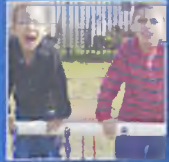


2



Women:
Shocking acid attacks in mainly Muslim countries

3



Science:
Children 'wired' to believe in God, says academic

4



Politics:
Catholic Church at war with Spain over education

8



Religion:
A pastor's kid in the US finds solace in atheism

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

JANUARY 2009

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Atheist soldiers are 'at war' with Christian extremists in the military

THE Secular Coalition for America and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers have called on President-elect Barack Obama to ensure that his administration pursues a military policy more open to non-believers, who make up around 21 percent of the US armed forces.

The action follows a much-publicised legal case involving atheism and the military. Jeremy Hall, 23, a US Army specialist, grew up a Bible-reading Baptist in rural North Carolina. But his faith in God did not survive the battlefields of Iraq. Since disclosing his atheism, Hall claims he has become a target of insult and scorn — labelled "immoral," "a devil worshipper" and, curiously, gay — by fellow GIs and superior officers. But the nub of his complaint runs deeper than personal insult.

In his lawsuit, filed in Kansas in 2007 but later dropped, Hall and his co-plaintiff, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, accused the military establishment not only of prejudice against non-believers but of blatant favouritism toward Christianity. The suit, challenging the place of religion in the armed forces, sparked a national debate about one of the military's least discussed shibboleths.

According to Jonathan Patrick Herzog, an acting assistant professor of history at Stanford University: "The battle lines are already drawn. Critics depict Hall's complaint as a campaign to destroy the spiritual foundation that the nation's military has depended on for centuries. ('His right to spew his lying hot air cannot be allowed to decrease the morale of soldiers in combat,' writes one Christian blogger.) Meanwhile, the latest crop of best-selling atheists grant Hall some form of secular sainthood."

Although he has since dropped his lawsuit — Hall says he plans to leave the army this year — the MRFF is now pursuing a suit on behalf of army medic Dustin Chalker, a decorated Iraq combat veteran and atheist. Chalker joined the Army in 2002 and earned the Combat Medic Badge and a Purple Heart in Iraq.

Chalker is suing the Department of Defence, claiming he was forced to attend military events where fundamentalist Christian prayers violated his constitutional rights.

Chalker's experience with religious coercion by his chain of command was pervasive in the US military under the Bush Administration, according to Michael L "Mikey" Weinstein, founder of the Military Religious Freedom Foundation.

Weinstein, a 1977 honours graduate of the US Air Force Academy, says extremist Christians are engaging in a widespread pattern of unconstitutional sectarian activity in all branches of the military, the Coast Guard, and reserves such as the National Guard.



With God on their side: US military personnel in full prayer mode

As of mid-September last year, the MRFF had collected more than 9,100 reports about such activities at a rate of 80 to 100 per week. By far most of those complaining — 96 percent — come from other Christian service or reserve members who are being targeted because "they are not Christian enough," in Weinstein's words.

"In fact, sectarian activities in the military pose a domestic national security threat that the country ignores at its peril," Weinstein warns, adding: "What will it take to get Americans to wake up and see what's going on?"

The religious extremists involved are known as Christian Dominionists and Christian Reconstructionists, among other names. They do not acknowledge any separation of church and state, and aim to remake their country as a Christian theocracy — the Christian counterparts of the Taliban/Al Qaeda nexus. Weinstein says they are active on all 737 US military bases around the world.

See **Fighting for God and Country**, page 10



Naeema Azar with her son

Can eye-for-an-eye justice ever be right?

BARRY DUKE IS APPALLED BY HIS KNEE-JERK REACTION TO A BARBARIC PUNISHMENT

MY INITIAL reaction to the news that an Iranian man is to be blinded, following an acid attack on a young woman he had been stalking, so unsettled me that I found myself quite unable for a while to think rationally about the case.

"Good!" I exclaimed when I read that a Tehran province criminal court had ordered Majid Movahedi, 27, to be blinded with acid in both eyes in response to a plea from his victim, Ameneh Bahrami. Sickened as I was by the crime, I was horrified more by my knee-jerk approval of the sharia-based tit-for-tat sentence.

According to a report in the *Guardian* in late November, Bahrami was left horrifically disfigured after Movahedi threw a jar of acid in her face as she walked home from work in a busy Tehran neighbourhood in October 2004. She had previously complained to police about being threatened and harassed by Movahedi, whom she had known while they were both university students, but had been told no action could be taken.

Since the attack, Bahrami has undergone 17 operations, some by surgeons in Spain, in an unsuccessful attempt to reconstruct her face. Her injuries led to the loss of one eye and left her blind in the other. The Iranian government has paid £22,500 towards her treatment.

Testifying in Movahedi's presence, Bahrami told the court that she wanted "to inflict the same life on him that he inflicted on me."

Asked by the judge if she wanted Movahedi's face to be splashed with acid, she replied: "That is impossible and horrific. Just drip 20 drops of acid in his eyes so he can realise what pain I am undergoing."

Bahrami, an electronics graduate who worked for a medical engineering company before the attack, said Movahedi's family had asked her to marry him several times, but she had refused. Movahedi later threatened to kill her, she said, after saying that he had built his dreams around her.

Moments before the attack, she sensed she was being followed and tried to get away. But Movahedi caught up with her and stepped in front of her, before throwing acid in her face, leaving her screaming in pain.

Movahedi said he decided to attack Bahrami after she told him she had married someone else, and pleaded with him to leave her alone.

"I decided to splash acid on her face so her husband would leave her and I could have her," he told the court. He said he had earlier contemplated suicide.

A few days later, I was forced to re-assess my initial distaste of the punishment when *Freethinker* reader Adam Tjaavk drew my attention to a feature in the *New York Times*, which featured the photograph at the top of the page.

I recoiled with horror. "If Ameneh Bahrami looks anything like that," I thought, "then perhaps Movahedi deserves his punishment."

The woman pictured with her 12-year-old son is Naeema Azar, a Pakistani who, according to *New York Times* reporter Nicholas D Kristof, "had once been an attractive, self-confident real estate agent. Acid had burned away her left ear and most of her right ear. It had blinded her and burned away her eyelids and most of her face, leaving just bone."

The perpetrator of this terrible crime was her ex-husband Azar Jamsheed, who was never arrested, and has since disappeared.

Kristof revealed: "Acid attacks and wife burnings are common in parts of Asia because the victims are the most voiceless in these societies: they are poor and female. The first step is simply for the world to take note, to give voice to these women ..."

"Since 1994, the Progressive Women's Association has documented 7,800 cases of women who were deliberately burned, scalded or subjected to acid attacks, just in the Islamabad area. In only two percent of those cases was anyone convicted."

He added: "Here in Pakistan, I've been

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investigating such acid attacks, which are commonly used to terrorise and subjugate women and girls in a swath of Asia from Afghanistan through Cambodia. (Men are almost never attacked with acid.) Because women usually don't matter in this part of the world, their attackers are rarely prosecuted and acid sales are usually not controlled. It's a kind of terrorism that becomes accepted as part of the background noise in the region."

Islam is associated with enough human rights violations without also having to stand accused of encouraging acid attacks on females. But the fact remains that this horrible, barbaric religion, more than any other, demands that women be subjugated and dehumanised. And out of subjugation and dehumanisation flows hatred and contempt.

After all, isn't the burqa an open-and-shut form of disfigurement?



BARRY DUKE
FREETHINKER
EDITOR



Children 'wired' to believe in God?

An Oxford academic, Dr Justin Barrett, claimed recently that kids are "wired" to believe in a deity, and if you dumped a bunch of them down on a desert island they would become believers.

A senior researcher at the University of Oxford's Centre for Anthropology and Mind, Barrett says that young people have a predisposition to believe in a supreme being because they assume that everything in the world was created with a purpose.

He says that young children have faith even when they have not been taught about it by family or at school, and argues that even those raised alone on a desert island would come to believe in God.

Is Barrett a Christian? Oh yes – and then some! Ac-

cording to *Wikipedia*: "Barrett is described in the *New York Times* as a 'prominent member of the by-product camp' ['by-product' refers to the theory that religion is a by-product of natural selection] and 'an observant Christian who believes in 'an all-knowing, all-powerful, perfectly good God who brought the universe into being', [and] 'that the purpose for people is to love God and love each other'."

Also that he considers that "Christian theology teaches that people were crafted by God to be in a loving relationship with him and other people. Why wouldn't God, then, design us in such a way as to find belief in divinity quite natural?"

Curiously, no mention is made of Barrett's superstitious Christian beliefs in the *Telegraph* article in which his views were reported

Barrett also told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme: "The preponderance of scientific evidence for the past 10 years or so has shown that a lot more seems to be built into the natural development of children's minds than we once thought, including a predisposition to see the natural world as designed and purposeful and that some kind of intelligent being is behind that purpose. If we threw a handful on an island and they raised themselves I think they would be-

lieve in God."

In a lecture given at the University of Cambridge's Faraday Institute, Barrett cited psychological experiments carried out on children which he says show they instinctively believe that almost everything has

been designed with a specific purpose.

In one study, six and seven-year-olds who were asked why the first bird existed replied "to make nice music" and "because it makes the world look nice".

Barrett said there is evidence that, even by the age of four, children understand that although some objects are made by humans, the natural world is different.

He added that this means children are more likely to believe in creationism than evolution, despite what they may be told by parents or teachers.

Barrett claimed anthropologists have found that, in some cultures, children believe in God even when religious teachings are withheld from them.

"Children's normally and naturally develop-

Massive defeat for Christian lawyers

The Christian Legal Centre (CLC) and Comment on Reproductive Ethics (Core) are fuming over a High Court decision last December refusing them permission to bring a test case against the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA)

Mrs Justice Dobbs, sitting at the High Court in London, ruled that the application for a judicial review was "totally without merit", and she ordered the groups to pay £20,000 in costs.

The campaigners wanted to overturn a decision of the HFEA in January this year, granting research licences to scientists at Newcastle University and King's College London.

CLC founder, Andrea Minichiello Williams, said: "This is a sad day for justice in this country. We see a public interest body, with little funds and no other way of challenging matters of huge ethical and legal importance, being penalised with a £20,000 costs bill.

ing minds make them prone to believe in divine creation and intelligent design. In contrast, evolution is unnatural for human minds; relatively difficult to believe."

Commenting in the *Guardian* on this notion, A C Grayling pointed out that Barratt's research was "funded by the Templeton Foundation, an organisation keen to find, or to insert, religion into science and to promote belief in their compatibility – which, note, comes down to spending money on 'showing' in the end that the beliefs of ancient goatherds are as good as modern physics."

He added: "The Templeton Foundation would do better to be frank about its propagandistic intentions, for while it tries to dress itself in the lineaments of objectivity it will always face the accusation of tainting the pool, as with the work of this Oxford University institute.

"Indeed, I question the advisability of Oxford taking funds from the Templeton Foundation for this kind of work. I wonder whether it has undertaken due diligence on this one. I hope it would not take money supporting research for astrology, Tarot divination, proof that the Olympian deities still exist, and the like. The general claims of religion differ not one jot in intellectual respects – or respectability – from these. Perhaps it should think again."

"Children are more likely to believe in creationism rather than evolution, despite what they may be told by parents or teachers"



Catholic Church at war with Spain over citizen lessons

The Catholic Church in Spain is heading for a showdown with Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero's socialist government over a new course introduced in schools for 12- to 14-year-olds.

The innocuous-sounding Education for Citizenship course is intended to give youngsters an understanding of the meaning of the constitution and the rights that every citizen of Spain can expect.

But the curriculum has become the latest battleground in a raging war between Spain's government and a Roman Catholic Church that is rapidly losing ground in that country.

Church officials and conservative social activists are trying to have the mandatory courses scrapped, insisting that the curriculum promotes ideas that go against church teachings. Among those is acceptance of homosexuals and, by implication, same-sex marriage, which the government legalised three years ago.

Last month, BBC Radio 4's *The World Tonight* programme reported

that opinion polls in Spain clearly show that, for most young Spaniards, Catholicism plays little or no part in their lives. Said reporter Steve Kingston: "Conservatives in the Church accuse the government of deliberately encouraging this trend, and that the citizen classes are further evidence of an alleged push by the Prime Minister to secularise Spanish society."

In 2007, ahead of the introduction of the lessons, Sister Maria Rosa de la Cierva, a Church representative at the Education Ministry, said: "This is a frontal assault on the Catholic religion. This is an authentic scholastic war ... and part of a clear persecution, little by little, of the Catholic faith."

But the Prime Minister Zapatero hit back at the Church, saying that the Spanish Constitution ensured there was room for everybody in Spain, that everybody has the right to have rights, whatever they think, and whether they belong to a religion or not.

Most encouraging part of the BBC broadcast were the opinions voiced by a group of around eight Madrid youngsters, all but one of whom admitted to being Catholic. One vociferously declared "I do not believe in God." Another said: "I don't believe the Catholic Church is relevant today to young people ... It disapproves of the use of condoms by young people."

Education is only the latest squabble driving a wedge between the church and the state in Spain.

Church officials, a so-called pro-family conservative lobby and right-wing opposition politicians have reacted with horror to the government's liberalisation of abortion and divorce laws, its reduction of state funding for churches and its efforts to better separate church and state.

At the heart of the conflict is a Vatican-backed effort by Spanish conservatives to restore traditional Catholicism to a place of importance in public life – and to recapture the power and influence they have lost in recent years.

The Socialist government, however, sees the promotion of secular values and its socially liberal agenda as essential to the nation's modernisation, especially in today's fast-changing, multicultural Spain.

Modern Spanish history is replete with the ups and downs of tumultuous relations between church and state. As the renowned Basque writer Pio Baroja

once put it: "Spaniards through the ages have followed their priests – either with candles, or with clubs."

Under Franco, Catholic instruction became compulsory in school. To this day, under a treaty that Franco signed with the Holy See, Spain is obliged to offer Catholic instruction in all public schools. But it is now possible for a pupil to be instructed in the beliefs of the Catholic Church in one schoolroom, then hear opposite arguments in another.

Education Ministry officials say that teaching about citizenship and laws, and all that goes with it, including tolerance for minorities, is essential in a Spain that is no longer homogenous.

Alejandro Tiana, secretary-general of the ministry, said that "the reality of Spain today is that students are coming from different kinds of families. The education system should teach the importance of fighting discrimination and avoiding homophobia."

But opponents contend that the government is using the courses to impose its own beliefs.

By refusing to establish marriage between man and woman as the only acceptable form, for example, the instruction creates a kind of "relativism" in which there are no rules or absolute truths, the critics maintain.

"Spaniards through the ages have followed their priests – either with candles, or with clubs"

Marlene - movie star, cabaret artiste, war hero ... and atheist!



National Secular Society President Terry Sanderson has a treat in store for Marlene Dietrich fans in an entertaining show in February which examines the many aspects of Dietrich's complex personality.

He will explore her movie career, using generous clips from her films; then, accessing rare archive material, give a moving tribute to her phenomenal work as an anti-Nazi during WWII. The evening culminates with a complete performance, on the big screen, of her fabulous one-woman show, with which she toured the world.

Recorded in Sweden in 1963, this is Dietrich at her peak, accompanied by Burt Bacharach and his orchestra. Don't miss this rare opportunity to see a legendary performer in dazzling form.

The show takes place at the Conway Hall, Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL on Friday 20 February 2009, 7.30pm.

Tickets are £10, and you can book on-line at www.secularism.org.uk/marlene.html, or by post (cheques made out to NSS) from NSS (Marlene), 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R.

“There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life”

Atheist bus campaign slogan

Churches plan ‘a response’ to atheist bus campaign

The Churches’ Advertising Network revealed in December that it was planning to “respond” to the atheist bus campaign in the New Year – but did not reveal what form its counter-strategy would take.

Speaking on BBC1’s *Breakfast Show*, Francis Goodwin of CAN, somewhat surprisingly said he thought the atheist campaign was “fantastic” and welcomed the debate. “Bring it on,” he said.

He was joined on the programme by Ariane Sherine, who suggested an atheist bus ad campaign earlier in 2008 after writing in the *Guardian* about her profound irritation with religious advertising on public transport.

The campaign that followed captured the imagination of thousands of Britons, as well as supporters from other parts of the world, and donations came flooding in for the project.



Ariane Sherine and Francis Goodwin

By December, the fund stood at a staggering £140,000.

In his interview on the *Breakfast Show*, Goodwin produced a statistic that shows just how irrelevant Christianity has become in the UK.

He said: “Only one in eight people in the UK have a clear understanding of the Christmas story ... and it’s fewer among children.”

Vatican accused of ‘total idiocy and madness’

Italian gay rights groups and newspapers have turned their fury on the Vatican following its decision to oppose a proposed UN resolution calling on governments worldwide to de-criminalise homosexuality.

The row erupted after the Vatican’s permanent observer to the United Nations told a French Catholic news agency that the Holy See was against the resolution, which France was due to propose on behalf of the 27-member European Union.

Archbishop Celestino Migliore, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the UN, said the Vatican opposed the resolution because it would: “add new categories of those protected from discrimination” and could lead to reverse discrimination against traditional heterosexual marriage.

“If adopted, they would create new and in-placable discrimination. For example, states which do not recognise same-sex unions as ‘matrimony’ will be pilloried and made an object of pressure.”

A strongly worded editorial in Italy’s mainstream *La Stampa* newspaper said the Vatican’s reasoning was “grotesque.”

Pointing out that homosexuality was still punishable by death in some Islamic countries, the editorial said that what the Vatican really feared was “a chain reaction in favour of legally recognised homosexual unions in countries like Italy, where there is currently no legislation.

Franco Grillini, founder and honorary president of Arcigay, Italy’s leading gay rights group, said the Vatican’s reasoning smacked of “total idiocy and madness”.

“The French resolution, which is supported by all 27 members of the European Union, has nothing to do with gay marriage. It is about stopping jail and the death penalty for homosexuals,” he insisted.

Human rights groups say homosexuality is still punishable by law in more than 85 countries and by death in a number of them, including Afghanistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Yemen.

An editorial in Rome’s left-leaning *La Repubblica* newspaper said the Vatican’s position “leaves one dumbstruck.” Margherita Boniver, a leading member of the Italy’s leftist Democratic Party, called it “alarming anachronistic.”

newsinbrief

BIBLE ‘PROBABLY NOT TRUE’

Outgoing US President George W Bush said that the Bible is “probably not” literally true and that a belief that God created the world is compatible with the theory of evolution.

“I think you can have both,” he told ABC television, adding “You’re getting me way out of my lane here. I’m just a simple president.”

But “evolution is an interesting subject. I happen to believe that evolution doesn’t fully explain the mystery of life,” said the President, an outspoken Christian who often invokes God in his speeches.

“I think that God created the Earth, created the world; I think the creation of the world is so mysterious it requires something as large as an almighty and I don’t think it’s incompatible with the scientific proof that there is evolution.”

Asked whether the Bible was literally true, Mr Bush replied: “Probably not. No, I’m not a literalist, but I think you can learn a lot from it ... The important lesson is ‘God sent a son,’” he said.

POPE PRAYS FOR ALEXY

Pope Benedict XVI last month called for prayers for the soul of Russian Orthodox Patriarch Alexy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who died in December at the age of 79. Relations between the Vatican and the ROC have been strained over Orthodox accusations that the Vatican was poaching congregants in former Soviet nations. The Vatican denies that.

‘GOD SAVE CAR WORKERS’

Three SUV (or 4x4) vehicles were parked at the altar of the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit, Michigan, last month during a service in which God’s help was called upon to save America’s collapsed auto industry. Worshippers were summoned up to the vehicles and anointed with oil.

All-or-Nothing Reasoning in the Bible

BY DR THOMAS W SMYTHE AND DR THOMAS G EVANS OF NORTH CAROLINA CENTRAL UNIVERSITY, USA

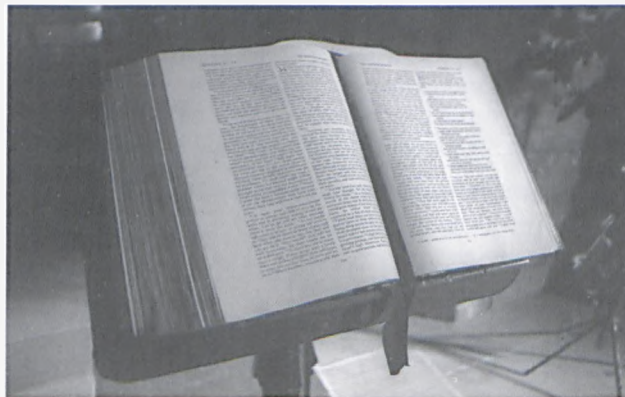
Though the Bible is taken by some Christian fundamentalists to be in its every detail the infallible and inspired word of God, it contains many passages that can be shown to contain poorly reasoned arguments that have the effect of oversimplifying moral issues and human values.

Consider the all-or-nothing reasoning in the following passage from Psalms: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good" (14.1). The passage asserts that either one believes in God completely and wholeheartedly, without question, or one is actively morally corrupt, with such a defective character that one can perform no good act. Are we to believe that no atheist is capable of performing a single virtuous act under any circumstances? If a single atheist does a single act of kindness, the argument contained in the passage fails. Similar passages are found throughout the Old Testament. Consider for example: "And it shall be, if thou do at all forget the LORD thy God, and walk after other gods, and serve them, and worship them, I testify against you this day that ye shall surely perish. As the nations which the LORD destroyeth before your face, so shall ye perish; because ye would not be obedient unto the voice of the LORD your God" (Deut 8.10-20). By this reasoning the very existence of any religion other than Judaism becomes logically impossible, since God certainly would have by now wiped the competing religion off the face of the earth. Nor is the destruction of other religions a one-time event, for in Deuteronomy 13 believers are commanded to kill anyone – even members of their own families – who proselytize for another religion. Under such a system it would be difficult indeed to have any serious discussion of moral issues without putting one's life at risk. Nor is the New Testament free of such reasoning. In Matthew, Jesus tells us that on the Day of Judgment he will separate the metaphorical sheep from the metaphorical goats (25:31-34), giving the one group life eternal and casting the other "cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels" (41). For Jesus, as he is presented here, everyone is all good or all bad, right or wrong, saved or unsaved, and there are no other options.

Such a moral classification oversimplifies the

complexity of the human moral condition in support of a gross and unjustified authoritarianism based on empty threats.

We are not either just sinners or just saints. There are plenty of other possibilities. Modern philosophy and psychology reveal, if our life experience has not already shown us, that people are complex with a wide range of character traits and behaviors, from the saintly to the merely venial to the utterly corrupt. No-one's behavior is always moral or always immoral. Moreover, people offer all manner of reasons to justify doing bad things. Not all evil acts derive from a lack of religious belief. In fact, there is no provable connection between the amount of religious fervor in a community and its moral behavior. Certainly



there is no clear evidence that the proportion of Christian fundamentalists in a community has a salutary effect on the crime rate, and one can speculate that a moral education based on all-or-nothing reasoning cannot be good for children.

Such an all-or-nothing moral system promotes authoritarianism: either do as I (or the Bible or God) say, or perish in hell. Such authoritarianism accompanied by a demand for absolute unthinking obedience is detrimental to effective moral education, which depends on the development of moral insight through careful reasoning on ethical subjects. On what basis will sheep-and-goats logic allow one to make the subtle distinctions on which moral reasoning depends? If every moral speculation risks the charge of blasphemy, such reasoning at best will suffer a chilling effect and at worst will be completely stunted.

Bullying is seldom the best way to promote learning, in ethics or any other field, and the empty threat of do what I say or you will go to hell is obvious intellectual bullying. One would like to think that we have advanced beyond the kind of Puritan scare tactics exemplified by Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the

Hands of an Angry God," in which he pictures the human soul dangling like a spider on a gossamer thread over the flaming pit of hell. But sadly, the hellfire and brimstone sermon is still a staple in many of our churches. According to psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, behavior motivated solely by fear of negative consequences is the lowest level of moral development. A morally advanced society must move beyond the empty threat of hell and divine retribution.

In order for such a movement to take place, moral education must not be confined to scriptural education from the church, synagogue and mosque. It must move into an arena where open debate and discussion is encouraged, where creative moral thought is fostered, and where the answers to complex moral questions are not routinely stuffed into a predefined rigid formula. One should not have to model one's behavior on a code based on fear of eternal damnation or fear of being stoned at the town gate. Of course, there is no guarantee that good moral education will lead to good behavior—one recalls that Watergate felon Jeb Magruder had been a student of a renowned ethicist, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin—but that does not mean that moral education should be relegated to those with the most narrow and rigid views; it must be made available in an atmosphere that encourages reasonable moral thinking and open-minded discussion, that helps people to live respectable, morally mature lives based on careful and sensitive thought.

The kind of narrow, disjunctive thinking that classifies all people into sheep or goats is all too common in organized religion. We have to learn to allow some open middle-ground between belief and blasphemy. Religious exclusivity must end. As Barack Obama said in his Berlin speech in July 2008: "The walls between races and tribes; natives and immigrants; Christian and Muslim and Jew cannot stand. These now are the walls we must tear down." Our best chance for tearing these walls down is by opening our minds to the insights of moral philosophers, psychologists, psychiatrists, medical researchers, and other scientists. If we limit ourselves to the religious exclusivity and bigotry that is encouraged by literal readings of most of the world's holy books, we will never solve our moral problems. We must reject the tribalism of texts written 2,000 to 3,600 years ago. They cannot provide the moral compass we need. **FT**

UN passes 'sinister' anti-blasphemy resolution

Late last year Islamic countries won United Nations backing for an anti-blasphemy measure that Western critics say would curtail freedom of speech.

The Combating Defamation of Religions resolution passed by 85-50 votes with 42 abstentions.

But while its sponsors say that it, and earlier similar measures, were aimed at preventing violence against worshippers regardless of religion, religious tolerance advocates warn the resolutions are being accumulated for a more sinister goal.

"It provides international cover for domestic anti-blasphemy laws, and there are a number of people who are in prison today because they have been accused of committing blasphemy," said Bennett Graham, of the Becket Fund, a think tank aimed at promoting religious liberty.

Graham said: "Those arrests are made legitimate by the UN body's (effective) stamp of approval."

While the current resolution is non-binding, Pakistan's Ambassador Masood Khan reminded the UN's Human Rights Council last year that the OIC ultimately seeks a "new instrument or convention" on the issue. Such a measure would impose its terms on signatory states.

"Each time the resolution comes up, we get a measure of where the world is on this issue,

and we see that the campaign has been ramped up," said Hillel Neuer, executive director of the Geneva-based monitoring group UN Watch.

While last year's draft was less Islamocentric than previous ones, analysts note it is more emphatic in linking religion defamation and incitement to violence.

This "risks limiting a broad range of peaceful speech and expression," Neuer argues.

The 2008 resolution "underscores the need to combat defamation of religions, and incitement to religious hatred in general, by strategising and harmonising actions at the local, national regional and international levels."

It also laments the fact that "Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism."

But Western democracies argue that a religion cannot enjoy protection from criticism, because that would require a judicial ruling that its teachings are the "truth."

"Defamation carries a particular legal meaning and application in domestic systems that makes the term wholly unsuitable in the context of religions," says the US government in a response on the issue to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

"A defamatory statement . . . is more than just an offensive one. It is also a statement that is false."

It also points out the legal difficulty of even defining the term "defamation" since "one individual's sincere belief that his or her creed alone is the truth conflicts with another's sincerely held view of the truth."

Yemen, on behalf of OIC, successfully introduced the measure to the UN General Assembly for the first time in 2005 after Pakistan first tabled in 1999 for annual consideration in the Human Rights Commission – the Council's forerunner.

Western countries emphasise the distinction between granting an "idea" rights – and defending the right of people not to be discriminated against.

"Canada rejects the basic premise that religions have rights; human rights belong to human beings," said Catherine Loubier, spokeswoman for Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon.

"The focus (here) should not be on protecting religions, but rather on protecting the rights of the adherents of religions, including of people belonging to religious minorities, or people who may choose to change their religion, or not to practise religion at all."

Muslim countries say they are only trying to cut down on what they see as extensive bias against Islam in the West. In the lead-up to last year's vote, many referred, for example, to the 2005 publication of Danish cartoons that satirised Mohammed, and which touched off riots through the Muslim world.

"Everybody is aware that there is a campaign in certain media to fuel the fire of incitement to hatred and to disfigure certain persons or figures through caricature," said one Sudanese diplomat.

But supporters of the Western position say the resolution and its predecessors contribute to increasing discrimination based on religion. "From the human rights side of things, this is the opposite of what is supposed to be happening," said Becket's Graham.

"Instead of protecting an individual, this resolution protects an idea, and relies on hurt feelings as a source of judgment. It can only lead to a jurisprudence of hurt feelings."

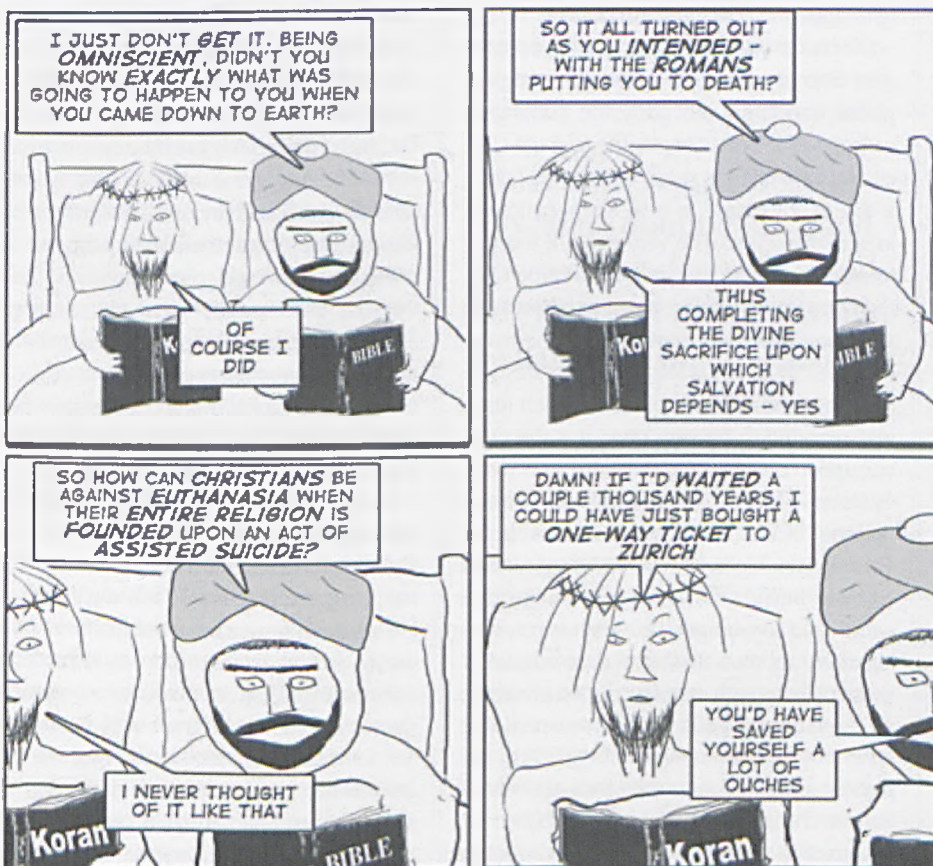
Canada says Islamic governments have abused laws against defamation or contempt of religions to "prosecute and imprison journalists, bloggers, academics students and peaceful political dissidents."

The Iranian parliament, for example, is currently weighing a draft amendment to its penal code that would impose capital punishment for apostasy.

There's also consensus among opponents of the UN measure that people most likely to be targeted by anti-blasphemy laws are Muslims in Muslim countries.

"Pakistan has the (toughest) anti-blasphemy laws, and while they are certainly used against lots of minority religions, they are used mainly

Jesus & Mo



The Climate Crisis

Reason, Religion & Riches

Outbreeding the opposition is the goal of every world religion, but such competition will be the undoing of us all, argues **Edwin Salter**.

"Go forth and multiply" is the commandment, perhaps from "selfish genes" and certainly from most societies, which is enshrined and made holy in almost every religion. Alas there are now about 6,600 million of us, a global population so youthful and fertile that another thousand million are predicted to be with us in little over a decade. Few countries have achieved stable populations or have diminished (usually by emigration).

Exceptionally, some religious movements (the Shakers in USA for example) have terminated themselves through celibacy, tactfully departing from sin. But outnumbering the opposition remains fervently on the agenda of the self-righteous of all kinds, and ten children per woman (what a property boom for the man in charge) has been achieved in modern times (as by the Hutterites, also USA).

What is the point of us all? A tenth as many happy, healthy, helpful people could sustain and develop all our virtues and the achievements of civilisation, the arts and sciences. Almost all of us fall far short of our human potential and it is hard to see any positive value in our population plague and easy to identify its hideous consequences. Unfortunately, if a catastrophic climate change is not prevented, the survivors may be vicious and embittered remnants in a ruined world.

The population explosion is a major cause of our climate crisis. When Plato commended small city states of controlled size, we perhaps numbered around a couple of hundred million. In a sliver of geological time we have become the major influence on the planet, with the new Anthropocene likely to be a mere moment. There are plenty of stopgap campaigns to feed the starving where local

resources are exceeded, virtually none to restrain our multiplication – and for that such religious fundamentalisms as those of Rome and of the USA (which opposes funding) must bear most blame. China received great criticism for the harshness of its population control policy, but how to do better swiftly is not easy (the Indian subcontinent particularly needs to know).

If the rich demand property and power, it seems the poor demand children for their security. In Britain the freethinking of Bradlaugh and Besant accepted the warning of Malthus about the grim consequences of excess population and did much to improve our society from the bottom up by countering ignorance and enabling birth control.

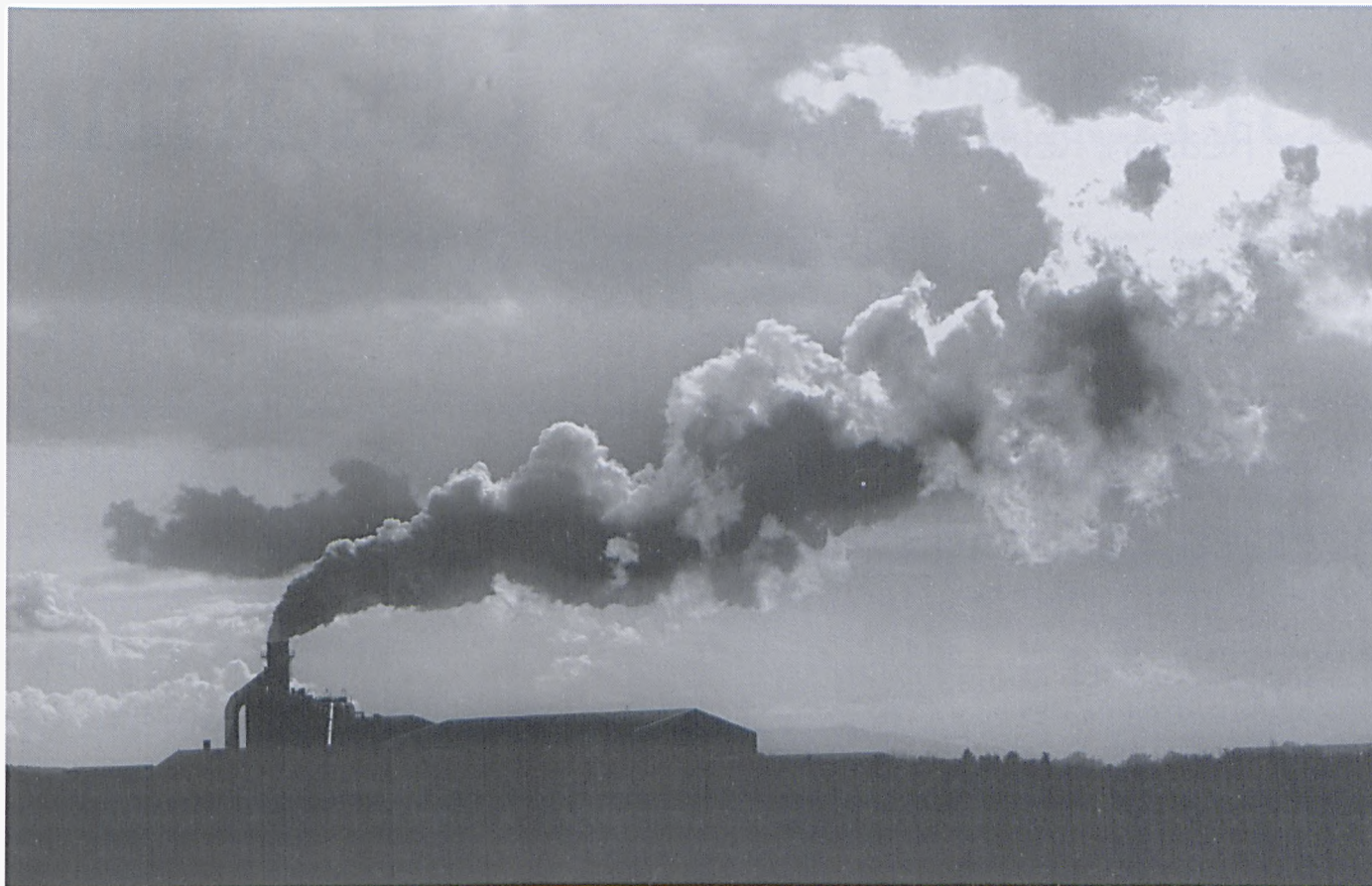
Of course the developed world contributes disproportionately to the root causes of global warming, particularly the burning of carbon fuels. For example, the average USA citizen generates as much carbon dioxide in a day as a Chinese in a week, a Tanzanian in seven months. The very rich are too few to make a significant direct contribution but their untrammelled privilege is excused as an aspiration (however hopeless) for the many who seek to join or at least ape their lifestyle. If there is one splendid point on which Jesus was reported to be very clear, it is the utter corruption of riches and the worship of money (John 2, Mark 10, Matthew 19 but see the "gimme" of 25). Yet somehow, in a coup of Calvinist doublethink (the founding austerity now become boastful self-indulgence), wealth and consumption are seen as confirming divine approval: faith in one's predestined salvation is enough, good works are unnecessary, and all evangelists should prosper. The other major contribution of many rich in the present crisis is, of course, their disinclination to change: presumably they expect to buy comfort (everything valuable privatised)

even if the worst happens.

If humanity has needed permission to overcome and largely destroy the natural world, Genesis provided it through "dominion" (1.26, though 2.15 requires all to be kept) and only in current adaptations are a religious notion of 'stewardship' (v the strange Luke 16) and a sanctimonious or clappy "Let's Love His World" emerging. One problematic aspect of much religion is its yearning for the past time of foundation and success, preferring pastoral certainties (the heaven on Earth expected by such as Witnesses seems at risk) to technological change.

It has to be accepted that industrialisation and scientific developments have enormously accelerated the climate crisis, albeit unawares until the last twenty-odd years. And what use is a Royal Society that is silent in the crisis or a huge effort devoted to "big bang" distractions for physicists: what learned body redirects itself to the new great task? A century separates the calculation by Arrhenius that carbon dioxide would heat the planet from the formal public warning by climatologists (in 1995) that the process was massively underway. The great vested interests of business seek to maintain complacency amidst a chaos of deregulated capitalism, and politicians busy spinning their power games have no interest in confronting an absolute difficulty.

Human beings are not well evolved for planning on a grand scale and, like our flight/ fight response, much of our functioning is triggered by what is actually before us. Hence the difference between beliefs about ourselves and actual responses in particular circumstances (as in the cruel compliance demonstrated by Milgram and Zimbardo). Tell someone about global warming and they are inclined to respond with a contrary anecdote or an unanswerable question about their particular future weather. What can be



predicted are the global average temperature rise and much change, especially an increase at the extremes. At the most pessimistic, processes become chaotic with immense change involving not only atmospheric phenomena such as jet streams but also ocean currents including the "gulf stream", which moderates British temperature in contrast to continental temperatures at the same latitude. It is a certain consequence of feedback that the process will not be steadily linear but is accelerating formidably.

All this sounds obscure, best left to others, and rationality has to struggle hard to urge the effort of response. The faiths may offer instead certainties, various and incompatible. As I write, many in the USA, in a hideous parody of democracy, are celebrating a potential Vice-President in Sarah Palin (creationist, oil advocate and opponent of environmentalism) who represents on their behalf the negation of reason and civilised concern.

It seems that no amount of expertise will make leaders pursue unappealing policies, however essential. There is much need for the general public to become seriously concerned (though not in panic) so that action is widely demanded, recognising that this comes at a cost even if tiny in comparison to the consequences of inertia and fatalism.

A rational and systematic programme to restrain climate change and achieve eventual stability could comprise three steps (which

should not wait on each other). The first is emergency action to control temperature, and the only current plausible method seems to be the reduction of solar heating by reflection back. Part of the possible gain here has already been taken up by 'global dimming' due to pollution (which has disguised the underlying heating process as well as damaging the ozone layer, health, forests and much else). Creating low sea clouds (as by

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spraying sea water mists) seems a practical and relatively inexpensive form of white paint and needs trial at once. Saving the rainforests and the selective protection of land from sea incursion are also very urgent.

The next step requires a cure for the basic cause, excessive greenhouse gas (carbon dioxide is now 386ppm up from the high of 315 in 1958). The term comes from the way incoming solar radiation passes through the gas but then radiation reflected back from the surface (at different wavelength) is absorbed

in the atmosphere so that heat builds up. There are few proposals for this task, all very uncertain and needing substantial research quickly. The natural process by which tiny sea creatures form shells of carbonate that sink to the sea bed might be accelerated by adding nutrients. Gases might be absorbed on activated surfaces and then the gas separated and pumped to storage, perhaps in empty oil wells. Just possibly microorganisms might process methane or, if nothing better, it is burnt as fuel. Freezing out gases seems scarcely practical and effective sequestering compounds not in evidence: desperation would harvest organic matter merely to lock up the carbon.

The final step is that of achieving sustainability, especially in respect to power generation. Because of the huge interest of existing business, this is presented as the crucial issue when in fact there is no major problem (though electricity requires energy conversion). There are plenty of widely distributed sources of energy relatively harmless to capture, many now familiar – sun, wind, tide, geothermal – and others being researched – wave, ocean temperature differentials, fusion, artificial photosynthesis for hydrogen (the gas is a useful clean intermediary but has of course to be produced). Only in limited circumstances is there need for traditional combustion, nuclear power with its severe problems of future cost and safety, or biofuels

The Climate Crisis Reason, Religion & Riches

at the expense of agriculture or nature. Replacing carbon fuels will eliminate the violent politics of black gold and conserve its complex chemicals.

The principles to guide our attempts include the limiting of costs and side-effects as possible, and equity among peoples and states of very different vulnerabilities. Crucial for safety are three criteria: that interventions should be gradual in implementation, measurable in their effects, and reversible. It is not appropriate to think of economic competition for one best solution, and dealing with a complex system requires multiple adjustments.

Perhaps you think all this doom-saying is wildly exaggerated. Well, what level of risk do you take in life, what risk of death would make you take the long route to cross a road? If you thought the chance of global disaster greatly affecting yourself within a decade or two was 50:50, would you alter your life and demand precautions? Published estimates of change are themselves revised to predict ever shorter time-scales and increased magnitudes.

A more frugal lifestyle would no doubt do us good physically and morally. And the evidence is that we would be happier – an unwelcome idea for profitable consumerism. But it is not clear how money calculations can ever care about human matters (and how alarming that global companies rule us without even the dubious mandates of states). By essential measures such as less polluting travel, eating less meat (animals consume tenfold food), and by a general pattern of reduce-reuse-recycle, we can aim at a wiser future. Sadly this “green” ecologically aware approach cannot by itself now save us and the useful and beautiful treasures of landscape and biodiversity. Nature is denuded by our sheer numbers, by livestock and forest fires (both adding greenhouse gases), and even the nature reserves we have saved threaten to become death-traps as conditions change.

As geological history shows, the planet endures cataclysms and sudden fluctuations: it is merely biology that largely succumbs, changed criteria of fitness giving opportunity for new (so no, the famous meteorite that probably ended the dinosaurs was not thrown with intelligent design, primates naturally selected within its aftermath). There has been an unfortunate superstition that the Earth is self-healing and will obligingly maintain the particular equilibrium to which we have adjusted in the relatively brief period of our final evolution. Gaia is a myth which has attracted well-meaning folly and wasted time just like the deliberate effort (blame avoidance and commercial greed in the USA despite clear warnings since 1978, dodging responsibility at a cost of 30 years’ damage) to produce bad science denying the crisis and its human origins.

It is the complexity of interactions that makes the situation so difficult and unpredictable. There are other greenhouse gases including water vapour itself (more in warmer air) and methane (very potent and barely retained in huge cold deposits). One change precipitates a whole cascade of others as when loss of ice 1) reduces reflectivity so increasing warming, 2) exposes tundra, releasing methane, 3) leads to sea level rise, so flooding low land (from London to Bangladesh), and 4) affects ocean density, so redirecting currents: and on and around again it all goes (my diagram of the whole system certainly frightens me). Compare this with the appeal of religious explanations in their simplicity and personification. “He Did It!” explains all while conveying no useful or testable information whatsoever, unless to try grovelling or imbecile applause.

Will the signs of disaster be celebrated by faiths that have regularly foretold the end of a world of evil disbelief (as proved, of course, by its being ended)? Will all those religious be consoled that a messiah may come just for them or a rapturous ascent to paradise? However often mischance strikes such faithful it is always somehow for the best, wonderfully beyond explanation. The sad reality may be a desperate and brutal struggle with few survivors.

It need not happen unless wilful ignorance triumphs. The vast majority of religious people share the kindness of humanity, and will, let us hope, be far too sensible to welcome catastrophe. And atheists know that there is just the one life for themselves and their children. Danger mightily concentrates the mind and if humankind is determined enough, reason can provide salvation. **FT**

Fighting

Jonathan Patrick Herzog, writing in the *Washington Independent*, points out that American martial leaders have long prayed before and after battle: George Washington at the close of the Revolutionary War; George Dewey after his victory against the Spanish fleet at Manila; and Dwight D Eisenhower on the eve of D-Day. Chaplains have also been key components of US fighting forces, from the ragtag colonial militias to the highly professional units of today.

“So when Americans learn that soldiers are being evangelised on military bases, that religious materials are often circulated among troops and that depictions of Washington kneeling in prayer are ubiquitous in military circles, they might likely see all this as an organic part of a venerable tradition.

“But these incidents are anything but organic — and not nearly as deeply rooted as one might imagine. In fact, they are largely the residue of a forgotten footnote to US military history during the late 1940s and 1950s — a time when civilian and military leaders attempted to imbue the armed forces with religious zeal and purpose.

“At issue today, however, is not the place of religion in the military. Rather, it is the official sanction that government gives it. While this matter is given special weight by those who see America in the midst of a modern holy war against terrorism, it has precedent in the nation’s last great quasi-religious crusade — the battle against atheistic communism.

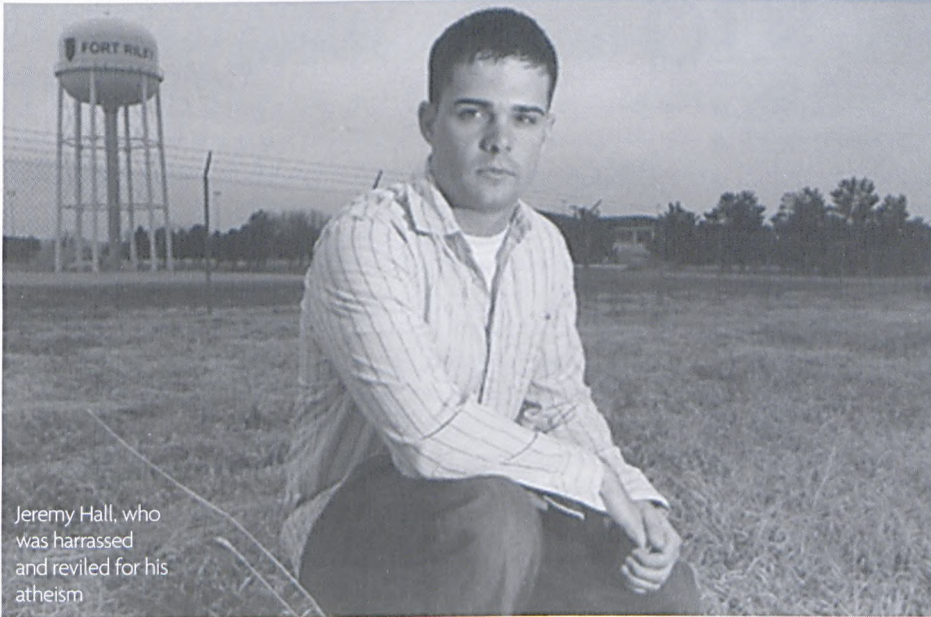
“More than 60 years ago, when the Cold War was menacing but still unnamed, US leaders faced the luckless dilemma of picking their own poison. If they demobilised the military after World War II, as their predecessors had done after previous wars, the Soviet threat might become unmanageable. But maintaining a large standing military would betray a national principle. It was considered profoundly un-American to maintain a powerful armed force in a time of peace. According to a long line of patriots, from Samuel Adams on down, standing armies threatened liberty and smothered virtue.

“Added to this dilemma was a spiritual wild card. While Americans today would probably define communism as a political or economic philosophy, decision-makers in the 1940s and 1950s viewed it as a quasi-religion. It had prophets and prophecy, missionaries and martyrs, and a belief in the ultimate perfectibility of mankind through inevitable historical process.

“National-security analysts fretted over the almost “messianic” devotion of Soviet citizens. Military leaders worried that physical force alone might be insufficient in the emerging Cold War. ‘Over and over again, gigantic concentrations of physical power have gone down in defeat before a lesser strength propelled by conviction,’ warned one brigadier general in 1949. ‘The Goliaths have perished at the hands of the Davids.’

“President Harry S Truman decided to run the risk of

g for God and Country



Jeremy Hall, who was harassed and reviled for his atheism

America maintaining a sizable standing military. But to many, his cure looked worse than the disease. In 1938, only one in five servicemen was younger than 21. Ten years later, soldiers under 21 made up more than half the military and accounted for 70 percent of all enlistments. America's new standing army was regarded as puerile, impressionable and naive.

"Military leaders wondered if they stood on the verge of creating a potential Frankenstein's monster. Their plan needed a fail-safe. So they decided not to pull the plug on their monster — but to give it a soul instead. To this end, religion became indispensable.

"Military leaders vigorously blended the martial with the sacred to foster virtue and create spiritual warriors immune to the siren songs of communism. In the Fort Knox Experiment of 1947, the army toyed with the idea of simultaneously running new recruits through a physical and religious boot camp. Though this proved too blatantly unconstitutional for Army-wide adoption, the 'Fort Knox methods' lived on in the Army's commitment to develop the spiritual side of its troops.

"Truman thought so highly of this mission that, one year later, he created the President's Committee on Religion and Welfare in the Armed Forces, the first presidential commission devoted to religion. Its members designed campaigns to encourage soldiers to attend church; to urge local religious groups to invite servicemen to their congregations; and to revitalize the military chaplaincy.

"While the military brass had no stomach for mandatory religious services, it did authorize, beginning in the late 1940s, various 'character guidance' programs run by the reorganized chaplaincy. New recruits attended a minimum of six hours of chaplain lectures on such topics as the sacredness of marriage, the relationship between democracy and religion, and the dangerous

faith of communism. All other personnel had to attend similar lectures once a month.

"Among other things, soldiers learned that in the Cold War, the United States, a 'covenant nation' due to its reliance on God, confronted the 'demonic nation' of the Soviet Union. In a contest between God and Satan, military leaders bet on the home team.

"This was tame compared to the religious programs of the newly independent Air Force. Under Maj Gen Charles I Carpenter, the Air Force project consisted of lay retreats, on-base preaching missions by religious groups and the confiscation of obscene materials.

"Carpenter also believed in the power of religion to solve the personal problems of Air Force personnel. Consider one case cited by a US Air Force report. A military surgeon reported treating an airman suffering from a nervous breakdown. The diagnosis: neurosis stemming from religious confusion. The prescription: a session with the base chaplain, who set up a 'systematic plan' of religious treatment.

"Nor did Carpenter stop there. In late 1948, he struck a deal with the Moody Bible Institute of Science, an evangelical organization devoted to repairing the damage done to religion by Darwinism. Soon, airmen across America and throughout the world were watching films like *God of Creation and Duty* or *Destiny*. The Air Force even provided the representatives of the Moody Institute with a fully crewed B-25. By 1951, nearly 200,000 Air Force personnel were watching Moody films each year.

"Non-believers like Hall must have existed in the 1950s, or, at the very least, troops uncomfortable with the idea of religious training. But few spoke up. It took a 1962 decision by the US Supreme Court to end the 15-year period of officially sanctioned military sacralisation.

"In the wake of *Engel vs Vitale*, the Supreme Court

ruling that deemed prayer in public schools unconstitutional, the Washington director of the American Civil Liberties Union brought grievances of 'religious indoctrination' directly to Army Secretary Cyrus R Vance. Vance responded quickly. In March 1963, he ordered Army chaplains to create a new, secular version of character guidance — outside chapels and without sermonising. The other services did the same.

"As long as the United States remains a religious country, there will be religion in the military. And while the outcome of Hall's lawsuit is uncertain, it has sparked a worthwhile conversation about faith and the uniform.

"Understanding why the military was allowed to craft its own religious imprimatur 60 years ago takes no large stretch of the imagination. During an era when the truly religious could not be communists, the truly irreligious could not be Americans. This axiom rang particularly true for those on the front lines of the Cold War.

"Those lamenting Hall's lawsuit today should consider this slice of military history. From Puritan dreams to evangelical rallies, religion has remained a constant force in our national journey — the military's in particular.

"But the official sanctions afforded it have been anything but constant. Few today realise just how much of the military's current positions toward religion, far from being long-time American attitudes, are merely vestiges from the Cold War era.

"Those cheering Hall's case should appreciate the extent to which the military has grown more secular over the past few decades. Where once the US Air Force supplied airplanes to evangelists, it now officially insists that commanders 'not take it upon themselves to change or coercively influence the religious views of subordinates.'

"During the struggle against atheistic communism, comments like those of the Army's Lt Gen William Boykin — who in 2004 called the war on terror a battle against 'Satan' — were not only common but celebrated. Today, they are decried by the command structure, including President George W Bush.

"Throughout history, the Davids have sometimes slain the Goliaths. But more often, the stronger, better-equipped force prevailed — with or without the blessings of the Almighty.

"Maybe this is what Hall means when he says that while he doesn't believe in God, he does 'believe in Plexiglas.' Whether he wanted to or not, Hall may have stumbled on the ultimate form of 'coming out' in the military, and this may require the consideration of military leaders, an appreciation for the military's religiously sanctioned past and perhaps even a decision from the next commander-in-chief.

"If nothing else, it would give a new meaning to the policy of 'Don't ask, don't tell.' **FT**

The atheism of a preacher's kid

By **Sarah Trachtenberg**

At age nine, Janet prayed to forgive the man who sexually abused her, an enormous test of her faith. Her Christian background encouraged her to forgive him. Praying did not help, but what did help was when she had nightmares in which she killed her enemies. "My brain avenged me," she says, calling her nightmares a healing defense mechanism.

The molester, a camp counselor and children's book author, sexually abused hundreds of children, including Janet. Her father, a preacher, despite warmth and good intentions, did not know how to respond when this ugliness reared its head. Like every little girl, she wanted her father to be angry at the offender and protect her, but her father was "never that person". She did not testify at the trial, feeling too angry. Raised to believe that God must have a plan for her, she thought God had allowed the sexual abuse, but did not know why it happened to her. It took her years to sort it out. Her father couldn't reconcile that such a bad thing had happened to his daughter since it didn't fit with his concept of God's rewards and punishments.

Janet asked her father if people like the sex offender could still go to heaven, and he said yes, which didn't make sense to her: "As a kid, I thought of heaven as a place with rainbows and unicorns. Child molesters shouldn't get in." Her father said that if bad people accepted Jesus with their last dying breath, they got into heaven. "You could be a horrible person your whole life. This seemed wrong to me. What justice system is this? Part of the comfort of religion is that bad people will go to hell, and good people will get rewarded."

As a teenager, Janet dated a boy who was abusive to her, and again, her father knew about it and did not act. When something was bothering him, he went into a room, closed the door, and prayed, while she wanted him to talk and deal with situations directly. She found his passive aggression very frustrating. Both abusive incidents had a huge impact on Janet's belief system, her concepts of good and bad, trust and deceit, and the realization that her father was not a hero.

Originally from Maine, Janet is in her 30s and lives in New York with her husband. She works in retail and is realizing her goal of being a professional musician.

Janet was a "PK" (preacher's kid), whose father was a Protestant Methodist minister who went to seminary as a young man; his own father was a minister, as well. Instead of belonging to a single ministry, he filled in at various churches. He traveled around New England working as a resort minister at ski lodges, starting services in resort towns, and Janet and her sister enjoyed skiing when they tagged along on his travels. In some ways, Janet was very proud of him: he was a cheerful, warm and supportive preacher who comforted the sick, helped the needy, and was a very loving father. But some of his views were callous and unsympathetic, leaving Janet ambivalent about her feelings towards him.

Her parents divorced when Janet was four. Her father didn't believe a woman should work outside the home and held that wives should obey their husbands, conflicting with Janet's mother, who wanted to work, or at least have the option. While her father was "born-again", her mother came from a Catholic family, but was veering away from Catholicism, saying that the Protestant God was "nicer".

She did not want her children raised Catholic, and raised Janet and Janet's sister from her subsequent marriage as Protestant. (Janet's father officially adopted her half-sister.) Janet and her mother's family went to a liberal church where she sang in choir and participated in the youth group. She enjoyed Sunday school and the liberal atmosphere, which did not include yelling about fire and brimstone. It was a positive experience and Janet had trouble giving it up later.

As a child, Janet thought much of the Bible was meant to be interpreted rather than taken literally. Her mother encouraged her to ask questions and even encouraged her to experiment with other churches. Despite this liberalism, no one presented the option of not going to church at all, nor did it occur to Janet. Probably, this is the case for many American kids.

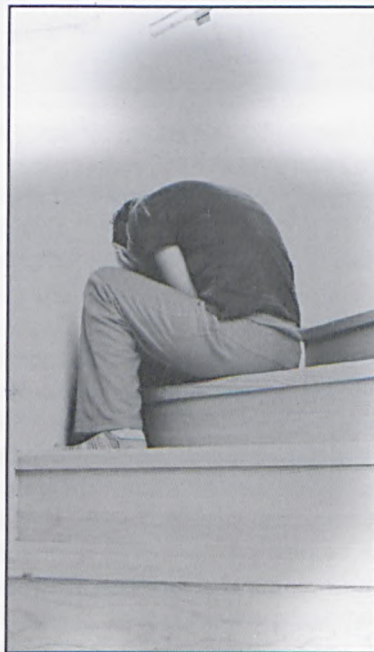
Janet's father, though divorced from her mom, was still at times very involved with his kids. He would get together with his two daughters most weekends and holidays, but since weekends with him were his working hours (Sundays), he didn't always give his children his full attention. Sometimes seeing him was good, but other times Janet and her sister felt that they were just in his way. Her dad's religion often proved an obstacle.

"God was first, work second, family third" to Janet's father, a sentiment he expressed to his family. Janet notes that the statement was reflective of the Bible, in which Jesus told his followers to leave their families to join him. Janet thought that God was selfish since she wanted to spend time with her dad, who was busy writing sermons, checking on people in hospitals, and praying. Often, he would go into a room, close the door, and pray for hours at a time. On the plus side, his absence did allow Janet to bond with her sister, with whom she otherwise did not get along, since during his time alone they only had each other. Their father told them that he wanted to see them more often, but his work demands trumped this. As the girls got older, Janet's sister rebelled against the church, having lost interest in visiting their father.

Janet's maternal grandmother, who was "not a fan of dad", described him to Janet's mother: "He was too heavenly-minded to be of any earthly good". Her mother quoted this to Janet when, as a teenager, she couldn't understand why her father always put his work first.

When Janet was 15, her father was witnessing (trying to convert people). Upon meeting a young gay man dying of AIDS, he told the patient that it was his fault and God was punishing him for being gay. The preacher warned him to accept Jesus's salvation before he died. Janet couldn't believe that her father would be so thoughtless to a man dying of a painful disease, but her father was proud of himself, unaware of the pain he caused. But Janet, still a Christian at that time, thought it was the most awful thing she had ever heard. Similarly, when sponsoring Janet in a walk for AIDS, he commented, "Well, that'll take care of the gays". She could not understand the paradox of a warm, loving man being so callous.

Janet gradually detached herself from Christianity during her 20s as she learned more about the Bible and read about how biblical stories were lifted from other mythologies, such as Greco-Roman. Noting that religions could not all be correct, she came to the realization that one's religion is



the result of the nation of birth and who one's parents were. As a child, she avoided reading Revelations, "the unpleasant stuff", and as an adult understood that people were cherry-picking the parts that they liked from the Bible. At 22, Janet still believed in God, but was no longer going to church.

Janet's father wanted to know if, at 22, she was sleeping over at her boyfriend's apartment, hoping that she was not having premarital sex. When she told him it was none of his business, he said that must mean that she was not a virgin. He told her that he would be very sad if he went to heaven and did not see her there. He wanted to save her soul and was very disappointed, gently telling her that she was going to hell. After that exchange, she didn't speak to him for months. "I felt like a good person. If I felt guilty, that was between me and God, not my father."

When she was seriously questioning the existence of God at 25, she mentioned to her father that she was not going to church anymore. He asked her outright if she accepted Jesus, and she said "Not anymore."

Janet discussed atheism with her husband, an atheist, and her mother. But despite her lack of faith and anger at religion – particularly its hypocrisy and greed – Janet couldn't call herself an "atheist". She instead called herself agnostic. Then last year, walking in the snow in Boston with her husband one evening, Janet looked at the stars, and "just saw stars": "I didn't think of it as heaven. I thought, oh, they're just stars, but they're still amazing." She had been reading Hitchens and Dawkins, watching related videos on YouTube, and was interested in rational thought. She talked about this with her mother, who had been thinking the same way, describing her own feelings as agnostic, even though she had been in organized religion for years.

It was fun for Janet to share that moment with her mother, but she mourned the loss of religion, feeling lost. No longer could she believe in heaven, and along with it, the comfort of believing that deceased family members were there, and she would see them again one day. She had to accept that all she could do was to live with the memories of her loved ones.

On the other hand, she was relieved that God couldn't see you all the time. She describes losing God as liberating, freeing herself from the control of religion, and embracing humanity and her conscience. "I was no longer feeling constantly judged. I no longer felt God was always looking over my shoulder, or that I needed to apologize."

She has not yet told her father that she is an atheist. The closest she came was writing a song called *A New Belief*, which she professionally recorded and played for her father. Its lyrics were about trying to find reality in a confusing world in which she was raised with a belief system she was now questioning.

When her father said the song bothered him, she said it was about how she was trying to figure out what was going on. He said he knew she was against organized religion and was not a Christian. Janet says that if he knew she was an atheist, he would probably pray for her, thinking he failed to save her soul and that she was going to hell. She does not believe that coming out to him would do any good, saying it would do nothing except hurt him. For this reason, her father is the only person to whom she isn't "out".

Janet is proud that she managed to get through her abusive situations and their aftermath and is in a wonderful relationship now. Despite his loving and amiable personality, Janet asks herself why, if her father is basking in God, he is not happier. In truth, he is often depressed. "It never occurred to him to not follow a religion," says Janet.

Many people who follow religion believe that it cures people of depression and hopelessness, and often ask atheists how they can get out of bed in the morning.

But for Janet, being free of God has proved a positive experience. "Living in the moment is more relevant now that I'm not heavenly-minded, so life as an atheist seems far more important. I have come to celebrate that, rather than mourn the loss of my faith." **FT**

Sarah Trachtenberg is a freelance writer and amateur stand-up comedian in Boston and has been published in several national magazines in the US and Canada. She is currently working on a book about the personal experiences of atheists in America, *Not My God*.



Upon my soul!

By Denys Drower

"You atheist," they cry, "You have no soul!" "Quite right," I return, "It's not a soul I have but a brain; no insubstantial thing. It holds my memory, evaluates each situation and directs my life. It also fills me with delight when I hear a blackbird sing or a baby laugh, see a tree in blossom or an engine in steam. It fills me with rage when I read of Baby "P", or contempt when I contemplate the follies of governments. Over the years it has tried to learn what is right and wrong and thus has acquired a conscience.

"What purpose then has a soul?" I ask the theists, "where and what is it?"

They will concede that a soul has no mass, no dimensions, has no magnetic field, no resistance, neither emits nor reflects light and exerts no motive force. It is invisible and intangible. In fact it has no discernible purpose.

Where then is it? They will look uneasy and, avoiding the foolish trap of suggesting the heart, will presume it is in the brain somewhere. If I then press them further by pointing out that exhaustive research over many years has revealed, stage by stage, the clear function of each part of the brain and that no separate and discrete function that could be called a soul has been discerned, let alone located, the conversation will lapse into the standard cop-out that "science has yet to discover many things".

So let us put the theists right. A person's "Id" involves the whole of the brain and is the compound of the genes which they inherited together with the environment, experience and influences that have affected them; "nature and nurture" as has often been said.

What the theist thinks of as a soul is a mindset – a conditioned reaction acquired through religious indoctrination over the years. Hence, when any situation arises, say a moral or social problem or a new discovery to be grasped, the theist's thought process will begin by immediately "switching the points" so that the matter is directed through their developed religious filter.

Inconvenient facts will be ignored, discounted or twisted, to meet the faith requirements.

The theist will probably not accept it, but the fact is that when a person dies this mindset will, like all the cells of his brain, change to nothing but ash in the crematorium or decay to earth in a grave.

Here is the rub: a life hereafter requires a soul and without an afterlife there can be nothing; no "other side" – no Heaven, no Hell; no resurrection, no "sitting on the right hand", etc.

In fact the non-existence of the soul demolishes the whole fictional structure on which the Abrahamic religions are founded. I know nothing about Buddhism or other religions, but I would be surprised if the absence of a soul, if acknowledged, would not mortally wound them too.

points of view...

A DIG IN THE POST BAG... LETTERS FROM OUR READERS



DAN O'NEILL'S JESUS

THE editor comments on my letter about a piece by Dan O'Neill which appeared in the September issue. He explains that Mr O'Neill was only saying what Stephen Green would be likely to say if he had been present at "events in Palestine a couple of thousand years ago years ago". Referring, of course, to a scenario which comes from the "New Testament".

Since this also tells us that the Jesus group travelled with women, how would anyone, even the frightful Stephen, be able to say what Dan O'Neill, prophesying in reverse, says he would have?

No, the stuff of Dan O'Neill's article came from his mind, no-one else's. I would guess he had not done any groundwork.

John Lawrenson
Leicester

CREATION MYTHS

Prof Radford expresses the conventional view that every society has a creation myth (*Looking for loopholes*, December). So it was interesting to read of Daniel Everett's discovery of an Amazonian tribe that does not have such a myth and believes that the world has existed as it is for ever ('How an Amazonian tribe turned a missionary into an atheist', same issue).

Stuart Campbell
Edinburgh

ATHEISM ON THE BUSES

It's great to see how well the atheist bus campaign has taken off.

It even got mentioned on Radio 4's *News Quiz*, when one panellist suggested the slogan "There probably is no God ..." might "even make a chap think twice before blowing himself up on the top deck!"

Peter Harris
Burnley

FISHERS OF MEN

IN THE July/August edition of the Free Church of Scotland's extraordinary magazine *Witness* (available at www.freekirkcontinuing.co.uk), retiring Moderator Rev Maurice Roberts (he of the British creationist organisation www.truthinscience.org.uk) reminds the clergy of their responsibility to go out into the world and be "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19).

If the text were not daft enough in itself, alongside his final paragraph (to illustrate that not for nothing did Jesus Christ say to those first disciples, "I will make you fishers of men") is a picture



of a sorry-looking fish, dangling at the end of a rope knotted round its lower jaw, dead.

Had I been either author or editor, I would never have considered for a moment such a barny illustration unless I wanted to satirise the article. So what on earth possessed them that they actually chose to feature it?

Is this really how they see their converts, pursued until exhausted into submission, at which point they are as good as dead? Maybe that's the point: to these death-obsessed fundamentalists, death is all we're good for.

Jame Merryweather
Scotland

JOHN POLKINGHORNE

I HAVE had a book in gestation for over ten years concerning the God myth. Reading the article about physicist-turned-priest, John Polkinghorne (feature, Dec 2008) reminded me of an analysis I made of his argument for God. Polkinghorne, writing in his book *Science and Creation* (1988; SPCK) defined the conditions for God thus: "He is internally constrained by the consistency of his own nature. His omnipotence is rightly understood as the ability to do what he wills, but he can only will what is in accord with his character. The rational God must expect reason."

This definition is effectively saying that the omnipotent God is constrained by the natural laws he supposedly created and therefore ceases to be omnipotent. Polkinghorne goes on to say: "...the laws of nature are signs of God's fidelity", implying a self-imposed limitation by God on God's freedom of action.

"... the balance between internal constraints is a delicate one."

The constraints are man-made and

therefore God becomes the creation of the human mind. To allow for the constraints, Polkinghorne then resorts to the concept of a loving God, who "... will grant a generous measure of independence to his world."

Recognising the anthropomorphic restriction placed on God, he acknowledges a difficulty and goes on to justify God by saying that: "... perhaps the answer lies simply in refusing to make the implied separation (of reason, fidelity and love) since ... God ... is the ground of all reality, but they are not tautologies for what he thinks, does and wills."

Finally, in despair, he admits that: "... our rational prattle is inadequate to discourse of the divine nature." Then, anxious not to let go: "... but he is not so wholly Other that the declaration of his reason, faithfulness and love has no meaning for us."

Polkinghorne's contrived and convoluted argument to explain God smacks more and more of a God created by theologians to explain the unexplainable; that is, a God of the Gaps.

Richard Batchelor
Fife



SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS ON ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

THE field of “alternative” medical therapies is one in which there is usually more heat than light. Barbara Smoker (*Points of View*, December 08) is absolutely right to stress the need to consider each separately. The fact, for instance, that hypnosis is effective in cases of irritable bowel syndrome provides no ground for believing in homeopathy for back pain.

Barbara goes on to recount her own experience of osteopathy and I would not deny her experience. But it’s a cardinal principle in this field that “data is not the plural of anecdote”. As humanists we should judge alternative therapies according to the evidence, and that means looking at studies covering many patients and allowing carefully for the placebo effect.

This is hard work but fortunately Simon Singh and Prof Edzard Ernst have done it for us. *In Trick or Treatment* (Bantam Press, 2008) they review the evidence for the effectiveness of 24 “alternative” therapies from the Alexander Technique to traditional Chinese medicine. They conclude that most of the therapies are ineffective for most of the conditions to which they’re applied – and some are ineffective for all conditions and/or dangerous. They particularly mention chiropractic treatment of the neck and traditional Indian and Chinese medicines as dangerous.

David C Flint
Chairman, BHA Science Group

I TOO can vouch for the efficacy of some alternative therapies. Earlier this year I suffered from a severe cold, I dosed myself with a homeopathic remedy. It wasn’t a branded product but clean water, which is of course the same thing. I can report that in a few days all symptoms had completely disappeared and I made a full recovery.

I had previously used this product on numerous other minor ailments, all with great success. I have had similar results with herbal products, blackberries taken in the form of a tart for example. With such conclusive evidence there can be no doubt that these treatments are effective.

I think most would agree that all healers, including the orthodox, have always taken the credit for nature’s own curative successes and these can sometimes be triggered by the mind, hence the placebo effect.

Scientific medicine is set apart by and having access to proven treatments such as vaccination, antibiotics, surgery and drugs submitting to double-blind testing. As with other human activities, mistakes are made but that does not invalidate the method. As far as I am aware all double blind tests have failed to discover any benefit from homeopathy. Both practitioners and patients rely on faith rather than evidence, so perhaps like other faiths it could be considered a religion. Fortunately for their life expectancy, when confronted with real health problems most believers, like the Prince of Wales, turn to modern medicine.

Alan Watmore
Gwynedd

SWISS GRAFITTI

IT was nice of Mary Rogers to go to so much trouble to have some graffiti removed near Lucerne in Switzerland but methinks this was rather a storm in a teacup – or on the lake, if you prefer.

The slogan she saw was probably written by a solitary teenager – and one who can’t even spell in German, at that! (The German for Jews is Juden, NOT Jugen.)

No doubt it will be removed in due course, even if not within a few hours as she might have liked.

For the same amount of effort, Ms Rogers could have raised her standard on behalf of the Palestinian people, who I fancy are suffering rather more than the Jewish population of Switzerland are. Alternatively, for not much more than the price of a cup of coffee in Lucerne, she could have made a donation towards reducing human suffering somewhere.

Graham Livingstone
London

66
*Is circumcision, male
and female, a blasphemy
against “God’s perfect
intelligent design”?*

W K Harper
Stoke-on-Trent

CRITICS HIT ROCK BOTTOM

I HAVE served on a paddle steamer, a UK coaster converted to serve as a Convoy Rescue Ship, a Portuguese coaster sailing under the Panamanian flag, two liners, four tankers (one of which was a Norwegian and one that was adapted to fuel the escort at sea), a millionaire’s steam yacht and nine cargo ships (again one was a Norwegian and another was a weather-reporting ship). I have my 2nd Mate’s Certificate and, had it not been for the disastrously cold winter of 1947 when all trains were off and I was stranded in Middlesbrough, I should have had my Chief Mate’s Certificate.

In view of this I certainly do not need a landlubber like Graham Newbery to lecture me about HMS Hood and other maritime matters as I have probably wrung more salt water out of my sea boot than he has sailed on. Also, I fail to see the connection between Hood and Homeopathy – apart from both starting with the letters “Ho”. My critics seem to have struck a new rock bottom.

By sailing all over the world for many years, keeping my eyes and ears open, I have learned much. I know things about countries, not because I have a university degree, or from reading about them in a book, or because my geography teacher told me about them at school; but because I have been there and seen it for myself. In fact I have learned facts about countries that you will not find in any book.

In addition, it has given me a degree in tolerance – something that sadly many of *Freethinker’s* erudite contributors seem to lack.

As for Dr Stephen Moreton, by defending thalidomide he reminds me of Oliver Goldsmith’s schoolmaster in *The Deserted Village*: “For e’en though he was vanquish’d, he could argue still.”

C A M Aitcheson
Glasgow

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists: i Tova Jones 021454 4692
w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk. Friends Meeting House,
George Road & St James's Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham 15.
Thurs Feb 12, 7.45pm Darwin Day meeting. Richard Lea: *The
Weird and Wonderful World of Reproduction in Animals*.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273
227549/461404 w [http://homepage.nflworld.com/
robert.stovold/humanist.html](http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html). The Lord Nelson Inn, Tra-
falgar St, Brighton. Wed, Jan 7, 8pm. Robert Stovold: *Spiritual
Care on the NHS – Chaplains or Charlatans?*

Bromley Humanists: Meetings on the second Tuesday of
the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne
Road, Bromley. i 01959 574691.
w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com

Central London Humanist Group: i Jemma Hooper,
75a Ridgmount Gardens, London WC1E 7AX
e rupert@clarity4words.co.uk Tel: 02075804564.

Chiltern Humanists: Enquiries: 01296 623730.

Cornwall Humanists: i Patricia Adams, Sappho, Church
Road, Lelant, St Ives, Cornwall TR26 3LA.
Tel: 01736 754895.

Cotswold Humanists: i Philip Howell, 2 Cleavelands Close,
Cheltenham GL50 4PZ. Tel. 01242 528743.

Coventry and Warwickshire Humanists: i Tel. 01926
858450. Roy Saich, 34 Spring Lane, Kenilworth, CV8 2HB.

Derbyshire Secularists: Meet at 7.00pm, the third
Wednesday of every month at the Multifaith Centre, University of
Derby. Full details on w www.secularderby.org

Devon Humanists: i Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046
e info@devonhumanists.org.uk

w www.devonhumanists.org.uk

Dorset Humanists: Monthly speakers and social activities.
Enquiries 01202-428506.

w www.dorsethumanists.co.uk

Ealing Humanists: i Secretary Alex Hill Tel. 0208 741
7016 or Charles Rudd 020 8904 6599.

East Cheshire and High Peak Secular Group:
i Carl Pinel 01298 815575.

East Kent Humanists: i Tel. 01843 864506. Talks and
discussions on ten Sunday afternoons in Canterbury.

Essex Humanists: Programme available,
Details: 01268 785295.

Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):
1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067.
Email: secretary@galha.org w www.galha.org

Greater Manchester Humanist Group: i John Coff.
0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday)
Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wed
Dec 10, 7.30pm. Review of activities marking Darwin's
200th anniversary.

Hampstead Humanist Society: i N I Barnes,
10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP.
w www.hampstead.humanists.net

Harrow Humanist Society: Meets the second Wednesday
of the month (except January, July and August) at the HAVS
Centre, 64 Pinner Road, Harrow at 8pm.

Havering & District Humanist Society: i Jean Condon
01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Cres,
Gidea Park. Tues, Dec 4, 8pm. Mike Howgate: Tackling

Creationism.

**Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern
Ireland:** i Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27
4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 e brianmccolinton@btinternet.com.
w www.nirelandhumanists.net

Humanist Association Dorset: Information and pro-
gramme from Jane Bannister. Tel: 01202 428506.

Humanist Society of Scotland: 272 Bath Street, Glasgow,
G2 4JR, 0870 874 9002. Secretary: [secretary@humanism-
scotland.org.uk](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-
scotland.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism-
scotland.org.uk) or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk
Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: [educa-
tion@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:educa-
tion@humanism-scotland.org.uk). **Local Scottish Groups:**

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dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Edinburgh: 07010 704775,
edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Glasgow: 07010 704776,
glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Highland: 07017 404779,
highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk.

Perth: 07017 404776,
perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk

Humanist Society of West Yorkshire: i Robert Tee on
0113 2577009.

Isle of Man Freethinkers: i Jeff Garland, 01624 664796.
Email: jeffgarland@wm.im w www.iomfreethinkers.org

Isle of Wight Secular and Humanist Group: i David
Broughton on 01983 755526 or e davidb67@clara.co.uk

Jersey Humanists: Contact: Reginald Le Sueur, La Petella,
Rue des Vignes, St Peter, Jersey, JE3 7BE. Tel 01534 744780
e Jerseyhumanists@gmail.com w [http://groups.yahoo.
com/group/Jersey-Humanists/](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Jersey-Humanists/)

Lancashire Secular Humanists: Meetings 7.30 on 3rd
Wed of month at Great Eccleston Village Centre, 59 High St,
The Square, Great Eccleston (Nr. Preston) PR3 0YB.
www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk i Ian Abbott,
Wavcrest, Hackensall Rd, Knott End-on-Sea, Poulton-le-Fyde,
Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone
Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 0116 262 2250.
Full programme of events on
w www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk

Lewisham Humanist Group: i Denis Cobell: 020 8690
4645 w www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com The Goose, Rushey
Green, Catford SE6. Third Thurs, 8pm. Jan 15, Graham Bell:
DNA, Ethics and Humanism.

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286.
w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/
e lhghumanist@googlegmail.com. Meetings on the second
Wednesday of each month.
Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk and Fens. Tel: 07811870215.

Marches Secularists: A local pro-secular movement covering
the counties of Shropshire, Herefordshire and Powys in the
Welsh Marches region of England and Wales. Membership is
free w www.MarchesSecularists.org
e Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

Mid-Wales Humanists: i Maureen Lofmark, 01570 422648
e mlofmark@btinternet.com

Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group: i Vince Chainey,
4 Mill St, Bradenham, Norfolk IP25 7QN. Tel: 01362 820982.

Northants Secular & Humanist Society: For information
contact Ollie Killingback on 01933 389070.

North East Humanists (Teesside Group):
i C McEwan on 01642 817541.

North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):
i the Secretary on 01434 632936.

North London Humanist Group: Meets third Thursday of
month (ex-August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green
Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact
Sec: 01707 653667 e [enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.
co.uk](mailto:enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk) w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk
e enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

w www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk

North Yorkshire Humanist Group: Secretary: Charles
Anderson, 01904 766480. Meets second Monday of the
month, 7.30pm, Priory Street Centre, York.

Reigate & District Humanist Group: i Roy Adderley on
01342 323882.

Sheffield Humanist Society: i 0114 2309754. The
SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Public Meeting first Wednesday
of the month, 7.30pm. No meeting in January. February 4, Rob
Murtin: *Was Darwin Right?*

South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard
Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689 e [info@southhantshumanists.org.
uk](mailto:info@southhantshumanists.org.uk) w www.southhantshumanists.org.uk

South Place Ethical Society. Weekly talks/meetings,
Sundays 11am and 3pm at Conway Hall Library, Conway Hall,
Red Lion Square, London WC1. Tel: 0207242 8037/4

e library@ethicalsoc.org.uk. Monthly programmes on request.

Somerset: Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in
Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or
e edward@egwinnell.orangehome.co.uk

Suffolk Humanists & Secularists: 5 Hadleigh Road,
Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828

www.suffolkhands.org.uk e mail@suffolkhands.org.uk

Sutton Humanists: i 0208 773 0631. w [www.slhg.
adm.freeuk.com](http://www.slhg.adm.freeuk.com) e BrackenKemish@ukgateway.net.

Think Humanism: An independent discussion forum for
anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought
- www.thinkhumanism.com

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: i 01568 770282
w www.wmhumanists.co.uk e rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk.
Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October
to June.

West Glamorgan Humanist Group: i 01792 206108 or
01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands,
Swansea SA2 0JY.

Please send your listings and events notices to:
Listings, the Freethinker,
PO BOX 234, Brighton, BN1 4XD.

Notices must be received by the 15th of the
month preceding publication.