's Family and Community Development Committee concluded Cardinal Pell's response revealed "a reluctance to acknowledge and accept responsibility for the Catholic Church's institutional failure to respond appropriately to allegations of criminal child abuse.

The committee also challenged Pell over a speech he gave in Ireland in 2011 in which he said a Supreme Court judge had advised him the sex abuse scandal "would bleed us to death" if not cleaned up. Its report said Pell – the archbishop of Melbourne from 1996 to 2001 – seemed to indicate the Church's central aim was to

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All correspondence to:
The Freethinker

Apt F, 31st Fl, Sol de Poniente II, C/
Presidente Adolfo Suarez 22, Benidorm 03502, Spain.

Email: barry@freethinker.co.uk
Tel: +34 603 823 243

Website: www.freethinker.co.uk

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Philomena accused of underplaying Catholic cruelty and insulting atheists

Report: BARRY DUKE

JUST ahead of its release date in the United States, the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) slapped an R-rating on *Philomena*, a docu-drama based on UK journalist Martin Sixsmith's 2009 book that exposed the horrors inflicted on unmarried mothers by the Catholic Church in Ireland.

They did not do so because the movie was as harrowing as the 2002 movie *The Magdalene Sisters*, an account of four "fallen" teenage girls who were sent to Ireland's Magdalene Asylums, but because it twice contained the word "fuck".

Philomena's producer Harvey Weinstein was outraged that his film was given an R rating, which meant that under-17s would have to be accompanied by an adult to watch it. He appealed the rating – and won. It was then given a PG-13. Responding to suggestions that *Philomena* is not a film targeted at children, he explained his appeal thus: "Our research shows us that, especially down south and in the Midwest, the PG-13 rating is very important for adults. There are two F-words in the movie – you're just allowed one F. The movie is the gentlest, most wonderful true story, filled with humour and joy."

This statement arouses suspicions that the movie is a whitewash. Sixsmith's book – *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* – documented unspeakable cruelty and greed. The author was quoted in *The Big Issue* in October as saying: "Behind the onscreen drama is a real-life story of heartlessness and hypocrisy that affected me deeply when I was writing the book on which the film is based. I've always considered myself a hard-bitten sort. Two decades as a journalist reporting wars and disasters left me inured to suffering. But the depth of inhumanity and cruelty I stumbled across made my jaw drop."

In the book he tells of how the Church wrenched a three-year-old toddler from his teenage mum in the 1950s, sold him to a family in the US, stonewalled all his attempts to be reunited with his birth mother, and drove him into a life of self-destruction. Only when the Church learned that Michael Hess, who became a successful Washington lawyer and a leading figure in the Republican Party was dying AIDS did they grant his last wish to be buried in a Catholic cemetery in Ireland – *in exchange for a substantial donation!*



Judy Dench and Steve Coogan in *Philomena*

This we know: Philomena Lee found it in her heart to forgive the nuns for the cruelty they inflicted on her. Fine. But if the movie seeks to downplay the cruelty of the nuns, then it would be an unacceptable betrayal of the many young women who fell victim to Catholic abuse during that era.

This is what US movie critic Alonso Duralde wrote on *The Wrap* website: "There's a particularly smug and tut-tutting billboard currently making the rounds which reads, 'To Our Atheist Friends: Thank God You're Wrong'. *Philomena* has a similar head-patting brand of dismissive arrogance, which is doubly offensive given its theme of forgiveness against those who have done you wrong.

If the movie wants to let the Catholic Church off the hook lightly for its crimes against unwed mothers in Ireland in the mid-20th century, that is its right, but why top that off with such a dismissive attitude toward non-believers?

He added: "Where *Philomena* gets problematic is in its insistence that the audience sees Philomena's take on the world as 'right' and Sixsmith's insider cynicism as 'wrong'. Can't they just be different? Does the film's pedestal for Philomena's righteousness have to smother Sixsmith's differing viewpoint? Is this secretly a Tyler Perry* movie?"

"Biopics about the living can be tricky – each one has its own minefield of keeping the subject happy – and *Philomena*, at least, never soft-pedals the injustices visited upon its central character. Had the film stopped short of beatifying her, however, we might

have a more satisfying drama."

Steve Coogan depicts Sixsmith, and Judi Dench plays Philomena Lee. Both have been nominated for best actor and actress categories for their performances in this year's Moët British Independent Film Awards. Coogan and co-writer Jeff Pope also get a best screenplay nomination.

It has to be said that two regular visitors to the *Freethinker* blog commend the movie. One wrote: "I've seen the film and it's not by any means a suck-up to the Catholic Church. We already have the harrowing *Magdalene Sisters*. *Philomena* is a more heart-warming, ordinary people centred movie. At the end, you can either go with Philomena's attitude of forgiveness, or Sixsmith's more bitter attitude of non-forgiveness. Personally, I'm with Sixsmith. What those bastards did to those innocent women was barbaric. But that shouldn't put people off watching a frequently amusing, well acted human drama.

Another wrote: "It's a fantastic movie. If you were a Catholic I think that you may well have your faith shaken as some scenes are real tear-jerkers – and there is nothing sympathetic about the portrayal of the assholes running the Magdalene laundry – they are portrayed exactly how they are; on the surface, a collection of kindly looking old folk in habits, yet inside, after a bit of investigation, they are bitter twisted, brain-washed and evil. I can't recommend the film highly enough, to be honest."

* Tyler Perry is a fundamentalist Christian film producer in Hollywood.

Opposition to birth control leads to more lives lost in natural disasters

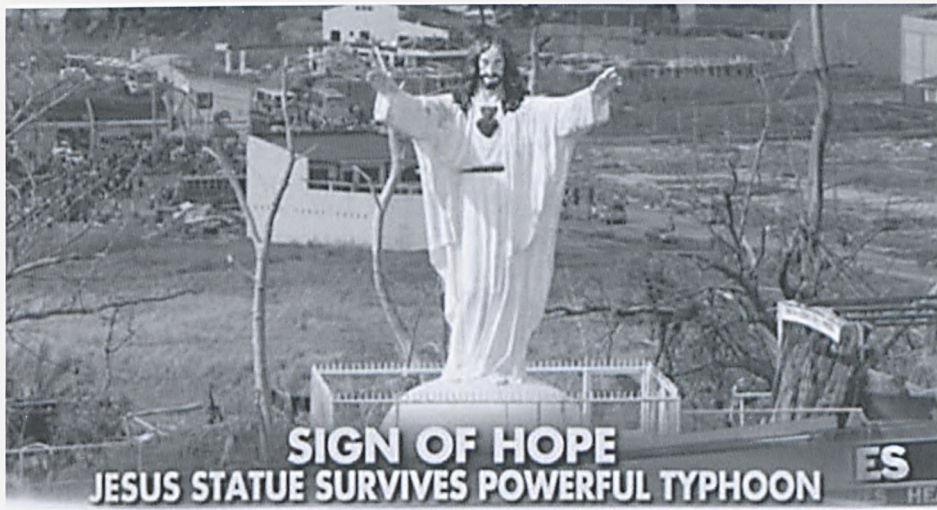
OUTRAGE was expressed last month by Catholic commentators over a report published in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan which killed thousands in the Philippines. Population Matters said: "Typhoon Haiyan is a natural phenomenon, though one perhaps exacerbated by climate change.

"However, the scale of suffering has been worsened enormously by the five-fold increase in the population of the Philippines since 1950, from less than 19 million then to almost 100 million today."

The organisation added: "Pressure on space and resources means people are more likely to live in areas vulnerable to storms, such as coastal and low lying areas, where land is cheaper and where they can access fish stocks. Poverty, to which population growth contributes significantly, means that people cannot afford the sturdy dwellings which can withstand extreme weather events. The sheer numbers of people mean that more suffer when storms do strike and that recovery efforts are that much more difficult.

"The average birth rate in the Philippines, though falling, is still around three per woman. While family planning is now legal, decades of rearguard action by the conservative local Catholic hierarchy means that access and use is limited. Only one third of married women of childbearing age are using a modern method.

"If we are to limit the impact of future dis-



More than 3,600 lives were lost in the Philippines, yet Fox News and other media in the US felt obliged to also report on the 'miracle' of the survival of a Jesus statue

asters, we must help vulnerable communities to manage their family size. That means supporting initiatives such as the FP2020 initiative that mobilizes global policy, financing, commodity, and service delivery commitments to support the rights of an additional 120 million women and girls in the world's poorest countries to use contraceptive information, services and supplies, without coercion or discrimination, by 2020.

"It also means integrating sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equity, together with small family messaging,

in the planned Sustainable Development Goals." An outraged deacon Nick Connolly on the Protect the Pope blog responded by saying: "No doubt International Planned Parenthood and other EU, USA funded culture of death peddlers will be swamping the Philippines with condoms and providing abortions like carrion crows feasting on a battle-field. In the face of disaster and suffering the answer of the pro-abortion and pro-contraception lobby is to see an opportunity to inflict more death and destruction on vulnerable people."

Victoria's scathing report into Catholic clerical abuse

safeguard its own interests. "It is noteworthy that this description of objectives contains no acknowledgement of the terrible suffering of victims."

Accompanying the questions raised over Pell is a claim in the report that Catholic clergy in Australia are responsible for *six times more* child sexual abuse than all the other churches combined. Professor Patrick Parkinson of the University of Sydney and a former consultant on the church's Towards Healing protocol provided compelling research to the inquiry. He said: "The levels of abuse in the Catholic Church are strikingly out of proportion with any other church, and that is the reality."

The committee also rejected evidence of other church leaders that awareness of sexual abuse was "slow to percolate through society and the church. Rather than being instrumental in exposing the issue and the extent of the problem, the Catholic Church in Victoria minimalised and trivialised the problem".

The cross-party inquiry by MPs from both houses of the Victorian parliament was set up last year by then-premier Ted Baillieu. It received 578 submissions and held 162 hearings. It referred 135 fresh claims of abuse to the police.

The report recommends that priests and other religious leaders face imprisonment if they fail to report or if they conceal criminal child abuse; or if they knowingly put a child at risk of abuse or fail to remove children to safety. Even more radical are recommendations that would open the courts to victims of abuse by clergy.

All faiths would be exposed by legal changes that gave victims more time to take action and clarified the legal responsibility to protect children from offenders. But the particular legal protection now enjoyed by the Catholic Church may be swept away if the Victorian government accepts the recommendation that the Church – like other churches – becomes a legal entity under Australian law. Crozier told the Legislative Council that continuing benefits to the Church should depend on such a change being accepted. "We propose that organisations receiving tax exemptions or funding from the Victorian government should be incorporated and adequately insured."

Archbishop Denis Hart welcomed the report. He said: "The Catholic Church in Victoria supports the inquiry's key recommendations. The report is rightly called "Betrayal of Trust". I have spoken before about the betrayal and the irreparable damage it has caused. It is the worst betrayal of trust in my lifetime in the Catholic Church."

Warsi's 'self-serving' speech in Camb

the West or agents of regimes is wrong. We need to speak out and raise this with the countries where this is happening.

Warsi said she had already had "very frank conversations" with ministers in Pakistan, telling them that senior politicians have a "duty" to speak out against persecution and set a standard for tolerance.

"Of course there have been moments when religious communities have been in conflict, but there have also been great moments of co-existence between faiths. There isn't an intrinsic clash between different faiths," she said, adding: "Politicians need to set the standard. There was some interesting research in the US which said that the way in which a minority community is treated after an extremist incident is very much dependent on the tone that politicians set. Politicians do have a responsibility to set the tone, to mark out legal parameters as to what will and will not be tolerated."

Asked whether Lady Warsi's warning of the possible extinction of some Christian communities was correct, the leader of Catholics in England and Wales, Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols, told the *Today* programme: "I think in some parts of the Middle East that is probably true. There are real challenges for Christians in this part of the world to support and get alongside them and also for politicians to understand that the presence of Christians is a great mediating factor, often for example between different segments of Islam."

"It's a mix that has lasted for a thousand years and no Western government should promote a course of action in the Middle East which would end with a new government which was intolerant to its historical neighbours and colleagues within the territory."

After her speech in Cambridge, Sanderson penned a scathing attack on Warsi, saying that "the Coalition's 'Minister for Faith' is no friend of the National Secular Society. Why should she be? Her role is the very antithesis of secularism".

He added: "For a government minister whose brief is to promote religion in politics, she does not seem to understand much about secularism. Or if she does, then she is actively misrepresenting it. She tries to give the impression that secularists in some way seek to deny the right of religious people to express their faith and that there is some kind of repressive agenda in secularism. There is not."

"Does she not know that the American constitution is secular? Is the US Government repressing religion? Or has secularism protected America from the sectarian warfare and bloodshed that has plagued Europe for millennia?"

"In her anxiety to promote the idea that religion and government belong together, Warsi makes statements without factual basis, distorts statistics and edits out inconvenient truths."

"Her latest masterwork was a speech full of

divisive rhetoric. Let's have a look at some of what she says: 'You only have to look around this building to see the evidence. Winston Churchill's letters, speeches and papers make repeated references to faith'.

"This is true, but they were not always complimentary."

Warsi said: "Churchill may have had some interesting things to say about Islam. Personally, I think Churchill's own removal of his passage on Islam from *The River War* shows that he revised and contextualised some of these views. After all, this was a man who argued for 'a spirit of religious toleration'."

Sanderson pointed out: "Of course, Churchill wrote in other books about the

What Churchill wrote

THIS is the extract from Winston Churchill's *The River War* on Mohammedanism lays on its votaries! Besides the fanatical fanaticism in a dog, there is this fearful fatalistic apathy.

"The effects are apparent in many countries, in the impious methods of commerce and insecurity of property or life. A degraded sensualism deprives this life of its grandeur and sanctity. The fact that in Mohammedan law every woman is property, either as a child, a wife, or a concubine, must delude of Islam has ceased to be a great power among men."

"Individual Moslems may show splendid qualities, but the social development of those who follow it. No stranger being moribund, Mohammedanism is a militant and proselytising force. In Central Africa, raising fearless warriors at every step, and the strong arms of science, the science against which it modern Europe might fall, as fell the civilization of ancient

Baroness idolises Thatcher, and contemptuously dis

AFTER saying of Churchill that "for him, religion was of the utmost importance to British society", Warsi turned her sycophancy to Baroness Thatcher, "our greatest peacetime Prime Minister" and "a woman whose own faith was far from tepid".

She said: "Under this roof are the carefully-annotated catechism of the young Margaret Roberts. And school exercise books, with her father's sermon's scrawled in the back. All reminding us that this leader, whom we so sadly lost this year wasn't just a grocer's daughter; she was a minister's daughter."

"Someone who believed that faith had a firm place in politics. From her speeches 'I Believe' to her so-called 'Sermon on the Mound', this sentiment was hammered home. In the latter she

took issue with the phrase 'Christianity is about spiritual redemption, not social reform'. For her, there was no separation between the two. There was, she thought, an undeniable role for faith in society."

She then claimed that the "Conservative Party has always put faith at the heart of policy making. Religion runs through our history and through our veins. So today I want to argue that, in government, even in a Coalition government, we are staying true to those roots". And she added: "We didn't just get behind faith schools, we created more. And of our flagship free schools, one in four are faith-based: Sikh, Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Christian, Muslim and Hindu. Our approach isn't just about enabling people to practice their faith.

It's about allowing people to act upon their faith. To provide public services, to undertake social action, to enhance communities. Not being suspicious of their motives, or fearing that they will be proselytising, but understanding that charity virtue, and helping others are key components of religion. And that, more often than not, people who do God do good.

"I know that Mrs Thatcher would have approved of devolving power to faith communities. There was nobody clearer on society's duties to its fellow man, and the shortcomings of the state."

She concluded: "So I hope I have been able to demonstrate that we are staying true to our roots. Putting faith in its rightful place - at the heart of British politics. Of course there are those

Cambridge attacked by NSS President

evils of 'Mohammedanism' which he didn't retract. Some of the things he wrote would, these days, get him locked up. That Baroness Warsi can put Churchill up as an exemplar of religious tolerance is a measure of her delusion. Or maybe her dishonesty."

He added: "Churchill was convinced that Christianity was the true 'religion of peace' and, as he wrote in *The Story of the Malakand Field Force*: 'In each case civilisation is confronted with militant Mahommedanism. The forces of progress clash with those of reaction. The religion of blood and war is face to face with that of peace. Luckily the religion of peace is usually the better armed.'"

ll wrote about Islam

's *The Fiver War*: "How dreadful are the curses which Mohammed fanatical frenzy, which is as dangerous in a man as hydrophobia,

ies, improvident habits, slovenly systems of agriculture, sluggishness of property exist wherever the followers of the Prophet rule life of its grace and refinement, the next of its dignity and every woman must belong to some man as his absolute property, must delay the final extinction of slavery until the faithing mer.

l qualities, but the influence of the religion paralyzes the No stronger retrograde force exists in the world. Far from tantanc proselytizing faith. It has already spread throughout very stup, and were it not that Christianity is sheltered in ist which it (Islam) has vainly struggled, the civilization of tion of ancient Rome."

y dismisses the NSS

who disagree. Who describe faith leaders and politicians as a 'gruesome combination'. Who talk about curbing my 'theocratic ambitions'. Who say that the country should brace itself for the pro-religion Conservatives' return to power.

"But that's enough air time for the National Secular Society. What really matters is that we support people in their right to believe. That we mobilise those who want to do good deeds motivated by the faith. And that we protect people from discrimination, bigotry and intolerance. That is our stance on the place of faith in politics.

"I know Churchill would have welcomed it. I know Mrs Thatcher would have championed it. And that is why we, as a party, and I, as a politician, are committed to it."

With regard to Warsi's determination to have religion better represented in politics. Sanderson said: "We don't mind the Government being 'pro-faith' (but not one particular faith) but we care very much that religion is an 'equal informer' at the top table. We know what that leads to.

"Baroness Warsi, however, seems able to edit from her memory the sour and bloody history of this country during periods when religion and government were as one.

"She makes the bland claim that 'people who do religion, do good'.

"Sometimes they do. But, as Andy McSmith points out in the *Independent* there are plenty that don't."

McSmith observed: "Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda and the perpetrators of the 11 Sep-

tember atrocities all claimed in their different ways to be doing God's work.

"When Bloody Mary had Protestants burned alive, or Oliver Cromwell drowned Ireland in Catholic blood, they, too, were 'doing God'."

Sanderson concluded: "The religious privilege on which Baroness Warsi is so keen, undermines British democracy. Even though no-one ever elected her, Lady Warsi claims to speak for the nation when she says we need more religion in schools and more public services handed over to religious groups to run.

"Perhaps if she wants to keep her seat in Government she should stand at the ballot box and ask the electorate what it wants for the country, rather than relying on God to tell her what it wants on their behalf."

Norway's 'moderate' Muslims support stoning of homosexuals

AFTER overwhelmingly agreeing by a show of hands that they were "normal" Sunni Muslims and not radicals or extremists, delegates to a "peace conference" in Norway earlier this year indicated their full support for the death penalty for homosexuals and adulterers.

This vote, said the Chairman of a Norwegian organisation Islam Net, Fahad Ullah Qureshi, was indicative of the fact that ALL Muslims hold the view that the Koran is correct when it prescribes stoning, not just radical preachers.

The show of hands was requested during a section of the conference that dealt with the manner in which the media reports the words of "Shaykhs who speak openly about the values of Islam." Qureshi, in a video his organisation posted on YouTube, said: "As soon as these preachers are invited to speak at an Islamic gathering the Islamophobic Western media starts murdering the character of that organisation and the invited speaker."

Qureshi, in an explanation posted under the video says: "The question these Islamophobic journalists need to reflect upon is; are these so called 'radical' views that they criticise endorsed only by these few individuals being invited around the globe, or does the common Muslims believe in them? If the common Muslims believe in these values that means that more or less all Muslims are radical and that Islam is a radical religion.

"Since this is not the case, as Islam is a peaceful religion and so are the masses of common Muslims, these Shaykhs cannot be radical. Rather it is Islamophobia from the ignorant Western media who is more concerned about making money by alienating Islam by presenting Muslims in this way."

He added: "These speakers would most likely be labelled as 'extremists' if the media were to write about the conference. The attendees were common Sunni Muslims. They did not consider themselves as radicals or extremists. They believed that segregation was the right thing to do; both men and women agreed upon this. They even supported stoning or whatever punishment Islam or prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) commanded for adultery or any other crime. They even believed that these practises should be implemented around the world.

"Now what does that tell us? Either all Muslims and Islam is radical, or the media is Islamophobic and racist in their presentation of Islam. Islam is not radical, nor is Muslims in general radical. That means that the media is the reason for the hatred against Muslims, which is spreading among the non-Muslims in Western countries."

Let it Be

A report from the frontlines of the American Billboard Wars by **DALE DEBACKSY**



On October 7, the creationist organization Answers in Genesis rolled out its first thundering, bi-coastal salvo in the ongoing conflict of attrition known as the Billboard Wars.

Well, not so much rolled out, as *dragged* out and then let flop limply onto the curb, if the towering artlessness of their final product is any indicator of the care with which they launched the thing.

The board, featured both at New York's Times Square and throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, reads simply, "To All of our Atheist Friends: Thank God You're Wrong!" smeared in a Twitter blue and white which is meant, presumably, to ap-

peal to The Youth.

It's one of those bits of sloganeering that comes to you in the middle of the night, which you feel is so brilliant you must write it down, and then, in the morning, appears as the utterly stale brain-flotsam that it is.

We've all had those moments, but most of us let go of our ill-advised notions with the coming light. Not so Ken Ham, President of the Answers in Genesis, who took this idea and decided to ride it proudly even as it plummeted him into apeish notoriety. Which might be brilliant – a less-asinine slogan might have blended into the advertising background, but something so ball-sily inept as "Thank God You're Wrong"

grabbed the attention of the country for a few whispering moments. It was so clearly the worst possible way to go about boosting Christianity that I think the media stopped in its tracks and asked, "Is that something put up by atheists to make theists look bad, maybe?" and then for some reason kept following the story with the same interest in freakishness that kept PT Barnum in business for so long.

Even the *New York Times* did a story on it, and Ken Ham mistook morbid train-wreck curiosity for success. Then our attention was turned elsewhere. Probably by a video of a kitten. And that is where it should have ended, but didn't. There is nothing the atheist community could possibly say that

would have spoken our point as eloquently as Ham inadvertently did. In that masterpiece of a four word call-to-arms he managed to encapsulate everything disturbing and grotesque at the heart of modern fundamentalism: its medieval view of what counts as established truth, its complete lack of human humor or aesthetic sense, its willingness to use massive financial muscle to pick on a group it outnumbers nine to one, and its operatically unappealing sense of self-pity in spite of its cultural dominance in this country.

All of that truly awful stuff is already there in those scant words, and *they*, for reasons known only to themselves, actually paid to display it publically!

After having put in such effort to torpedo themselves, all we had to do was sit back and watch the ship sink. But for some reason, it's written into the laws of our American mentality that the proper response to an obnoxious over-simplification is an even more obnoxious one.

And that's where the Wisconsin Freedom from Religion Foundation made their grand entrance, with a counter-billboard so

epically crass and stupid that it just makes you want to weep. It is in a Facebook blue and white instead of Twitter shades, features a massive picture of Julia Sweeney, and has as its text, "OMG! There is no God!"

This throws away everything that is good about atheism – its sense of nuanced argument and passion for free thought, and puts in its place a statement every bit as unsupported as the AiG's, but with the extra special addition of adding puerile texting abbreviations in place of anything, oh, clever.

It reeks of that 'The First Idea Somebody Came Up With' smell. Perhaps it's a meta-commentary. But that's not how it comes off. No, what it does is make atheists look just as bad as the Christians who had so thoughtfully gone to so much trouble to skewer themselves, throwing away a potentially beautiful moment of religious self-immolation in the name of getting that last snark in.

And American Atheists, whose Christmas billboard, "Keep the Merry, Dump the Myth" inspired Ham in the first place, is planning a board of its own in response, according to our otherwise very sensible and

often heroic president David Silverman. My deep hope is that the FFRF fiasco acts as the slap in the face we've all needed, that sometimes our own over-confident sense of superior cleverness gets us in fights that are in every way beneath our notice. We think of ourselves as So Very Smart, and can't resist getting that last word in, even rushing to do so ahead of our better judgment, and when we finally take to that sordid stage, "OMG! There is no God!" is the result.

But the lesson isn't to pull away from brevity. Just as the AiG was able to make four words speak a universe (granted, in the exact opposite direction of that intended), so can atheists, through tweets and ads and all of those other snatches of voice permitted us in the Age of the Short Attention Span, say some quite complex things that expose basic truths worth pondering.

We just need to be hyper-aware, and after this debacle hopefully we are, that the things we say aren't clever by virtue of we being the ones who say them, and that merely because a challenge is issued, it doesn't mean it's worthy of being answered.



The LA Times reported that Sweeney – an actress and former Saturday Night Live cast member was 'the latest salvo in an ideological turf war that's probably done more for the outdoor advertising industry than it has for either side in the debate. It appears on the very same digital display, at the bustling intersection of 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, which recently featured a very different message from the Christian organization Answers in Genesis.'

In announcing the signage, which premiered in October on the very same digital billboard that the Christian message was being presented, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor made her organisation's stance on theology perfectly clear. 'A fifth of the US population identifies as non-believers. We don't thank a non-existent god, we put faith in each other and human ingenuity. We believe in deeds, not creeds. We believe the only afterlife that ought to concern us is leaving our descendants a secure and pleasant future.'

Science can liberate us from

The British Institute of Posthuman Studies is a newly-founded think tank spearheaded by writers **MARCO VEGA** and **PETER BRIETBART** and creative (One Thing), **BIOPS** aims to get responsible thinking about the future of humankind. A fully animated introduction to Transhumanism, posted last month on YouTube, and a thought-provoking script, the film offers an informative, concise overview of human thought in just over 10 minutes. Below is the production's s



Peter Brietbart, left, and Marco Vega

Every aspect of our lives has been reshaped by technology. From the way we get around, to the way we seek information, and the way we communicate. It's easy to think that if only our technology advances enough, we'll finally be satisfied. But the fact is, we remain shackled by our primitive Darwinian brains.

Humanity, for whatever progress we have made, is the result of an unguided, natural, 3.8 billion year long experiment of chemistry. Evolution is the process that has made you what you are. But it is not farsseeing. It does not, and can not, consider the future, make decisions about where we ought to go, how we ought to be. Passing on genes is the only objective. But as thinking human beings, we care about far more than that.

Consciousness means that we have the capacity to experience the world, to reflect upon, and – most importantly – to shape it.

And so, what begins as Humanism – our most sympathetic understanding and treatment of human nature – becomes Transhumanism: the drive to fundamentally revolu-

tionise what it means to be human by way of technological advancements.

Changing human nature might be the most dangerous idea in all of human history, or perhaps the most liberating. Generally speaking, Transhumanist thought does two things: First, it considers current trends to see how future technologies will develop, and how they might affect us. Second, it calls for the use of current, and upcoming technology, to bring about beneficial societal change.

We'll examine three central areas of Transhumanist thought: "superlongevity", "superintelligence" and "superwellbeing" – dubbed "the three supers" – because of their extraordinary transformative potential.

So let's begin with a thought experiment to get your intuitions flowing: Consider this. An evil organisation creates an airborne virus. It infects you – and the entire human race. As a result, 100,000 people are dying every day. Within 30 years, one in seven – a billion people – will have died because of the virus. Now, how much money should world leaders put into research to develop

an antidote? How high on a list of global priorities would you rate this?

There is no denying the situation would be dire. Most people would demand immediate action. But, hey, this is just a thought experiment, right? Not quite. 100,000 people really do die everyday from diseases caused by ageing. So what explains this double standard? Are we are simply resigned to death by ageing?

Aubrey de Grey, an expert in research on ageing, argues that our priorities are fundamentally skewed, and that we must start thinking seriously about preventing the huge number of deaths due to ageing – the greatest cause of fatal diseases in the Western world. The goal of this strand of transhumanism is "superlongevity".

Today, we have the minds and the equipment to begin developing technologies to combat ageing. Unfortunately, we lack the will and the financial support to do so. Most of us are so accustomed to the idea of growing old that ageing seems like just a fact of life. If modern medicine is supposed to

From our inherited weaknesses

ink tank for discussing, critiquing and disseminating Transhumanist thought. creatively led by multimedia artist **MIHAI BADIC** (aka Many Artists Who Do of humanity into mainstream debate. Their first contribution to the field is a month on YouTube. Through a combination of light-hearted illustrations give an overview of one of the most exciting and potentially dangerous areas of fiction's script that can be seen online at <http://tinyurl.com/n45rhss>

keep us alive and healthy for as long as possible, then the anti-aging movement takes medicine to its logical conclusion. It's what happens when "as long as possible" means "as long as we want".

But what would a world without ageing look like? How would we manage the huge population growth? And who would own the technologies that make it possible? These are huge questions, but we only have time to raise them. We'll investigate them in depth, in future presentations.

Let's move onto the next area of Transhumanist thinking: Every year computers are getting more powerful. What used to fill up a room now fits in our pockets. More crucially, the time it takes for computer power to double is also getting shorter. At the outset of computing, the doubling process took 18 months, and this interval appears to be getting smaller. Plot this on a graph and it's not a straight line, but an exponential, upward curve.

We need only project into the future to see that there is a point at which the line is practically vertical: A moment in human history referred to as the technological singularity.

The futurist thinker Ray Kurzweil postulates that as these technologies develop, we will likely edit our bodies in order to integrate with computers more and more. This concept should be familiar; we're already in a symbiotic relationship with technology. You can send your thoughts at incredible speeds to recipients on the other side of the planet, find your precise location using satellites, and access the world's repository of recorded human knowledge with a device you carry with you at all times. And all of this was unthinkable 20 years ago.

Out of this predicted computer capability explosion, may eventually come Artificial Intelligence; a simulated consciousness in silicon. Given the rate at which an AI will be able to improve itself, it will quickly

become capable of thought with precision, speed and intelligence presently inconceivable to the human mind. If Kurzweil is right, and we end up integrating ourselves with technology, we could be in private contact with this AI whenever we choose. The result of this is that we effectively merge with this AI, and its abilities become our own. This would propel the human race into a period of super-intelligence.

But, perhaps, as some argue, no non-biological computer could ever become conscious. Or what if, as every other dystopian science fiction plot goes, this AI's goals differ from our own? And what does our increasing reliance on computers mean for our future?

Super-longevity and super-intelligence are all well and good, but only insofar as they make us happier, more fulfilled, more content.

Let's look at the last section, which deals with the issue of well-being. Imagine you're soon to be a parent. Your doctor informs you that, if you wanted, you could choose certain features of your child's biology. You could choose how genetically prone to depression they will be, their levels of anxiety, jealousy, anger, and even their pain threshold. Would you choose a high likelihood of chronic depression? An intolerably low pain threshold? How about panic attacks and anxiety? If you would choose to avoid these, you're already in favour of genetic engineering.

The last major branch of transhumanism, spearheaded by philosopher David Pearce, aims to investigate and phase out suffering.

He argues that ultimately, all our conscious states – our feelings, mood, and emotions – are all an expression of our brain chemistry. For Pearce, it is clear that natural selection hasn't designed us to be happy; it designed us to be good at surviving and passing on genes. A species that is permanently anxious and discontented will have a higher

motivation to watch out for predators, and take precautions for survival. But in today's world, these emotions are vicious.

Our biology has barely changed in 200,000 years, which means that whilst culture and society has arguably made progress, we are still those same aggressive, jealous, anxious savannah-dwelling hunter-gatherers. This is why Pearce argues that if we ever hope to increase the well-being of our species, we will have to edit our genes.

Minimising our suffering – and the suffering of those we care about – is a crucial part of what drives us. Hence, so called "abolitionists" argue that we start using modern technologies to do exactly that: minimise and eventually abolish suffering, ushering in an era of so-called superwell-being. At present, every child is a roll of the genetic dice. Pearce argues that the least we can do is load the dice in our favour, to create happier, healthier, longer-living humans.

But might our compassion, curiosity, and pursuit of knowledge become secondary to our hedonism. If we're all content – why visit the stars? And isn't suffering sometimes a good thing?

These are three key areas of Transhumanist thought, and we've only begun to scratch the surface. The "three supers" might radically change human history if – or when – they are realised.

One of the main issues facing Transhumanist ideals is that they are seen as far-fetched or perceived as just science fiction. But this is a big mistake. We are already transhuman – we're living longer, integrating more with technology, and emphasising quality of life.

We're in the process of redesigning what it is to be human, only the effects are still so subtle, and so slow, that it doesn't look like much. But these changes will come faster and faster, and it's only wise to be an active, informed participant in the next stage of human development.

We need better morals, not better labels

‘VICTOR ONRUST’ – who is based in the Netherlands – responds to JEFF T HALEY’S essay lengthy essay in the October edition of the *Freethinker*

Let’s start out with approving the fact that we should have a better label. But not before examining what should be the contents of this new label. If it is the same message that goes around with the old labels of “atheism”, “skepticism”, “brightness” or “the church of virus” it will meet with the same kind of success.

The problem with these labels is that morally they all stand for the same value-system that I would call some variant of liberal humanism. In my reading of his essay, Haley suggests nothing else. Now what is wrong with (liberal) humanism? Aren’t we all humans? The answer is that morally seen, we’re not. “We” are Christians, Muslims, humanists, socialists, libertarians, “primitives” or whatever.

It is an illusion that we are one of these because we have freely chosen to be so. We were raised in one, and if we are now not a part of it anymore, we had reasons to change. It is not impossible to change from one “we” to another, but in order to do so there are two important conditions to be met.

The first is that one’s present social environment of which one’s belief system is a part (or better: one’s belief-system makes you a part) is open enough to allow such a change. The second is that this other belief-system should offer you advantages over your present one.

For this, the fact that a belief system is “rationally more true” is, by far, not enough. There are circumstances that encourage a change, such as real life not being as it should be according to the Book. But in such a situation it remains to be seen whether a secular outlook is the more attractive alternative. Many people are going for some vague spirituality, with an extreme emphasis on individual well being.

Before we can go on we will have to critically examine the notion of a belief system. The strands of humanism assigned by the

terms “atheist” and others see themselves as holding a more or less absolute truth. Strange as it may seem, this claim is exactly the one that any belief-system makes. The only difference is that atheists (and socialists) claim their truth is based on scientific knowledge and that theists base their absolute truth on the existence of God. The atheist claim is too bold. Our belief systems, seen as a set of moral instructions, are the result of our culture, our history. They do not flow from raw nature itself but are man-made over a long period and, as such, are fallible.

The first conclusion is that any belief system is just that: a belief. It takes an act of faith to be with it. There is no objective guarantee in “science” that can make this an absolute claim. We can, however, claim that on the scale of scientific truth the humanist belief system scores better than any theist one. However, on the whole I would say the humanist belief system scores pretty weak in relation to the realities of this world.

The main problem is precisely the idea that “we are all humans” and “born equal”. This is in flagrant conflict to the reality of the situation in the world we occupy.

You can tell that without much science. You could say that it is a desirable goal to have equality. But apart from the fact the world could become a rather boring place if this were achieved, this goal could probably never be reached, and in any case it would not provide a good moral foundation for the here and now.

So one of the objectives of a good secular belief system would be that it copes with inequality as a fact of life and perhaps leads us to actions that in the long run bridges the gaps, or makes them smaller. This is a tricky business, because it could easily lead to the justification of Nazism, racism or slavery.

The second shortcoming in liberal humanism is its stress on individualism. It sees the matter of finding and upholding moral

standards as a private business, where everybody is responsible for his own interpretation of the “Golden Rule”. No serious movement can exist where members do not share some common mores and hold each other accountable for it.

These shortcomings do not only affect the position of atheists and the like but are the main cause of the deterioration of our democracy, the immorality in financial sectors and the increasing weakness of the West on the world stage.

Since about 2004 I have tried to tackle these problems and find a beginning of a solution to them. The last two years I have done so with a small number of others. I even have thought up a nice label and started a website. During my struggles with these problems I have come to the conclusion that it’s a bad idea to drop another label into some website, make some public noise and wait for the enthusiasts to flock to it. This kind of movement must rely on personal contact and slow growth, especially in the beginning. Websites and public media can only play a supporting role.

A second thought is that, in as far you make public statements these should be pseudonymously. The media have an insatiable appetite for the “person” which will mostly cloud the message or it will not transmit the message at all because the person is not sexy or interesting enough.

Second, pseudonymity should somewhat curb personal interests, from the leaders or writers as well as from the readers or followers. In some situations it might be better to do this in non-public communications as well. Third, it offers some protection against non-verbal opposition. Some ideas could be seen as controversial.

It is for this reason that I have chosen to pen this article under a pseudonym. “Onrust” is Dutch for unrest.

If you are seriously interested in sharing your views on this issue, you can mail me at victor.ft@xs4all.nl.

Save the Secular!

T R PERRI argues that, in the hands of non-believers, the world would be a safer and more rational place

The Parrot Cry “Save the Women and Children” during wars and crises is impractical and unreasonable. Apparently men are a less valuable social resource. Children to a certain age are helpless and also the future, so I agree adults should compensate for this through favoring them during crises. But I fail to see the practical value behind including women in the same category as children.

First, let’s assume this theory is actualized in a real-world setting. A post-war society of predominantly women and children does not guarantee a prolific, diverse future. For those of you who don’t know, babies are made after sperm and ovum merge, not two ovum. So either the Parrot Cry endorses pedophilia, or whoever thought of this paradigm really wasn’t thinking about the future, yet their own egos in the present. Thus, exclusively validating the death of men during crises jeopardizes the present and the future of the culture and species, whereas a random death-sample of both men and women simply jeopardizes the present yet preserves the future.

Second, men and women aren’t very different when it comes to fundamental capacities. Both can problem solve, communicate, learn, become leaders or followers, and are capable of making ethical choices. This whole zeitgeist of women being more emotional than men is a moot point, because as a pretty emotional man I can still make objective choices, despite entailing deliberate effort. Women may be smaller on average in stature, but that too isn’t a demarcator considering someone with a smaller frame and musculature who understands space will be able to manipulate it better than someone with a larger frame and musculature who is spatially inept. Doesn’t matter the gender. And I’ve met many women who are more forthright, confident, adaptable and responsible than men, despite those traits often described as “manly.” These are prejudicial limitations. Physical and emotional strengths and limitations are thus chosen.

Now, it’s often believed that women are more suited to take care of children because of their “motherly instincts” and emotional availability. Again, there are plenty of men



Marches for a secular Europe are an annual event in London and other big cities

more emotionally available than women, and plenty of women with not a care to raise or nurture a child. Hence, even the theory of saving women and children first is built upon the faulty premise of a natural bond between mother and child. I’m not going to dismiss a bond when it does exist, however I think it’s fair and just to point out that men can have a comparable bond.

As you see, this gender-based Parrot Cry is teeming with logical flaws and implications. Civilization should just drop it and lick its wounds.

I think if we are going to send a sample of the population to war, it’d be more effective to send the religious. First off, they’re paying for a life in heaven with a mortal life of sacrifice and service (read: proselytism) anyway, so what better way than to physically battle for their community? Plus, death to them – at least in theory – isn’t the end, but a reward. Third, there is no gender discrimination for who can believe in religion, despite the biases each particular religion has toward gender orientation and expression. So in war there would be no disproportionate elimination of either sex; it’d be random. That randomness would increase the probability of post-war human proliferation.

A more plausible and effective Parrot Cry during wartime would thus be “Save the Secular.”

For beginners, the secular choose reason over faith, enabling them to be more adaptable to new and pressing stimuli and envi-

ronments. Who wouldn’t want children (the future of humankind) to have those traits? Seculars also don’t work at forcefully converting believers into seculars, because their fundamental premises are individual freedom, capability of reason, and development of the present time frame.

They argue you can’t predict the future, but you can prepare yourself to deal with adversity through strengthening your mind and reasoning skills. Values are capable of being understood and changed. Again, who – other than sadistic people – wouldn’t want children to have those traits?

This isn’t an argument of religious genocide but an extension of premises that already exist within both secular and religious schools of thought. Thus, the Parrot Cry based in gender discrimination is insufficient at bearing valid, realistic post-war effects, however, the new Parrot Cry seems to produce what both seculars and religious believers already want in the first place.

T R Perri lives in Connecticut, US. He has a Master’s Degree in Creative Writing, and specialises “in the decay of civilisation via human-centrism, anti-intellectualism, and materialism”. More of his writing can be found on his blog: <http://www.trperri.com/>



points of view...

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

MORE ON JOHN GRAY'S *THE SILENCE OF ANIMALS*



IN A long and marvellous letter David Simmonds (*Points of View*, November) comments on David James' review of *The Silence of Animals* by James Gray (*Freethinker*, October).

Unfortunately I no longer have the October issue, as when I have read the *Freethinker* I deliberately leave it on the train for the benefit of other travellers. Nevertheless I'd like to add to the points Simmonds makes about the Enlightenment.

Simmonds rejects Gray's linkage of the Enlightenment and totalitarian ideologies. It's worth saying also that Gray's book is just one part of the current widespread denigration of the Enlightenment, which was actually far more diverse than is recognised by the common generalisations linking it with inevitable progress and intolerant rationalism.

This denigration matters for secularists because perhaps the most characteristic aspect of the Enlightenment was its rejection of the theocratic power that was common in Europe at that time. For secularists the Enlightenment represented a major step towards the kind of world we want to live in and for that reason, among others, we should be defending it.

I close with a quote from David Hume who once described religion as "a source, which has, from uniform Prescription, acquired a Right to impose Nonsense on all Nations and Ages... in all ages of the world, priests have been the enemy of liberty".

Michael Levin
London

AS DAVID Simmonds (*Points of View*, November) thinks that my review of John Gray's *The Silence of Animals* gives Gray "an easy ride", his complacency about the inevitability of progress needs shaking up.

Does he really believe that "more and more people have become accustomed to rational thinking"? In his defence of something he calls "Enlightenment values", he maintains that our "capacity for violence has receded". This is surely nonsense. Drones, nuclear and chemical weapons are not just computer toys, Mr Simmonds.

He naively cites South America and Africa as places where democracy has triumphed. Really? Think Angola, Somalia, Rwanda, Libya, Nigeria!

Read Kurt Weyland on why Latin America is becoming less democratic! Things go in cycles as John Gray wisely says. Mr Simmonds should read what Isaiah Berlin has to say about Historical Inevitability: "Our values – what we think good or bad, important or trivial, noble or contemptible – all these are conditioned by the place we occupy in the pattern, on the moving stair."

David James
London

MALALA ... AND VOLTAIRE

YOUR item in the November issue suggesting that a Nobel peace prize for Malala Yousafzai would have been a Good Thing ignores the politicising of the peace prize committee evident in the award of the prize to Henry Kissinger, Mother Teresa and Barack Obama (before he had done anything). Would Malala look good in this company?

David Simmonds' letter (*Points of View*, November) on David James' book review mentions Voltaire's "famous maxim – those can make you believe absurdities...".

This frequently used "quotation" is not found in any of my standard quotation reference books. The Internet has many quotation websites most of which do not give their sources but instead merely copy from each other. Eventually I found the following, of which the usual "quotation" is an extreme precis:

Formerly there were those who said: You believe things that are incomprehensible, inconsistent, impossible because we have commanded you to believe them; go then and do what is unjust because we command it. Such people show admirable reasoning. **Truly, whoever is able to make you absurd is able to make you unjust.** If the God-given understanding of your mind does not resist a demand to believe what is impossible, then you will not resist a demand to do wrong to that God-

given sense of justice in your heart. As soon as one faculty of your soul has been dominated, other faculties will follow as well. And from this derives all those crimes of religion which have overrun the world.

[Il y a eu des gens qui ont dit autrefois: Vous croyez des choses incompréhensibles, contradictoires, impossibles, parce que nous vous l'avons ordonné; faites donc des choses injustes parce que nous vous l'ordonnons. Ces gens-là raisonnaient à merveille. Certainement qui est en droit de vous rendre absurde est en droit de vous rendre injuste. Si vous n'opposez point aux ordres de croire l'impossible l'intelligence que Dieu a mise dans votre esprit, vous ne devez point opposer aux ordres de mal faire la justice que Dieu a mise dans votre cœur. Une faculté de votre âme étant une fois tyrannisée, toutes les autres facultés doivent l'être également. Et c'est là ce qui a produit tous les crimes religieux dont la terre a été inondée.] – Questions sur les miracles (1765)

Barry Thorpe
Cheadle

MALALA Yousafzai being lauded as a cause célèbre by Western media for having survived a murder attempt by the Taliban, her youth and sex creating an extra tug on our heartstrings, is not a necessary and sufficient reason in itself for a Nobel Peace Prize (*Freethinker*, November).

Its previous bestowal on Barack Obama shows the danger of awards prematurely given in order *pour encourager les autres*.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has had inspectors labouring in perilous conditions since 1997 in its quest to rid us of a deadly threat no matter in whose possession and deserve their recognition for withdrawing the sting from all parties.

That so many sections of Pakistani society have behaved despicably in their Stalinist denial of Malala's existence only serves to show that it is not oil she is pouring onto troubled waters.

If "courage and resilience" were the main criteria, not sustained efforts to bring peace, the Nobel committee would be overwhelmed by unsung suitable candidates.

I am not quite sure why the photograph

accompanying the article has the Taliban spokesperson, a joke on Islam if ever I saw one, flanked by Peter Sellers and Bob Marley.

Chris Oldman
Cheltenham

ATHEIST AID

THANKS for the timely and thought-provoking feature from Dale Debakcsy ("Giving without God", *Freethinker*, November, 2013). However, I think that atheists and secularists should take pride in the fact that the influence of secularism on people's well-being is far greater than anyone's charitable activities.

Theism's record regarding charity and social progress is quite atrocious. It was secular forces which challenged – and eventually eradicated – witch burning and the Spanish inquisition. Slavery was rendered historically and economically obsolete by the development of capitalism, which demanded a more secular approach to social policy. Contrary to Christians' hoary myth that Christianity was instrumental in the abolition of slavery, the church not only accepted slavery until the mid-nineteenth century but was itself a major slave owner.

A secular initiative, the 1944 Beveridge report did more to improve people's lives than any charity has ever done; and coming to the present day, social progress is taking place in spite of religion. The church remains misogynistic by refusing women the right to hold the office of bishop, and homophobic where it fights the right of gay people to marry. It is again only secular forces which can be relied upon to bring about reforms.

Jim Dymond
Aldershot

I WAS pleased to see the article by Dale Debakcsy smashing the atheists don't do charity myth in the November *Freethinker*.

Earlier this year the newly elected Archbishop Justin Welby went on record claiming that Christians contributed over 22 million hours of voluntary service every month. I questioned this and wrote to his Secretary for Public Affairs at Lambeth Palace asking for details of how this figure was calculated.

I received a courteous reply together with reams of statistics advising on the vast numbers of "good" Christians who contribute millions of hours and millions of pounds to charities. There was, however, no evidence to show how these figures could be justified.

I checked further with figures related to charities and establish that there are 24,000 charities registered with the Charities Commission engaged in religious activities.

The Commission also acknowledges that the total number of charities registered is 162,000. Thus it would appear that the

overwhelming majority of the voluntary community and charity sector is secular in nature. While the Christians are claiming that their fellow "good" Christians spend 22 million hours every month giving their time to charity, they make no mention of the number of non-believers who do the same. From the figures above it will be seen that Christian related charities are only about one seventh of the total number of registered charities.

Thus it would appear that vastly more time is likely to be given by non-believers than Christians or other believers because there are more of them. Non-believers, however, do not identify themselves as atheist volunteers, they just call themselves volunteers. It

is only Christians who want you to believe that volunteering is a virtue and they want to be known as Christian volunteers. Why should belief have anything to do with it?

It is Government policy to promote community relations which includes voluntary organisations. It would be helpful to cooperate with the Government in their endeavours, but clearly there is no merit in the churches trying to claim that only Christian organisations are morally acceptable to take on such activities.

I would like to see our leading secular organisations challenging church spokesmen when they make such claims.

Alan Stuart
Reading

'LOONY FEMINIST NONSENSE'

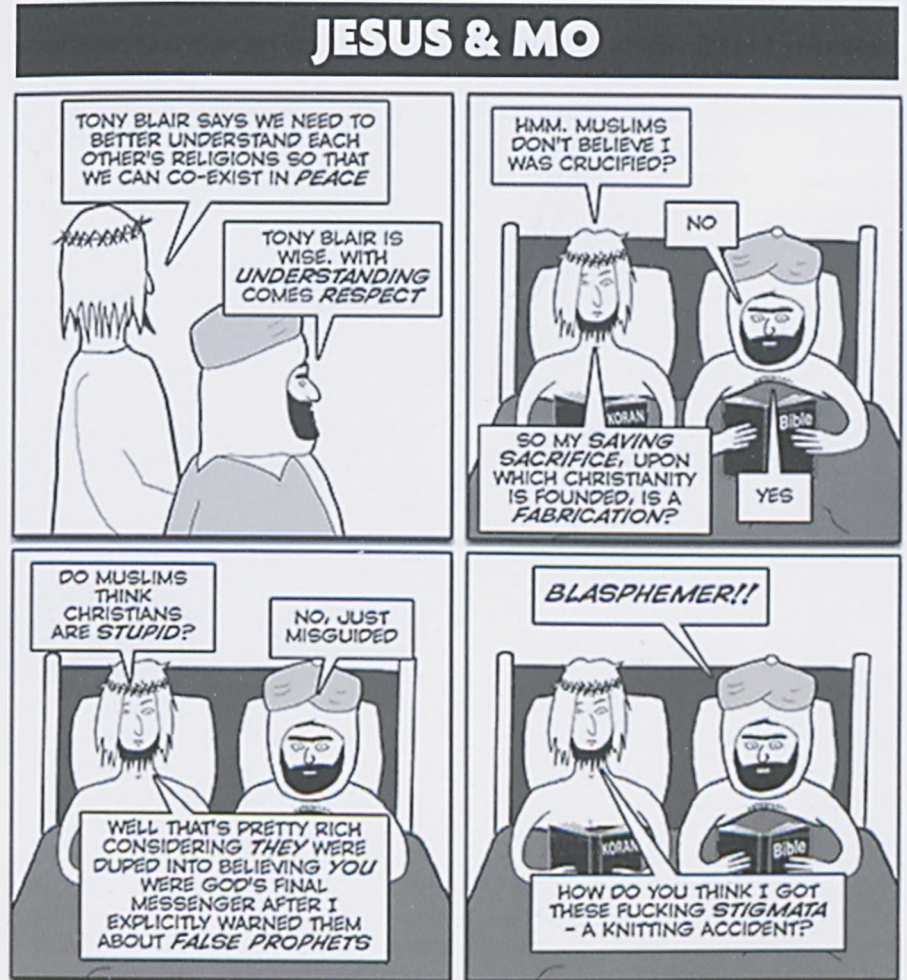
OPHELIA Benson's article in the October issue was an example of what *Private Eye* called "loony feminist nonsense." Colin McGinn seems to have been hounded from his job by humourless prudes.

I admire, at least, some of the people *he* does and generally those who have the guts to be "rebellious and contrary and healthily nonconformist".

The names Winston Churchill, Errol Flynn, Oliver Reed, Frank Sinatra and George Best come to mind – in the words of Flynn's daughter, they "did what [they] bloody well wanted to do."

It is time to tell various people that their being offended by something is not a reason to ban it; when it comes to humour, anything goes. Acceptable then is acceptable now and vice versa.

Mark Taha
London



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Young gay waiter discovers that Christianity brings out the very worst in people

Instead of tipping their waiter in a Kansas City Italian restaurant for his excellent service, a Christian couple left the 20-year-old an abusive note which condemned his “lifestyle choices” and called him a “fag”.

The waiter, who works at a branch of Carabba’s restaurant, had just finished serving the couple a few weeks back when he received their written message, which thanked him for his “excellent” service, but attacked his sexuality.

It read: “Thank you for your service, it was excellent. That being said, we cannot in good conscience tip you, for your homosexual lifestyle is an affront to GOD. Queers do not share in the wealth of GOD, and you will not share in ours. We hope you will see the tip your fag choices made you lose out on, and plan accordingly.”

It added: “It is never too late for GOD’S love, but none shall be spared for fags. May GOD have mercy on you.”

The waiter’s mother, who also works at the restaurant, said the couple were lucky she had not seen the message before they left. She fumed: “When this Mama Bear gets her hackles up, the claws come out.”

Friends of the waiter and customers took to social media to spread the word about the incident, and promised to go to the restaurant to show their solidarity.

The waiter responded by saying: “The offers to help pay me back are much appreciated, but not at all needed. I’d prefer to let my work ethic and my service do the talking, nothing else”.

Immediately after the incident, a steady stream of people entered the restaurant in support of the waiter.

The report was widely aired in the US media, and the *Consumerist* magazine ran this headline: “What Kind Of Jerk Refuses To Tip A Waiter Because He’s Gay?”

Willy Blackmore, food editor for the TakePart website, wrote: “Here are a few things not to take into account when calculating the tip you leave on a restaurant bill. Your tip should not be contingent on your server’s race. It should not be withheld,

if the attractive female server didn’t deign to flirt with you. It shouldn’t be a pitance because you just can’t afford to give anymore – that means you can’t afford the meal in the first place.

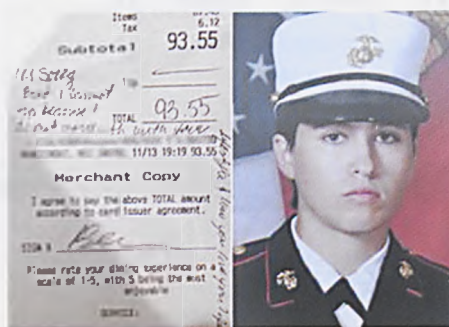
“You certainly should not bring your personal religious beliefs, contra your server’s sexuality, into consideration.”

He pointed out that the minimum wage in Kansas for tipped employees is \$2.13 per hour, the same as the federal minimum. For people working in the service industry, like restaurant servers, the assumption is that the 15 or 20 percent diners tack onto the bill will bump up their hourly take to something in the proximity of the non-tipped minimum wage – \$7.25 per hour in Kansas (also the federal minimum).

“So when you fill out the gratuity on a restaurant check, you’re engaging in a social compact – albeit a rather broken one, by most accounts – but the bottom line is, if you weren’t tipping, your meal would be more expensive.

“In other words, it’s not a space to make some moral crusade.”

As we were going to press a similar incident occurred – this time in New Jersey, at the Gallop Asian Bistro in Bridgewater.



When Dayna Morales, pictured above, introduced herself to a couple and their two children, the mother was allegedly shocked by Morales’ short hair, and said: “Oh I thought you were gonna say your name is Dan. You sure surprised us!”

At the end of the meal, Morales – a lesbian who served in the Marines for two years – was left with no tip on the \$93.55

bill. Instead, she found a note on the receipt, reading: “I’m sorry but I cannot tip because I don’t agree with your lifestyle & how you live your life.”

Unlike the Kansas incident, the New Jersey customers did not identify themselves as Christians, but most bloggers who reported this incident concluded that they were motivated by religious malice.

Morales reacted angrily by exposing the incident online, writing “I am THOROUGHLY offended, mad, pissed off and hurt that THIS is what her kids will grow up learning, and that I served in the Marines to keep ignorant people like them free.

“Sorry lady but I don’t agree with YOUR lifestyle and the way you’re raising your kids but you didn’t see me throwing that in your face and giving you shitty service. Keep your damn mouth shut and pray we never cross paths again.”

Facebook users offered their support to Morales in response to the post. One person wrote: “As a member of the heterosexual community, I beg your forgiveness for these ignorant people.” Another wrote: “I always tip 15 percent to 20 percent no matter who my server is, what my server does out side of the place is none of my business.”

Morales’ experience went viral, and she received an avalanche of messages and donations from around the globe. She said: “People have sent me tips from all over the world just to show support. I have had people from Germany to South Africa, Australia to the UK, San Diego, everywhere ... It’s great to see everybody’s support and I’m thankful for it, but it doesn’t excuse or change the fact that it actually did happen.”

She revealed she had received around \$2,000 by November 20. She insisted that she hadn’t gone public with the treatment she received for the money. “I never planned on this. I just wanted to vent. The purpose was to inform people it wasn’t OK.”

Now Morales wants to help others by giving a portion of the money to the Wounded Warrior Project to help injured servicemen and women.