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the freethinker

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The future of the *Freethinker*: important news for our supporters

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By DAN BYE, Chair of G W Foote & Co Ltd

The Board of GW Foote and Co, publishers of the *Freethinker*, is proud and excited to announce plans to secure the future of the magazine by re-launching as an Internet-only publication.

The *Freethinker* has been published – either weekly or monthly – without a break since our first issue in 1881. But the *Freethinker* has never been a profitable publication, and we have relied for our survival on donations, legacies and subsidies for most, if not all, of our 133-year history.

Our amazing record of publication, despite crises such as the prosecution of G W Foote for blasphemy, and war, has been maintained thanks to the energy, generosity and dedication of its editors, writers, publishers and readers: we pay tribute to them all.

But times change. Younger freethinkers who might have taken out a subscription in the past can now get the news and comment they need from the Internet, for free.

The National Secular Society has moved away from the advocacy of atheism, and no longer promotes our magazine to its members. Financially, our losses are no longer sustainable, and there is no realistic prospect of increasing readership to break-even level.

The Board has therefore had to make the sad and difficult decision to cease the publication of the paper edition of the magazine after the May edition. However, we believe the *Freethinker's* distinctive radical voice is needed as much as ever, and we will continue publishing at a re-developed and re-launched www.freethinker.co.uk. The new site will not only feature daily updates of news of interest to freethink-

ers, but will carry many more features and op-ed pieces from writers across the globe. We also plan on developing a comprehensive archive of the most important and entertaining articles that have appeared in the *Freethinker* over almost a century and a half.

We hope that this decision will enable us to promote atheism and progressive secular values for at least another 130 years.

Over the last several years we have seen many magazines close or convert to Internet-only publication in order to cut costs and reach a wider audience. The *Freethinker* faces many of the same challenges. It costs over £40,000 a year to publish on paper, but over the last decade our annual losses have increased remorselessly – they are currently running at £30,000 a year.

Our current blog reaches many thousands more readers than receive the paper magazine; we get more visitors to the website every month than ever saw the paper even at the height of our blasphemous notoriety.

If we did not take action, we would be facing the closure of the *Freethinker* within a few years. By taking these difficult decisions now, we can fund improvements to our web presence and do what we can to ensure that the unique and historic *Freethinker* name will be around for generations to come. We hope we will continue to enjoy the support and generosity of our current readers in pursuit of what George Meredith called “the best of causes”. The Board will be writing to all our subscribers over the next few weeks to formally notify you of the changes, thank you for your support for the print *Freethinker* over the years, and invite you to continue to support us online.



14.—NOAH'S ARK.

And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark . . . The same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.—*Gen. vii., 7, 11.*

The *Freethinker* began using 'blasphemous' cartoons early in 1882 with a series called 'Comic Bible Sketches' after its founder, George William Foote saw similar items in a French periodical. The one above – showing Noah thumbing his nose at God – is particularly relevant today, given the controversy raging around the Paramount blockbuster, *Noah* (see p5)

Shut up he explained

OPHELIA BENSON EXAMINES THE RISIBLE LEGAL LANGUAGE THAT PROMPTED THE DESTRUCTION OF *THE HINDUS: AN ALTERNATIVE HISTORY*

India is the world's largest democracy, but democracy by itself unfortunately does not entail freedom of enquiry or respect for human rights. India is a democracy but not currently a liberal democracy.

This fact was illustrated in February when Penguin India agreed to withdraw a book by the University of Chicago scholar Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. Penguin India agreed to withdraw and pulp all its remaining copies of the book after an out-of-court settlement of a lawsuit it had been fighting for four years.

There was outrage; writers protested; Index on Censorship and PEN International protested; readers protested. Sales of the book, which was published in 2010, shot up, so that's one in the eye for the people who sued – but all the same a terrible precedent was set, and for the most absurd and footling of reasons.

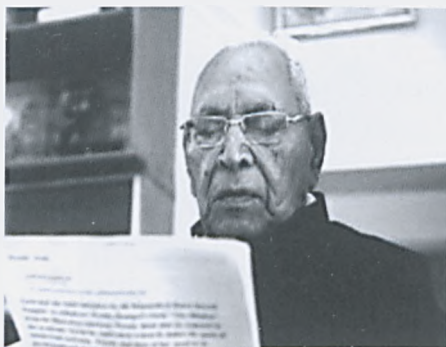
Perhaps you think I exaggerate. Perhaps you think the reasons can't be that bad, or the court would have thrown the suit out. Well get comfortable, because I'm going to give you samples of that lawsuit so that you can see just what kinds of violation of section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) can get a major publisher to withdraw a work of scholarship.

First, here is Section 295A:

Deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings or any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. – Whoever, with deliberate and malicious intention of outraging the religious feelings of any class of citizens of India, by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, insults or attempts to insult the religion or the religious beliefs of that class, shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to three years, or with fine, or with both.

That's an alarming and dangerous law, a law which makes it unsurprising that India was the first country to ban Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, before Iran's Ayatollah issued his loathsome fatwah, and unsurprising that India has done so little to help Taslima Nasreen since her exile from Bangladesh.

Now for the lawsuit brought by Dina Nath Batra, President of the Hindu nationalist



After retired school headmaster Dina Nath Batra succeeded in getting The Hindus banned, he reportedly said he would be gunning for another Doniger title, On Hinduism, published by Aleph. Subsequently this title was withdrawn last month (see p4)

group Shiksha Bachao Andolan, in March 2010.

It presents 49 numbered items by way of evidence that the book violates Section 295A.

4. That my client has read the book authored by you namely the Hindus: An Alternative History. That after reading the book my client found it to be a shallow, distorted and non serious presentation of Hinduism. That it is a haphazard presentation riddled with heresies and factual inaccuracies.

That looks like the opening or closing of a harsh review, rather than anything to do with a lawsuit.

5. That after reading the said book my client is of the opinion my client states that the aforesaid book is written with a Christian Missionary Zeal and hidden agenda to denigrate Hindus and show their religion in poor light.

The clumsiness is startling in a legal document – “my client is of the opinion my client states”? But even more startling is the idea of a lawsuit based on what the litigant thinks is a hidden agenda. If it's hidden, how does the litigant know it's there? Especially given that Wendy Doniger is a secular Jew and thus probably not much given to Christian Missionary Zeal.

Much of it is just plain risible.

15. That YOU NOTICEE at many places has made factually incorrect assertions about Hinduism. Such as at page 680, YOU NOTICEE inform in the present tense

that: “To this day horses are worshipped all over India by people who do not have horses ...”

In fact no Hindu worships horses. Terra cotta horses are made for some deities so that they can symbolically mount horses. My client further states that everyone loves his animals, cars, yatches but that does not mean that one worships all of them.

Okay...

21. That YOU NOTICEE has hurt the religious feelings of millions of Hindus by declaring that Ramayana is a fiction.

“Placing the Ramayan in its historical contexts demonstrates that it is a work of fiction, created by human authors, who lived at various times ...” (P.662)

This breaches section 295A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC).

For real? Indians are forbidden by law to say any particular religious book is a work of fiction, created by human authors? And Indian publishers are forbidden by law to publish such books? That must stifle a lot of secular thought.

39. That the University of Chicago should be aware and cautions in allowing an author to spread pornography and hate literature in the University. The author, University and the Publisher alike are accountable to the law as well as to the Society. This book is a disgrace on the academic reputation of the University of Chicago.

Well, that's debatable at best, and in any case it's not for a lawsuit to decide, or even weigh in.

40. That my client states that everybody has a right to profess, practice and propagate religion of one's own choice but nobody has a right to insult and repudiate other religions.

That just sums up the mindset, doesn't it: religions get every protection while criticism of religion and religions is strictly forbidden. That's the utopia of all theocrats and hell on earth for thinking people.



OPHELIA BENSON
Picking fights with God

Jailed: A Muslim couple who posted videos on the Internet showing them rejoicing over Lee Rigby's slaying

AN ISLAMIST couple from London who pleaded guilty to glorifying the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby by posting a series of YouTube videos have been jailed.

Royal Barnes, 23, of Hackney, east London, was sentenced to five years and four months in prison after he and his wife Rebekah Dawson, 22, admitted to making three "vile" videos following the murder of Rigby in Woolwich on May 22, 2013.

In one of the videos, Barnes could be heard describing the soldier's murder as a "glorious day". They also uploaded a video of themselves laughing hysterically as they drove past a floral tribute to Rigby at the scene where he was killed.

Barnes, who was friends with one of Rigby's killers, Michael Adebawale, also posted a message on Facebook encouraging people to murder British, French and American



Islamic converts Royal Barnes and Rebekah Dawson

soldiers. The status posted on June 12, 2013, said: "Any1 who kills an invading soldier in Muslim land I will give them a Vauxhall Astra 3door and money [French British American any kaffir soldier take ur pick]."

Barnes pleaded guilty to three counts of disseminating a terrorist publication and one of inciting murder.

Dawson, who insisted on wearing her veil in court, admitted to disseminating a terrorist publication at an earlier hearing. She was sentenced to 20 months in jail.

One of the videos made by the pair features a clip of Rigby's killer, Michael Adebolajo, holding a knife in his hand next to Rigby's body followed by a to-camera tirade from Barnes, filmed by Dawson. The second showed Dawson in her veil with the title "British troops kill Muslims so they will die on London streets".

The third video shows the pair driving to the scene in Woolwich where Rigby was killed and laughing hysterically at the tributes paid to the soldier while blasting loud music.

It was established that Dawson had also sent links for the videos to a number of associates with an extremist mindset.

Temp cmdr Duncan Ball, head of the Counter Terrorism Command, said: "Disseminating violent extremist material and encouraging others to carry out acts of terrorism are serious offences.

"I hope today's sentences send out a clear message that we will arrest and prosecute those responsible."

Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale were found guilty of the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby in Woolwich.

Mari Reid, of the Crown Prosecution Service's Counter Terrorism Division, said: "While the whole country was unified in grief and horror in the wake of Fusilier Lee Rigby's death last year, Royal Barnes and his wife sought to take advantage of the situation to promote their extremist views.

"Royal Barnes went further, using the savage attack on Fusilier Rigby to encourage others, via Facebook, to murder British, French and American soldiers.

"These were not throwaway comments from a thoughtless individual, but the hardened beliefs of an extremist.

"We pride ourselves in Britain on allowing the right to free speech to flourish. But the vile views posted online by Royal Barnes and Rebekah Dawson justified and glorified terrorist attacks, and tried to foster hatred in our communities."

Shortly after, in a separate trial last month, Dawson, who was allowed to wear a veil throughout the proceedings, was sentenced to six months imprisonment for witness intimidation. The charge related to threats she made against a security guard at a mosque in north London

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Another book deemed 'offensive' to Hindus is withdrawn in India

Within weeks of Penguin recalling Wendy Doniger's book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, a second publisher withdrew another of the US author's work, *On Hinduism* early in March. Bookshops across Bangalore received calls from representatives of the Aleph Book Company seeking the return of all copies of the book.

Confirming the move, an Aleph spokesman said, "We don't want to get involved in any controversy. Officials from our Delhi office sent a clear message to us – recall all copies of *On Hinduism* we had sold to across Karnataka.

On Hinduism was published in 2013 while *The Hindus* was published in 2009.

Advocate Lawrence Liang of the Bangalore-based Alternative Law Forum, who had filed a legal notice on Penguin India over the withdrawal of Doniger's book, described Aleph's step as "terrible".

"It's absolutely shameful and ridiculous. If you want a publisher to withdraw a book, all you have to do is file a police complaint. Reading has no future in this country," Liang said.

The Hindus had been recalled by Penguin following protests by a little-known organisation Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti, on grounds that its contents were "derogatory and offensive to Hinduism" and misrepresented facts. It then upped the ante and demanded the withdrawal of *On Hinduism* as well, as it too was "malicious and offending."

Speaking to Shougat Dasgupta in February on the *Live Mint/Wall Street Journal* website about his successful campaign against Doniger, Dinanath Batra accused Doniger of being driven by a "Christian missionary zeal and hidden agenda to denigrate Hindus and show their religion in poor light."

Dasgupta pointed out that Batra is committed to seeing the national syllabus shaped according to his particular worldview. "We want a total change in the system", Batra says, "we want 'Indianness' in the field of education".

"Patriotism and spiritualism," wrote Dasgupta, "are key to Batra's vision of an Indian education. It all sounds innocuous enough until you realise that what he is proposing is the vetting by committee of all books, that only certain versions of his-

Illustration by Sorit, courtesy Outlook India.com.



tory should be permitted, versions wiped clean and bloodless."

Batra ended his interview by telling Dasgupta: "The good times are coming. Believe me". That, concluded Dasgupta, "sounds like a threat".

Later, in a piece entitled "Good Times are Gone," published online by *Outlook India*, Romila Thapar, one of India's foremost historians, wrote: "We don't know why Penguin Books India capitulated to the threat over Doniger's book. Nevertheless, publishers have to be reminded that they should be among the primary guardians of freedom of expression.

"Unfortunately, in this recent case the law is not supportive of publishers or authors. IPC 295-A and IPC 153-A can only be described as arbitrary. They leave the field wide open for anyone to be convicted on the faintest twist of the evidence.

"The colonial administration needed an open-ended law by which it could ban a range of writing pertaining to identities of religion, politics, caste, race or whatever, claiming to have hurt the sentiment of some group or the other. Such a group generally claims to speak in the name of a larger community, but the views of such a community

are never ascertained. It could be a small group calling the bluff of those in authority.

"These laws were a useful mechanism of controlling society. They have been dredged up today by those still adhering to colonial ideas and using these to create a society of their choice. Given the diversity of India, there are many groups who can claim that their sentiments are hurt by a particular opinion and can then resort to these laws.

She continued: "We are however no longer a colonial society and in theory we are governed by a Constitution that is based on secular democratic principles. But many colonial period laws have been retained even where they are not compatible with the Constitution. This is either out of apathy or a disinclination to comb through such laws still prevalent in India, and discard those that are unacceptable in a democratic system. This discrepancy needs to be urgently corrected.

"The demand for having books withdrawn because of the ideas they contain has generally been the activity of those whose reading of such books is so minimal as to be almost negligible. Some even state proudly that they haven't read the book. There is thus a strong streak of anti-intellectualism in banning books.

"Such banning becomes essentially a political act – in the widest sense of political – facilitating control over the mindset of a society. The main purpose of the ban is to silence the author, and prevent the diffusion of the author's ideas (but in fact it has the reverse effect and advances interest in the book). Additionally it gives publicity to the organisation making the demand. How many people, other than members of the RSS, had heard of the SBAS prior to their recent activities?

"One expects differences of opinion and one expects them to be aired and debated openly. Displeasure with a particular interpretation of a subject should be expressed by publishing a critical assessment of the original. Pulping a book merely ensures its being pirated and published in larger numbers and its availability on the internet, as with Doniger's book, negates the ban."

World Jewish Congress wants the UN to strongly oppose increasing pressure for bans on ritual killing and circumcision

THE WORLD Jewish Congress (WJC) last month called on the United Nations Human Rights Council to recognise as violations of religious freedom any bans or limitations on the right to practice Jewish and Muslim ritual slaughter of animals and male circumcision.

"We call on the governments of all UN member states to stop any attempts to abridge these crucial religious freedoms," said WJC Chief Executive Officer Robert Singer. "We hope that the UN Human Rights Council, via its Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, will issue a clear statement that bans or limitations on religious slaughter and circumcision are attacks on fundamental liberties, and that the affirmation of those liberties will serve to deter such attacks."

In a statement delivered before the UN Human Rights Council, WJC decried the "increasing number of government actions that seek to condemn and ban these religious practices" and called on UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt "to consider limitations on ritual slaughter and circumcision as violations of freedom of religion in his next report to the Council."

In his concluding remarks at the end of the discussion, Bielefeldt acknowledged that "issues like male circumcision are part of freedom of religion". Bielefeldt is expected to complete his report next year.

Lisa Rahmani, a member of the WJC's Jewish Diplomatic Corps programme, delivered the WJC statement. Originally from France, Rahmani now lives and practices law in Tel Aviv. She said:

"I speak today on behalf of the World Jewish Congress, an international organisation representing more than 100 Jewish communities worldwide.

"The Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects the right of individuals and communities to manifest their religion or beliefs freely. Ritual slaughter, known as *shechita*, and the tradition of circumcision, which dates back thousands of years, are cornerstones of Jewish religious practice.

"However, today we are witnessing an increasing number of government actions that seek to condemn and ban these religious practices. Judaism was the first culture to

teach that animals, and even plants, should be treated with respect, at a time when humanity had not begun to think in terms of animal rights. Quite conveniently, some prefer to ignore the origin of the values they claim to defend.

"If opponents of *shechita* really cared about animals, they would have banned, for example, the cooking of live seafood in pots of boiling water; they would have banned force-feeding of geese and ducks; they would have banned hunting for sport.

"But they did not. Instead they chose to attack ritual slaughter – be it *shechita* practiced

by Jews, or *halal* practiced by Muslims.

"In the same way, it is ironic and distressing to observe that circumcision is considered to be a mutilation when performed for religious reason, but is acceptable, and often encouraged, if performed for medical reasons.

"Respectfully, we call on the Special Rapporteur to recognise that these practices are forms of religious expression; to recognise that they are not trumped by other values; and to ask him to consider limitations on ritual slaughter and circumcision as violations of freedom of religion in his next report to the Council."

Noah movie angers Christians and Muslims

THREE Arab countries last month banned the biblical epic movie *Noah* because it contradicts Islam. As we were going to press, three more – Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait – were expected to follow suit, a Paramount spokesman said.

Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates told Hollywood giant Paramount that the film, starring Russell Crowe, would not be released in their countries.

The spokesman said: "The censors for Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE officially confirmed the film will not release in their countries. The official statement they offered in confirming this news is because 'it contradicts the teachings of Islam,'" he added, saying it was "assumed the film will ultimately not be shown in Egypt, Jordan and Kuwait."

Egypt's top Islamic body, the Al-Azhar institute, said that the big budget film violated Islam by portraying a prophet and should not be screened in the country.

Having an actor play a prophet "contradicts the stature of prophets and messengers... and antagonises the faithful," it said in a statement. Muslims believe Jesus was a prophet and was not crucified.

Egypt has banned other movies in the past, including *The Da Vinci Code*, after protests from the Orthodox Coptic Church. But it did allow the screening of Mel Gibson's *The*



Russell Crowe plays Noah

Passion of Christ, which depicts Jesus being crucified.

The film has already angered some Christian institutions in the United States, with Crowe's reportedly unconventional portrayal of Noah, and had been compelled to add a disclaimer to Darren Aronofsky's movie. It reads, in part: "The film is inspired by the story of Noah. While artistic license has been taken, we believe that this film is true to the essence, values, and integrity of a story that is a cornerstone of faith for millions of people worldwide. The biblical story of Noah can be found in the book of Genesis."

The disclaimer, which has angered Aronofsky, was requested by the National Religious Broadcasters. NRB member Phil Cooke explained this was necessary because the film is: "Historically inaccurate [It is] more of an inspired movie than an exact retelling."



Lent: nowadays there's more

RICHARD WHITE believes that this is yet another

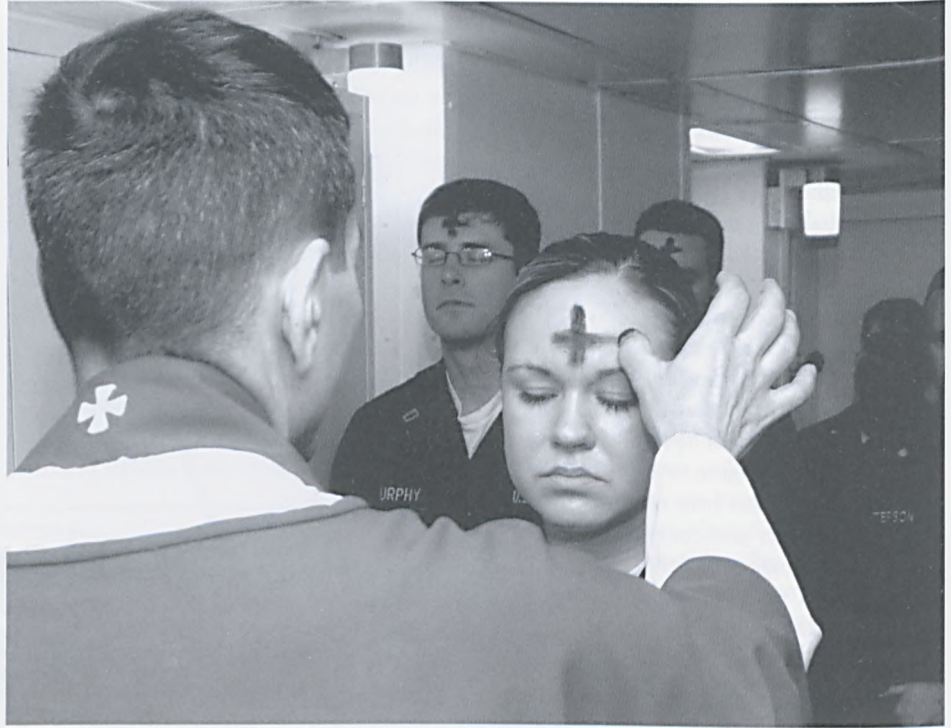
As a young child I attended a Catholic primary school, and every year we would be ushered into the school hall for the priest to wipe some ash onto our foreheads, in the shape of an archaic torture device (the crucifix; the priest didn't get to choose which torture device to decorate us children with).

I couldn't have cared less about the entire ordeal, to be honest, especially as there was a big field outside waiting for a ball to be kicked around and the act of human graffiti was accompanied by the usual Catholic guilt trip: "Jesus ... sins ... died ... sinner ... not worth ... sin ... punishment ... reflect..."—you know the routine.

But we were told this was Lent, the period of time in which Jesus wandered the desert for 40 days, being tempted by the Devil and refusing to eat or drink. Because Jesus did this, apparently his followers should also give something up for 40 days (you'll notice, as I did, that Christians weren't so keen on re-enacting his "get nailed to this cross and suffer" gig).

Being told as a child to give something up for 40 days seemed pretty cruel at the time (it still does, in fact), and it probably comes as no surprise to learn that I never really took part in Lent. Some years I would think about what to give up, but I don't recall ever sticking to it.

As an adult, I don't even think about Lent, except for the past couple of years my social media feeds keep informing me about what



A member of the US Navy pictured receiving an ash cross from a chaplain

people are giving up. Usually anything with sugar but chocolate and alcohol are particularly common; even Facebook has apparently become problematic enough in some lives to warrant a six-week abstinence.

In previous years I've simply viewed these posts and thought nothing of them except preferring my own choice of eschewing Lent itself. But this year, skimming Face-

book soon after waking and seeing more of these statuses, I realised how trivialised Lent has become for so many modern Christians. Considering that this period began as a time of penance, to make the sacrifice of useful things, to share in Christ's suffering and perhaps to help others to connect with God, it demonstrates a true bastardising of it to use that time to give up chocolate instead.

County Cork Catholics suffer burns after Irish priest marks their foreheads with corrosive ash

FATHER Eugene Baker, of St Joseph's Catholic Church in Newtownshandrum, County Cork, made a hash of Ash Wednesday, and was forced to abandon a service after people complained of suffering forehead burns.

The priest said he first became aware of the problem when a parishioner told him during Holy Communion they were "experiencing a burning sensation".

About 30 parishioners had received ash crosses on their foreheads during

the ritual. "I stopped the service and alerted people that there was a problem with the ash. They went to wash it off in the sacristy. Some people did get quite a nasty burn from the ash, whatever's in it," the priest said.

Fr Baker said he had taken a sample of the ash to a public health laboratory at a local hospital to find out what had gone wrong.

"Something was either in the ash or maybe it was the way it was burned, but we can only speculate.

"It did burn. You could see afterwards when it was washed off that it had burned into the skin."

He said the ash had come from "blessed" palms that are burned after Palm Sunday during the previous Easter.

"I apologised for any hurt caused during the Mass, and rang around later to see how they all were.

"I didn't hear of anyone taken to the hospital and as far as I know, they just treated themselves with some cream."

More posturing to it than piety

Another sign of the churches losing their grip

Lest this be misinterpreted, I'm not about to stand at a pulpit and deliver a sermon on the failings of the church and why people need to return to God. No, not I. Actually, I find it sad, sometimes grotesque, that people are putting themselves through a level of self-imposed punishment for the sake of a bronze-age myth – though admittedly I reserve that for the people who take Lent more seriously.

Rather, my musings on the trivialisation of Lent have more to do with how much the meaning of these holidays and traditions has been lost. One could argue that they only continue through name and not action

for so many people. I also find it particularly amusing, and somewhat ironic, that people spend Lent avoiding chocolate and sugar, only to feast on chocolate eggs when Easter rolls around.

Could this be a sign that the power and respect religion once commanded is slipping? That Lent, one of the big events in the Christian calendar, has now been reduced to something like a 40-day New Year Resolution affair rather than a spiritual reflection of self and God, and their relationship? It could be an indication of the time that Christians are not using this time to re-establish a connection with their creator, nor to reflect on

their shortcomings or how grateful they are Jesus's sacrifice, but instead to focus on their waistline or consumption levels – actions that are necessarily selfish.

Put another way, many modern Christians are not using an important religious holiday to focus on their religion, morals, spirituality or beliefs, but to embark on vanity projects instead.

When we compare this to the acts of religion elsewhere in the world – terrorism, refusing women's rights, honour killings and so on – I think it must be embraced as our society doing the sensible thing and shunning religion even further.

Deputy PM Nick Clegg's 'liberal dilemma'

BRITISH Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has shown his true colours as of late by declining to prioritise the welfare of animals ahead of religious practise. In an interview with the London-based radio station LBC, the leader of the Liberal Democrats told host Nick Ferrari that, while he wanted to see animal suffering minimised, he “emphatically disagreed” with the prospect of prohibiting both halal and kosher slaughter in the UK.

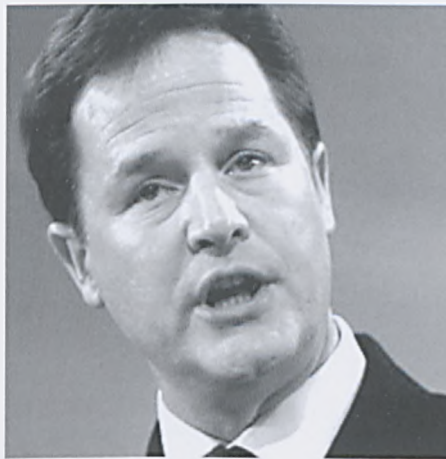
This was in response to a query from a listener asking if he agreed with the practises being effectively outlawed by Danish Minister for Food, Agriculture and Fisheries, Dan Jorgensen – a move which John Blackwell of the British Veterinary Association is calling for in the UK.

At present, Muslim and Jewish communities can claim exemption from a law found in The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995, which necessitates the stunning of animals before they are slaughtered.

Although there are differences between traditional Jewish (Shechita) and Islamic (Halal) slaughter methods, both involve the cutting of an animal's throat with a very sharp knife, in many cases without any form of stunning.

However, though Mr Clegg's comments have been met with condemnation throughout the media and public domain in general, such a view has been defended by political and religious commentators who stress the supposed sanctity of both liberal and political values.

By JOHN STEPHENSON



Nick Clegg

Nick Thornsbey for example, writing for the influential blogsite “Liberal Democrat Voice” was in disagreement with Clegg but sought to defend him, referring to his position as the result of a complex issue and a “liberal dilemma”.

What's more, Jonathan Arkush, vice-president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews claimed that the process is actually humane, the cut being efficient enough to “bring about an immediate and irreversible loss of sensation and death”.

While the legislation's compatibility with liberal values can be debated, the claim that the slaughter method brings death immediately is simply false. In fact the Farm Animal

Welfare Council (FAWC) in 2003 published a report outlining the likelihood of an animal that had foregone stunning, suffering at the hand of such methods, concluding that “such a massive injury would result in very significant pain and distress in the period before insensibility supervenes”.

Worse still is that brain activity within calves has been shown to persist for up to two minutes suggesting that the animal suffers until its body ultimately gives up.

Nevertheless, Clegg's motivations need to be scrutinised and the idea of a “liberal dilemma” dismissed. It goes without saying that minority protection is a must, but his views appear to go against his previous comments on other important issues regarding both religion and minorities.

Clegg is an outspoken advocate for LGBT rights and for that he deserves applause, yet does he not see the parallel between the action of slaughter in the name of doctrine and the denial of civic rights and dignity to, say, gay couples committed for the same reason?

Now of course the argument can be made that legislation on areas like gay marriage is fundamentally different from the prohibition of religious slaughter, because it does not act as an “imposition” on religious values.

In fact, this is exactly the argument Clegg used in 2012 to justify a whipped vote for Liberal Democrat MPs when voting on the issue, stating that “if you are two individuals who love each other, who want to show a

(Continued on back page)

Mixing Allah with Kal-el

The new frontier of Islamic superheroes

DALE DEBAKCY insists that introducing religious characters into comic books is ‘ridiculous’ – but there’s money and publicity to be gained by doing so

Strictly speaking, traditional religion in *DC* or *Marvel* comics makes no damn sense. We mere humans have some excuse for believing the dictates of Christianity or Islam because we don’t have the ability to travel back to Jerusalem or Mecca to see what actually happened in the time of the messiahs, or forward to the end of the universe to see whether their great predictions come true.

But in comic books, they can. They’ve seen and recorded the beginning of the world and also its end and know as a matter of observed fact that the proclamations of religion aren’t true.

To introduce religious characters, then, is somewhat ridiculous. To believe that Jehovah is the one and only god, and humanity his one and only sentient creation when you have regular visitations by demigods and aliens is to be pigheaded to a degree that would render one unfit for normal society.

But, of course, there’s money and publicity in it, so regardless of whether it makes a lick of sense, first *DC* and then *Marvel* took their turns at unveiling Islamic superheroes with great pomp and spandex.

Leaving behind the palpable silliness of believing in the Koran when you can poke your head out a window and ask Galactus about his personal experience of the Big Bang, what we find are some interesting stories that disappointingly but inevitably soft-peddle the religious part of Islam, opting instead to tell cultural tales about being Muslim in America.

DC started the trend with Simon Baz,



Simon Baz, Islamic superhero

who was introduced not only in one of their flagship titles, but square in the center of one of the most important arcs in *DC* history.

Without going too far into the *nerdutiae* of the matter, Green Lantern was a walking punchline for many years before Geoff Johns took the reins and crafted a consistent and compelling universe around this single neglected character. His run on Lantern is one of the great writer-character pairings of all time, and right in the midst of its titanic conclusion Simon Baz was introduced as the newest earthling to

don the Lantern’s ring.

Baz is a man racked by guilt. He challenged his brother-in-law to a drag race that ended in an accident which put said brother-in-law into a coma. To help pay the hospital bills, Baz turned to stealing cars and had the singular misfortune of nabbing a van with a live bomb in the back.

To keep it from killing anybody, he crashed it into an abandoned building, it went boom, and he, as a man of Arabic descent from an Islamic family, was immediately arrested and brought to Guantanamo on charges of terrorism. Just before his waterboarding, however, a Lantern ring finds him and he is transformed into the next Green Lantern.

Simon himself says nothing about his religious beliefs throughout this arc, the only oblique reference being an arm tattoo that he mentions his father disapproved of for religious reasons. It is left to his family to provide a religious dimension, mentioning how they are not

welcome at the mosque anymore because of the suspicion that Baz’s actions have brought on their small, threatened community.

His sister, in the meantime, is quietly told not to report to her job at the State Department until things have settled down, since her co-workers are no longer able to trust her.

And that’s largely it. The word “mosque” once, the word “Allah” never, and Baz himself is quickly dwarfed by the galactic events Johns worked up for the end of his epic run.

The depictions of everyday fear for people of Arabic descent living in America during the decade following 9/11 ring true and tragic. But that's where all dialogue ends. When Baz shows up again, as a member of the Justice League of America, he fills the role of the Rookie Who Doesn't Know How To Use His Powers Yet, and is again lost in the shuffle of the Trinity War.

One can't help but think of it all as a chance missed. Baz isn't terribly interesting – he's a carbon life form that events happen to more than an actual character, but his family is rich in possibility, and the one page spent on the sister and father is perhaps the best in his intro story.

In all events, one gets the distinct impression that DC wanted the buzz of an Arabic superhero without the reaction that comes with actually saying something compelling about religion's status in the world.

Marvel, for its part, seems to have taken good notes in the crafting of its response character, an Islamic Ms Marvel. Rather than introducing her in the middle of a titanic arc where she would necessarily get lost, they gave her a stand-alone title penned by G Willow Wilson.

That meant that they didn't need to rush character development, and so could avoid throwing Guantanamo at her to make her develop the semblance of a character quickly. No, the new Ms Marvel is a slightly geeky kid named Kamala Khan who wants to be good but wants to be normal too. Her family is a bit heavy on the stereotypes, but at least they are willing to engage in a dinner table discussion about the merits of different degrees of re-



Kamala Khan is Ms Marvel

ligiosity. Her father is practical but firm, her brother a privileged ascetic, and her sister devout and standoffish.

They have character, they interact, and they have developed opinions, which is more than Baz's family were allowed to evince in their scant panels.

Kamala faces discrimination, but of that simmering everyday sort. Jocks and Barbies who say that she smells of curry and make fun of her social customs – stock characters from the Silver Age who we can only hope don't represent the last word on Islamic critique in the book.

Still, though, in the character of Kamala *Marvel* has taken a decided leap over DC. She has interests and silly fantasies, normal problems and a quirky sense of self that will make her an interesting character to watch develop, as her beliefs come into contact with a wider world that includes Asgardian gods and Skrull shape-shifters.

As I'm writing this, only the first issue has come out, but I have high hopes that

here, at least, the tensions of religion in a modern world will have some purchase at last in a regular superhero comic from the Big Two.

In spite of how I began, I think religion can be done in comics, and well. Look at *Lucifer* or *Preacher*. They are filled with brilliant stories that grapple with the real meat of our twisted relations with our deities. But the world of superhero comics is, in many ways, the playground of all of our best instincts and ideals.

Its heroes are champions of freedom, inquiry, science, and love in a way that is, at its best, timeless. It takes extreme sensitivity to motivation and psychology to make a religious family fit in such a world. But the potential for beautiful storytelling if the writers really let that gorgeous world of comics work its best on such characters is immense, and possibly very instructive for kids reading comics today, pondering the good and bad of how culture restricts and defines a person in a progressive world.

Ultraman upsets Malaysian Muslims

PUBLISHERS of a Japanese comic featuring Ultraman, a superhero who dates back to the 1960, found themselves in hot water with the Malaysian authorities last month when it was discovered that the character was referred to as "Allah" in an edition entitled *Ultraman, The Ultra Power*.

On banning the edition, Malaysia's Home Ministry said in a statement that the Malay-edition contained elements that could undermine public security and societal morals. A line in the book said Ultraman "is considered and respected as Allah, or the Elder, to all ultra heroes."

"Ultraman is idolised by many children" and equating the lead character, Ultraman King, with Allah would especially "confuse Muslim children and damage their faith", the statement said.

"Allah", the Arabic word for God, is commonly used in the Malay language to



refer to God and cannot be used by outsiders or Christians, said Rosli Ani, a representative of a Muslim NGO known as Per3. "People now may know the difference but our children will not."

The government has decreed that "Allah should be exclusively reserved for Muslims because of concerns its use by others would confuse Muslims and tempt them to convert".

The ministry said that, as "Allah" is holy to Muslims, irresponsible use of the word could provoke the community and threaten public safety.

"The Ultraman character itself is not banned and only this edition is prohibited," the ministry said. Anyone caught distributing the book could be jailed three years, it warned.

What's wrong with religious charities 'helping' the disabled?

STUART HARTILL poses the question

I am increasingly concerned about the role of religious charities in "help" for the disabled. Do they serve any useful purpose, or are they – in effect – an additional handicap for people who already have more than enough physical barriers to a full and happy life?

After even a brief look at the issue, I suspect that religious help for the disabled falls firmly into the category of those who, as one disability rights campaigner I knew some 20 years back used to say, "will do everything to help except get off your back in the first place."

Additionally, there is an increasing danger that religious organisations are perfectly placed to fill the gap left when governments cut statutory services, replacing trained, objective professionals with deluded (if sometimes well meaning) amateurs.

I hope we can agree that we need a world where people stop focusing on the "limitations" of the wheelchair and consider instead the potential of the occupant, but does religion have any role in bringing that about?

Honestly?

I came to consider this issue after a conversation with a disabled friend – a newcomer to my neighbourhood and an advocate for getting disabled people out of specialised "homes" and institutions and into the workplace whilst encouraging them to be far more autonomous in general.

He now spends a lot of time bending the ears of politicians and civil servants, and is frustrated that every time he raises an issue with government officials they point him towards churches or religious charities who, they claim, are providing the local answer – and often with public money.

But far from "helping", providing practical solutions to physical problems (eg of access to buildings) or tackling social injustice



Children with learning disabilities are particularly vulnerable to religious indoctrination programmes. The boy pictured here is Alex Felici, 14, who was put to work drawing the crucified Christ at the Circle of Friends special-needs ministry at Bay Presbyterian Church in Cleveland, Ohio. Photo: Lynn Ischay/The Plain Dealer

and causing the public to question common assumptions, my friend – a self-confessed "militant cripp" – insists religious groups perpetuate such problems, and that in some cases religion is the problem.

Their very existence within this community makes it harder for him to press government to provide facilities, or to encourage genuine self-help and advocacy groups.

To put things into context we need to understand the way in which a disability rights movement, like feminists or the gay community, has tried to change the way we think about disability.

Their major target in the 1980s was what they dubbed the "medical model" of disability, by which they meant a way of defining and controlling illness or disability primarily by medical means, led by doctors. While this model acknowledges that a compassionate society needs to make provisions for the disabled, the emphasis is on the search for medical cures or ways of containing the disability.

In contrast, a "militant cripp" tendency

amongst disabled people would say that the greater problem was more to do with the barriers that prevent them from being independent, fully functioning members of society. Simple physical obstacles which were never removed because of a tendency to regard the disabled as an expensive "problem" to be fixed, a social expense to be borne or unfortunates to be pitied and patronised, not potential assets to an increasingly technology-led workplace, retail outlet or community who were being wasted because they couldn't get through the front door or up to the top floor.

These militants proposed instead a "social model" of disability, which, as explained in one handy definition, "implies that attempts to change, 'fix' or 'cure'

individuals, especially when used against the wishes of the patient, can be discriminatory and prejudiced. This attitude, which may be seen as stemming from a medical model and a subjective value system, can harm the self-esteem and social inclusion of those constantly subjected to it (eg being told they are not as good or valuable, in an overall and core sense, as others)." Now where have we heard this before?

Twelve-step programmes perhaps? Ex-gay therapy? I think you may get the general idea, and perhaps have a few examples of your own. But what really worries me is the possibility that religious intervention into the lives of the disabled may not even meet the standards of the medical model, never mind the social one.

Consider, for example, the disastrous "intervention" of Mother Teresa and her gang in the AIDS crisis, which was about as useful as letting the Manson Family loose in a care home.

Remember, this was a "charity" that openly admitted believing that if it was

their Magic Invisible Friend's will that some poor sod was terminally ill then they had no mandate to utilise modern medicine or technology to stop either the death of their clientele or the considerable inconvenience and pain that would precede it.

In fact, it was the holy duty of their victims to suffer to the max and of both "carer" and "cared for" to learn from this suffering in order to be fast-tracked into heaven.

And this was also a "charity" that believed it had a divine right to ignore local or national legislation for safety or comfort in nursing homes (eg installing lifts, disability-appropriate doors, beds, toilet and bathroom facilities) and who, even when one exasperated local authority in California offered to install the facilities free of charge, refused the technology and building work and then mounted a media campaign to gain the public money which would have been used to implement them. Money which the Mother from Hell then planned to pass straight to the Vatican to finance yet more pro-life badgering of reluctant mothers-to-be.

While other religious charities are less in your face about this, the underlying "philosophy of care", I would argue, is the same. It simply is not in the religious interest for the disabled to overcome the social restrictions of their disability and to gain power and independence, just to endure it.

And behind the cod-philosophical musing lies a less openly acknowledged truth. That it also is not in the religious interest for the disabled to become autonomous because that would deprive churches of cheap propaganda which, in turn, provides a steady income and the pretence of community

involvement. A few years back I saw this while helping a friend dying of prostate cancer to mount a local campaign to get the possibilities of assisted death into the public eye. The pro-life response was a series of cheap visual stunts that depended upon a public view of the disabled as helpless victims and centred on scaring isolated disabled people and their relatives with the fictitious dangers of a "slippery slope".

A key part of their strategy was to play on the disability rights movement's call for meaningful independent life.

In practice, they do this by having on call tiresome career cripples who get (quite literally) wheeled out by their employers for TV interviews every time the public seems willing to accept the common sense, decency and humanity of the case for assisted dying. And if you wince at that description, maybe you should look past the wheelchair and concentrate on the person in it instead.

The maladies of such pity puppets are purely physical. That does not excuse them from exercising their brains, considering evidence, telling the truth or the other responsibilities of a grown adult and citizen.

While dabbling with the rhetoric of the disability rights movement, their cheap emotional fascism actually plays on a bigoted image of the disabled as "helpless victim", needing to have every aspect of their lives supervised (or more bluntly, dictated) by paternal interests and institutions who, just coincidentally, happen to retain not only social and physical control over those they claim to care for but also economic power (and in particular public money) meant to end or alleviate the problems associated with

such disabilities.

In conclusion, I cannot hope to cover all the issues, ask all the important questions or come up with the answers in a single piece. I also openly admit an aversion to charities in general. This stems from a period earlier in life when I was pretty much a full time community activist seeing the growth of large, professional charities who made it harder (these days almost impossible) for ordinary people with problems to organise their own solutions. What are many of them really for, other than to provide a safe, comfortable income for their executives?

But if we are to question the role of religious charities in the lives of disabled people we do have to answer two basic questions.

Firstly, if not charities, then who challenges common discrimination and brings about a fairer deal for the disabled? And secondly, if we do accept that such change is not possible without charities but that religious charities are a key element in the problems, not the solutions, then are we going to step up ourselves?

These will be the first questions asked by parasites whose income is threatened (and for us the god-bothering ones in particular), so we do need answers. But at the very least, I hope to have demonstrated that we must pay closer attention to religious activities and their effect on the lives of the disabled (or any other group whose relative isolation has as much to do with social attitudes as physical barriers). Every time they are mentioned in the media we should be asking: "Why are they even there and are they really necessary?"

'God Hates Fags' church founder Fred Phelps is dead

FRED Phelps, the infamous American hate-monger who established the anti-gay Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, died last month aged 84.



Phelps founded the church in the 1950s. Shortly before the preacher's death, his son Nathan, who ran away from home as soon as he turned 18 and later became a gay rights advocate, said in a Facebook posting he had learned Phelps was near death in a hospice and that he had been excommunicated from the church in 2013.

The church later denied that Phelps' had been excommunicated or that there had been a power struggle within its ranks.

Its website said: "Listen carefully; there are no power struggles in the Westboro Baptist Church, and there is no human intercessor – we serve no man, and no hierarchy, only the Lord Jesus Christ.

"No red shoes, no goofy hat, and no white smoke for us; thank you very much."

The church was widely denounced as a hate group and was not part of any mainstream Baptist organisation. Its membership

has been estimated at about 100, many of whom were related to Phelps.

By Phelps' reasoning, cancer, the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, school shootings and the deaths of soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as other tragedies and disasters involving Americans, were God's retribution for a lax attitude toward what he called "the modern militant homosexual movement".

"God Hates Fags" was the overriding slogan for Phelps and his followers, as well as the name of their primary website.

They carried that message to protests, brandishing signs declaring "Thank God For AIDS," "America Is Doomed," "Thank God For Dead Soldiers" and "God Blew Up The Troops".

"Look, you can't preach the Bible without preaching the hatred of God," Phelps said in a 2010 *Huffington Post* interview.

The PR machine and the pontiff: Is Pope Francis a public relations maestro?

CHARLES HODSON detects signs of the Roman Catholic Church slowly 'lumbering into the secular world'

More than one year into his tenure, his drive to transform the fortunes of the Catholic Church continues apace. Pope Francis has been reportedly leaving the Vatican at night to minister to those in need. This would be consistent behaviour for he was known to also visit the poor on the streets when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires.

He joins a small and discerning clique of pontiffs who ventured out of the lavishly marbled Holy See, either because they were trying to assist others or more simply because they enjoyed the view. It is on the surface a simple and generous gesture. The temporal and spiritual head of a religion of over a billion people worldwide sneaking out, dressed as a simple priest, to give what comfort he can to those in need.

There will be those who call this meaningless or cheap and to some extent they might be right. However it is surely a better thing for *El Papa* to do this than not to do it.

With the release of the Apostolic Exhor-

tation in which he detailed his vision for the Catholic Church, he showed that his real drive is to help humanity. Key to His Holiness's vision was a move away from the coolly detached capitalist society and towards a more humancentric one where under-privilege is met with positive assistance rather than indifference.

This is a laudable aim and one that most can get behind, regardless of religious bent or social agenda. Yet I cannot quiet my sceptical side.

The kissing of a disfigured man with neurofibromatosis, which is thankfully not contagious. The playful wearing of a fireman's hat or letting a small boy hug his leg while he addressed thousands at the Vatican. These are the mark of a man who has understood the problem and who knows what to do about it. In short, this is PR.

Of course he is damned if he does and damned if he does not. He can't very well change the Church without leading that change himself. If this involves redefining people's perception of what, quintessentially,

a pope should be or represent then it would be disingenuous to blame him for picking up the PR baton and running with it.

Let's change perspective for a moment. The newly elected head of a worldwide cancer charity is visiting a head office. Supporters and many of the people the charity helps have gathered to hear the new CEO speak. He talks passionately about how much more effective in helping people the charity can be. He carefully and reasonably tries to draw a line under a recent child sex scandal that rocked the charity.

The crowd seem pleased and to cap it all off the new CEO shakes hands with some cancer patients and offers them messages of hope and praise. Sometime later a newspaper runs a report of how the CEO has secretly been visiting cancer support groups and helping those affected by the disease in a variety of ways.

What we are seeing there is an example of an effective leader changing an organisation for the better.

The pope, and the Catholic Church behind him, is no different. In the modern world good PR rules the day. So the church seems to be beginning the slow lumbering journey into the secular world. After all, what is PR if not secular? Twitter could hardly be less spiritual. The Church seems to be turning more and more into a true charity. Tax exempt and one million employees worldwide all while making effective use of PR. A study by the *Economist* last year concluded that the total annual spend of the Catholic Church in America last year was around \$170 billion. Just over half, 57 percent was given to health care, while 28 percent was spent on the Church's college and university network, six percent on day-to-day operations and direct charitable donations bring up the rear at just below three percent.

One could almost call the health opera-



tions charitable. "Almost" because they have refused to treat, or do not provide for, victims of rape. Not very charitable, then.

So it seems the Catholic Church receives all the benefits of being a charity without the inconvenience of having to behave like one. Could we at least not hold them to the same standards then? Could their staff not be held legally accountable for their actions like any other organisation?

What if we did hold them up to the same

light that we hold charities up to, how would it change the behaviour and outlook of the Church? A total transparency of their accounting could certainly open their practices to helpful suggestions for improvement from the lay financial world. An understanding of the internal processes and staff management could help the outside world interface better with Church organisations and increase secular and church cooperation. Sharing health and scholastic

best practice between Catholic and secular entities could only be to the benefit of both.

If the pope hopes to transform the Church, rather than ask the secular world to adapt to it (less blatant capitalism, more charity) perhaps the Church could learn to become more transparent and accept secular assistance in becoming better.

If the Catholic Church can do this, can we in the secular community learn to take the positives that the Church offers us?

Pope's concern for the poor may be laudable, but, says the NSS, on child abuse his first year has been a failure

AT THE first anniversary of his papacy, it's a good time to review the Pope's handling of the child abuse crisis, which so plagued the papacy of his predecessor, writes NSS Executive Director, Keith Porteous Wood.

Few would dispute that clerical child abuse was the most pressing issue, given that his predecessor's lamentable performance on this was widely thought to be the main reason that a papal election took place.

The nearest to anything positive in the whole year is the Holy See's announcement, during the examination of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (surely no coincidence) of the establishment of a Commission on clerical child abuse. A sceptical *New York Times* editorial announced this as "long overdue". Associated Press concluded it had been "hastily put together", an analysis reinforced by the absence of any more detail three months later.

In a wide-ranging interview in the *Corriere della Sera* on March 5, 2014, the Pope said the following on clerical child abuse: "Abuse cases are horrific because they leave the deepest wounds. Benedict XVI has been very courageous and opened a path. The [Catholic] Church has moved very far along this path. Possibly more than most. Statistics on the phenomenon of child abuse are astonishing, but they also show clearly that the great majority of abuse takes place within the family and amongst neighbours.

"The Catholic Church is probably the only public institution that has acted with transparency and a sense of responsibility. No one else has done more. And yet the [Catholic] Church is the only institution to have been attacked."

This short passage is remarkable for its

aloofness, its shameless attempt to downplay the seriousness of the abuse by drawing invalid comparisons, its solely positive portrayal of the Church's role, its failure to acknowledge the worldwide clerical child rape on an industrial scale for decades, and probably centuries. His comments are hardly a display of the transparency demanded by the UNCRC.

Despite asking specialist lawyers recently, I am not aware of a single case where the Church has voluntarily reported a cleric or provided evidence to secular justice authorities. No other organisation is able to maintain such a lack of transparency because no other organisation can do so by exploiting the sovereignty of the nation state. Nor is any responsibility taken in the Pope's comments for clerical child abuse, far less any contrition being shown nor any concrete action proposed.

Of course there are abuse problems with other denominations and other religions, but the reason "no one else has done more" as he says, is most likely to be that there was more wrong in the Catholic Church than in any other single institution.

The numerous inquiries in the form of reports and commissions were not written to victimise the Church, but to expose the truth. In every case what the inquiries found was very similar, and horrific; none concluded there was no case to answer. Rather than face this, the Pope has resorted to the Church's customary unprincipled last line of defence: play the injured victim card.

It is both significant and troubling that these first words of Jorge Mario Bergoglio of substance on this topic are to praise Benedict, the man who has presided over the

decades of the Church's disastrous failure appropriately to tackle child abuse since he was made prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in 1981. It is extraordinary that Francis should seek to identify with and even praise his predecessor, who, according to the PBS Frontline documentary *Secrets of the Vatican* aired on February 25, 2014, claims resigned because of his inability to handle this issue.

"In the [C]hurch's entire history, no one knew more but did less to protect kids than Benedict," said Barbara Dorris, outreach director of the US-based victims' advocacy group SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. "As head of CDF, thousands of cases of predator priests crossed his desk. Did he choose to warn families or call police about even one of those dangerous clerics? No. That, by definition, is a cover-up."

I acknowledge that there may well have been cases or procedures where Pope Benedict would have liked to have done more, but felt prevented from doing so because of internal politics.

The current Pope carefully omits to set out just what this courageously-opened path is, along which "the [C]hurch has moved very far". I fear the Pope is not moving to greater transparency but to total secrecy. The most stringent of edicts about secrecy is the one Benedict introduced in 2010, effectively centralising in the Vatican all decisions over clerical child abuse.

And what precisely will the Commission achieve? Apparently "formulate suggestions for new initiatives" – a better starting point

(Continued on p14)

Pope's failure on child abuse slammed

would be to follow the concluding observations of the UNCRC, which is a panel of experts. As Ireland has just found out, internal commissions lead to cover-ups. And there have been suggestions that the Pope wants to speed up the process of dealing with accusations – presumably another way of releasing into the community even more perpetrators without criminal records.

It is not setting the bar very high on the achievements of the Church simply to state that the great majority of abuse takes place within the family and amongst neighbours. The families and neighbours haven't signed the UN Convention, don't have a professional duty of care over the children and don't claim to have supreme moral authority.

The Pope's comments are reminiscent of the rather ill-judged response by the Holy See to criticism at the UN Human Rights Committee on 22 June 2009, which does not appear on the Vatican's website as "the Vatican had chosen not to publish it, in order not to 'add gasoline to the fire' on a volatile topic". It elicited widespread condemnation from newspaper and media outlets around the world.

One element of this response understandably not repeated was that: "From available research we now know that in the last fifty years somewhere between 1.5 percent and five percent of the catholic clergy has been involved in sexual abuse cases."

Even at 1.5 percent this approaches 9,000 clergy. And most perpetrators have multiple victims and often abuse the same victim repeatedly.

Whether this is one of the statistics that the Pope regards as "astonishing", a rather mild word, is not known, but the UNCRC put the number of victims at "tens of thousands of children worldwide".

To suggest that: "The Catholic Church is probably the only public institution that has acted with transparency and a sense of responsibility" is at utter variance with the numerous formal reports in Ireland, the commission in Australia, the countless civil lawsuits and criminal trials.

And the Pope maintained this shortly after the Vatican's worst worldwide press coverage ever, following the UNCRC's report.

Unfortunately we can't dismiss these comments of the Pope as an over-defensive response to an aggressive interviewer. The interviewer was sickeningly obsequious; he started the question by saying: "Fortunately,

the scandals that have perturbed the [Catholic] Church's life are now behind us." And, although we would like to have thought otherwise, the comments are in line with the Holy See's general stonewalling of the UNCRC in the last two years.

It is clear that there has been no perceptible change in the treatment of clerical child abuse since Benedict, particularly since the Holy See refuses, despite all protests, to accept that it is responsible for enforcing the Convention on the Rights of the Child throughout the worldwide Church.

It is no longer credible to hope that the Pope has not been behind, or fully supportive of, the Holy See's strategy at the UNCRC. After decades of electing arch conservative cardinals, the conclave simply wanted business as usual, but with better PR. So, in retrospect, it is no surprise that the papal election was such a short one.

What could the motives be of the Pope in making these irresponsible comments, praising his failed predecessor, continuing with business as before and telling the UN where to get off?

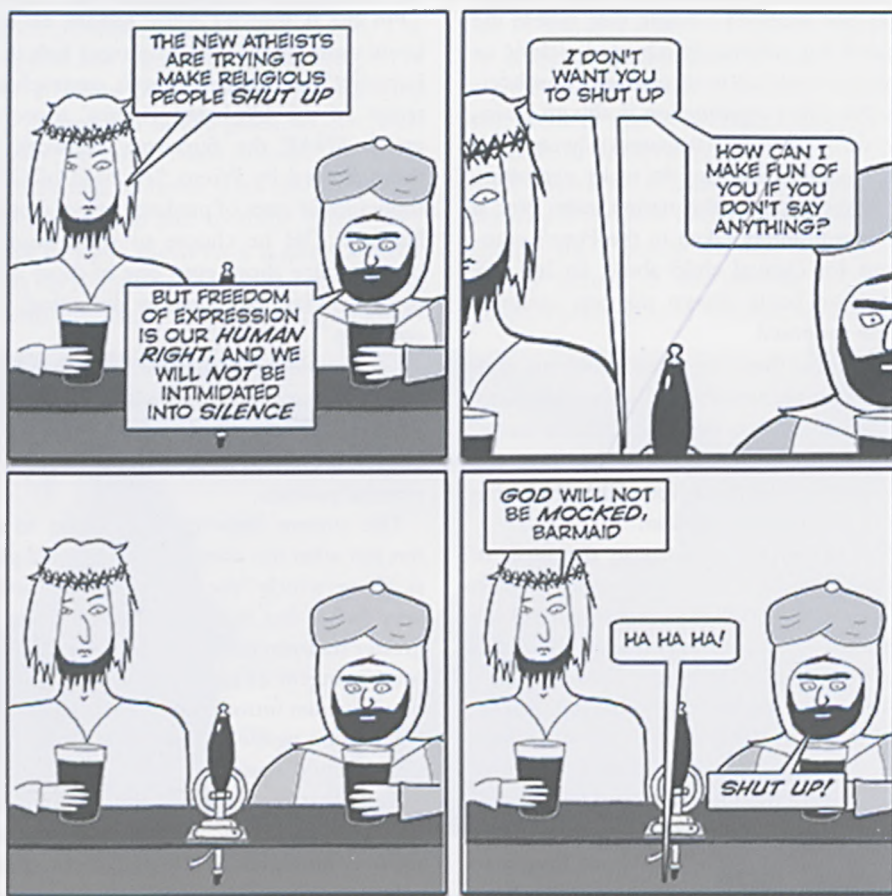
I fear the answer is the papal equivalent of the little boy sticking his fingers in his ears and saying defiantly to his chiding parents: "I can't hear you". It suggests the Church considers that the huge reputational and financial scale of the child abuse scandal already publicly known – and there is much more to come – leaves them no option but to continue to deny justice to victims by refusing them compensation (or minimising it) while shielding perpetrators from the secular authorities.

The Church and the Pope will, however, find it increasingly difficult to continue with business as usual. Even *The Times* has run an editorial describing the Pope's defence of the Church's record on sex abuse as "irresponsible".

International rules to prevent money-laundering and tax evasion in the EU are forcing discipline on the Vatican bank. Similarly, increasing international concerns about child abuse in the Church, in the light of the growing scandals and reports such as the one in Australia, backed up by criminal and civil legal cases and rigorous UNCRC monitoring, will make secrecy much more difficult to maintain in the Church worldwide, and the Vatican too.

Just as the Vatican risks being branded a rogue state if it does not thoroughly clean up the Vatican bank, a similar fate awaits it if it fails to scrupulously follow the UNCRC's concluding observations and finally offer full disclosure of child abuse within its ranks.

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Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist

ANTHONY B PINN went from being a Methodist preacher to an avowed non-believer. **BARRY DUKE** dips into his latest book

There has always been an element of homo-eroticism in the manner in which male Christians relate to Jesus. Nowhere is this more obvious than in religious art – kitschy Catholic art in particular. This subject is rarely, if ever, raised in fundamentalist Christian circles; one has to follow the example of Anthony B Pinn and bid the religion a not-so-fond farewell before one can even begin to broach this thorny (no pun intended) topic.

Pinn, who went from Methodist preacher to atheist when he was in his mid-20s and is now a member of the Board of Directors of the American Humanist Association – refers to this homo-eroticism in his newly published book, *Writing God's Obituary*.

He writes: "... and no one raised questions concerning the latent homoerotic nature of the male's relationship to the male savior. Nor was it mentioned that black men in my church (and churches like my church) prostrated themselves before images of a white Christ.

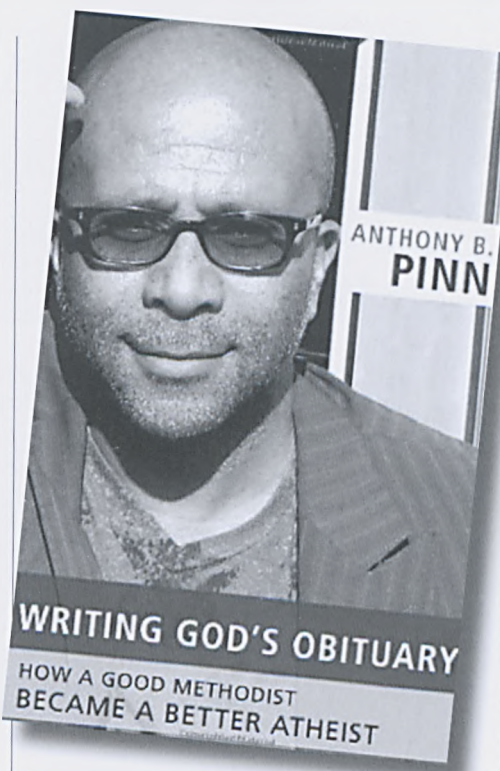
"Was there a hint of white supremacy in this move? This wasn't discussed. Loving and surrendering to this Christ emotionally and physically was okay – it was an act of manhood not to be duplicated elsewhere in life."

Pinn and his contemporaries were taught at an early age that dating always involved three individuals: the boy, the girl and Jesus – "the third wheel" who was always present "to hamper our desires because we shouldn't do anything we would be uncomfortable doing in front of Jesus".

To be avoided at all costs was any speculation about the sex life of Jesus.

Pinn, an African American who preached his first sermon at the age of 12, points out that "Jesus, the saviour of the world, had a penis (typically not depicted in the images) but his sexual ethics – what he did with that penis, who received pleasure by means of it, and how Jesus received pleasure as a result of it – was never spoken of.

"To even think about Jesus having sex with men or women was construed as sinful



because it meant reducing the God/man to a human controlled by a sex organ."

Some may think I do Pinn a disservice by using his references to sex to introduce a book that is much, *much* more than about human sexuality. But I would argue that one cannot avoid the issue because people's sexuality – homosexuality in particular – re-

mains the principal driving force behind so much of the prejudice and hatred generated by Christian fundamentalists – indeed, religious zealots of all stripes.

Harsh anti-gay laws recently enacted in countries such as Nigeria and Uganda, for example, are the direct result of pressure put on politicians by evangelical Christians, many of whom have travelled from the West to spread their homophobic venom in Africa. Sadly, far too many Africans have fallen under the spell of the white man's voodoo – Christianity – and have become enthusiastic foot soldiers in the evangelicals' war on homosexuals.

Pinn, I am sure, recognised this and there can be no doubt that, in his case, Christianity's fixation on sex and sexuality – obsessive to the point of paranoia – played a part in his decision to walk away from the religion.

Towards the end of his book he writes: "I've come a long way – from evangelical Christian to proud humanist without God. The journey has had its twists and turns and its rough patches.

"Still, I've never doubted my departure from the church. I've never looked back because I have never had reason to look back."

This book is a valuable addition to the growing list of publications that are proving helpful to those seeking to escape the emotionally and intellectually deadening influences of the religions they are trapped in.

Among the many who have praised Pinn's latest book is Roy Speckhardt, Executive Director of the American Humanist Association, who described *Writing God's Obituary* as "a whirlwind of writing, leading the reader on the invigorating progression of Pinn's life and way of thinking.

"Over the course of this journey, he shows us the very natural way that a thoughtful person can transition from experiencing the awe of God through speaking in tongues to the very different position of experiencing the joy of intellectual exploration through presenting humanism as a new, godless approach to theological inquiry."

Register for World Humanist Congress

THE World Humanist Congress, organised every three years, is a unique event bringing together humanists from over 40 countries under the auspices of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. In 2014 the British Humanist Association will host the WHC in the beautiful and historic city of Oxford from August 8-10.

To register for this event please visit: <http://whc2014.org.uk/>

More corpses, please, for those wanting to bone up on raising the dead



TYLER Johnson runs a ministry called the Dead Raising Team in the US. He claims to have brought 11 people back to life. He says he even persuaded the authorities in his state to issue him with an official photocard that lets him through police lines at car accident sites.

Johnson appears in a new documentary film called *Deadraisers*, which follows enthusiasts (some are pictured above wearing their Deadraiser T-shirts) as they trail round hospitals and mortuaries trying to bring people back to life.

But those they pray for in the film remain resolutely dead. According to the DRT site “Tyler and his wife Christine are blissfully married with four kids. They hope to see a DRT started in every city in the world, so that nobody could die without being prayed back to life. Tyler is a graduate from Bethel’s School of Supernatural Ministry.”

Johnson is unwilling to provide successful case studies. And in general, the proof that believers cite is a bit unconvincing. For example, there is an American heart surgeon who allegedly brought a heart attack patient back from the dead with prayer ... oh, and a defibrillator.

The BBC’s Jolyon Jenkins then got to meet Alun and Donna Leppitt, a British couple who are convinced that the dead can be raised

through the power of prayer. (They are the two immediately above.)

The evangelical Christians were subject of a BBC 4 programme last month called *Out of the Ordinary: The Power of Prayer*. During the course of the broadcast, Donna lamented the fact that there aren’t too many corpses in the UK that they can practice on.

The one that they did try to resurrect to was Donna’s brother, who died of a heart attack. By the time they got to the mortuary, he had been dead for eight hours. They prayed over him for nearly an hour, and although at one stage they thought they saw him move, that was as good as it got.

Are they discouraged? “Not at all,” says Alun. “Practice makes perfect,” adds Donna. “But in this country, we don’t often get access to dead bodies.”

The Leppitt are the UK end of a worldwide fellowship of evangelical Christians called Global Awakening. In countries like Mozambique and Brazil, Global Alliance missionaries are converting people to Christianity with spectacular displays that claim to heal through prayer. They say they cure blindness and deafness in big open-air meetings.

Nick Clegg’s ‘liberal dilemma’ is sheer hypocrisy

But with this in mind, would he not disagree with the ruling that in 2011 saw Peter and Hazelmary Bull ordered to pay to a gay couple £3,600 in damages for refusing them a double room at their B&B? They were clearly acting on their religious beliefs but it was the law that made for an imposition.

Perhaps even more telling of Clegg’s confusion was his empathy with the actual beliefs that bring about the practise of kosher and halal slaughter, stating that “these are ancient beliefs handed down over generations”. Yet those of us without a short-term memory will recall that just six months ago, Clegg referred to opponents of gay marriage as “dinosaurs”, the joke being that their views are archaic, belonging to a bygone era.

If he had the courage of his convictions he would acknowledge that such bigotry often stems from religious convictions “handed down over generations” so should be justifiable under his watch.

Such duplicity has not gone unnoticed however. Richard Dawkins took to Twitter to question why Clegg had taken such a stance on religious slaughter, stating “I voted LibDem in every election since they existed. I VERY much hope Nick Clegg is not trying to appease religious lobbies” and his opposition to a ban is facing criticism from members of his own party.

Though the ability of secularism to be impartial is dismissed by its critics, anyone with a sense of consistency will acknowledge that in BOTH gay rights and the issue of ritual slaughter it is religious considerations that should first be removed from the equation. From thereon in policy can be formulated in accordance with what is considered reasonable and just from a rational perspective, without conforming to any kind of religious exceptionalism.

Perhaps for Mr Clegg however, the fabled “liberal dilemma” really does exist. Although in his case it should be called “hypocrisy”.