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# the freethinker

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## Atheists face death sentences in 13 countries – all of them Islamic

Disturbing study released by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) also shows widespread discrimination against non-believers in other parts of the world

**A** detailed study issued last month by the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) showed that in 13 countries around the world, all of them Muslim, people who openly espouse atheism or reject the official state religion of Islam face execution under the law. And beyond the Islamic nations, even some of the West's apparently most democratic governments at best discriminate against citizens who have no belief in a god and at worst can jail them for offenses dubbed blasphemy, the report said. Five countries were cited as having laws that could lead to jail sentences for blasphemy: Iceland, Denmark, New Zealand, Poland and Germany.

The study, *The Freethought Report 2013*, was issued by IHEU, a global body uniting atheists, agnostics and other religious sceptics, to

mark United Nations' Human Rights Day on Tuesday, December 10.

"This report shows that the overwhelming majority of countries fail to respect the rights of atheists and freethinkers although they have signed U.N agreements to treat all citizens equally," said IHEU President Sonja Eggerickx.

The study covered all 192 member states in the world body and involved lawyers and human rights experts looking at statute books, court records and media accounts to establish the global situation.

An initial survey of 60 countries in 2012 showed just seven where death, often by public beheading, is the punishment for either blasphemy or apostasy – renouncing belief or switching to another

*(Continued on p6)*



Hundreds of thousands of Islamists rallied in Dhaka last year after staging a 'long march' to the Bangladeshi capital to demand the execution of atheist bloggers for allegedly defaming Islam.

# US Catholic bishops should be harshly penalised

OPHELIA BENSON REPORTS ON A LAWSUIT LAUNCHED ON BEHALF OF A WOMAN WHOSE LIFE WAS PUT AT RISK BY INHUMANE CATHOLIC DOGMA

**O**n December 2 the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Michigan announced that they had filed a lawsuit on behalf of a woman who had miscarried and had not received proper medical treatment, because the only hospital within her reach is a Catholic hospital which obeys rules handed down by bishops.

The rules are handed down in the Ethical and Religious Directives of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, which is available on the USCCB's website. (Pause for a moment to contemplate the marriage of modern technology with medieval authoritarian pseudo-ethical bullshit.) The relevant rule is number 45:

*45. Abortion (that is, the directly intended termination of pregnancy before viability or the directly intended destruction of a viable fetus) is never permitted. Every procedure whose sole immediate effect is the termination of pregnancy before viability is an abortion, which, in its moral context, includes the interval between conception and implantation of the embryo. Catholic health care institutions are not to provide abortion services, even based upon the principle of material cooperation. In this context, Catholic health care institutions need to be concerned about the danger of scandal in any association with abortion providers.*

When the bishops say never, they mean never. This includes "even when an abortion is needed to save the mother's life." It includes "even when an abortion is needed to save the mother's life and the fetus won't survive in any case." The bishops mean never. That's why the ACLU is suing them.

Now in case you're thinking "oh no they don't mean that, it's just that over-zealous hospital administrators have misunderstood them" – think again. They do mean that. The bishop of Phoenix (Arizona), Thomas Olmsted, made that very clear in November 2009. A pregnant woman at St Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix had been found to have pulmonary hypertension, a condition that is made worse, and possibly fatal, by pregnancy. After consulting with a nun who was a member of the hospital's ethics committee, doctors terminated the



Tamesha Means

pregnancy. Olmsted called this an abortion – *never permitted*, says the ERD – and excommunicated the nun. Over the next year he tried to force the hospital and its parent organization, Catholic Healthcare West, to undertake in writing never to perform such a termination again. On June 23, 2010, the USCCB issued a statement reiterating that this is their position.

Now consider what happened to Tamesha Means, the plaintiff on whose behalf the ACLU is suing the bishops.

She went to Mercy Health Partners, the only hospital in her county in Michigan, when her water broke at 18 weeks. To quote from the lawsuit itself:

*Because of the Directives, MHP did not inform Ms Means that, due to her condition, the fetus she was carrying had virtually no chance of surviving, and continuing her pregnancy would pose a serious risk to her health. Nor did MHP tell Ms. Means that the safest treatment option was to induce labor and terminate the pregnancy. MHP also did not tell Ms. Means that it would not terminate her pregnancy, even if necessary for her health, because it was prohibited from doing so by the Directives.*

The hospital simply sent her home. She returned the next day, bleeding and in severe pain from contractions. The hospital sent her home again. She returned *again*, for her third visit, still in pain and with signs of an infection. The hospital was in the process of sending her home untreated for the third time when she began to deliver.

Tamesha Means survived, so she had better luck than Savita Halappanavar did when she went to University Hospital Galway, in Ireland, last year. Savita too miscarried,

and UHG too failed to terminate the pregnancy, but Savita took nearly four days to deliver, so she died of the infection that resulted. Means survived, but she survived despite the hospital rather than thanks to it.

The ACLU suit is long overdue and, I hope, the beginning of the end of this outrageous setup, in which bishops order hospitals to let women die of miscarriages or pulmonary hypertension if abortion is the only cure, and some hospitals obey orders. The fact that this is the setup is a secret to most people; some will accuse you of lying when you tell them about it.

What Mercy Health Partners did to Tamesha Means came to light only because an educational researcher discovered at least five such cases at that one hospital.

The researcher brought the cases to the attention of MHP during a meeting with the Vice President of Mission Services, Joseph O'Meara. O'Meara's response? Quoting again from the lawsuit:

*Mr O'Meara explained to the public health educator that upon review of Plaintiff's chart by a MHP physician, MHP's decision not to induce labor was proper because Defendant USCCB's Directives prohibited MHP from inducing labor in that situation.*

There you have it. It's "proper" for a hospital to let a woman die of a miscarriage because the bishops say abortion is never permitted. It's "proper" to do this *without even informing the woman that that's what you're doing*. It's "proper" for Catholic hospitals to refuse to perform the standard of care, and to keep the patient herself (and of course her family and friends) in the dark on what is happening and why.

The ACLU has demanded a jury trial. Juries in the US are notorious for awarding enormous punitive damages when they get angry. I'm hoping the jury in this case awards Tamesha Means the bubble car, the golden pots and pans, the Vatican and all its bank accounts – *everything*.



OPHELIA BENSON  
Picking fights  
with God

# Hate preacher heaps praise on Muslim vigilantes jailed for violent attacks



Anjem Choudary, left, commended Jordan Horner aka Jamaal Uddin, centre, and Ricardo MacFarlane who were jailed for carrying out vigilante attacks on people in London's East End

FOLLOWING the jailing last month of three Islamic thugs who operated a violent "Muslim Patrol" in east London and posted videos of their activities on the Internet, firebrand preacher Anjem Choudary revealed that two of the vigilantes were "followers" of his, and that they should have been "commended" and not jailed.

The two referred to by Choudary in an *Evening Standard* report are Jordan Horner, 19, who changed his name to Jamaal Uddin after converting to Islam, and Ricardo MacFarlane, 26.

Choudary said the pair, who attacked non-Muslims, "deserve a pat on the back". He told the newspaper that they "could have done it differently" with "different styles and means", but added: "I did have a word with them afterwards and said there are certain things that can't be changed physically, but these guys should be patted on the back for some of the other work they have done.

"I don't condemn them at all. They are up-standing, upright members of the Muslim community. Their character is immaculate, they are fantastic individuals. People say much worse things on football terraces."

The vigilantes told one couple they could not hold hands because it was "a Muslim area" and said a young woman would face "hellfire" because of the way she dressed.

Choudary said the men regularly attended his lectures, adding: "Essentially, they didn't do anything wrong. They didn't harm anyone. What they did in essence, it's commendable. They are trying to address issues like drug abuse and prostitution."

The Old Bailey heard how Joshua Bilton and Anna Riddiford were shouted at through a megaphone for holding hands in Bethnal Green in December 2012.

Two weeks later five friends were told to stop drinking in the street because it was "Allah's land". During the same incident Horner threatened to stab the men saying "get the shank (knife) from the car," while another of the group shouted "kill the non-believers".

Old Bailey judge Rebecca Poulet jailed Horner/Uddin for 17 months after he admitted assault and using threatening words and behaviour. MacFarlane pleaded guilty to affray and got 12 months. A 23-year-old man who cannot be named for legal reasons, received a six-month sentence after pleading guilty to affray.

The judge told them: "Islam is a peaceful religion. This conduct was anything but."

The court had been told that Horner and the 23-year-old man drove alongside Bilton and Reddiford in Bethnal Green and yelled at them through a megaphone. Horner shouted: "Let go of each other's hands. This is a Muslim area!"

The couple initially believed it was a joke but the group repeated the warning until they let go of each other's hands. When they began holding hands again a few minutes later the car re-appeared and blocked their path until they let go.

Two weeks later, on January 6, 2013, Horner/Uddin and MacFarlane attacked a group of men drinking in the streets of Shoreditch.

They said that they were there to "enforce sharia law" in "Allah's land" and shouted: "Kill the non-believers." Horner then punched two of the group, hitting James Forward in the jaw and knocking out Patrick Kavanagh with a punch to the head.

A week later, Horner and the 23-year-old confronted another couple, Clare Coyle

and Robert Gray, walking in the street in Stepney. The 23-year-old accused Coyle of dressing inappropriately in a Muslim area and that she would be punished in "hellfire".

Horner filmed the incident on his mobile phone and called Clare Coyle a "slag". She told him: "This is Great Britain. I can dress how I wish."

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# Christian child-rearing book figured in the deaths of three US children

MOUNTING concern over *To Train Up a Child* – a Christian child-raising book that advocates whipping toddlers with branches and belts – has led to its removal from the shelves of British bookseller Foyles, and Waterstones, according to a BBC report last month, won't stock it.

Amazon, however, has shown no sign of yielding to growing pressure to stop stocking it. The company said in a statement: "This book has been widely debated in the media, and on Amazon, for many years, and anyone who wishes to express their views about this title is free to do so on its product page on our website."

Three separate petitions have been launched in the UK and the US calling for the removal of the book after the deaths of three children in America whose parents followed the advice of the authors, fundamentalist Christians Michael and Debi Pearl.

The latest case involved Larry and Carri Williams who, late last year, received lengthy jail sentences for inflicting such extreme cruelty on their adopted daughter, Hana, that the 13-year-old died of hypothermia brought on by severe malnutrition in 2011. Carri Williams was sentenced to 37 years in prison, and her husband Larry, convicted of lesser charges, was sentenced to just under 28 years.

The Williams were found guilty of denying their children Hana and Immanuel food, beating them and making them sleep in closets or washrooms. They were fed a diet of sandwiches that had been soaked in water and vegetables that were still frozen. Some of the couple's seven biological children sometimes took part in the abuse.

In sentencing the couple, Skagit County Superior Court Judge Susan Cook said: "I feel the punishment should match the outrage felt by this community. I am at a complete loss. I think at some point in this trial each and every one of us sat stunned and speechless without the slightest hope of making any sense of this whatsoever."

The deeply devout couple kept their children isolated by home schooling them, and used *To Train Up a Child* to raise them.

The Pearls advise using punishment instruments on a seven-month old baby for crying and clenching his fists for not getting his own way. They suggest using tools instead of hands for beating children, recommending a willow branch for babies and a quarter-inch plumbing supply line for older chil-



Child-beating advocates Debi and Michael Pearl

dren, which Michael Pearl says is "too tight to cause damage to the muscle or the bone".

One witness in the trial of Carri and Larry Williams' told how the book instructed parents to give unruly children cold baths, withhold food and force children outside in cold weather as punishment.

*To Train Up a Child* had previously been linked to the death of two other children in the US. Seven-year-old Liberian-born Lydia Schatz was killed by her adoptive parents in 2010 after they referred to the Pearls' book. She was hit with a plastic tube for hours at their home in California for allegedly mispronouncing a word and died in hospital a day later from her injuries. Her sister Zariah, 11, was also beaten for "being a liar and a bad influence" on Lydia. Zariah was admitted to hospital in critical condition but she survived.

Parents Kevin and Elizabeth Schatz were sentenced to serve a minimum of 22 years and 13 years, respectively.

Sean Paddock, a four-year-old from North Carolina, was killed by his mother Lynn after she bought *To Train Up a Child*. He was beaten with plastic tubing to discipline him but when this did not work, she bound him so tightly in blankets that he suffocated. She is now serving life imprisonment.

The Pearls have always denied their book advocates abuse, with Michael Pearl address-

ing his critics after Lydia's death by saying: "I laugh at my caustic critics, for our properly spanked and trained children grow to maturity in great peace and love."

According to the BBC report, *To Train Up a Child* is widely seen as the most extreme of the publications produced by conservative Christians in the US who advocate corporal punishment.

It is produced by the Pearls' organisation, No Greater Joy Ministries, which is attached to the church where Michael Pearl is a pastor in Pleasantville, Tennessee.

First published in 1994, the book soon became popular among fundamentalist, non-denominational groups outside mainstream Christian culture.

Elizabeth Esther, a blogger who grew up in a conservative Christian community in California and describes herself as a "recovering fundamentalist", says that in her church the Pearls were "basically held up as the sterling example of how to raise your children before God".

*To Train Up a Child* has sold more than 800,000 copies, according to Michael Pearl. Sales have remained steady in recent years and are only boosted by attacks, he says. "We have several million very happy and cheerful parents and kids who've seen great, wonderful fruit from that book and other things we've written."

# Segregation guidelines published for UK universities cause outrage

ALTHOUGH an online petition against gender separation at UK universities was signed last month by around 8,000 people, only 100 turned out to protest outside the headquarters of Universities UK in Tavistock Square, London, after UUK issued new guidelines approving segregated audiences at certain debates featuring outside speakers.

Among those who did turn up at the protest on Human Rights Day – December 10 – was Yasmin Alibhai Brown, the Muslim columnist who writes for the *Independent*.

Outraged by the guidelines issued by UUK, which describes itself as “the voice of UK universities”, she wrote: “In its wisdom, this august body has published guidelines on gender segregation at universities. The issue has been raised over the last few years by lecturers and students who complain that, for certain events, organisers and speakers expect men and women to either sit apart or that women not attend.

“Sexist dress codes and other behaviours are being spread and pushed in British universities by retrograde Islamic societies and individuals, most of them men – though there are always willing maidens who say ‘yes, yes, yes’ to such diktats.

“UUK upholds this apartheid and offers up nauseating justifications. It’s done in the name of free speech. Yes, really. ‘Concerns ... [for the] beliefs of those opposed to segregation should not result in a religious group being prevented from having a debate in accordance with its belief systems’.”

She added: “So, as of now, separation in lecture halls and seminar rooms is fine as long as women don’t have to sit behind men (gee thanks!) but can be seated in lecture hall reservations. Separate but equal. Just as Boers ordered society in pre-freedom South Africa. So should gays have to sit apart from heterosexuals? Hindus be kept equal and apart from Muslims? If EDL members want to have meetings and insist blacks can only sit in designated areas, I suppose UUK would not object. Having conceded to the most objectionable demands once, they would absolutely have to again and again.”

She concluded: “Muslim educational achievements are so abysmally low because our educators do not liberate them from dark age interpretations of Islam but rather encourage them. (Perhaps it’s a cunning plot to keep them down and out of mainstream life!) I know of female medical



Protesters pictured outside UUK’s headquarters in London last month

students – three Muslim and one Orthodox Jew – who will not touch male patients, of all-male religious professional networks and even worse examples.”

In its report, UUK claimed that universities faced a complex balance of promoting freedom of speech without breaking equality and discrimination laws.

Chris Moos, a PhD student at the London School of Economics, who attended the protest, told *Channel 4 News*: “What we want to achieve is for Universities UK to immediately rescind their guidelines condoning gender segregation, and issue guidelines that clearly lay out that any kind of segregation, whether under racist, cultural, religious, nationalistic or sexist pretences, is wrong and has no place in the public space.”

Erin Marie Saltman, research project officer at Quilliam and PhD researcher at University College London told *Channel 4 News*: “There is a fear of offending the Muslim community but there are a lot of modern Muslims that would never allow gender segregation.”

In a statement, UUK said: “The guidance was approved by senior legal counsel as properly reflecting the law. It is not prescriptive. Universities are independent institutions and will make decisions on a case by case basis.

“The guidance does not promote gender segregation. It includes a hypothetical case study involving an external speaker talking about his orthodox religious faith who had requested segregated seating areas for men

and women.

“The case study considered the facts, the relevant law and the questions that the university should ask, and concluded that if neither women nor men were disadvantaged and a non-segregated seating area also provided, a university could decide it is appropriate to agree to the request.

“It is very hard to see any university agreeing to a request for segregation that was not voluntary and did not have the broad support of those attending. As the guidance explains, there may be many other reasons why a university might refuse a request for segregation.”

Maryam Namazie, spokesperson of One Law for All and Fitnah, Movement for Women’s Liberation, said: “Their new guidance to universities on external speakers states that the segregation of the sexes at universities is not discriminatory as long as both men and women are segregated side by side rather than women being made to sit in the back.

“Would racial apartheid have been non-discriminatory if white and black people had been segregated in the same manner? In fact that is the very argument the apartheid regime of South Africa used when faced with criticism: separate but equal.”

Earlier this year, a student equality group claimed that preaching by extremists and discrimination through segregation at student events has become a “widespread”

(Continued on back page)

# Survival of Islam depends on mainta

religion. But this year's more comprehensive study showed six more, bringing the full list to Afghanistan, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

In others, like India in a recent case involving a leading critic of religion, humanists say police are often reluctant or unwilling to investigate murders of atheists carried out by religious fundamentalists.

Across the world, the report said, "there are laws that deny atheists' right to exist, revoke their citizenship, restrict their right to marry, obstruct their access to public education, prevent them working for the state..."

Criticism of religious faith or even academic study of the origins of religions is frequently treated as a crime and can be equated to the capital offense of blasphemy, it asserted.

The IHEU, which has member bodies in some 50 countries and supporters in many more where such organisations are banned, said there was systematic or severe discrimination against atheists across the 27-nation European Union.

The situation was severe in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Malta and Poland where blasphemy laws allow for jail sentences up to three years on charges of offending a religion or believers.

In these and all other EU countries, with the exception of the Netherlands and Belgium which the report classed as "free and equal" there was systemic discrimination across society favouring religions and religious believers.

In the United States, it said, although the situation was "mostly satisfactory" in terms of legal respect for atheists' rights, there were a range of laws and practices "that equate being religious with being American."

In Latin America and the Caribbean, atheists faced systemic discrimination in most countries except Brazil, where the situation was "mostly satisfactory," and Jamaica and Uruguay which the report judged as "free and equal."

Across Africa, atheists faced severe or systemic violations of their rights to freedom of conscience but also grave violations in several countries, including Egypt, Libya and Morocco, and nominally Christian Zimbabwe and Eritrea.

Shortly before the report was published, Nahla Mahmoud, an environmentalist and human rights activist (pictured above) said in an article published by *Left Foot Forward* that



"it is absolutely ridiculous in the 21st century to have laws where one could be criminalised and punished for thinking differently or expressing an opinion".

She added: "Just this year, Kuwait jailed Abdel Aziz Mohamed Albaz for criticizing Islam, Tunisian artist Nadia Jelassi is facing prison for her 'un-Islamic' artistic pieces, Moroccan activist Imad Alhabibi was arrested for being an ex-Muslim, and Saudi activist Raif Albadawi was sentenced to seven years and 600 lashings for airing his liberal views.

"In Islam, apostasy is commonly defined as the rejection in words or action of one's religion by a person who was previously a Muslim. As simple as this might sound, the definition is quite broad and could include not only renouncing Islam, but also criticising or defaming the religion and 'attempting' to lead others away from it.

"It is also broad enough to include liberal and progressive Muslims who challenge traditional Islamic thoughts. Cases such as that of the late Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu-zaid who fled the country after being charged with apostasy for his critical Islamic writings and Sudanese theologian Mahmoud M Taha who was hanged in the centre of Khartoum for expressing his progressive Islamic thoughts are just two examples among many others.

"Terms such as *Kafir/a*, *Murtad/a* and *Zendeeg/a* are specifically designed to label individuals who challenge Islam and to encourage action to be taken towards them. Ebn Warraq spells this out in his book *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak out.*"

Mahmoud said that through the trial process, apostates are usually given a chance to publicly repent. They have to declare their

guilt and vow never to repeat this act. The cases of Saudi Arabian journalist Hamza Alkashgari and the 129 Sudanese in south Khartoum are among those reported to have been forced to publicly repent to avoid the death penalty. If those charged insist upon apostasy, the court will then implement a punishment. This could be a fine, a prison term or a number of lashings. Failure of the authorities to take action means that groups and individuals can take it upon themselves to carry out a sentence.

"As for the UK, a worrying pattern of aggressive attitudes toward 'apostates' has appeared recently. A survey by Policy Exchange investigated the perception of a number of Muslim communities toward the death penalty for apostates. Thirty-four percent aged 16-24 believe that apostates deserve a death penalty. This goes along with the recent documented cases of Islamic threats of violence.

"Among these were the threats directed towards the spokesperson for One Law for All campaign, Anne Marie Waters, in a lecture where she was debating sharia law and human rights; threats made against Tom Holland after broadcasting his documentary *The Untold Story About Islam*; threats made against the Atheist, Secularists and Humanist Society at UCL for posting a *Jesus and Mo* picture on their Facebook page; and intimidatory remarks towards 17-year-old Rhys Morgan for his "offensive" *Jesus and Mo* drawing at school. I myself have received death threats after an interview on sharia law implementation in the UK broadcast on Channel 4 earlier this year."

Mahmoud pointed out that "there is, however, a significant effort being made by some liberal Muslim organisations and individuals.

# Maintaining strict laws against apostasy

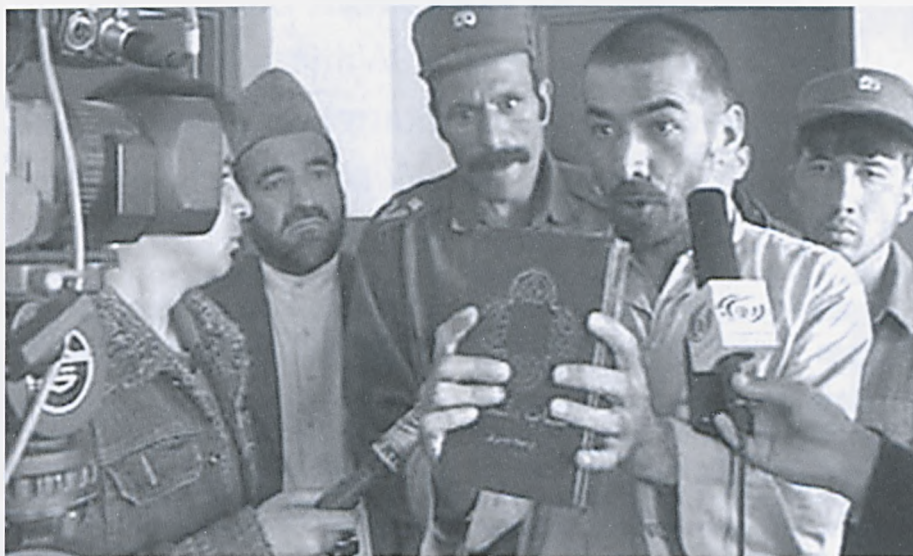
The British Muslims for Secular Democracy and Muslims for Progressive Values are doing a great job of challenging political Islam and promoting secularism”.

Earlier, writing for the Gatestone Institute, Nonie Darwish, a Middle East scholar and Director of Former Muslims United and author of *Cruel and Usual Punishment*, wrote that the most influential Sunni leader in the Middle East “has just admitted what many of us who grew up as Muslims in the Middle East have always known: that Islam could not exist today without the killing of apostates. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, head of the Muslim Brotherhood and one of the most respected leaders of the Sunni world, said on Egyptian television: ‘If they [Muslims] had gotten rid of the punishment [often death] for apostasy, Islam would not exist today.’

“The most striking thing about his statement, however, was that it was not an apology; it was a logical, proud justification for preserving the death penalty as a punishment for apostasy. Al-Qaradawi sounded matter-of-fact, indicating no moral conflict, nor even hesitation, about this policy in Islam. On the contrary, he asserted the legitimacy of Islamic laws in relying on vigilante street justice through fear, intimidation, torture and murder against any person who might dare to leave Islam.

“Many critics of Islam agree with Sheikh Qaradawi, that Islam could not have survived after the death of the prophet Mohammed if it were not for the killing, torturing, beheading and burning alive of thousands of people – making examples of them to others who might wish to venture outside Islam. From its inception until today, Islam has never considered this policy inappropriate, let alone immoral. In a recent poll, 84 percent of Egyptians agree with the death penalty for apostates; and we see no moderate Muslim movement against this law. That 1.2 billion Muslims appear comfortable with such a command sheds light on the nature of Islam.

She added: “Unlike Americans, who understand basic principles of their constitution, most Muslims have no clue about the basic laws of their religion. Most Muslims choose ignorance over knowledge when it comes to Islam, and often refuse to comment negatively out of fear of being accused of apostasy. While in the West it is considered a virtue to try to understand one’s religion, ask questions about it and make choices accordingly, in the Muslim world doing the same thing is the ultimate sin punishable by death. What the West prides itself on, is a crime un-



*In 2006 Abdul Rahman, an Afghan convert from Islam to Christianity, was arrested and put on trial for apostasy. If found guilty he would have been sentenced to death. But following an international campaign to have him released, prosecutors ruled that ‘insanity’ was the reason for his conversion. He was freed and given asylum in Italy.*

der Islamic law. The main concern of Muslim citizens in any Islamic state is staying safe, alive and away from being accused of doing or saying anything against Islamic teachings. In such an atmosphere of fear and distrust, harm can come not only from the government, but from friends, neighbours and even family members, who are protected from prosecution for killing anyone they regard as an apostate.

“It is not a coincidence that Muslim countries have the highest rate of illiteracy and that they lack education: in an Islamic culture that criminalises not only apostasy, but also asking questions or doubting, ignorance is a virtue that protects you.

“The Islamic and Judeo-Christian cultures are polar opposites when it comes to value systems and moral compasses – the core divisions between Islamic and Western morality. No religion other than Islam kills those who leave it – probably a sign of Islamic leaders’ lack of confidence in Islam’s ability to survive among other religions that do not kill to keep their followers in line.”

She then referred to a discussion on an Egyptian television show about Islamic textbooks from Al-Azhar, the world’s premier Islamic University, in Cairo, where students were told that “any Muslim, without permission of the ruler, can kill and barbeque a *murtad* (apostate) and eat him!”

This lesson was confirmed to be in official Egyptian government books for high school students. She wrote: “The stunned guest on the TV show could not believe that Egyptian

students of Islam are being taught that cannibalism of apostates is *halal* (permitted).”

Darwish added: “Policies such as these should be of great concern to the West. The West, however, appears to be in denial. It refuses to be openly concerned; and when its citizens are concerned, they are suppressed. ... Instead of soberly facing the threat of Islam, the West has become desensitised to all the murderous videos pouring out of the Muslim world.

“There is no outrage in Western governments, media or NGOs over what we hear and see sluicing daily out of the Middle East: the photos of hundreds of Christians burned alive by Muslims in Nigeria; the videos of beheadings and burning-alive of apostates to be found all over the internet; or the daily Islamic reminders from many political leaders, Arab television, and the pulpits of mosques, Arab television and political leaders – that, in their opinion, Jews are the descendants of apes and pigs.

“If we are to preserve Western freedoms for future generations, it is time to change our dismissal of, and indifference to, the deep-rootedness of these views.”

She concluded: “Westerners have been investing a lot of time, effort and money trying to understand Islam, when all they need to do is listen to what Muslim leaders are saying. American foreign policy priorities should not be the appeasement of an Islamic culture desperate for approval, but protecting its citizens, culture and constitution from all morally bankrupt and tyrannical ideologies.”

# Clergyman behaving badly

**JAMES MERRYWEATHER** pens an article in the form of an open letter to the Reverend William Mcleod, minister of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Glasgow, and editor of *Free Church Witness and Good News*

Every so often the doorbell rings and I find myself face-to-face with a brace of inately grinning 19-year-old “elders” of the Mormon persuasion or Jehovah’s Witnesses wagging infantile little pamphlets in my face. This usually results in a pleasant discussion which, it seems, these doorstep evangelists entirely fail to recognise as a send-up. The joyful message they peddle is lamentably feeble and easily quashed, often with reference to their own naïve doctrines.

Representatives of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) also call, but the only evidence of their coming is a colourful magazine entitled *Good News* posted annually through the letterbox. The dour black-suited deliverer always scuttles away before I have time to identify the thud of paperwork in the hallway and reach the door to engage him in conversation.

Only once was I alert enough to catch up with one of those Free Church ministers whose back I could see rapidly retreating. After I hailed him he reluctantly retraced his steps and the conversation that followed was invigorating, enlightening and magnificently atheism-affirming.

*Good News* and its monthly parent magazine *Free Church Messenger* both provide me with privileged glimpses into the ways of a weird religious cult in which the sole source of wisdom, apart from argumentative in-house publications, is a motley collection of Bronze Age and Iron Age texts, much translated, re-translated and mistranslated, and adjusted for the convenience of a 2,000-year succession of assorted, usually squabbling, priests. The cult is a hyper-conservative offshoot of Christianity – as far as I can tell, itself a suite of weird cults – known as The Free Church of Scotland (Continuing).

Here I examine *Good News* articles that claim to disprove verified facts, pretending to falsify things we know to be true so that archaic Christian doctrine may become truths (untrue truths) in their stead.

## Defining false witness



Rev William Mcleod

Dear William,

You will be familiar, I trust, with these passages from your holy book. What do they mean, and what precisely is “false witness”?

- And God spake all these words, saying ... Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. (Ex. 20:16)

- And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them: Neither shalt thou bear false witness against thy neighbour. (Deut. 5:20)

- Jesus said ... Thou shalt not bear false witness. (Matt. 19:18)

- And Jesus said unto him ... Thou knowest the commandments ... Do not bear false witness, Defraud not. (Mark 10:19 and, almost identically, Luke 18:20)

- Thou shalt not bear false witness ... (Rom. 13:9)

Because misinterpretation can be a serious pitfall in criticism, I have always been quite cautious before leaping to conclusions about the precise meaning of “bearing false witness” and I purposely avoid the automatic presumption that this archaic

term refers to telling lies. Before deciding, I asked Google what “bearing false witness” means and results showed it to be a matter of dispute, consternation, even confusion, among Christians.

Evidently the Internet chatters don’t consult their holy book, source of all knowledge, when it puzzles them or they would have come across Proverbs 6 where false witness is defined unequivocally: “These six things doth the LORD hate: [including] a lying tongue, a false witness that speaketh lies, and he that soweth discord among brethren.”

That still leaves us to ensure, now we know false witness does mean lying, that to bear false witness means to perform the act of lying, and that one’s neighbour can be just about anybody. On careful reflection, I think we may consider that interpretation valid. I hope you agree. Unlikely, I suppose, because Christians tend to nit-pick over such matters for centuries and rarely fully agree with one another, let alone with critical unbelievers.

So Commandment nine, in all its multiple Old Testament iterations and the teaching of Jesus, as well as in Proverbs 6, provides us with unambiguous instruction that the LORD heartily disapproves of those who knowingly speak incorrectness, especially if in doing so they offend other people.

It is one thing to cause offence with your opinion or inconvenient truths and another entirely to do so by promulgating untruths intentionally disguised as facts, deliberately misleading people whilst affecting a gratuitous air of authority. I have witnessed the latter routinely being used by *Witness* and *Good News* authors when attacking atheism and science, in unashamed contravention of law laid down by their own supreme authority and condoned, in your actions, by you as editor. Is truth inadequate as a rhetorical device for spreading your Good News?

Quite clearly, bearing false witness is the intentional presentation of untruth as truth with malice aforethought: deliberate, calculated deception. To put it even more blunt-



ly – after all, Proverbs 6 makes no bones about it – one who bears false witness is an out-and-out liar. Since God hates liars, their fate will likely be divine retribution, and we all know what that means.

### Truth v “Truth”

Drivel written by a clergyman is no different from drivel expressed by anybody, and no more or less deserving of fair criticism. How should one behave when responding to drivel-packed articles by revered ministers of the Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) – who are appointed community leaders, supposedly well-informed, trusted wise men who entitle themselves Reverend – that contain transparent untruths leavened with idiotic advice?

Should politeness be maintained when we who can see through their façade feel we ought to expose unmitigated balderdash, particularly when, in civil and friendly correspondence (that you and I once enjoyed), that unmitigated balderdash has already been corrected? Should one pussy-foot around, maintaining misguided respect for the cloth because it is courteous and comfortable, when respect is unwarranted and unbridled frankness would be more effective for clarification? In other words, should one respectfully button one’s lip or emerge, guns blazing, in the righteous defence of uncontaminated truth?

Now, I expect you would reply that you consider truth – truth as you see it – can vary according to personal choice, opinion or faith (or something like that; we’ve heard it before from the faithful). Various statements of faith say as much perfectly clearly: “By definition, no apparent, perceived or claimed evidence in any field, including history and chronology, can be valid if it contradicts the scriptural record.” It’s rubbish of course.

Truth is a linguistic tool for describing succinctly what is true, real and incontrovertible. When I speak of truth and untruth I am not referring to personal or corporate opinions or beliefs, but to matters of fact; things that really are; things that truly, really and demonstrably exist and can be witnessed by anybody willing to observe and learn. Facts (reality) are immutable and cannot be adjusted to match personal beliefs.

We humans (scientists in particular, for fact handling is what they do) refer to facts when attempting to construct valid and meaningful conclusions. Those conclusions might not always be entirely correct – they might be considered provisional, available for revision – but if people have reached those conclusions, they have reached those conclusions. (In case you didn’t quite grasp that I’ll repeat: if people have reached conclusions, they have reached those conclu-

sions.) That is a matter of incontrovertible fact. That they have done so is a straightforward matter of unquestionable reality. When something has been said or written, nobody may reasonably deny that what has been said or written is what has been said or written. Nobody may reasonably assert that the opposite of or something different from what was said or written was what was actually said or written. Yet you Christians do precisely that, and since it is demonstrable facts that you mess about with, it is easy to show how wrong you are by comparing the real facts with your mangled versions of them.

If you say that you believe in God, I may (and do) disagree with you, but I can’t deny that you hold your belief or portray your belief as it is not, for instance by contrarily asserting that your monotheistic God belief is actually all about, say, eleven little blue goblins who eat kippers in bed. If I opine that a cheese tastes too sweet, you may disagree, but it is undeniably true that I consider that cheese to be too sweet for my palate and that I have said so.

Similarly, you may disagree with what scientists tell you about their science, but you may not, in all reasonableness, falsely represent what they have published of their views on the subject (available for public scrutiny and criticism) so that you can then “prove” them wrong. That is illegitimate, shabby, foolish, bad practice and a waste of your (God given?) intellect.

That, regrettably, is the way the magazines you edit – *Free Church Witness* and *Good News* – tackle subjects outside your religion, such as atheism and science, and it’s a deep-rooted, rotten, dishonest carry-on. Your congregations and readers look up to you for guidance and you lead them wildly astray. They trust you to reveal the truth to them, even to tell them how they should think (fools), because over the centuries the churches have told their congregations they are not allowed to think for themselves, on pain of all sorts of nasty punishment. In return for that trust, you and your henchmen mislead them into false beliefs, reinforced by the Christian obligation of unquestioning obedience consolidated by persistent threats of hell.

How should a person who relies entirely upon the Bible’s teachings deal with inconvenient facts such as scientific information; those irritating nuggets of reality that contradict your sacred scriptures? How should someone who decrees that morality should be based upon the Ten Commandments behave? I expect – and you will surely agree – she or he is obliged to obey Commandment nine to the letter: “Thou shalt not bear false witness ...”

### Wilful Misrepresentation of Science

Having already helped you to come to terms with real biological truth in the past, I have recently come across two more major instances of false witness in *Good News*. When the 2013 edition arrived in my letterbox I decided to see if there were earlier editions I might have missed. The 2011 edition included another version of Rev. Graeme Craig’s preposterous rant purporting, by wilful misrepresentation of well-known science, to disprove evolution.

If you remember – I doubt you can have forgotten – a few years ago we enjoyed an interesting e-mail exchange on that subject, after you had written articles that were based on skewed information.

Actually what you wrote can easily be shown to have been entirely wrong, and I did just that. The “facts” you used to reach your erroneous conclusions were wrong. You have every right to assemble your personal interpretations of known facts – even if they are badly wrong you have that right – and your opinions are your own affair, but facts are facts and you can’t invent and shouldn’t teach your own versions of facts so they conform to your whacky beliefs.

Kindly read, if you will, the following idiotic diatribe by Ray Comfort:

*If every creature evolved without a creator, there are numerous problems for “scientific” evolution. Take for instance the first bird. Did the bird breathe? Did it breathe before it evolved lungs? How did it do this? Why did it evolve lungs if it was happily surviving without them? How did it know what needed to be evolved if its brain hadn’t yet evolved? Did the bird have a mouth? How did it eat before it had evolved a mouth? Where did its mouth send food before a stomach evolved? How did the bird have energy if it didn’t eat (because it didn’t have a mouth)? How did the bird see what there was to eat before its eyes evolved? Evolution is intellectual suicide. It is an embarrassment.*

What do you think of that? I can tell you that every statement in this passage is wrong. Ray Comfort’s portrayal of evolution is a completely erroneous confection he has devised to suit his own nefarious purpose.

It is not evolution as understood by all the people who devised, research, refine and employ the theory. Therefore, his conclusion that evolution is intellectual suicide is just plain wrong. He clearly doesn’t understand the subject he is attacking. That should be, for him, a profound embarrassment. Comfort wrote this in 2001 and should have changed his mind by now. Debaters, notably AronRa, have patiently

(Continued on p10)

# Demolishing God as the First Cause

EDWIN SALTER takes an axe to the age-old argument

**W**e explain the change all around us by something happening beforehand. Global warming is due to greenhouse gases that are due to the burning of fossil fuels and that's due to us and we are due to Him – stories too short often have improbable endings. If science achieves a grand theory of everything, we will probably yearn to trace our equations back to some fundamental circumstance. Aquinas – who kicked off much intellectual theology – followed Plato by insisting that all causes lead back to a point of origin when something itself uncaused began it all, that something being

of course God.

Islam once had much notable scholarship. It's good to recognise, as in the TV programmes of Iraqi-born British theoretical physicist Jim Al-Khalili, this past, and possible future, when much about the Muslim world is rather awful (though as a reaction to the greedy history of Western invasions and subversions it seems to me plainly enough caused). The theology included the Kalam version of the “first cause argument” that now gives it some fresh impetus.

The argument is both famous and powerful, based on our presumption of cause and effect. In a nutshell: the universe must have

begun sometime but obviously there could not have been some antecedent material cause because such a thing would already be part of a physical universe. The mighty and decisive first cause, the ancestor of all subsequent causes, can only have been God who exists outside space and time. Aquinas argues this is the Unchanging Changer, though the “unchanging” seems mere supposition as the single consummating action of creation could even have been terminal of the prior condition.

We incline to suppose a beginning to the universe as the Big Bang theory provides. This origin from a profoundly unique sin-

## An open letter to Rev William Mcleod

given him plenty of corrective instruction so that, even if he still does not accept evolution, he should by now understand the the science. Maybe, 12 years on, he regrets having written his silly book, so I apologise if by quoting him thus I misrepresent his current opinions (I doubt it), but it is a very good illustration of how wrong creationists can be about the science they so brazenly pretend to defame.

Let us next use an example that does not require any specialist knowledge. If I maintain that London Routemaster buses are yellow I am wrong. Likewise, if you (or Graeme Craig) say that scientists have concluded B when scientists actually concluded A, then you are wrong in exactly the same way. Thus, Craig's *Science Discredits Evolution – Not Creation!* can be shown to be wrong throughout, not because I or anybody else disagrees (they do of course), but because the evolution science that he attempts so ineptly to demolish is not evolution science as understood and published by evolution scientists. His argument is not with evolution but with his own Comfort-like distortion of same. For him to expound, to a congregation that trusts him to provide reliable guidance, a case against evolution as it is not described by evolution scientists is clearly a case of wilful false witness for which we may legitimately – ref. Proverbs 6 – substitute the more strident expression: pack of lies.

Rev Craig – and you, because you are guilty of the same tactic in your own articles, such as *The Theory of Evolution is Crazy!* – is on

stupidly dangerous ground when he misrepresents science, because what the scientists say is available for all to read or, in these modern times, learn from the Internet. He is, according to his own boast, a scientist himself when it suits him to flaunt his honours degree in geology in paradoxical contrast with his calling as a fundamentalist Christian preacher. If his BSc were of any real significance to him he ought to be thinking like a scientist. But instead he stubbornly clings white-knuckled to outmoded Bronze Age myth and archaic dogma. His credibility among his readers will last only as long as they are kept ignorant of the science and are forbidden to think for themselves. If ever they do become well enough informed that they can see through his dishonesty they might next suspect the dependability of his ministry.

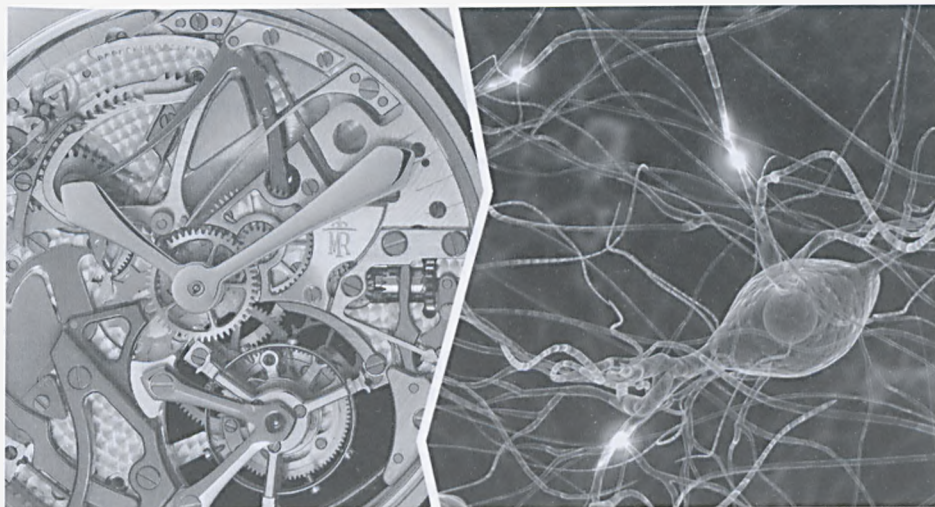
You wrote a wildly uninformed essay against evolution Dawkins and evolution even though I had previously supplied you with a lot of what you needed to understand evolution correctly and properly – not to mention a copy of the book you pretended to dismantle, that explains evolution and associated topics better than most. It is obvious that you still understand neither real biology nor even the false anti-evolution version promulgated within the blinkered world of creationism. Why did you go to all that trouble, I wonder, plagiarising standard creationist false witness about basic biology? What was your conscience telling you at the time of composition? Do you ever listen to your conscience when you feel obliged by

your faith to think contrarily to truth so that you can maintain strict adherence to the Bible? Do you switch your conscience off for the purpose of writing about evolution or did you entirely fail to understand what I so carefully explained to you? If you did understand and then decided to overlook the real science, then it seems to me that you intentionally disobeyed Commandment 9 and did so many times. According to your own sermons on the subject of the hereafter, that means you'll wind up alongside me in Old Harry's realm.

I won't bother to dissect Graeme Craig's disgraceful – silly, actually – article claiming that science contradicts evolutionary theory. It contains the same nonsense, plagiarised and shuffled, as so many others written by creationists. As usual he got science completely wrong whilst you, the editor, didn't correct him. Since science is not your subject, you could have consulted a specialist to referee and correct his text. If you recall, I once offered to do this for you.

Together you lied to the innocents who read your magazine and I expect they lapped it all up obediently and even admired you for it. If only they knew how you hoodwinked them to satisfy your religious motives, at the expense of precious knowledge and truth. You've been rumbled.

• James Merryweather's *Freethinker* essays are included with many others in his book *Reality is Enough*, available from Amazon in paperback and Kindle formats.



*The second most common argument for a creator after the first cause argument, the 'Argument from Design' that claims that the complex functionality in nature indicates that an intelligent being designed it. William Paley presented a watch and watchmaker argument that went like this: 1. The complex inner workings of a watch necessitate an intelligent designer (a human creator). In other words, you can tell, simply by looking at something, whether or not it was the product of intelligent design. 2. Therefore, like a watch, the complexity of something in nature – a particular organ or organism, the structure of the solar system, life, the universe, anything complex – necessitates an intelligent designer.*

gularity also appeals to theologians. It places God in a position that is beyond attack because by definition our science can know nothing of conditions prior to that event. Other arguments for God that involve the present natural world are open to investigation and challenge. Do we really need God as a “continuing cause” that keeps everything going? If we look for design in nature can that only be explained by deity? Do all the unique features that characterise this universe, one that has led to us, require a divine anthropic plan? Such proposals can be eroded and discredited, but the First Cause seems an unassailable bastion for the faithful. No wonder the Church of Rome is agreeable.

First I want to consider the problem of infinity in all this, second to argue that anyway it doesn't really matter.

We are uncomfortable with the possibility of infinity except as a convenient mathematical fiction – in familiar geometry “parallel lines meet at infinity” seems neat though we are strangely unbothered that this infinity has a beginning (or end?) on our page. But that the universe may have permanent existence is translated as “has existed for infinite time”, a queasy notion.

It leads to the enjoyable “if the universe has existed for infinitely long, then the time to the present would be infinite, and the present could not have been arrived at” – hence God must have created the start. A possible undoing is that the “time to the present” is necessarily being measured from some point.

The ancient Greeks were disconcerted by Zeno's paradoxes that rendered motion problematic (I move halfway to my destination, then half the remainder, and so in-

initely on ... never to arrive). As Galileo observed, we find it hard not to treat infinity as some special number. “Hilbert's Hotel” is infinitely large and full with infinitely many guests, but then, oops, someone else turns up. To stop this silliness we might suggest that the infinite number of occupants would include all possible guests already, or decisively by following Cantor in understanding that there are endless infinities of different capacities and extents. (Fractals colourfully propose infinite perimeters in small finite areas to enliven a concept that can become almost trivial – though it has been suggested that both Cantor and Godel were driven mad by concern with God and infinity. Stop now).

This abstract stuff may interest some but seem opaque and tedious to many. That's a fair point, so let me now propose that all this is a red herring infinity and irrelevant to the main concern.

The crucial point in the theological argument is the statement “and this First Cause is God”. Suppose we concede – if only to be nice to most astrophysicists – that there was a start by an unknowable “efficient” (Aristotle) cause. We could still make guesses in the spirit of forensic psychology regarding any agent, perhaps one that acted from boredom in eternity and, as quantum physics suggests, liked making complex rules and found symmetry appealing. Possibly a harmless sudoku enthusiast?

But no! We are told that this is indeed the chap whose many doings we have read about in the holy books. This omnipotent, omniscient person is intensely interested in each one of us, prescribing laws and rituals and judging who is for eternal reward,

who for punishment. All this despite, as we now know, having not merely Earth central among heavenly spheres to oversee but instead a vast, diverse universe.

Obviously none of this is logically required. The stipulative definition “and this First Cause is God” and the simple assertion “specifically this is the person who set up poor Adam and Eve, who had Gabriel talk to Mohammed, or whatever” are quite arbitrary. It cannot even be shown that a First Cause must be an agent (somehow personal) let alone one who continues to have all knowledge and power and the assorted, incompatible other characteristics asserted of God by the various religions.

Almost all cultures have had a creation myth describing a first cause that is not further explained, it enables the story (back to top) to have an origin. Our misfortune is that the Abrahamic books are vicious.

Creation often also asserts rights. There is a parallel with the increasingly controversial claim of parents to indoctrinate children in their faith and to exclude knowledge of other beliefs – the father's “I made you, you are mine, you must obey and others must respect this”. The two forms of rights of ownership support each other, and correspondingly to undermine one is to weaken the other.

It should be added that the Big Bang theory, mockingly named by Hoyle, is not undisputed, but there is a lack of funding for other cosmologies (various enduring universes or perhaps one with recurring Bangs of more or less stable consequence: I decline infinitely many “parallel” universes). It assumes that we can apply our concepts and constants to the most astonishing initial circumstances, has needed substantial adaptation to fit the evidence, and leaves us with a universe requiring to be full of dark matter and energy.

What really concerns atheists is not some hypothetical remote cause but the sheer absurdity and the cruel demands of religion that rest on the claimed authority of gods. It is as though writing “This is true and you had better believe it all” on the front page were conclusive. But the vast majority of the religious are ordinarily decent people who focus on the nicer bits to support and explain a well-meaning view of life.

However, the evils within founding texts remain a threat that is taken up by the disturbed, by the haters. For them, theological arguments for the existence of God provide a cloak of reason, a veneer of civilised proof. It is important for atheism to banish such disguisings. Without that what do they have but the phantasies of equally nasty men living in harsh long ago societies, men presumably brought up by capricious tyrants to detest the rest of the world?

# Three things atheists say in p

DALE DEBAKCY argues that non-believers should ex

**A**ny movement that's around a sufficiently long time picks up a set of obligatory phrases for public consumption that sound all right, don't cause trouble, and aren't actually believed by anybody in the movement. These become commonplaces that paper over contentious beliefs and make for good sound bites.

We atheists have been out of the closet long enough to have collected a mass of them rather against our best instincts, turning our public utterances increasingly into strings of scripted pleasantries rather than the free intellectual engagement we say we love. The only way to fix the problem is to admit frankly that we often don't quite mean those things that we say when the cameras are rolling. We're not lying, mind you, it's just that a lot of the issues we've been grappling with are so personally painful that safe and smooth phrases which are 60 percent true have slowly supplanted their thornier cousins. Now there's virtue in simplicity, but we should also have it on record that, when we say these things, what we mean is far less round and obliging.

Thing One: "I'm not afraid of death, because death gives life meaning."

This comes up *a lot*, is very striking and heroic, makes for good debate material, and whenever we say it, we're being lusciously insincere. Try as we might to resist the utterance, it's just so simple and effective that it sort of falls out of our mouths against our will, the atheist equivalent of "He's in a better place now."

The idea that life has meaning beyond itself is part of the metaphysical baggage we have inherited from religion. Strictly speaking, life is meaningless. We all know it, but we don't like saying it in public for fear of seeming nihilistic and cruel, so we say stuff like this instead.

Death isn't okay. Humans know that on a fundamental level, hate it, and are willing to give immense amounts of power to anybody who will speak the contrary with seeming authority. It takes a very brave movement to opt out of that power, to say, "Sorry, death is just death. It doesn't make anything mystically better in any way, and it's going to happen to you," and leave it at

that. I think we had that bravery once, and maybe we can work up to it again someday

Perhaps, though, it's not actually an issue of bravery, but a pedestrian, workaday case of unfortunate word choice. The basic idea here is seemingly fine, namely that the realization of death lends an at times desperate, at times radiant, intensity to our appreciation of life that doesn't necessarily exist for people who think themselves immortal. In the light of that, we could amend our stock phrase to become "I profoundly dislike death, and am genuinely afraid of it, but that fear has at least one often good result."

Less pithy? Absolutely, but a tad more honest, and in the long run, honesty always wins.

Thing Two: "Well, really, when you get down to it, I'd describe myself as more of an agnostic."

Speaking truthfully, no, we wouldn't, though the temptation to do so is always there, and the best of us succumb to it from time to time just to get by. The problem is that religions, with their monomania for questions of existence, have monopolized the defining of atheism, and *that* is the definition we have to deal with in public.

Small wonder, then, that we scoot away from this foisted label and towards something more benign and less starkly defined. Religion has decided that The Big Issue is one of the possible existence or non-existence of gods, and has defined atheism as the position that takes the latter view.

That is inaccurate.

The Big Issue for atheism is not an ontological one, but a much more comprehensive linguistic one. It is not about the existence of mere gods, but the existence of religions. Insofar as religions are attempts to describe spiritual beings using terrestrial language, they necessarily fail. They no sooner speak than they err. There is no way for the situation to be otherwise, language being what it is. It's like trying to use a chainsaw to solve a differential equation.

If you agree with the idea that "whenever somebody attempts to describe the nature of a supernatural entity, including statements positing existence, he is wrong, and if that person continues to insist on having this knowledge, he is either a charlatan, or

insane, or some provocative yet zesty con- mingling of the two", then, congratulations, you're an atheist. And in accepting that, you haven't just pushed gods out of the picture, but anything that attempts to use language to do things that language simply cannot do.

So, the next time you feel that cold hard press of being forced into assuming a false mantle of agnosticism to escape judgment, just take a breath and say, "Yes, I actually *am* an atheist, and here's exactly what that means..."

Thing Three: "If my kid came home and wanted to join a church, I'd be fine with that."

Atheist Parenting is its own subculture entirely, charged with the particularly tricky task of walking the line between protecting children from religious bullying and preserving open-mindedness. It's incredibly difficult to do, and I have nothing but respect for those who honestly try. After all, "now, honey, you're not going to Hell like that other kid in class said you are, but you have to remember to respect his religious beliefs", is a sentence that the mind can barely wrap itself around, let alone the tongue.

In my most idealistic heart of hearts, I'd like to think that I have complete trust in the evaluative tools my kids possess to throw off whatever a church might throw at them. At the same time, though, even though I gave my daughter karate lessons, it doesn't mean I'm going to let her join the nearest brawl out of trust that she has the skills to survive. Just like a brawl is a social event aimed at systematically hurting people, so is a church an organization aimed at systematically breaking children into a certain mode of belief. Even if you survive either process, you're still going to bear scars from the attempt.

So, no, if my kid comes up and says, "I want to start going to church" I am decidedly *not* going to just hand her over with a "here, she's curious, do whatever the heck you want to her and we'll hope she shakes it off". You don't bring addicts to opium dens and you don't bring children to churches.

Am I limiting my children's scope of curiosity? Absolutely, but as a parent I do that *all the time*. I'd be a really crappy parent if

# in public but don't really mean

ould express their ideas in a far more forthright manner

I didn't: "Well, I see you're curious about these knives, one-year-old daughter, and far be it from me to restrict your curiosity, so here ya go!" Once they've developed fully their critical thinking skills, then by all means let them taste those dark alleys of the human mind a bit more, but so long as they are in the That Nice Priest Gave Me Candy So She Must Be Good phase, to church we shall not go.

The thing is that we can communicate all

of these ideas without sounding like terrible people. As a matter of fact, by communicating them at all, we'll sound like regular people, dealing with all of the messiness of regular life, rather than the too-sure intellectuals we often come off as.

"Death sucks, and sometimes you have to be a meanie to be a good parent" will gather more people out of curiosity and sympathy than the insincere formulations that are working their way into our speech

patterns at present.

The good news is that it's not too late, these stock phrases haven't become banners we must march under. We just have to be each other's watchdogs for a while, with a "did you say that because you meant it, or because it sounded good?" offered every so often to keep ourselves tending towards honest rather than quotable, embracing complexity even when it is a rather lonely thing to do.

## How to seize an editor's attention

By BARRY DUKE

LAST month I received an email from a man living in Clint Eastwood territory – Carmel in California. He asked me to check out his artwork, saying "I'm an American artist and dedicated atheist. I've recently created an editorial cartoon series titled 'Holy Smoke' that I believe will interest you as an addition to your publication."

Because I was inundated with work at the time, I did not respond immediately, but did follow the links Shell Fisher sent me – and I was extremely impressed.

But before I could respond, he sent me a nudge, in the form of the illustration on the right, which made me laugh out loud, and prompted me to send him an immediate acknowledgement, in which I said that, later in 2014, we have plans to revamp the *Freethinker* website to make it bigger and far more sophisticated, and that he may very well have a role to play in helping us improve the site's appeal.

Since then I have learned more about Fisher via an article in the *Monterey Herald*. It reported that he's "a recluse, a guy with an unusually small circle of very close friends. His preferred diversion is the solitude of long-distance running."

"He gives much of his work away, mostly to the charity events within Monterey County's running community. Over the past three decades, his paintings, cartoons, caricatures and logos have adorned T-shirts and posters of the Big Sur International Marathon, the Big Sur River Run, the Just Run For Kids program, the Run in the Name of Love, the Squid Shuffle, the Carmel Fine Arts 5K, and the Big Sur Mud Run."

• Shell Fisher's work can be seen at [shellsart.googlepages.com](http://shellsart.googlepages.com)

### Holy Smoke

To those blokes at "The Freethinker"  
My good friend Shell Fisher tells me he sent you samples of his satirical feature "HOLY SMOKE" but hasn't heard back. Take heed my Fellow Brits: It's absolutely spiffing, capital material.

Alfred



UH, OH . . .

Fisher's Holy Smoke will spifficate 6000 years of my hard work!

SHELL FISHER

# Artist outrages Christians by using Lego bricks to recreate stories from the Bible

THROUGH the extraordinarily creative use of Lego bricks, a young American artist called Brendan Powell Smith, pictured right, set out to reproduce scenes from the Old Testament on a website he created in 2001. The project captivated millions, and Smith then produced a book that proved such a hit that he then published a second volume covering events in the New Testament.

Now the two volumes, aimed at young readers, have been combined as *The Brick Bible: The Complete Set*. The set has attracted a huge number of rave reviews – with some notable exceptions from Christians who believe that Smith has perverted the Bible to create generations of atheists by emphasizing the gore and the sex but omitting the “good bits”.

If you go onto the Amazon website, you will find a number of reviews in which Smith gets a good kicking.

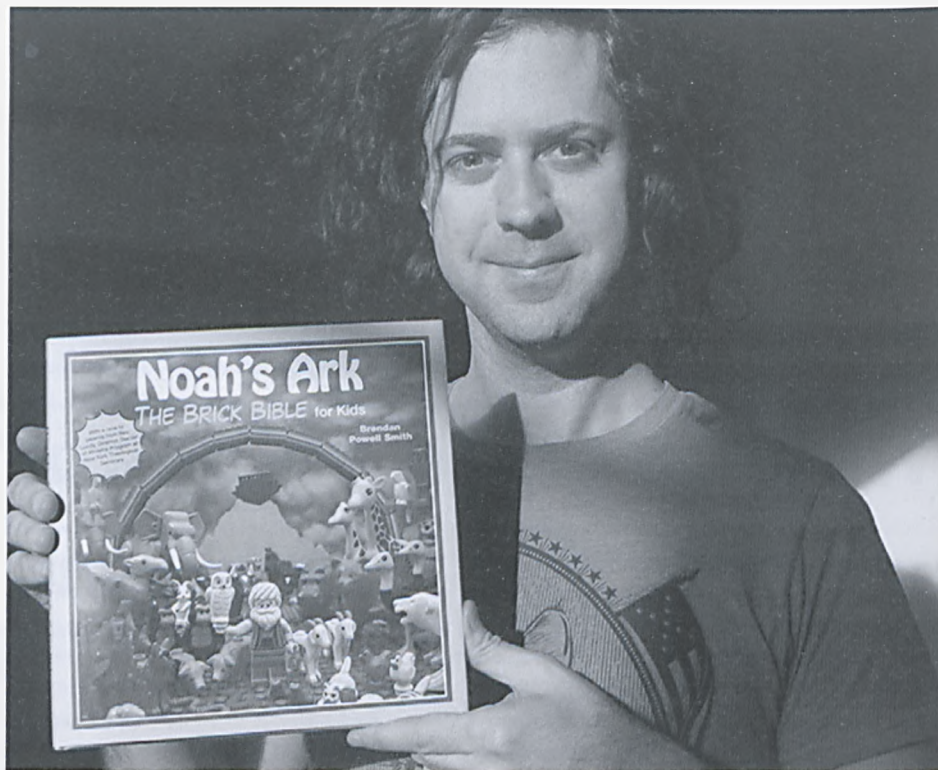
S Schmidt, a pastor, railed: “This is an absolute joke. Why would you buy a ‘Bible’ written by an atheist? The author clearly has an agenda with this book: mock the God he doesn’t believe in and make as much money as possible.

“As a full-time pastor, with a Bachelor’s and Master’s (and working on a 2nd Master’s to boot) all in biblical related fields, I can devoutly affirm this ‘book’ is as far away from the Bible as possible. It is a joke. It is disgusting. Save your money. As a parent, you DO NOT want your child to have this piece of garbage.”

A calmer but no less damning review of the first volume by a deacon’s wife, Kathy Schiffer, appears on the Patheos Catholic blog, where she writes: “At first glance, a Lego Bible seemed an enviably good idea. The Creation Story, the Sermon on the Mount, the Last Supper – artfully recreated in Lego blocks, then photographed for a picture Bible – seemed an ideal gift for children.

“But the project turned out to be not the great ‘faith enhancer’ some had imagined. Somehow, it would appear that early fans of the world’s largest, most comprehensive illustrated Bible, *The Brick Bible: A New Spin on the Old Testament* by Brendan Powell Smith, missed an important detail about the author and his perspective on the scriptures.”

That “important detail”, according to Schiffer, is that Smith is “a self-avowed non-



believer who embraced atheism at the age of 13. Smith is called ‘The Reverend’ by his friends – a tongue-in-cheek moniker that he picked up in his junior high days –but a defender of the faith, he is not”.

His “fall from faith”, she says, has never been a secret. Indeed, he is actually quoted as saying in an interview that “I had this idea (I’m not sure from where) that it would be a good idea to ‘prepare for adulthood’ by consciously trying to rid myself of what seemed like childish ways of thinking. I recognised superstitions for what they were, and tried to turn away from ‘magical thinking.’ I didn’t intend for any of this to affect my religious beliefs, but in the end it did in a profound way, and soon enough I found myself the only atheist I knew amongst my family, friends, and community.”

Schiffer continued: “Then I reviewed some of the images on his website. There are the placid Garden of Eden, baby Moses in the bulrushes, the familiar Nativity scene, Jesus walking on water. But other scenes are so violent or so sexual in nature that it’s hard to think how anyone could have thought this was an appropriate idea for children. It’s hard to think, too, that atheist Brendan Powell Smith didn’t know, when he selected the verses to be illustrated, that many of the

images would be incendiary.”

She pointed out that Revelation in particular holds terrors for children under titles like:

- “Children to Be Killed as Warning”
- “God Tortures, Kills Billions”
- “God Tortures a Whore”
- “Remaining Humans Doomed to Torture”
- “Son of Man’s Bloody Gorefest”

“In all, the book – with its skewed perspective on matters of faith and its wry commentary on Old Testament stories – makes a pretty good case *against* faith. Since that’s not the objective of most parents, I’d suggest looking elsewhere for a good Bible storybook for your children.”

She concluded: “Oddly, I found myself feeling not wrath, but sadness for “Reverend” Smith. A young (30-something) man with a great amount of talent, he rejects God even while immersing himself in the Bible.

“I pray that God, who is all-knowing and who loves Brendan Powell Smith with an unquenchable love, might bring into Smith’s life someone who can help him to see the deeper meaning behind those stern Old Testament stories, the divine inspiration in the Bible he now mocks.”

# points of view...



A DIG IN THE POST BAG – LETTERS FROM OUR READERS  
ADDRESS CORRESPONDENCE TO [BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK](mailto:BARRY@FREETHINKER.CO.UK)

## DAVID JAMES REVIEW

I THINK that David James is being unfair in accusing me of complacency about the “inevitability of progress” (*Points of View*, December).

In the letter I stated clearly my view that a belief in the inevitability of progress is untenable. I did argue, however, that we humans have the capacity for making progress, which is very different.

Of course there have been ups and terrible downs, and of course humans still do atrocious things. (In the letter I agreed with Gray’s view on the possible misuses of science, such as the invention of ever more terrifying weapons.)

But, as Steven Pinker argues in *The Better Angels of our Nature* it is necessary to take a much longer view of history in order to understand how violence within and between societies has declined, and how our attitudes to violence and cruelty have progressed.

James misquotes me again. I did not say that our capacity for violence has receded, but that the justification for violence against our fellow human beings has receded, which is completely different. I was quoting Steven Pinker who marshals much evidence in support of this. This is especially noticeable, according to Pinker, in those societies which, over hundreds of years, have become more democratic, more secular, pluralist, and less superstitious.

Finally I did not say that democracy has “triumphed” in Africa, only that the number of pluralist democracies there is growing, having numbered about two or three 35 years ago. I believe there are about 18 today (much less than half), many seriously flawed, but it is at least evidence of movement in the right direction.

David Simmonds  
Essex

## BARONESS WARSI

AFTER reading Baroness Warsi’s comments I wonder why anyone should pay any attention to her (*Freethinker* report, December).

She is unelected, represents no one but herself, flutters here and there preening herself in the presence of celebrities, gives vacuous interviews and seems to live in her own

version of religious reality.

In this dream world she conjures up her personal villains and atheists/secularists are menacing figures.

The villains are targeted as persecuting Christians. Meanwhile, Warsi avoids mentioning that the violent and often lethal persecutors of Christians are more likely to be people of her own faith: Muslims.

Warsi, a politically created puppet and

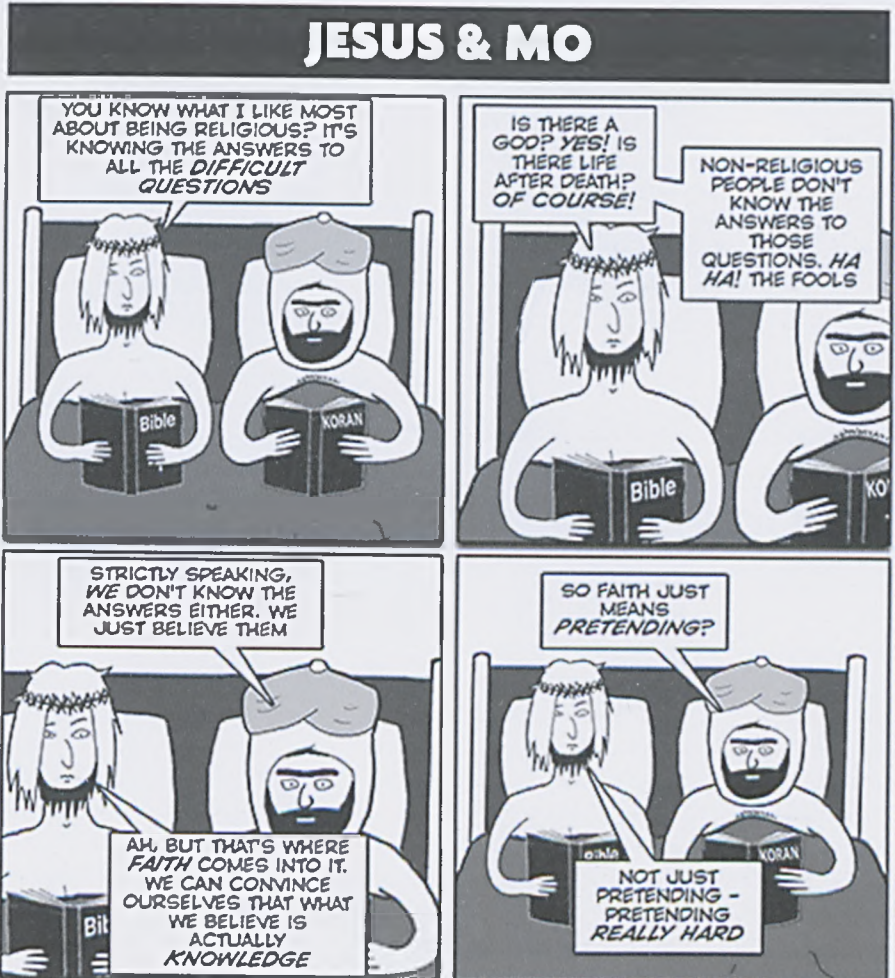
nonentity, seems to regard herself as someone of significance. The reality, I suspect, is that the significant people on whom she is imposed must wonder who she is and what she is supposed to be doing.

Amidst the muddle of her pointless role the answer to that is unlikely to be available. I doubt whether Warsi knows herself.

Denis Watkins  
Wales

## Waitress’s homophobia claim was bogus

LAST month we carried a report on the back page about a waitress and former member of the US Marines who claimed to have received a homophobic note in lieu of a tip at a New Jersey restaurant where she was employed. After the story received widespread coverage, the couple accused of not tipping Dayna Morales came forward with proof that not only did they not abuse her, but did, in fact, leave her a tip. Morales was subsequently sacked when her deception was exposed.



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# Christian Scientists ridiculed over new penis-shaped church

AFTER a Google Maps picture of a new Christian Science church in Illinois began circulating on the Internet late last year, giving millions the giggles because it resembled a giant brown penis, a red-faced church official told local media that the building “wasn’t meant to be seen from above”.

Scott Shepherd, of Christian Science Society of Dixon (motto: “Rising Up”) sorrowfully added: “The Internet has great capability for good – and great capability for gossip and destruction.”

He explained that the church was designed by an architect. The shape came

about because the church wanted to have part of the building near the intersection of Highland Avenue and Second Street, plenty of windows for natural light, and a sanctuary, which is in the eastern part of the building. But the church also wanted to preserve a large oak tree, which can be seen in the Google Maps image, so the decision was made to curve the building around the tree.

Local architect John McLane, not involved with the project, defended the current design, saying it was “a little bit of a stretch” to claim the church resembled a penis.

Commenting on the church’s Facebook

page, “Antilusional” pointed out that “another mistake was made. ‘Christian Science’? Wouldn’t that be an oxymoron? Science is about the explanation of observations through repeatable testing. I can’t see anything provable about Christianity. All one could do is make claims, but they could never be scientific. Also, the claims in the Bible aren’t testable either. In fact, there are claims all over that, that contradict real actual proven science. So for an organisation that is about a religion, it makes no sense to try to label themselves as being scientific. I can’t see how this could be possible at all.”



## Gender apartheid at UK universities deplored

trend at many UK universities.

Student Rights, which carried out the research, found that radical preachers spoke at 180 events at universities including Cardiff and UCL between March 2012 and March 2013.

Segregated seating for men and women was promoted or implied at more than a quarter of the events, at 21 separate institutions.

Among the events highlighted in the Student Rights report was a gender-segregated event at UCL on 9 March. The lecture, “Islam vs Atheism”, was organised by the Islamic Education and Research Academy (IERA), and pitted writer Hamza Tzortzis against Prof Laurence Krauss in a debate.

The IERA suggested a sexual segregation policy, and it was enforced at the event.

Men and women had separate entrances – although couples were allowed to enter together – and segregated seating. Security tried to physically remove members of the audience who would not comply, Student Rights said.

Also present at the protest was Pragna Patel, Director of Southall Black Sisters, a feminist group. She was quoted in the *Telegraph* as saying: “Words cannot fully describe what I feel today. Rage, indignation and sorrow are just some that spring to mind.” And she went on to say “that the assertion of religious political power obliterates the very ideas of liberty and equality that so many people lived for and died for”.