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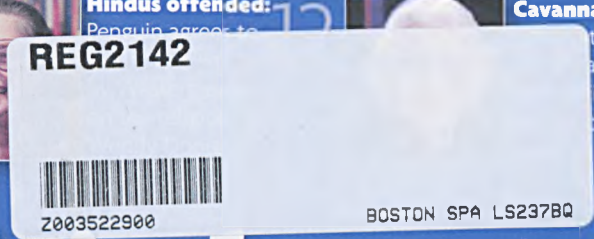


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# the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

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## Freethinker helps abuse victim gain support in lawsuit against a Catholic priest in Melbourne

BARRY DUKE reports

Just over a year ago, the *Freethinker* website carried a shocking report about the reinstatement of a Catholic priest who had been put on “administrative leave” for 16 months after he was accused of abusing a young disabled woman in Australia for 14 years. Father Tom Knowles, to the horror his victim, Jennifer Herrick, and others who had suffered abuse at the hands of priests, was returned last January to active ministry at St Francis’ Church in Melbourne.

After we posted a report that said that the Catholic Church had reinstated Knowles because he was now “committed to a prolonged, regular and very intensive and personally confronting programme of therapy” an unidentified woman posted a comment beneath our report which contained information that Herrick believed could be of considerable use to her.

She contacted me, and asked whether there was any possibility of being put in touch with the woman. As I had the person’s email address I was able to establish the contact the victim sought, and last month Herrick emailed me to say that she is now “in constant contact with the woman” who wishes to remain anonymous.

“She has thus been an immense support to me because she understands his character and has witnessed it over a long period of time. I tell you this so you know how important your website is for, in this instance, affording the victim about whom the article spoke, finding support in unexpected places!”

“I also want to tell you, Barry – and I’m sure you will be pleased to know – that I recently have taken out civil court proceedings against Tom Knowles and the trustees and the still-living provincial leaders of his Order (who ought to have been aware of what he



Father Knowles pictured back in the pulpit. Photo: Angela Wylie

was doing, being responsible for him) in the Supreme Court of NSW.”

Herrick also pointed out that so great was the outrage over the priest’s reinstatement that the Catholic Church was forced into an embarrassing backflip. On February 24, 2013, *The Age* reported that the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne had removed Knowles from one of Australia’s busiest churches.

Senior church official Father Graeme Duro had defended Father Knowles’ return to active ministry, stating that the priest had taken “responsibility for his actions and it was appropriate for

him to return to public ministry”.

But, within weeks, Melbourne Archbishop Denis Hart formally withdrew Father Knowles’ “faculties to engage in any public ministry within the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Melbourne”.

Hart is believed to have received letters from concerned Catholic parishioners after Father Knowles’ reinstatement was made public.

Herrick was quoted in *The Age* as saying that, while she “believed it was just” that Father Knowles had been stood down, she was “still incredulous” that she had not been told about it immediately by the Church. She was only informed after seeking confirmation from church authorities after hearing a rumour about his removal.

Herrick was 19 years old and suffering from bilateral congenital hip dysplasia – which caused her to walk with an highly abnormal gait – when Father Knowles, who was her family priest, began cultivating a relationship with her and her extended family.

Three years later, the priest initiated sexual intercourse with her. She was a virgin at the time. The sexual relationship continued for

(Continued on p5)



# When rights conflict

**OPHELIA BENSON** IS PLEASED THAT THE BBC POSED THE QUESTION IN JANUARY 'SHOULD HUMAN RIGHTS ALWAYS OUTWEIGH RELIGIOUS RIGHTS?' BUT THINKS THE QUESTION COULD HAVE BEEN BETTER FRAMED

**T**he BBC devoted an episode of its television discussion programme *The Big Questions* in January to asking "Should human rights always outweigh religious rights?"

Well thank you BBC; that's an issue that's central to most of what I write about and think about, so it was interesting to see a whole hour of TV devoted to it. Mind you, if I'd been in charge I would have moved the question back at least one step – I would have asked if there even is such a thing as "religious rights" that are in competition or tension with human rights. I certainly don't think there is. That's not how it works: human rights on the one hand and religious rights on the other. No, there are just human rights, and rights to do with religion are a subset of human rights. They are rights for humans to do things with religion, not rights for religions to do things to humans.

The relevant article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is number 18:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change her religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.*

The right belongs to the person; the person has the right to freedom of religion, including the right to change religion, and the right to manifest religion. The *real* question then should be "Does the right to freedom of religion conflict with other rights?"

The answer can be yes, depending on how "the right to manifest religion" is being interpreted. The same problem appears with the version of this right that's stipulated by the First Amendment to the US Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

That "free exercise" clause can and does cause a lot of difficulty over competing rights. Is there a free exercise right for parents to take their children out of school after the eighth grade, as Amish parents do? The Supreme Court ruled in *Wisconsin v Yoder* (1972) that it is, thus consigning generations of Amish to be trapped by lack of education in a way of life that they might prefer to escape.

That could be seen as the central conflict in human history: the one between human needs on the one hand and putative laws or demands or wishes of a god or a consortium of gods on the other. The concept of human rights has always been, tacitly or explicitly, a defiance of the idea that our first duty is to "God" rather than to each other and ourselves.

One human right is the right to believe whatever we choose to believe. (What good does it do to *order* someone to believe something anyway? This is the question that animates Orwell in 1984.) The complication is that from what we believe can come the desire – the perceived need, indeed the *duty* – to boss everyone else around in ways that violate their rights. One may believe that God made some people the slaves of other people. One may believe that God made women inferior to men, and permanently subordinate to them. One may believe that God gave a certain parcel of

land to a certain set of people and to them alone. One may believe that God has a horror of homosexuality, or of dogs, or of people who do menial work, or of menstruation. People have the "right" to believe all that and worse, but the reality is that beliefs motivate actions, so there is conflict.

One of the panelists on *The Big Questions* was Maajid Nawaz, a former activist and organizer for Hizb al-Tahrir who is now a liberal Muslim and a Prospective Party Candidate for the Liberal Democrats (Hampstead and Kilburn, where Glenda Jackson is retiring from her seat). Everything he said was admirable but he shone especially near the end, when two heavily veiled Muslim women on the panel were saying – with much heat – that they would not defend the right to wear T-shirts with images from the Jesus and Mo cartoon in public places. Nawaz jumped in to say that he is a Muslim and he's not offended by the T-shirts.

He later posted that view on Twitter and then all hell broke loose, as human rights bumped up against theocratic outrage.

Maajid's determination in the face of the backlash prompted me to read *Radical*, his book about how he went from Islamist to liberal.

The move started years before he actually left Islamism. He reports one step when he was in Pakistan working for the cause when his older brother broke his ties with HT.

*HT had become too controlling for him and too inflexible with his inquiring nature. Secretly, I began to empathize with Osman and I decided that I would never give all of myself in the same way; there'd always be part of me that I'd hold back. I'd gladly give myself unconditionally to Allah, but not to HT.*

The problem there is that if the Allah you give yourself to unconditionally is controlling and inflexible, you still have the same problem. But still, the Allah of someone with humane values is going to be better than the Allah of someone with harsh, controlling, punitive values. One step at a time.



**OPHELIA BENSON**  
Picking fights with God

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# Climate of fear increases as more and more individuals are accused of 'blasphemy' in Pakistan

IN DECEMBER 2013 the 72-year-old owner of a homoeopathic clinic in Lahore innocently explained the tenets of his Ahmadiyya faith to two young men. Within hours he was in police custody. The men Masood Ahmad had spoken to were carrying hidden tape recorders, and the elderly man was charged with blasphemy.

The minority Ahmadiyya sect is rejected by mainstream Muslims because it disputes the basic tenet of their faith that Mohammed is Islam's last prophet.

Ahmad, who returned from Britain to his Pakistani homeland decades ago to open his clinic was arrested after the recordings were handed over to the police. He has been jailed since his arrest, awaiting a trial that could take months or even years to begin.

He is not alone. In January, a Pakistani court sentenced a mentally ill British man, Mohammad Asghar, to death on blasphemy charges after he allegedly claimed to be a prophet of Islam.

According to a report by Kathy Gannon in *The Huffington Post*, Pakistan's blasphemy law is increasingly becoming a potent weapon in the arsenal of Muslim extremists.

"Although Pakistan has never executed anybody under the law, vigilantes frequently entrap and sometimes kill adherents of minority religions accused of blasphemy. They have created a climate of fear, forcing frightened judges into holding court sessions inside jails and keeping witnesses from coming to the defense of those on trial," Gannon reported.

IA Rahman, one of Pakistan's leading human rights activists, was quoted as saying: "At the moment, there are more and more pending blasphemy cases. Extremist organisations demonstrate and raise slogans, and judges are afraid. They agitate all the time, creating hatred, and the government is not doing anything."

The US-based Human Rights Watch has attacked Pakistan's failure to protect its religious minorities, saying in its 2014 world report that "abuses are rife under the coun-

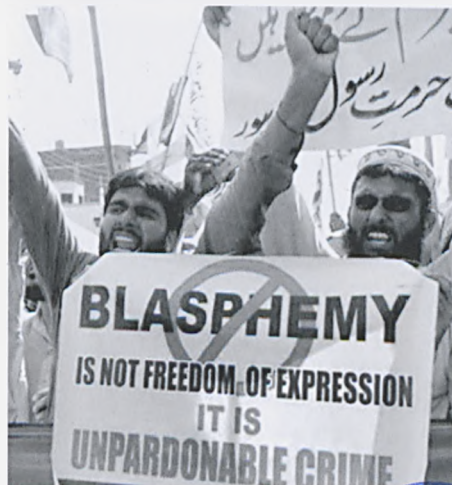


*Mahsood Ahmad*

try's abusive blasphemy law, which is used against religious minorities, often to settle personal disputes".

Maulana Abdul Rauf Farooqi, secretary-general of Jamiat Ulma-e-Islam, an organisation with close ties to many members of the Afghan Taliban's leadership, rejected allegations that the law is widely misused to settle personal disputes, though he said he supports a rigorous police investigation before charges are filed. He said those who were physically attacked had brought the violence upon themselves by saying things that were "offensive" to Muslims.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 34 people were charged with blasphemy last year. A government sta-



*Pro-blasphemy law protesters in Pakistan*

tistic says 27 were charged in 2012.

At least 16 people are currently on death row for blasphemy, while another 20 are serving life sentences, according to Human Rights Watch.

"In the last three years we have seen a large increase in the number of cases of blasphemy," said Keith Davies, head of RescueChristians, a US-based charity that started operations in Pakistan four years ago.

Pakistan's blasphemy law predates the founding of the country in 1947, but during the 1980s the US-backed military dictator, General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, amended it to add the death penalty. Islam was singled out as the religion that may not be insulted,

Pakistan is not the only nation with such laws on the books. Blasphemy offenses are punishable in more than 30 countries, including some with predominantly Christian populations, such as Poland and Greece, according to a 2012 report by Rev Chloe Breyer, executive director of the Interfaith Center of New York.

Most of Pakistan's population of 180 million is comprised of Sunni Muslims who do not support the militants' violence or their abhorrence for religious minorities. Nevertheless, the minorities, including Muslims who belong to the Shi'ite sect of Islam, say even the smallest quarrel can land them in jail on trumped-up blasphemy charges.

Abbas Kamaili, a leading Shi'ite cleric, told the Associated Press that he supported the idea of a blasphemy law but criticised the Pakistani version as "ambiguous" and easily distorted by militant Sunnis who want to rid the country of Shi'ites.

The violence associated with Pakistan's blasphemy legislation has been brutal.

Three years ago, liberal governor Salman Taseer was assassinated by his own guard after defending a Christian woman charged with blasphemy. In a separate attack, militants gunned down Minority Affairs Minister Shahbaz Bhatti after he campaigned for changes in the law. Last July, two brothers charged with defaming Islam's prophet were shot and killed as they stepped out of a courtroom.





# Embracing atheism: a 10-year struggle

**WILLIAM PANG**, a high school pupil at Berkshire School, describes his journey from piety to scepticism

**T**he airplane accelerated on the tarmac, on the verge of lift-off. Recalling the prayer Zeny taught me, I quickly murmured the words, “God, please guide this plane safely in your hands”. Shaking with trepidation, I nervously clutched the armrests, squeezing as hard as I could until the plane became airborne.

Ten years ago, I was devoutly religious. I attended an Episcopal school for nine years, never skipped a session of Sunday school, and prayed every day. At the age of six, I was empowered with religious zeal, feeling the presence of God in my body and spirit.

I was taught that God keeps a book by his side; a book that records the good and bad deeds of each and every human being. And on Judgment Day, God will sit on his throne with this book in his hand, deciding who shall enter the gates of heaven or suffer the vengeance of eternal fire. I feared God as much as I loved him.

But after the six years of Bible lessons and Sunday Schools, I snapped. I rebelled. There were no more conversations with God, no more bedtime prayers. I looked forward to the mandatory Bible classes not because I wanted to hear the repeated Bible stories, but because I wanted to challenge my teacher and point out all the flaws of the Bible. Naturally, I chose the Old Testament for my source of material. I bombarded my teachers with question such as “Why was a woman pulled out of a man’s rib? Isn’t that degrading woman?” and “Why does God condone



slavery in the Old Testament? Doesn’t God love everyone equally?” There were mixed messages in the Bible that I couldn’t explain, messages that didn’t seem to be expressive of the logic of a 21st century human being.

I turned to Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens for answers. I couldn’t explain the contradictions in the Bible, the unanswered prayers and the rational basis for believing in a religion. The downside of religion seemed so evident: suicide bombers sacrificing their lives in the name of God, the never-ending Sunni-Shi’ite conflict, brainwashing children with creationism ... the list goes on and on.

The “New Atheists” all seemed to make a plausible point: religion should be criticised and countered through rational arguments.

Four years later, my father was forced to retire. He promptly took up Hebrew, a shocking development because I have always

considered my dad as a non-religious and pragmatic person. I thought of many reasons to explain his drastic change in interests, though the answer was always before me. Seeing close friends and relatives pass away, my dad realised that death was no longer an idea tucked in the back of his mind. Maybe taking Hebrew classes was his way of finding comfort as death seems to approach closer and closer.

The first day I stepped into an Islam, Judaism and Christianity class, I was greeted by a loud, enthusiastic teacher. Mr Bowler loved to stir our inquisitive minds by viewing a story or an act from God from a fresh perspective.

Many students had to break away from the traditional understanding of a particular biblical story or event. It felt awkward questioning whether God or Satan was responsible for tempting Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge. But what role did God play when he told Adam and Eve that they could not eat from this one single tree, among the thousands of other trees in the garden?

Tackling Islam was no easy feat. The Koran is best understood when one chants the verses, rendering an English interpretation confusing and difficult to understand. Many students, including myself, had many preconceived notions about Islam. Having read and heard about the violence and bloodshed in the Islamic world, I regarded Islam as a violent and radical religion. It was not until reading the Koran and studying both the violent and peaceful message that I realised it is up to the reader to interpret the text in different ways. The powerful messages in the Koran could be used for promoting love and peace, but they could also be misinterpreted by a small group of people to promote a radical agenda.

Five years after renouncing my religious beliefs and becoming an atheist, it seems illogical that I still continue to recite the prayer Zeny taught me. But I find comfort in those words, like many others who pray when faced with problems and challenges in their daily lives. Being an atheist has taught me to walk a mile in one’s shoes, to put away my prejudices, and to continue to yearn for knowledge and understanding of different religions. I feel comfortable declaring myself an atheist because I respect and understand those who believe in God.

## Preacher to the deaf declares his atheism

USING sign language in a YouTube video last month, US pastor Justin Vollmar told his hearing-impaired flock that “a profound and wonderful thing has occurred in my life” and that he was now an atheist.

Around three years ago Vollmar founded the Virtual Deaf Church and created dozens of online sermons. Various topics were tackled, ranging from *Is Jesus truly GOD?* to the gay movie *Brokeback Mountain*, which Vollmar encouraged his followers to see.

In his “coming out” video Vollmar explains that he enrolled in a seminary to obtain his masters degree in theology. But his intense study of the Bible didn’t strengthen his faith. It led him away from it.



*There is ‘no God’ Vollmar told his followers near the end of his video. ‘It is all nonsense.’*



# Government's free school policy branded a failure as Muslim secondary school shuts

AL-MADINAH free school in Derby is to stop teaching secondary pupils from this summer. The Government stepped in last month after an Ofsted report warned that the school was "in chaos", with concerns over teaching quality and the curriculum.

Schools minister Lord Nash said: "I have come to the conclusion that it would simply not be in the interests of parents or pupils at the secondary school to continue to fund provision which has failed them in the manner now apparent."

He said the move would allow the trust to focus on the primary school.

The Al-Madinah school opened in September 2012, and within a year was under investigation by the Education Funding Agency over alleged irregularities.

There have been claims it was imposing strict Islamic practices, such as forcing women to wear headscarves, and a temporary closure due to health and safety concerns.

In October Ofsted branded the school "dysfunctional", prompting Lord Nash to announce that a new education Trust was being brought in, but before Christmas inspectors reported that there was still "no sign

of improvement".

In a letter to the Trust, Lord Nash said it was "clear there is a great deal of work to do at the school. I am particularly concerned at the poor quality of secondary teaching and the lack of breadth in the secondary curriculum.

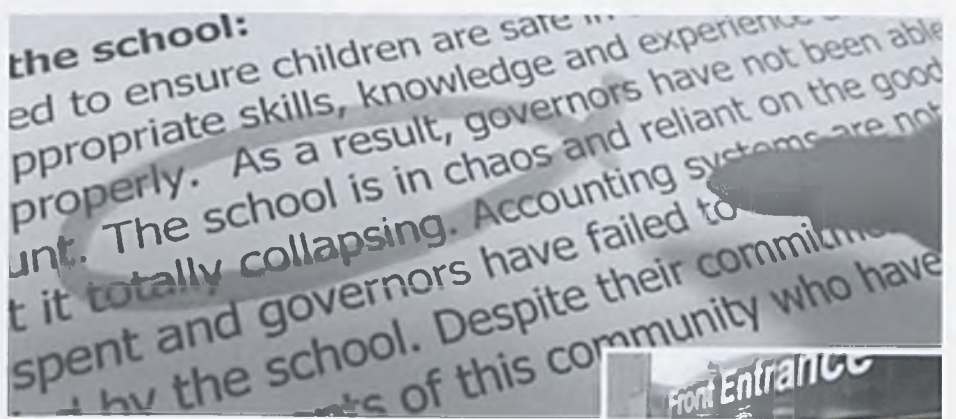
"I have decided it would be in the best interests of those children in the secondary school to continue their education elsewhere from this September onwards."

A Department for Education spokesman said: "The vast majority of free schools are

performing well but where we have found failure we have acted swiftly and decisively.

"We have monitored Al-Madinah very closely since problems came to light last year. Based on the current situation we believe the new board needs to focus efforts on the primary school in order to bring about the level of improvement required.

"The board has accepted our decision to close the secondary school and we have offered our full support in helping pupils to find alternative places before the start of the next academic year."



# The abuse of Jennifer Herrick could be the tip of an iceberg, says university professor

14 years and Ms Herrick later described it to church investigators as abusive and exploitative conduct. She said that the sex was often hurried, due to the need for secrecy, at times aggressive and often painful, due to factors related to her disability.

Herrick made it clear that she only made the case public when, after 18 months of dealing with ecclesiastical authorities, the Church's Towards Healing programme did not bring about a just end to the matter. In 2011, after she lodged a formal complaint, a confidential church investigation found the priest's conduct to be "highly inappropriate".

This relationship caused her to withdraw from friends and family and she grew increasingly anxious, ultimately having a breakdown and losing a promising career as a high school teacher. "You feel you can't say anything to anybody because he was a priest. When a young, disabled woman is caught up with a priest, you are trapped," she said. "I



*Jennifer Herrick at 22, pictured with her parents a couple of months after she was first assaulted. Photo: Nick McKenzie*

was denied an opportunity to develop normally as a young adult. I could never test out other relationships or have a family. It was a personal and pastoral betrayal."

Herrick's psychologist, Ana Grant, said the

priest's conduct had caused the woman serious post traumatic stress disorder.

A professor of theology at the Australian Catholic University, Neil Ormerod, believes there may be hundreds of similar cases yet to emerge.

He said he suspected the number of adults abused or in inappropriate relationships with their priests might be greater than the child abuse scandal.

In September 2011, Father Knowles' superior, Graeme Duro, wrote to Herrick acknowledging that she had "endured a great deal of emotional and psychological pain and suffering and that Fr Knowles's inappropriate conduct was to your detriment".

Professor Ormerod, who has supported Ms Herrick, said that in reinstating Father Knowles the church sent a "signal to the victim that her situation wasn't serious" when in fact the abuse of trust by the priest had been extensive.



# Twenty-five years after 'The Rushdie Affair', along comes *Jesus and Mo*

RALPH JONES argues out that the British media's attempt to protect the religious sensitivities of Muslims have done them more harm than good

On Valentine's Day, 1989, Salman Rushdie received a call from a BBC journalist to tell him that the Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini had issued him with a fatwah for writing the novel *The Satanic Verses*. This month marks a quarter of a century since the incident that ripped such a hole in Rushdie's life that his account of it – Joseph Anton (Rushdie's pseudonym when protected by police) – runs to over 600 pages. "The Rushdie affair", as it was known at the time, has been well documented and discussed. But the lid on its coffin was lifted a little in recent weeks as the result of two T-shirts worn by guests on the BBC's *The Big Questions* programme.

Chris Moos and Abhishek Phadnis chose to wear T-shirts bearing images from the online and *Freethinker* cartoon strip *Jesus and Mo*; one was of Jesus saying "Hey" to Mohammed and the prophet responding "How ya doin'?"; the other depicted the holy pair holding a banner reading "Stop drawing holy prophets in a disrespectful way NOW!" Mohammed adds: "If this doesn't work, I say we start burning stuff."

Maajid Nawaz, a Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate and chair of the anti-extremist think-tank the Quilliam Foundation, appeared on *The Big Questions* in the same studio as Moos and Phadnis, of the London School of Economics Students Union Atheist, Secularist and Humanist Society.

Nawaz said calmly on the programme that the cartoons did not offend him, and reiterated his point by saying on Twitter that "This Jesus & Mo cartoon is not offensive & I'm sure God is greater than to feel threatened by it." He accompanied his post with a copy of the first-mentioned cartoon.

Then came the death threats.

Let's be clear here: Maajid Nawaz was subjected to online death threats – as well as a ludicrous petition designed to deny him the right to run in a democratic election – not because he depicted Mohammed, but because he said that Allah is so great that he would not feel threatened by some cartoons featuring his earthly prophet.

In other words, in attempting to accommodate the views of others and lift Islam to



Abhishek Phadnis, left, and Chris Moos, centre, pictured wearing censored *Jesus and Mo* T-shirts at an LSE Freshers' Fair last year. They censored the shirts after being told the garments were 'offensive', but this wasn't enough for LSE officials, and the pair were warned that they would be ejected from the event if they did not replace their tops immediately.

a standing in which it would look positive and mature, he was hounded by numerous members of his own faith.

The similarities to the *Satanic Verses* débâcle do not begin and end with death threats issued as the result of works of fiction. They continue, as they did with the Danish cartoons in 2005, through the capitulation of the British media in surrendering to those howling for censorship.

Several media organisations come out of the sorry affair looking particularly bad. *Newsnight* decided not to give its audience a picture of the images in question during the section devoted entirely to an analysis of the images; an *Independent* article pointlessly obscured the T-shirts with a semi-transparent red line; Channel 4 made the bizarre decision to show viewers the Jesus section of the first cartoon, but not the Mohammed section, which they obscured with a big black blob. (Mohammed, remember, is saying

nothing more than "How ya doin'?"

As Charlie Klendjian of the Lawyers Secular Society points out, the outcome of this type of censorship is that not only does it reinforce the notion that the images are in some way X-rated to begin with, it robs the viewer of the ability to form their own opinion of the entire story. Being the broadcasters, Channel 4 and the BBC are perfectly entitled to do this; but it is safe to say they have outraged more people through censorship than they would have through open reportage. Many of those actually outraged would have been the Muslims the broadcaster patronisingly intended to protect.

Wrote Klendjian: "It's high time we all faced up to a very unsettling reality here: sharia law is alive and kicking in the United Kingdom in 2014, and so is its deadly blasphemy code. After Nawaz had tweeted the picture Mohammed Shafiq of the Ramadhan Foundation referred to him as 'Gustake



Rasool', which means 'Defamer of Prophets'. This is a religious and legal charge punishable by a death sentence in Pakistan. Nawaz travels regularly to Pakistan and has family there."

Stories pertaining to offence are unique in that they privilege the sensibilities of a minute sub-section of a population and thereby do a disservice to the larger section from which this sub-section is drawn. As Abhishek Phadnis said, "To show the cartoons is, in fact, the neutral position"; anything else means homogenising a large group of people and assuming (in this case wrongly) that you are serving their best interests.

Mohammed Shafiq of the Muslim youth organisation the Ramadhan Foundation looms large in this fiasco as the most pub-

lic of Nawaz's critics, backing as he did the petition to prevent Nawaz becoming an MP. He has since made peace with Nawaz in a reconciliation worded in such a way that one wonders why he didn't see in the first place how rashly he had reacted. Another development since the affair blew up is that the credibility of Nawaz's Quilliam Foundation has been called into question (not for the first time). This is an entirely different dispute.

The cartoons – and Nawaz's decision to post them online – exist independently of personal motive or political credibility. The discussion is about the images and the free discussion thereof.

It was the propensity of some writers and broadcasters to quiver and buckle in fear of being perceived as "Islamophobic" – or

simply in order to live a quiet life – that marked the Rushdie incident and marks Nawaz's story. At its heart the issue is not about whether or not the novel or cartoons are offensive but how we narrate and react to the fallout.

It was comforting to see writers like Nick Cohen and Tom Chivers jump to Nawaz's defence but there is a danger that since 1989 the issue has not advanced as far as atheists and liberal Muslims would have liked; that a desperate urge to avoid causing "offence" even in cases as trivial as this, still permeates the British press. While this kind of stranglehold exists – and even in an age in which the images are freely available online – the discussion about free speech will always have more than a touch of farce about it.

# Publisher agrees to trash book branded offensive to Hindus

PENGUIN Books India, part of Penguin Random House, has agreed to withdraw and destroy all copies of a 2009 book on Hinduism by an American professor to settle a lawsuit by a Hindu nationalist group that had objected to the book's portrayal of the religion.

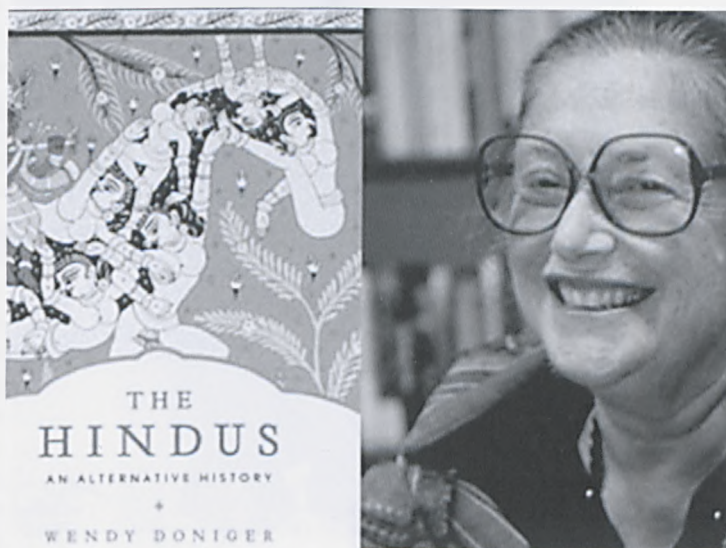
In a copy of the out-of-court settlement dated February 4, which has been widely circulating online, Penguin Books India said it would complete the withdrawal of *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, by Wendy Doniger, a University of Chicago religion professor, within six months.

In a leaked legal document, Penguin stated that: "It respects all religions worldwide."

An Indian cabinet minister, Jairam Ramesh, described the decision as "atrocious", and Vikram Sampath, an author and the organiser of the Bangalore Literary Festival said: "The answer to a book you don't agree with is another one – not a ban or withdrawal. If this trend continues, we will be left with chick lit books only, unfortunately."

The lawsuit had been filed by Dina Nath Batra, the head of Shiksha Bacho Andolan, a Hindu educational organisation in New Delhi, in 2011.

Prior to the lawsuit, he filed a notice to Doniger and Penguin Group USA, then the parent of Penguin Books India, in 2010, say-



ing that Doniger's book "has hurt the religious feelings of millions of Hindus" and was therefore in breach of section 295A of the Indian Penal Code.

The book, which was released in the United States and India in 2009, offended Hindus because of its "tendency to over-eroticise" the religion, said Ashok Malik, a journalist who reviewed *The Hindus* when it first came out. "I thought it was overdone," he commented. However, he did not support Penguin Books India's decision to withdraw the book.

"Why did Penguin go for an out-of-court settlement? They could have waited for a judgment. This is part of a larger trend where publishers keep away from controversial topics." Batra said in an interview that Shiksha

Bachao Andolan would continue to battle books that hurt religious sentiment, and Madan Mohan Sharma, a member of Bharatiya Shiksha, a sister organisation, said the group felt vindicated by Penguin Books India's decision.

In an email to India Ink, Doniger said that she was "angry and disappointed, and deeply concerned for freedom of speech in India".

The book is not banned in India, and it is still available as an e-book on Amazon.

Said Nilanjana S Roy, an author who is also a New York Times op-ed contributor: "If a smaller pub-

lisher wants to get the rights transferred and publish it, they could.

"But most publishers would not want this. Going to the courts is not what a publisher wants to do."

Roy said Penguin Books India's settlement sets a bad example. "There will be more people who would put pressure on the publishers, and they would not have the resources or the time to stand up for each of their books."

Doniger's scholarly work has drawn opposition from Hindu groups in India and overseas. During a lecture in London in 2003, she was almost hit by an egg thrown by a Hindu nationalist who was angry at the "sexual thrust" of her interpretation of the "sacred" *Ramayana*.



# Becoming heinous: How the Baptists went from heroes to arch-villains in three scant centuries

**DALE DEBAKCY** examines the descent into 'shambling self-parody' of a religious movement founded on concern for equality and intellectual freedom

In the roll call of modern religious grotesqueries, few groups figure so prominently as the Baptists. Homosexuality correction centers. Hunting camps. Abortion clinic violence. [Godhatesfags.com](http://Godhatesfags.com). Creationist textbooks. All of these, and so many more humanity-crushing ideas, have sprung from the collective evil genius of the modern Baptist movement, and in particular the Southern Baptist Convention. How did a movement which, at its founding, stood for the most progressive and liberal ideas of its age, descend to a state of such shambling self-parody?

The answer lies in the twisting brambles of United States history. The first Baptist church in America was founded in 1639 by one of the truly and legitimately great men of this nation's past, Roger Williams. He was unique in our increasingly blemished pantheon of colonial figures in that he did not believe the government had the right to enforce infractions of religious practice, and in his desire to deal honestly with Native Americans. Of course, such a man had no place in the religiously authoritarian structure of 17th century Salem, and he was driven into the woods, quite literally, to survive as best he could.

Survive he did, however, and he founded our first colony which held religious freedom as a central organizing principle, where the content of your mind would not interfere with the safety of you or your family. This was a Baptism of profound conscience, founded with a concern for equality and intellectual freedom, and its subsequent history bore out these con-



*Roger Williams (1603-1683) founder of Rhode Island, is depicted here being driven from Massachusetts into the wilderness because of religious differences.*

*Illustration Bettman/CORBIS*

cerns. When slavery ran rampant in the South, it was the Baptists and Methodists who stood in the front ranks against it.

And yet, the Baptist church was, even then, at its moment of greatest heroism, slowly nurturing the seeds of its own decline. The true explosion in its membership occurred with the waves of Revivals that swept America in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The emphasis on emotion, on the subjective experience of religion, attracted

droves of followers, and not only from the educated classes, where these movements usually thrash themselves out.

Thousands were told that what they experienced as true was true, and once that sapling of a notion was planted, it inevitably outgrew and overshadowed the more fragile undergrowth of compassion and tolerance that Williams had risked everything to establish a century before.

Southern planters and their families wanted slavery to be okay, felt that it must be so, and with the official sanction of Awakening-wrought theology, were able to convince themselves that it was even godly, and the preachers followed suit. In these torments of self-justification, the Southern Baptist Convention was born. The religion that began upon the most advanced principles of human dignity became the deft accomplice of gross degradation.

Now, to be fair, the SBC did apologize for its overwhelmingly racist origin story (though not until 1995). However, it doesn't appear

to have actually learned anything from it, structurally. The same underpinnings of blustering confidence in the righteousness of one's own life prejudices remained, even when the subject of that prejudice shifted.

The genius of Baptism as a religious denomination is its dressing of personal revulsion as a matter of mere scriptural adherence. In essence, they provide a brilliant proxy for your own hatred, allowing you the full scope of that hatred practically while still claiming a benevolent soul personally.



"We don't hate the sinner, we hate the sin," is the classic line of a movement filled with people who want to keep their low-hanging beliefs but not lose their friends. It's immensely self-deluded, of course, but also a very powerful combination for those who want the security of traditionalism but can't stand to be judged themselves. It's a flexible position ideally suited to keep awful practices alive.

This is why Southern Baptism has served for so long as the last refuge for social and religious ideas that more contemplative branches of Christianity have long since abandoned as untenable upon the briefest of reflections. Their current position statements are a veritable time capsule of the accumulated dross of American prejudice:

- *We affirm God's plan for marriage and sexual intimacy — one man, and one woman, for life. Homosexuality is not a "valid alternative lifestyle".*

- *A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ. She, being in the image of God as is her husband and thus equal to him, has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and to serve as his helper in managing the household and nurturing the next generation.*

- *We ask the people of the world to conform to Christ and His Word, and not to our merely human traditions.*

- *Procreation is a gift from God, a precious trust reserved for marriage. At the moment of*

*conception, a new being enters the universe, a human being, a being created in God's image. This human being deserves our protection, whatever the circumstances of conception.*

Notice the artful framing of that last phrase, which somehow makes of a rape a miracle without even having the principle to name it as such. This blend of random prejudice parading as scriptural adherence and personal moral cowardice has been with the church for a century and a half now, and has found its fullest flowering in that nadir of humanity, the Westboro Baptist Church.

They created the site [godhatesfags.com](http://godhatesfags.com), picket funerals, and in every way are so thoroughly loathsome that even other Baptist churches can't publically be seen to tolerate them.

And yet, their difference is just one of tact and method, not of belief. Westboro's approach towards social truth and how it is revealed and upheld is not substantially different than that of mainstream Baptism. Unlike with other religions, which have developed supplementary principles of morality against which personal opinion must be checked, the only requirement in the Baptist stated platform is the ability to find a line of scripture that approximately matches your opinion.

There is no secondary check, no way to know if you've gone too far or considered too little. Search through the Basic Beliefs section of the SBC's website, and you'll

find a good deal about political hot-button topics, and nothing whatsoever on how to be a basically good person.

This lop-sidedness is, I have to admit at least some happiness in reporting, finally putting the brakes to Baptism's 20th century juggernaut. It is still the largest Protestant denomination in the USA, but it is now experiencing a membership decline for the first time since the 19th century. Putting all of their efforts into the creation of an all-hatred-yet-all-innocence façade stitched together by sumptuous amounts of doublethink was very effective for a world where adversarial thought was the order of the day.

That's not really the case now, in a world intimately reliant upon cooperation for its basic functioning. The luxury of writing off different strips of humanity that we could afford in, say, 1952 or 1985, is too dear now, and fewer and fewer people are willing to buy themselves such a strange-fitting self-conception at the price of their own mental flexibility.

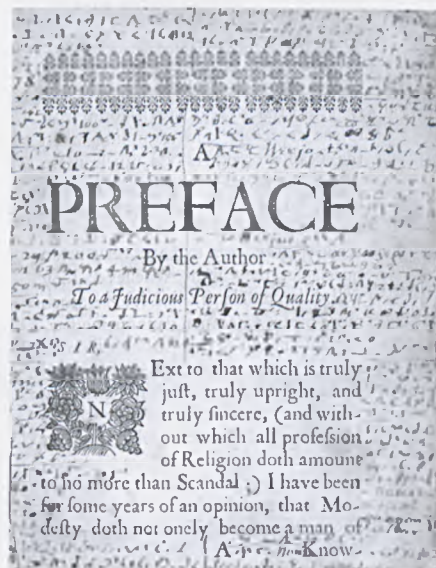
Maybe the SBC will get smart and return itself to the high level of its 17th century betters. More likely, it will continue its policy of taking a century and a half to realize specific errors without noting the common factor that binds them all. But when that time comes, when it's finally ready to apologize, to gays and women and teachers and doctors, will there be anybody left to listen?

## Williams' last book decoded after 250 years

IN 2012 it was reported that a mysterious book written in code by Baptist church founder Roger Williams had finally been deciphered. For around 250 years scholars had been trying to make sense of the book, believed to have been written by Williams in 1679 during the last four years of his life.

The *Daily Mail* reported that a crack team of Brown University students decoded the book after developing a statistical tool that allowed them to translate the curious characters.

Historians call the now-readable writings the most significant addition to Williams scholarship in a generation or more. Williams is Rhode Island's founder and best known as the first figure to argue for the principle of the separation of church and state that would later be enshrined in the Bill of Rights. His coded writings are in the form of notes in the margins of a book at the university's John Carter Brown Library. The nearly 250-page volume, *An Essay Towards the Reconciling of Differences Among Christians*, was donated in the 1800s



*The preface to the encrypted book*

and included a handwritten letter identifying Williams as the notes' author — though even that was uncertain at first.

A group including former library director Edward Widmer, Williams scholar and

Rhode Island College history professor emeritus J Stanley Lemons and others at Brown started trying to unravel the so-called "mystery book" a few years ago.

But the most intense work began in 2012 after the university opened up the challenge to undergraduates, several of whom launched an independent project.

Most of the decoding was done by senior math major Lucas Mason-Brown, then a 21-year-old from Belmont, Massachusetts. Mason-Brown was able to translate scattered fragments, and colleagues determined there were three separate sections of notes.

Two are Williams' writings on other books, a 17th century historical geography and a medical text. The third — and most intriguing — is 20 pages of Williams' original thoughts on one of the major theological issues of the day: infant baptism.

Williams also weighed in on the conversion of Native Americans, implying it was being achieved through treachery and coercion.



# The Body Beautiful

Monotheistic religions have never been entirely comfortable with sex. Doctrines within various groupings of Christianity, Judaism and Islam often regard sex with distaste, a function to be endured, not enjoyed. In this extract from his latest novel, *The Trouble with Sophie Gresham*, **ENVER CARIM** reflects on the issue.

**T**he windows of our hotel suite overlook the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens on one side and the shops and restaurants of Kensington High Street on the other, and in the warmth of the sunlight streaming in from both directions on our tenth wedding anniversary my lingering thought is how fortunate I am to be sharing the bed with Sophie. We've enjoyed each other repeatedly to celebrate the occasion and are having a long lie-in. In our relaxed, sexually satiated mood Sophie tells me what she's discovered in her research about religion.

It occurs to me as she talks that, in all fairness, we can't blame St Paul for his misrepresentations of the human body. We have the benefit of hindsight, whereas he used to be, according to the Bible itself, a blasphemer and a violent man. We have much more knowledge than even the most learned scholars in the past, people whose style of understanding was steeped in ignorance and superstition.

So the right thing for us to do is be magnanimous. We should forgive St Paul for his vilification of the human body, his dire castigation of flesh and blood. He didn't know better. He didn't have a clue two thousand years ago what a magnificently complex phenomenon the human body was with its skeleton, spinal cord, muscular and nervous and endocrine systems, its ligaments and tendons, all controlled by a brain weighing about one kilogram and containing approximately 100 billion neurons connected to 200 trillion synapses forming circuits: the neural network *par excellence*, integrating everything into a single coherent conscious person.

St Paul knew next to nothing about human anatomy. He didn't know that our buttocks, far from being proof of our primitive origins, only came into existence about two million years ago when the bipedal homi-

nids known as *Homo erectus* achieved the upright stance and began walking on two legs when they left the forested parts of Africa and started to inhabit the open savannah in search of food. The buttock muscles then took on a new structure and spherical shape, and the hands of this species, our forebears, being freed for other uses, had a transformative impact on the human brain and on the nature of the connection between the skull and the spinal column.

Beautiful, sensuous backsides, lovely buns, have resulted from our superior posture and are intimately linked with the complex development of our superior brains which have more than doubled in size over the last two million years to around 1,350 cubic centimetres. The body beautiful, far from being a sinful relic of the past, was one of the earliest signs of our transcendent future.

People all over the world, in all cultures, find the arse, the butt, the bum such an alluring part of human anatomy because its shape, its benign rhythmic geometry, is not bestial at all or primitive, but the physiological correlate of our brain power. It was determined by evolution and the force of gravity when our primal ancestors started walking on two legs across the open plateaux and grasslands of our birthing continent.

No other species on this planet has a round, curvaceous posterior protruding permanently from the spinal column, protruding with such erotic appeal, and no other species is numerate or literate or capable of music, poetry or even the vaguest abstract concepts. None other can really, truly smile or laugh.

In my brain is my butt and in my butt is my brain: a maxim easy to remember for those who insist that knowledge come in the form of soundbites or simplistic jingles.

It turns out from Sophie's research that if, due to sex starvation and the delirium built up by unassuaged longings, a man had a wet

dream, a "nocturnal emission" from dreaming of sex with someone friendly and forthcoming, he had to jump out of bed, kneel on the stone floor and reel off seven penitential psalms. Then in the morning he had to recite another thirty psalms. If he had an erection, he had to suppress it, look down on it as despicable, confess abjectly and beg his god for mercy.

"Masturbation was no way out of the maddening process," Sophie says.

"Why not?"

"Because masturbation was a sin greater even than harlotry."

"According to?"

"According to Thomas Aquinas," Sophie explains. "It was Thomas Aquinas who called a woman 'a failed man'. He was so clever, so far ahead of his time, that he taught that rain, hail and wind were the work of demons. He hated women so much that he taught that a devil could change into a man and fuck a woman by becoming an incubus."

"A what?"

"An incubus."

"What the hell's that?"

"It's a form of male that lies on top of a woman and makes her pregnant. And the devil could also become a succubus – lying beneath – and be made pregnant by a human man. That's the kind of rubbish religion propagates," Sophie says.

She pauses in thought for a while. I notice the shine of her hair in the sunlight. "That was how monsters were believed to be born," she continues presently, "by sex across metaphysical barriers, sex between a horny devil and a lustful human woman, or between a guy who hadn't got it off in ages and a devil lying under him disguised physically as a woman. It was congress of this kind that gave birth to monsters with the heads of animals and the tails of fish and which had to be fed a special, requisite food."

"What kind of food was that?"





The photograph used to illustrate Enver Carim's extract is of Canadian actor James Gangl – raised a Roman Catholic – who received rave reviews for his role in a 2011 play, *Sex, Religion, & Other Hang-Ups*

“Can’t you guess?”

“No, I can’t.”

“C’mon, Charlie,” Sophie says and turns on her pillow to face me, “have a guess. Show me what insight you have into religion.”

“I just know it’s blind, whether intentionally or not. How’m I supposed to know what sort of food demons have to be fed? You’re the one who’s done the research, not me. You’re the one who knows about this special cuisine. So it’s for *you* to tell *me*.”

“All right, then. Human children. Human

children had to be stolen from their parents and carried away to be cut up into pieces and fed to the demons.”

“What a horrible idea. I wonder if Baldock’s heard of it.”

“He won’t let on if he has. Evangelists pick and choose only the bits of religion that make them feel superior. You can ask him this afternoon when we get to Chesterton for Danny’s resurrection ceremony.

“As for women,” Sophie adds, lying beside me in the big hotel bed in the morning of our tenth wedding anniversary, “they were

beyond redemption. Women were the devil in disguise. Women were scheming temptresses destabilising men’s integrity with their good looks, their long hair, the shape of their tits and the way their backsides wiggled when they walked. Women were so full of wickedness that they couldn’t contain their evil essence which consequently poured forth from between their legs every month in a filthy red slurry that smelled to high heaven.”

• Extracted from the novel *The Trouble with Sophie Gresham* by Enver Carim. All rights reserved.

## Surprise expressed after nun becomes a mum

A NUN in Italy has given birth to a baby boy after being rushed from her convent to hospital in January with severe stomach cramps.

The nun was taken to hospital from the Little Disciples of Jesus convent in Campomoro near Rieti.

The woman, originally from El Salvador, said she had no idea she was pregnant after giving birth to her son.

The Italian news agency ANSA quoted her as saying: “I did not know I was pregnant. I only felt a stomach pain.”

The nun has named her child Francesco (Francis). The name is hugely popular in Italy where St Francis of Assisi is the national patron saint.

The nun is responsible for managing an old people’s home. Local folk immediately began collecting donations

and clothes for the new mother, who is expected to keep the baby, according to reports.

Simone Petrangeli, the mayor of Rieti has asked inhabitants of the small city, which has a population of just 47,700, to respect her privacy.

Nuns at the convent, according to local media reports, are said to be “very surprised” by the birth.



# François Cavanna dies aged 90

But why, wonders **BARRY DUKE**, was the passing of this French atheist, writer, cartoonist, satirist and animal rights campaigner virtually ignored by the world's English media

**A**t the end of January, 2014, France lost François Cavanna. The country's most inspirational atheist – a prolific writer, satirist and cartoonist – died at the age of 90, but his passing merited hardly a mention in the world's mainstream English-speaking media, a fact that both astonished and infuriated *Free-thinker* subscriber Nelly Moia, who lives in Luxembourg and is an enormous admirer of Cavanna and his work.

A while back, Moia was kind enough to send me a special edition of *Charlie Hebdo*, a satirical journal founded by Cavanna. Beautifully illustrated with photographs and some extraordinarily irreverent and “blasphemous” cartoons, it was a *paean* to Cavanna's life and work, and it pained me that I could not get the best out of the publication because I do not read or speak French.

Now while Cavanna's name may mean little or nothing to most English speakers, *Charlie Hebdo* will almost certainly ring bells, for it made worldwide news back in 2011 when its offices were firebombed by Muslim fanatics. The destruction of the

publication's headquarters in Boulevard Davout in the city's 20th *arrondissement* was their response to an announcement that latest issue would feature the “prophet” Mohammed as “Editor in Chief”.

Despite this outrage, the magazine *did* appear. The front cover showed an image of Mohammed saying “100 lashes if you are not dying of laughter”, and the back page depicted the “prophet” wearing a red nose and declaring “Yes, Islam is compatible with humour.”

*Charlie Hebdo* was already in Islam's bad books. In 2007, it grabbed the headlines after two French Muslim organisations, the Great Mosque of Paris and the Union of Islamic Organisations of France, initiated a criminal action against *Charlie Hebdo* for “public insults against a group of people because they belong to a religion”, after the magazine reprinted cartoons of the “prophet” which had originally appeared in a Danish newspaper in 2005 and provoked protests by Muslims worldwide.

The publication's then executive editor Philippe Val was, however, acquitted and

hailed the outcome as a victory for freedom of expression. He said at the time “If we no longer have the right to ridicule those who inflict terror on us, that's a problem.”

The journal started life in 1960 when Georges Bernier and François Cavanna launched a monthly magazine entitled *Hara-Kiri*, which quickly became branded as “dumb and nasty” (“*bête et méchant*”). The editorial team gleefully seized on this phrase and made it its official slogan. The publication was banned in 1961.

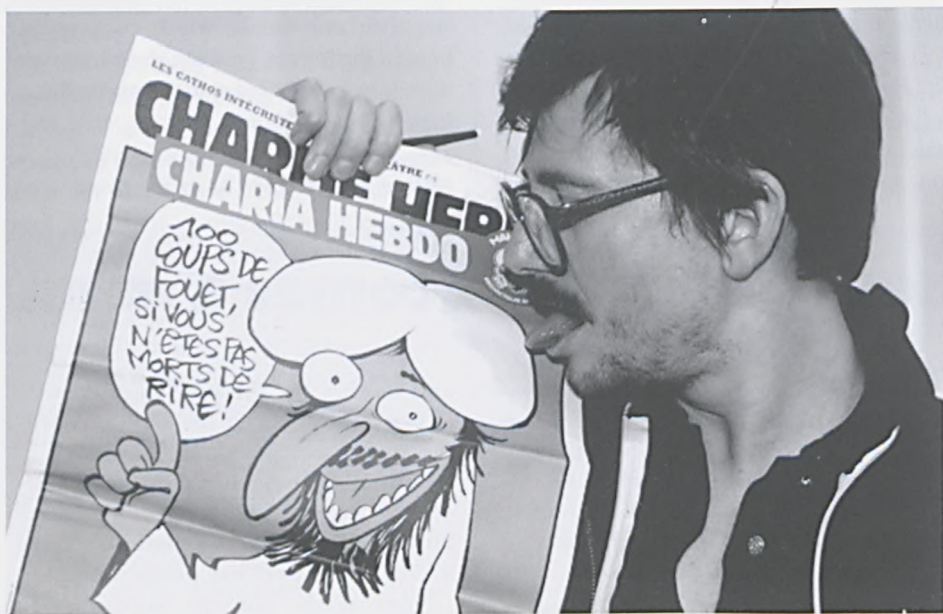
In 1966, however, it reappeared and in 1969 *Hara-Kiri Hebdo*, later renamed *L'Hebdo Hara-Kiri*, was launched after the team decided to produce a weekly magazine in addition to its monthly issue.

Things again turned sour following the death of French President Charles De Gaulle, who died in 1970 in his small hometown of Colombey, ten days before a fire in a club caused the death of 146 people. The publication released a cover that spoofed the mainstream press coverage of the tragedy, and the publication was banned once again.

To side step the ban, the team then decided to change its title to *Charlie Hebdo*. Like Britain's *Private Eye*, *Charlie Hebdo* specialises in amusing and provocative covers. Unlike *Private Eye*, it pushes the envelope far further than any British satirical magazine, and is frequently accused of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia – and even Anglophobia.

Reacting in 2011 to calls by UK Euro-sceptics for Britain to leave the EU, it ran a cover that posed the question “But who wants the English in Europe anyway?” This was accompanied by a cartoon of two “typical” English folk: a woman in an ill-fitting Union Jack T-shirt, with a tattoo that says “Fuck Off”. She a navel piercing and her belly is lobster pink. A little gent in bowler hat and pinstripe trousers, clutching a broom, his skin a very unhealthy grey, is shown as her companion.

A French word for the British is *rosbifs*. It's probably in retaliation to us calling



Charlie Hebdo cartoonist Luz poses provocatively with the copy of the publication thought to have led to the destruction of CH's offices.





Cavanna kept his devastatingly good looks and the mischievous twinkle in his eyes well into old age

them frogs. Commenting on that cartoon in the *Guardian* in December 2011, Johnathan Jones wrote: "It's actually more subtle than it looks. The cartoon gleefully combines stereotypes old and new. The man in the bowler hat is not a contemporary Briton at all. He's the ghost of a long-ago city gent. Is this why his skin is grey – because he's dead? The pairing of the two grotesques adds up to a pertinent satire on Britain's true curse – our class system. *Charlie Hebdo* sees our Etonian-led nationalism as the unholy marriage of Britain's bloodless aristocracy and bloodthirsty working class. A bit like Wellington's army at Waterloo, I suppose."

However, it's *Charlie Hebdo*'s strong anti-clerical content that has, over the years, caused the greatest offence. Not surprising, given that it came about as a result of Cavanna long-held hatred of religion.

Around 20 years ago he penned a book entitled *Lettre ouverte aux culs-bénits* (*Open Letter to the cul-blessed*). There is no English term for *culs-bénits* (or cul-blessed), Moia said. "You only have 'bigots', but in French there is the lovely *cul-bénit* (blessed arse) and his book is hilarious!

Regrettably, it has never been

translated into English, but I did gather, via Google Translate, that *Lettre ouverte aux culs-bénits* is essentially a call to arms to atheists, a plea not simply to stand by, with "arms

dangling" and permit the "hideous resurrection of the old swamp monsters we had really thought about to die a natural death".

In attacking religion, Cavanna ordered atheists not to be "too discreet, too timid, too resigned!"

He warned that, if non-believers stood idly by, complacent in the face of increasing Islamic fundamentalism, other religions would be inspired to aggressively spread their intolerance and fanaticism. And he predicted that Christian and Jewish zealots would open the gates to ultra-nationalist groups and allow them gain power.

"This is by no means improbable, given the accelerating state of decay in our democracies. The twenty-first century will be a century of persecution and bonfires ..."

Cavanna was also a strong advocate of animal rights, but I was only able to find one English reference on the Internet to this aspect of his life. Someone called "Jocelyne" a French expat living in Ireland, posted a note on a pet loss message board.

After questioning the "religious tone of so many of your messages",



(Continued on p14)



# points of view..



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

## DAWKINS REVIEW

PETER Sutherland's quibbling review of Richard Dawkins' autobiography prompted me to download a copy to my Kindle.

Yes, there is a good deal of detail about his childhood. Peter calls this self-indulgent but it is hard to see how an autobiography in two parts can avoid a narrative of one's early, formative experience.

Sutherland also questions the interest to the reader of Dawkins's research experience under Niko Tinbergen at Oxford.

I am still scratching my head wondering what Peter would have liked to include in-

stead. People rarely like the same wallpaper and so it is with books.

I thoroughly enjoyed Dawkins' story. I am his close contemporary and have a similar background of boarding school and helping out at the family farm.

I wish I could have shared these experiences with him. Richard is often portrayed as a dour anti-religious militant but if you have met him, read him and listened to his talks and debates, as I have, you realise that he is a gentle, civilised man, who is concerned that his science is not misunderstood and distorted by religious interest.

Apart from his well-known skill with

prose he should also be appreciated for his mischievous sense of humour which comes through in the book in the form of many amusing anecdotes. I am very much looking forward to the second instalment, hopefully available in two years time.

Peter Sutherland has perhaps hurried through his read with indecent haste, how otherwise could he have concluded that Niko Tinbergen was Norwegian, when it is very clear in the book (Dawkins mentions his Dutch accent) that, I am proud to say, he was a compatriot of mine.

Tony Akkermans  
Shropshire

# Farewell, François Cavanna

she brought Cavanna to readers' attention:

"Not that long ago, I was reading a book written by French author François Cavanna. Cavanna is an open atheist, a firm believer in evolution. And, he loves animals too, and has kept many of them (dogs, cats, poultry...)

"He supports animal shelters and campaigns for several causes (fur trade, bull fighting, hunting, etc are all things he absolutely abhors).

"As Cavanna talks of the animals he had as companions, he also reflects on why he loves them. Certainly, his experience in eastern Europe during the last war made a long-lasting impression on him, and horrified him – for life – at cruelty, death and violence, and at the stupidity of people for inflicting so much suffering on other living creatures, human or not.

"In substance, Cavanna says ... 'don't tell me about St Francis of Assisi ... I have no heaven to gain'; 'why do we have to consider our species as coming first, why do we care so much about US, humans, always US ... before any other species?; We only have time for animals who prove to be sweet looking ...or eatable...'; 'I know some people think animal welfare should not be taken seriously but ... animals can't talk for themselves, when we talk and talk about ourselves all the time...'"



Two Charlie Hebdo's covers that satirise Christianity. The first depicts Jesus saying "Next year I will do the resurrection 'thing' again" and the second is a rather rude portrayal of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost

Cavanna was born in Nogent-sur-Marne. Although raised in France, he grew up surrounded by Italian immigrants due to his father's being from Italy. He treated this life in his books *Les Ritals* and *L'oeil du lapin*.

At the age of 16, he took up various part-time jobs. He delivered letters for the postal service, sold fruits and vegetables, and was a mason's apprentice. His journalistic début came in 1945 when he began to work for the daily *Libération*.

Later, he turned to autobiographical writing. *Les Ritals* dealt with his childhood, while *Les Russkoffs* (and later *Maria*) treated his experience in World War II. *Les Russkoffs* was the novel for which he won the *Prix Interallié* in 1979.

In *Bête et méchant* and *Les yeux plus grands que le ventre* he tells of his hilarious experiences working at *Hara Kiri* and *Charlie Hebdo*. Cavanna's final book, *Lune de miel*, deals with his Parkinson's disease.



## GENDER SEPARATION

JOHN Lauritsen's letter (*Points of View*, February) acceding to sex-segregated seating in university events – including lectures, debates, and other meetings – is a male-chauvinist retreat from the last half-century's progress (at least in the West) towards equality. "Someone offended by sex-segregated events needn't attend them," he says. Just as there was no need, of course, a century ago, for university education to be extended to women.

During my presidency of the National Secular Society, I was expected to honour requests to present the case for secularism to university students, and as these events were often arranged by Muslim groups I was increasingly faced with a sex-segregated audience.

On one occasion a man who had inadvertently sat in the female sector of the hall was actually threatened with violence.

I began pre-empting the situation by writing to the faculty beforehand, asking for an assurance that mixed seating would be allowed, but the usual response was that I should put it to the vote of those present. As most of them were Muslims, the result of

this was predictably in favour of segregation. Even the women generally voted for it, and when I questioned them afterwards about it they replied that sitting next to men often meant being groped.

I knew this to be likely, as I myself had had my bottom pinched by a Muslim man in the open air.

The reason is obviously that these men had, all their lives, been denied non-family female proximity.

Barbara Smoker  
Bromley

I AM writing in response to John Lauritsen's letter last month's edition of the *Freethinker*.

He refers to sex segregation being practised by orthodox Jews as if this excuses sex segregation practised by Muslims – it doesn't.

He mixes up references to sex segregation practised in a private space – a synagogue – with sex segregation practised in a public space, providing a public service – buses.

Is he really saying that he has no objection to women being told to get to the back of the bus?

Perhaps he also finds nothing wrong with apartheid?

His idea of "live and let live" seems to mean: "let the gender fascists walk all over human rights".

Barbara Sanders

## PORTRAYAL OF ISLAM

I DO not go along with the way discrimination against non-believers in the *Dar al-Islam* (House of Islam) is presented in the *Freethinker*. Your reporting suggests that there is something odd going on, whereas the truth is that if it were *not* happening, something odd *would* be going on.

Islam is not going to change because scholars such as Dr R. Scruton, Bernard Lewis and Tom Holland have observed the system doing what it is programmed to do.

So I must add that the lurid depiction of how things are in the photograph on the front page of the January issue of the *Freethinker* gives a false impression. Quite simply, Islam is a programme to rub out the non-Islam, so of course the Bangladeshi are protesting. They would be liars if they weren't. As their holy book requires, the likes of us should be put down.

Keith Bell  
Wales

## DOMESTIC TERRORISM

DENIS Watkins (*Points of View*, February) suggests that we address domestic terrorism by trying to undermine Muslims' religious beliefs. I have a slightly more practical suggestion.

It is Western intervention in majority Muslim countries and support for Israel's appalling policies that fuels the anger many Muslims feel. Since this intervention and support is not even in *our* interest (and is often illegal in any case) we should oppose it. Last year's vote against war with Syria shows that we can win this argument.

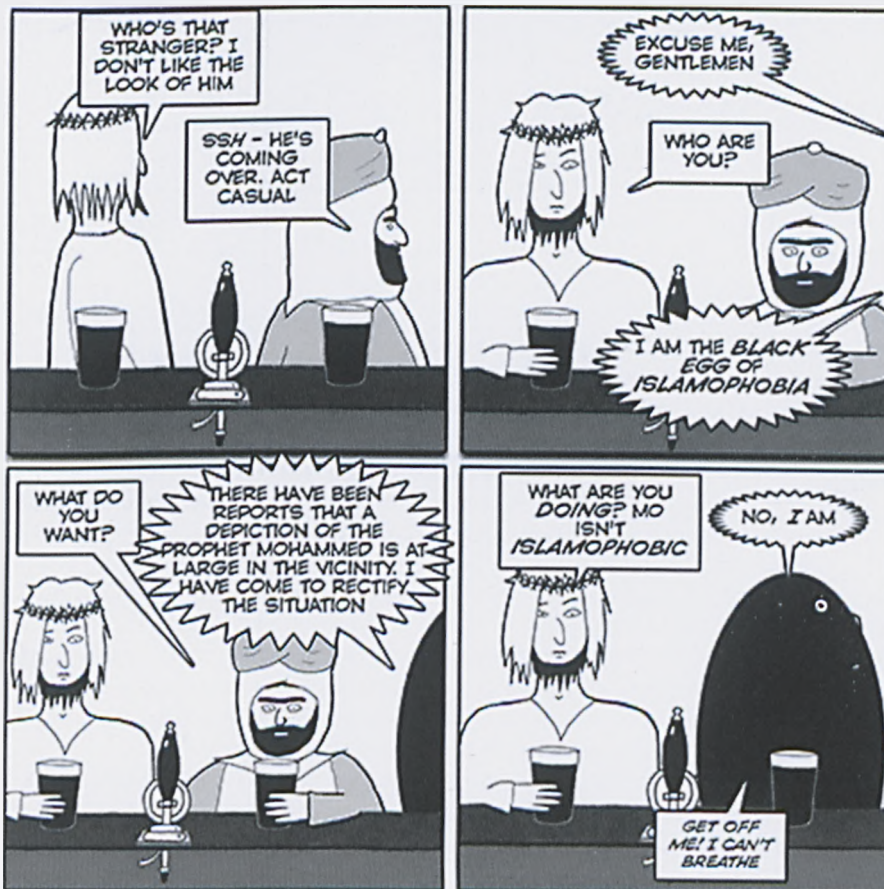
David Flint  
London

## CAPITAL QUESTION

IF it's atheist and humanist (rather than Atheist and Humanist), shouldn't it also be christian, jew, muslim, sikh etc?

R M Atkinson  
Edinburgh

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# Ultra-Orthodox Jews rampage over new conscription law



*One of dozens of protesters who were arrested when they took to the streets in Israel*

WATER cannon, stun grenades and police mounted on horses had to be used against rioting ultra-Orthodox Jews last month. They took to the streets in a number of Israeli cities to protest attempts to draft them into the army.

The violent protests came just days after a Supreme Court ruling ordered that funding be halted to seminaries whose students dodge the draft.

Ultra-Orthodox Jews have for years been exempt from military service, which is compulsory for other Jewish Israelis. The arrangement has caused widespread resentment and featured prominently in last year's election, after which the ultra-Orthodox parties lost ground and found themselves outside the governing coalition.

The new government immediately began pushing a bill that will alter the existing system to gradually reduce the number of exemptions and require all to register for service.

While it awaits parliamentary approval, the court ruling – followed by Finance Minister Yair Lapid's freezing of the funds – marked the first concrete sanction against draft dodgers and sparked angry reactions from ultra-Orthodox leaders who claim the military will expose their youth to secularism and undermine their devout lifestyle.

The opposition spilled into the streets in the form of about a half-dozen simultaneous demonstrations that snarled traffic for several hours. Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said some 400 activists tried to block the entrance to Jerusalem, while demonstrators hurled stones at police and set a patrol car on fire in the southern city of Ashdod. Elsewhere, about 2,000 protesters blocked a major highway in central Israel.

Police on horses beat back demonstrators with clubs and used stun grenades to clear the roads. Two policemen were wounded and 35 protesters were arrested, Rosenfeld said.

The issue of army service is at the core of a cultural war over the place of ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israeli society. The ultra-Orthodox, who make up about eight percent of Israel's eight million citizens, largely have been allowed to skip compulsory military service to pursue their religious studies.

Older men often avoid full employment and collect welfare stipends while continuing to study full time.

The ultra-Orthodox insist their young men serve the nation through prayer and study, thus preserving Jewish learning and heritage, and maintaining a pious way of life that has kept the Jewish people alive through centuries of persecution.

Leaders of the community, which in Hebrew is known as "Haredim," or those who fear God, say their followers would rather sit in jail than join the military. They charge their ancient brand of Judaism is under siege and warn of an uprising if parliament approves the draft plan.

Yair Sheleg, an expert on the Israeli religious sector at the non-partisan Israel Democracy Institute, said February's outburst of anger reflected a genuine rage over the proposed plan but also a show of strength to try to limit its impact.

"They understand that things can't go on the way they have and they will have to make some concessions to the state, but they are hoping to limit the damage. For the first time, they are starting to really be affected," Sheleg said.