

2



Race:
God helped blacks men turn white, claimed Jews

5



Faith:
Saga finds older people are ditching religion

6



Obituary:
David Tribe pays tribute to atheist Harold Pinter

8



Politics:
Helen Suzman: 'My ancestors wrote the Bible'

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

FEBRUARY 2009 VOLUME 129 NO 2

WWW.FREETHINKER.CO.UK

Westminster Abbey refuses to honour Charles Darwin

A member of the British Humanist Association, Rupert Young, is challenging "the authority and exclusivity of the Church of England" by means of a petition calling on Westminster Abbey to mark the 200th anniversary of this year of Charles Darwin's birth.

Says Young: "Darwin was undoubtedly one of this country's greatest scientists and one of the world's most significant thinkers, and his work has given humanity profound insight into our origins and elemental nature. Those insights and their scientific basis take an important place in the psyche of many rationalist, and religious, people in the United Kingdom.

"As the established church, of which Westminster Abbey is a part, the Church of England has a responsibility to cater to the 'spiritual' needs of all people irrespective of the nature of their beliefs, or non-belief. As such Darwin deserves to be commemorated at a national level, and what better place than Westminster Abbey – not only the focus of commemorations of national importance but the place where Darwin is buried."

Young originally submitted his petition to the 10 Downing Street petition website, but it was rejected, and Westminster Abbey has set its face against such a commemoration.

The petition, at <http://petitions.dogonism.org/Darwin.html> reads: "We the undersigned petition the Prime Minister, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Queen to hold a service of commemoration for the life and work of Charles Robert Darwin at Westminster Abbey to mark the 200th anniversary his birth, on the 12th of February 2009."

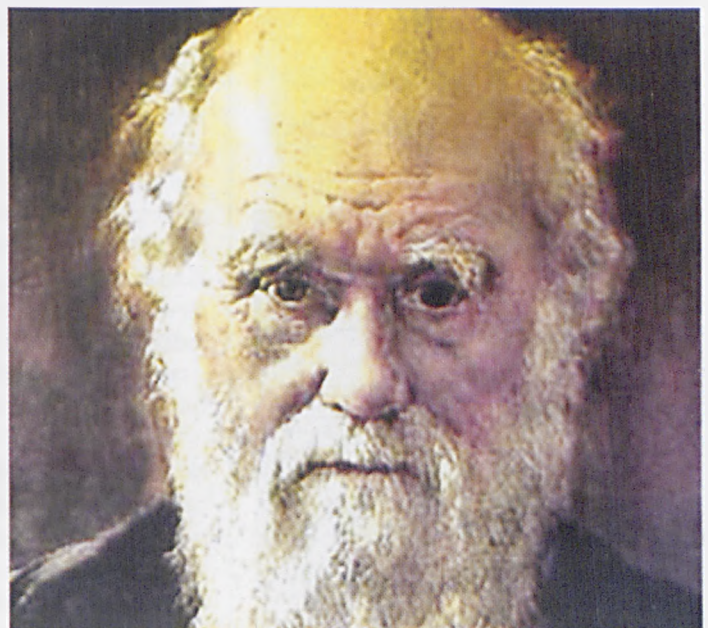
You do not have to be a UK resident to sign the petition.

When we posted details of this petition on the *Freethinker* website, two people responded negatively. One said: "I find this distinctly odd. Why would atheists want Westminster Abbey (or any other religious institution) to hold a ceremony for Darwin when such a ceremony would obviously be religious? I for one do not want this and therefore will not be signing the petition.

"There have already been secular celebrations of Darwin and his work and these are far more appropriate in my view."

Another asked: "Why would anyone want to commemorate one of the greatest scientific minds ever in what is essentially a temple to mythologist nut jobs?"

Given the awful shiver Darwin sent down the spine of the clergy with his findings – and the vilification they heaped on him in return



Charles Darwin: still courting controversy after all these years – p4

for the nasty shock he gave them – why was Darwin interred at Westminster Abbey?

In a 2002 Darwin biography – *Charles Darwin: the Power of Place* – author Janet Browne wrote: "Dying was the most political thing Darwin could've done. As Huxley and others were aware, to bury him in Westminster Abbey would celebrate both the man and the naturalistic law governing science that he, and each member of the Darwinian circle, had striven in his way to establish."

It turns out that the plan to bury Darwin in the Abbey was engineered by Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, and Darwin's friend, Thomas Huxley. Through their efforts, a petition persuading church officials to approve the event was signed by various parliamentarians. "For many people, the ceremony in the Abbey signalled not only Darwin's importance to English society but also a kind of reconciliation between science and religion. In fact, within a decade after the 1859 publication of *On The Origin of Species*, most educated Englishmen, including many of the clergy, had accepted the fact of evolution. More than a few were uneasy about where the evidence and the reason were taking them, but they went nonetheless."

'From black to white he slowly turned'

BARRY DUKE GETS FLAK FOR EXPOSING A WEIRD JEHOVAH'S WITNESS BELIEF

Tom SheepandGoats is not happy with the *Freethinker*. Tom (a Jehovah's Witness whose real name is not revealed on his internet blog) took umbrage over a piece I wrote for the FT website last December in which I alluded to an early JW belief that black folk, with God's help, could turn white.

In an earlier post commenting on daft and dangerous evangelical attempts to change the sexual orientation of homosexuals, I wrote: "People who are naturally homosexual cannot change their sexual orientation, any more than a white person can turn black. Evangelicals should take this fact on board, and instead of concentrating so much of their efforts on 'curing' gays, they should find themselves another hobby. They may have better success turning alligators into aardvarks."

I then discovered that JWs once believed that black people *could* change their skin colour to white, and drew readers' attention to a copy of the *Watchtower* (dated October

1, 1900), which recounted the case of the Rev Draper thus:

"From Black to White He Slowly Turned ... Rev William H Draper gave a living affirmative answer to the famous Biblical question, 'Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?' Though once as black as charcoal, the Rev Mr Draper is now white. His people say that his color was changed in answer to prayer. Many years ago Draper was employed by a fair-skinned man, and he was often heard to remark that if he could only be white like his employer, he would be happy.

"While in the white man's service Draper 'experienced' religion. From that day forward he prayed constantly and fervently that he might become white ... He first experienced a prickling sensation on his face, and upon close investigation found a number of small white spots scarcely larger than the point of a pin. He became alarmed, thinking he had some peculiar disease but he did not suffer and aside from the prickling sensation felt nothing unusual. Gradually the white spots became larger and extended themselves, until now, after the change has been in progress for over 30 years, Draper has not a single dark spot on his body."

I gave another example, from the *Watchtower* of 15/2/1904:

"Can The Ethiopian Change His skin color? No. But ... what the Ethiopian cannot do for himself God could readily do for him. The difference between the races of men ... have long been arguments against the solidarity of the human family. The doctrine of restitution has also raised the question. How could all men be brought to perfection and which color of skin was the original? The answer is now provided. God can change the Ethiopian's skin in his own due time ... Julius Jackson, of New Frankfort, Montana, a negro boy of nine years, began to grow white in September, 1901, and is now fully nine-tenths white. He assures us that this is no whitish skin disease; but that the new white skin is as healthy as that of any white boy, and that the changed boy has never been sick and never has taken medicines."

Tom SheepandGoats responded by asking: "Do you really think a 100-year-old quote (assuming it is accurate) proves anything? Look at the daily newspaper from 100 years ago. Much will seem nonsensical from today's point of view."

To which Dave McKeegan, *Freethinker* webmaster, retorted: "Of course. It proves that 100 years ago Jehovah's Witnesses

believed that God turned a black man into a white man on at least two occasions."

Tom SheepandGoats was correct, of course, to point out that bizarre items extracted from a 100-year-old publication might look nonsensical in the light of contemporary knowledge. We now know that when black people begin turning white – something that is happening to American TV anchorman Lee Thomas – they are victims of a distressing condition known as vitiligo. It is not happening because it is God's will that people are better off being white than black, as the nutty JWs once believed.

As many as 65 million people worldwide have the disorder, including up to two million in the United States.

It is true to say that JW's have also turned their backs on some, but not all, of earlier teaching in the area of public health.

An early JW leader, C J Woodworth, for example, vehemently opposed vaccinations. The group banned members from having vaccinations from 1931 to 1952.

An unknown number of Witnesses were disfellowshipped because they disobeyed their leaders on this matter.

Stern condemnations of vaccination were published in the JW periodical, *The Golden Age*, from 1921 to 1935. One declared: "Vaccination never prevented anything and never will, and is the most barbarous practice... We are in the last days; and the devil is slowly losing his hold, making a strenuous effort meanwhile to do all the damage he can, and to his credit can such evils be placed... Use your rights as American citizens to forever abolish the devilish practice of vaccinations."

In 1952 the JWs did an about-turn and declared: "The matter of vaccination is one for the individual that has to face it to decide for himself ... And our Society cannot afford to be drawn into the affair legally or take the responsibility for the way the case turns out." Clearly it was the fear of legal action, rather than common sense that brought about this turn-around.

Thus it still begs the question: how many JWs died needlessly in the early to mid-20th century because they were prevented by their faith from vaccinating themselves and their families? Another obvious concern is the number of times that infected JWs may have spread diseases to others.



BARRY DUKE
FREETHINKER
EDITOR

the freethinker

the voice of atheism since 1881

Founded in 1881 by G W Foote
UK ISSN 0016-0687
Editor Barry Duke

Views expressed in the magazine are not necessarily those of the publishers.

Letters, subscriptions, book orders and fund donations to the publisher.

Freethinker/GW Foote & Co Ltd
PO Box 234
Brighton BN1 4XD

Email: fteditor@aol.com
Tel: 01273 680531

Website: <http://www.freethinker.co.uk>

Annual postal subscription rates

12 months: UK £15.00 or £10.00 un-waged Overseas surface mail (including Republic of Ireland) £18.00 sterling. Air mail £25 sterling. Special trial subscription for readers' friends and contacts: £5.00 for six months. Send name and address of recipient with £5.00 cheque or postal order made payable to G W Foote and Company to Freethinker, PO Box 234, Brighton BN1 4XD.

Printed by Derek Hattersley & Son, Sheffield.

“The bad news is that God does not exist.
The good news is that we do not need him.”

– The Italian Atheist bus campaign slogan



Pictured at the launch of the Atheist Bus Campaign are, from left, Ariane Sherine, Professor Richard Dawkins and journalist Polly Toynbee.

Atheist buses now rolling into Catholic territory

It's not been a happy start to the year for religious zealots who have watched with dismay the astonishing progress of the Atheist Bus Campaign.

Started last year in the UK with the germ of an idea by petite London writer Ariane Sherine, who suggested an antidote to religious advertising on public transport, the campaign immediately captured the imagination of thousands of Brits, as well as people from abroad, and funds began pouring in to get the campaign rolling.

The money raised – almost £140,000 – meant that 800 buses across the UK would start carrying the slogan – *There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and and enjoy your life* – and there was enough left over

to extend the campaign to London tube trains as well.

It came as no surprise when American secular groups, euphoric over the loosening of the religious right's stranglehold on US policy, began similar campaigns. But only when atheist buses began trundling through the streets of Barcelona did European Christians – Catholic in particular – realise that they had a real problem on their hands.

Then we learned that atheists in predominantly Catholic Italy were planning a bus campaign in Genoa. Their slogan was far more confrontational than the British and its equivalent in Spanish. They opted for *The bad news is that God does not exist.*

Slogan 'upsets Christian and Muslim' bus users, say MPs

Bob Spink, former Tory and now UKIP MP for Castle Point, last month tabled an early day motion in Parliament headed *Offensive advertisements on public transport*. It said: "This House notes that posters with the slogan 'There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life', appear on 800 buses in England, Scotland and Wales, as well as on the London Underground; notes that this causes concern to Christian and Muslim people, many of whom feel embarrassed and uncomfortable travelling on public transport displaying such advertisements and would not wish to endorse the advertisements by using that public transport; regrets that the British Humanist Association backs the campaign; and calls on Ministers responsible for public transport and advertising media to investigate this matter and to seek to remove these religiously offensive and morally unhelpful advertisements.

The motion was tabled after Christian Voice's Stephen Green registered a complaint against the Atheist Bus Campaign with the Advertising Standards Authority, and a Christian bus driver, Ron Heather, refused to drive buses bearing the slogan in Southampton.

The good news is that we do not need him.

But, at the last moment, after pressure was put on them by "a furious" Catholic Church, local bus companies refused to carry the ads.

The campaign was condemned by the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Genoa, whose Archbishop Angelo Bagnasco is president of the influential Italian Bishops Conference. Father Gianfranco Calabrese, responsible for the diocese's catechism, said: "There are some methods which promote dialogue and others which feed intolerance. Head-on opposition always demonstrates intolerance."

Which is a bit rich, coming from a representative of one of the most intolerant and confrontational organisations on earth.

The Italian Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics (UAAR), which was behind the campaign, said it intended "to challenge" conventional religious beliefs "on Bagnasco's turf."

The archbishop has spoken out against events such as Gay Pride in Genoa, which was held last year on the same day in June as a Catholic feast day.

“I work in an office with about 50 people in a small middle class town near Bristol. The office is situated near the start of a bus route so buses regularly park near our office for long periods of time. You can imagine my delight as a committed atheist when, on the day of the launch, I popped out to the shops and spotted the advert on the side of a bus parked nearby. I rushed back in and told as many of my colleagues as I could what I had seen. About a dozen of us went out to take a look. Their response was overwhelmingly in favour of the advert and caused many to admit they were in fact atheists but didn't like to say so for fear of upsetting their religious friends and co workers. Seeing the advert for myself has helped legitimise my atheist thinking and made it something to be proud of rather than ashamed. I hope it helps many others feel the same way.

Could this be the beginning of the end for the apathy towards religion shown by so many closet atheists? Probably not, but its certainly a step in the right direction and long may it continue!

– Freethinker reader Dominic Wirdman



Rallying against Creationism

Darwin's 200th birthday has become a rallying point for scientists around the world opposing Creationism.

Four out of ten Britons now believe either in Creation or in its watered-down cousin Intelligent Design, and Creationism is being taught in state-approved schools.

Dr Bob Bloomfield of the Natural History Museum, who is a key player in the Darwin 200 18-month project which began last June, expressed his concerns: "The statistics in this country are quite frightening. I don't think society can be complacent when ideas which are unsound are perpetrated.

We are trying not to compromise people's faith views, other than where they are absolutely inconsistent with science."

A Secularist of the Year winner, Prof Steve Jones of University College London, has been accused by university students of "telling lies and insulting people's religion" by teaching evolution.

"They want permission not to come to those lectures and sit those exam questions," he said. "I have been teaching genetics and evolutionary biology for 30 years and for the first 20 I think the issue arose once. That's changed."

Professor Jones is one of the many scientists involved in Darwin's birthday projects. He and Professor Jonathon Silvertown of the Open University are involved in a mass science project to discover evolutionary changes in banded snails that will involve tens of thousands of people across Europe.

Last month the BBC began airing a season of landmark Darwin TV and radio programmes.

David Attenborough, Andrew Marr, Armand Leroi and Melyvn Bragg were among the key names who explored Darwin's extraordinary life and work.

Last year the Natural History Museum launched Darwin200, a national programme of over 200 exhibitions, talks, family events and performances. Details are available on the NHM's website:

<http://www.darwin200.org/>

Charles Darwin: still courting controversy after all these years

Last September, in a move that horrified creationists and crackpot "Intelligent Design" enthusiasts, the Church of England officially apologised to Charles Darwin for "misunderstanding his theory of evolution".

In a what the *Daily Mail* described as a "bizarre" step, the Church addressed its contrition directly to the Victorian scientist himself. The move was greeted with derision, with Darwin's great-great-grandson dismissing it as "pointless" and other critics branding it "ludicrous".

Church officials compared the apology to the late Pope John Paul II's decision to say sorry for the Vatican's 1633 trial of Galileo, the astronomer who appalled prelates by declaring that the earth revolved around the sun.

The officials said that senior bishops wanted to atone for the vilification their predecessors heaped on Darwin in the 1860s, when he put forward his evolutionary theory.

The Church was also anxious to counter the view that its teachings were incompatible with science, and it wanted to distance itself from fundamentalist Christians, who believe in the biblical account of the creation of the world in seven days.

An article posted on the Church's website said: "Charles Darwin, 200 years from your birth [in 1809], the Church of England owes you an apology for misunderstanding you and, by getting our first reaction wrong, encouraging others to misunderstand you still.

"But the struggle for your reputation is not over yet, and the problem is not just your religious opponents but those who falsely claim you in support of their own interests."

The article was written by the Rev Dr Malcolm Brown, the Director of Mission and Public Affairs of the Archbishops' Council, the Church's managing body, which is headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams.

Brown added: "People, and institutions, make mistakes and Christian people and Churches are no exception. When a big new idea emerges that changes the way people look at the world, it's easy to feel that every old idea, every certainty, is under attack and then to do battle against the new insights.

"The Church made that mistake with Galileo's astronomy and has since realised its error. Some Church people did it again in the 1860s with Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. So it is important to think again about Darwin's impact on religious thinking, then and now."

He added: "His theory caused offence because it challenged the view that God had created human beings as an entirely different kind of creation to the rest of the animal world. But while it is not difficult to see why evolutionary thinking was offensive at the time, on reflection it is not such an earth-shattering idea."

Former Conservative Minister Ann Widdecombe, who left the Church of England to become a Roman Catholic, said: "It's absolutely ludicrous. Why don't we have the Italians apologising for Pontius Pilate? We've already apologised for slavery and for the Crusades. When

is it all going to stop? It's insane and makes the Church of England look ridiculous."

Andrew Darwin, a great-great grandson of the eminent scientist, said he was "bemused" by the apology, which seemed "pointless".

"Why bother?" he asked. "When an apology is made after 200 years, it's not so much to right a wrong, but to make the person or organisation making the apology feel better."

Terry Sanderson, President of the National Secular Association, said: "It does seem rather crazy for an institution to address an apology to an individual so long after his death. As well as being much too late, the message strikes me as insincere, as if there is an unspoken 'but' behind the text. However, if it means that from now on the Church of England will say 'No' to the teaching of creationism in school science lessons, then we would accept the apology on Darwin's behalf."

A less critical tone was struck by Horace Barlow, 87, from Cambridge, who is Darwin's great-grandson. He said he thought his ancestor would have been pleased to hear the Church's apology.

"They buried him in Westminster Abbey, which I suppose was an apology of sorts," said Mr Barlow. Darwin was very concerned about offending other people, as his wife Emma was a committed Christian. So I think this apology would have pleased him."

"If it means that from now on the C of E will say 'No' to the teaching of Creationism in school science lessons, then we would accept the apology on Darwin's behalf"

Muslims must learn to live with criticism of their religion

A discussion paper calling for an end to the long-standing Dutch model of tolerance has been issued by the country's largest left-wing political grouping, the Labour Party.

The paper declares: "The mistake we can never repeat is stifling criticism of cultures and religions for reasons of tolerance."

In a clear reference to Holland's growing population of Muslims, many of whom have shown outright hostility to suggestions that they should better integrate into Dutch society, the paper said that the Government and politicians had too long failed to acknowledge the feelings of "loss and estrangement" felt by Dutch people.

The Dutch, according to Lilianne Ploumen, Labour's chairperson, had grown tired of the hostility shown to them by "parallel communities" who portray themselves as "victims".

She said that "the grip of the homeland has to disappear" for these immigrants who, news reports indicate, also retain their original nationality at a rate of about 80 percent once becoming Dutch citizens.

Instead of reflexively offering tolerance with the expectation that things would work out in the long run, she said, the government strategy should be to "bring our values into confrontation with people who think otherwise".

She added: "Without a strategy to deal with these issues, all discussion about creating opportunities and acceptance of diversity will be blocked by suspicion and negative experience."

Labour's line appears to stand the old equation of jobs-plus-education equals integration on its head. Conforming to Dutch society's so-

cial standards must now come first. Strikingly, it turns its back on cultural relativism and uses the word "emancipation" in discussing the process of outsiders becoming Dutch.

For the Netherlands' Muslim population (about 6 percent of a total of 16 million) it refers to jobs and educational opportunities as "machines of emancipation." But it also suggests that employment and advancement will not come in full measure until there is a con-

scious engagement in Dutch life by immigrants that goes far beyond the present level.

Indeed, Ploumen says, "integration calls on the greatest effort from the new Dutch. Let go

of where you come from; choose the Netherlands unconditionally". Immigrants must "take responsibility for this country" and cherish and protect its Dutch essence.

She added: "The success of the integration process is hindered by the disproportionate number of non-natives involved in criminality and trouble-making; by men who refuse to shake hands with women, by burqas, and separate courses for women on citizenship.

"We have to stop the existence of parallel societies within our society."

And the obligations of the native Dutch? Ploumen's answer is, "People who have their roots here have to offer space to traditions, religions and cultures which are new to Dutch society" – but without fear of expressing criticism. Hurting feelings is allowed, and criticism of religion, too."

• As we went to press we learned that Dutch MP Geert Wilders is to be prosecuted for "hate speech" following the publication last year of his anti-Islam/immigration film *Fitna*.

Conforming to Dutch society's social standards must come first

Older people abandoning religion

Saga, the organisation for the over-50s, has carried out a large-scale survey of its members and found that a quarter of them now call themselves atheists or agnostics. The poll of 15,500 people, carried out for the *Daily Telegraph*, showed that only one in four older Britons want the Church of England to remain established (most of them couldn't care less one way or the other).

The majority of those polled worship or pray less frequently than they used to, and many admit that their belief in God has evaporated as they got older. One in five said their religious beliefs were now weaker than earlier in their adult lives and 14 percent said they now had

more doubts about God's existence.

Terry Sanderson, the president of the National Secular Society, said:

"This is more bad news for the Church of England as even its most traditionally faithful demographic sector begins to desert it. It is also indicative of the way that society is moving generally.

"The C of E's established status becomes more and more difficult to justify. If even older people, who are generally regarded as the backbone of the faith, think it is time for a change, then the Government ought to give some serious consideration to new constitutional arrangements that better reflect the reality of our society."

newsinbrief

DEVILISH VISIONS

The Pope wants people who see visions of Jesus or the Virgin Mary to shut up about such sightings until they can be verified. He believes that the Devil might be orchestrating false sightings in a bid to bamboozle the faithful. He has instructed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, formerly the Holy Office of the Inquisition, to draw up a new handbook to help bishops deal with bogus visions. If the visionary is considered credible they will ultimately be questioned by one or more demonologists and exorcists to exclude the possibility that Satan is behind things like apparitions and stigmata.

JETT STORY PULLED

The *Daily Mail's* story last month on Jett Travolta, titled "Did John Travolta's weird faith seal son Jett's fate?" was pulled from its website after threats from the Church of Scientology. With the barrage of stories following the tragic death of 16-year-old Jett Travolta, Scientology lawyers were most likely working overtime to keep the media from looking too closely at their dangerous history of medical mishaps based on the group's anti-psychiatry beliefs.

FUNDIES BOYCOTT PEPSI

The American Family Association (AFA) has called for a boycott of PepsiCo. The association says that the soft drink company gave \$500,000 each to two groups – the Human Rights Campaign, and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. According to the AFA the cash was to be used to "help promote homosexuality in the workplace." The AFA also alleges that Pepsi "forces" its employees to attend sexual orientation and gender-identity diversity training "where they are taught to accept homosexuality."

Farewell, Harold Pinter (1930–2008)

DAVID TRIBE, A FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY, AND PAST EDITOR OF THE FREETHINKER, PAYS TRIBUTE TO ONE OF BRITAIN'S LEADING PLAYWRIGHTS – AND A MAN WHO DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS “A PAIN IN THE ARSE”

I was saddened by news of the death, long-expected and liberating as it was, of Harold Pinter, a great writer and a great secular humanist.

So established was he as a dramatist that “pinteresque” for his influential style of writing has entered the language and standard dictionaries. As a spare version of the Theatre of the Absurd pioneered by Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett, it relied for its effect on a teasing absence of story-line, apparently unmotivated stage “business” and dialogue that was repetitive, clichéd, alternately confronting and disengaging, punctuated increasingly in his career by long pauses.

As a casual drama critic, I must confess to being a traditionalist who prefers a narrative to loose endings or no ending at all, interactive to fractured dialogue, and continuity to long pauses.

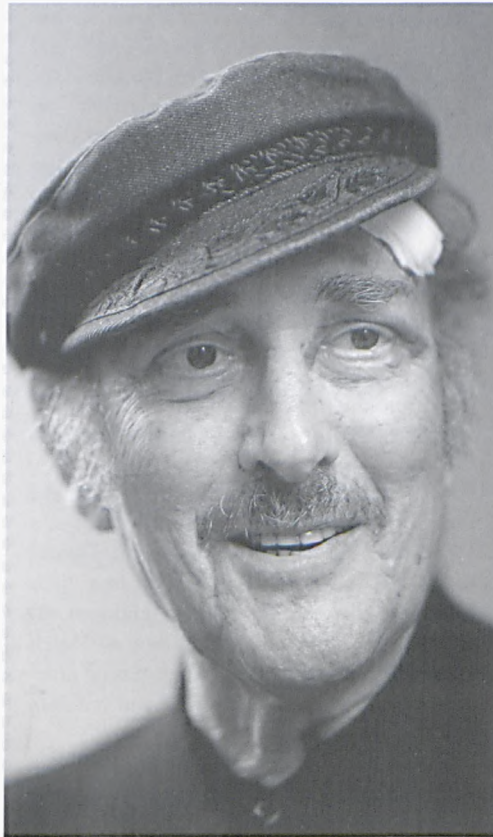
But it must be conceded that theatrical absurdity is closer to real life than much “high drama”. Nothing noteworthy happens in most of our lives, and in all of us in times of stress or other causes of self-absorption, and in those of us with mental problems, streams of consciousness can emerge as speech independently of what is going on around us; while in social groups multiple conversations often occur together. Like T S Eliot, Pinter found the remarkable in unremarkable situations and mystery in matter-of-fact utterances. Audiences must discover inner meanings themselves.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* speaks of the “comic menace” in his dialogue. Menace certainly, but I fail to find its bizarreness comic. Rather, its existentialist message seems to echo the line in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Huis-clos* (variously translated, most appositely as *Vicious Circle*) that “hell is other people”.

In mid-career Pinter largely turned to television and the cinema, which in my view suited his style better than the theatre, where long pauses, however naturalistic, are more obtrusive and even irritating. Like Noel Coward and John Osborne, he’d begun his career treading the boards of provincial rep, where he learnt his stagecraft, and like them continued to act while writing and then to produce or direct.

Like Sartre, he saw his generally bleak pic-

ture of the world not as misanthropy but as an exploration of the human condition. But perhaps he came to see fiction as a self-fulfilling prophecy in the real world, and in later years he largely abandoned writing in favour of human-rights agitation. This was



no new departure, as he was twice tried and fined as a conscientious objector in 1948, aged 18. Jewish himself, he was not afraid to criticise Israel.

He first came to prominence in the 1960s. Perhaps his Nobel Prize for Literature (2005) would have come sooner had he been a conventional Briton – or a Second or Third World dissident. This decade was a time of great vitality, if not always of achievement, in the British theatre. The climax of the Theatre of the Absurd coincided with the rise of provincial drama (about the provinces, not just in them), and “kitchen sink” working-class and “angry young man” lower-middle-class drama emerged. Growing hostility to the Lord Chamberlain’s pre-censorship role led to the establishment of theatre clubs trying to circumvent it,

and in 1968 to its abolition. Much publicity attended the quatercentenary (1964) of Shakespeare’s birth and the 350th anniversary (1966) of his death.

This was the time of Pinter’s first involvement with the National Secular Society after some exposure to the Ethical Church. (Nat Goldberg in *The Birthday Party* gave a lecture in “the Ethical Hall, Bayswater”). In 1964 the NSS staged *Freethought and Humanism in Shakespeare*, starring Joan Miller and Richard Ainley. Busy as he was, Pinter was kind enough to read my script and provide a strong endorsement, which featured on the front cover of the printed version.

In November of that year he sent a message of support for the society’s Secular Education Month. When the NSS celebrated its centenary in 1966, at the time of a World Union of Freethinkers Congress in London, he agreed to be a sponsor of our centenary appeal and in our Centenary Brochure he penned the following message:

The existence for 100 years of a free-thought organisation such as the National Secular Society is something to celebrate. However, the fact remains that children are still indoctrinated in schools at public expense, the blasphemy laws are still on the Statute Book, and many humane and rational reforms remain opposed. The activities of pressure groups are a constant threat to freedom of discussion in the press and on radio and TV. The work of the NSS remains highly important.

That year he was a signatory to a *Times* letter protesting against increased public financial support of religious schools. From then on he could always be relied on to lend his name to secular humanist public statements.

By a new constitution (1968) the NSS formed a Distinguished Members Panel, limited to ten. I can’t recall why Pinter wasn’t one of them (though it would have been difficult to omit any of the original ten), and I don’t know when he first appeared on the panel and the expanded – and expanding – list of honorary associates which replaced it. Significantly, as an outspoken secular humanist he has a secure place in freethought as well as literary history.

Fruitcakes attack doughnuts and the ASA

The phrase “freedom of choice” can never again be used in US advertising copy, thanks to a crazy accusation by a Christian group that a doughnut company was promoting abortion.

Days before President Obama’s inauguration, the Krispy Kreme Doughnut company issued a statement saying that it would be “honouring American’s sense of pride and freedom of choice on Inauguration Day by offering a free doughnut of choice to every customer”.

What followed was a demonstration of how utterly insane some Christians can be. The words “freedom of choice” was immediately interpreted by Judie Brown, President of the American Life League as pro-abortion propaganda, and she rushed out an hysterical statement, lambasting both Krispie Kreme and President Obama.

It read: “The next time you stare down a conveyor belt of slow-moving, hot, sugary glazed donuts at your local Krispy Kreme, you just might be supporting President-elect Barack Obama’s radical support for abortion on demand – including his sweeping promise to sign the Freedom of Choice Act as soon as he steps in the Oval Office ...

“Choice’ is synonymous with abortion access, and celebration of ‘freedom of choice’ is a tacit endorsement of abortion rights ... President-elect Barack Obama promises to be the most virulently pro-abortion president in history. Millions more children will be endangered by his radical abortion agenda.

‘Choice is synonymous with abortion access, and celebration of ‘freedom of choice’ is a tacit endorsement of abortion rights on demand

“Celebrating his inauguration with ‘Freedom of Choice’ doughnuts ... is not only extremely tacky, it’s disrespectful and insensitive and makes a mockery of a national tragedy.”

She wound up with: “We challenge Krispy Kreme doughnuts to reaffirm their commitment to true freedom – to the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – and to separate themselves and their doughnuts from

our great American shame.”

Krispie Kreme immediately took fright and caved in to this lunatic by issuing a fresh statement, from which the phrase “freedom of choice” was expunged. The new statement ended with the words: “The Inauguration Day promotion is not about any social or political issue.”

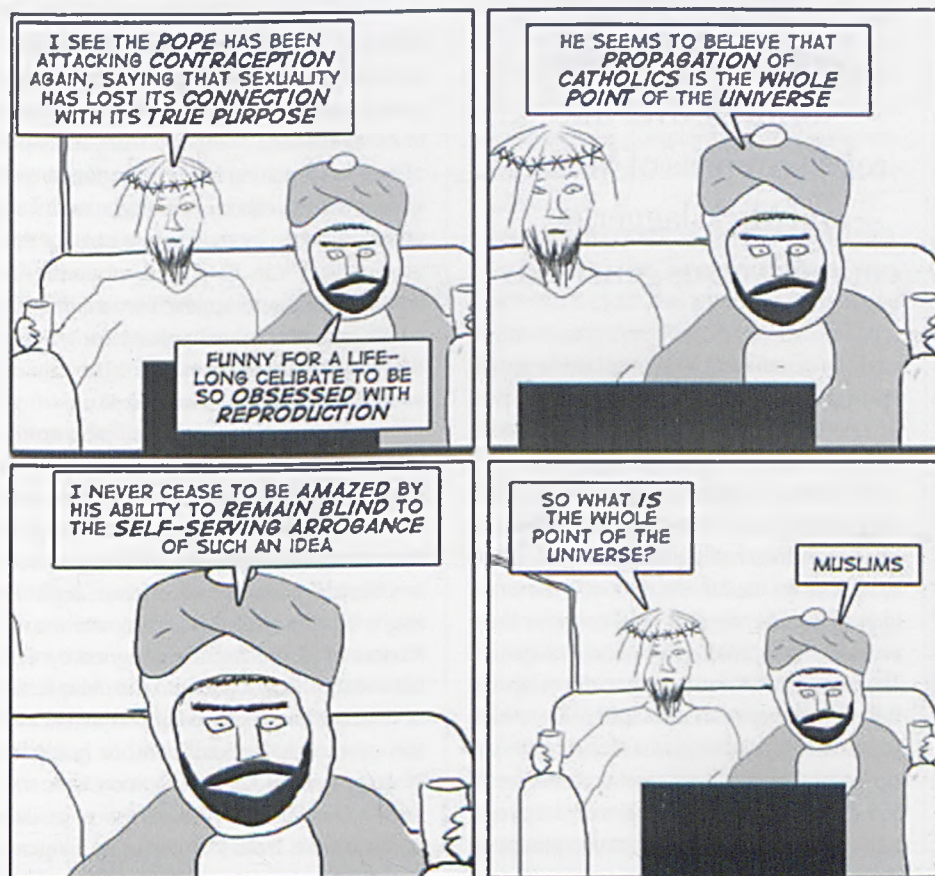
Just days after this lunacy, Stephen Green, who heads the failed campaigning outfit Christian Voice, claimed that Advertising Standards Authority was “a tool of the politically-correct secularist establishment” and that the ASA Council was appointed and run by a “homosexual”.

His attack on the ASA followed its ruling that the Atheist Bus Campaign posters breached no rules. Green wailed: “On planet ASA, complaints from people of faith are not given the same weight as those from secularists. But what do you expect when the ASA Council is appointed and run by a campaigning homosexual, Chris, Lord, Smith of Finsbury?”

He pointed out that: “Last year the ASA ruled against Sandown Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster when the church published an advertisement *The Word of God against Sodomy* against Belfast Gay Pride. That ad, decided the ASA, breached its code on decency (offensiveness) after receiving just four complaints ... Last week, it ruled against an advertorial Christian Voice placed in the *New Statesman*, after just one solitary complaint that a prediction that every Government initiative on teenage sexuality would increase teenage infertility could not be substantiated.

“We always knew the ASA was just another tool of the politically-correct secularist establishment, but here’s the proof. Their ruling is just another example of how the deck is stacked against Christians today, and the Church needs to wake up to the anti-Christian agenda right now. If Christian don’t start standing up soon, we shall see religious liberties trampled on, and the secularists will take us further down the road to their hell on earth.”

Jesus & Mo



A date for your diary

On Saturday, February 28 between 5pm and 7pm, Terry Little of the Freethought History Research Group (www.fhrg.bravehost.com) will give a talk on Darwin, Marx and Aveling, in which he will explore the relationship between the three men and between Darwin’s theory, secularism and the left. The event takes place at Housmans Bookshop (www.housmans.com), 5 Caledonian Road, Kings Cross, London N1 9DX. Tel 020-7837 4473

Not bread alone

Spirituality v Religiosity

An analysis by **JOHN RADFORD**, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London

"**M**an shall not live by bread alone". That's in the Bible – Matthew 4:4. So we know it's true, don't we? Strangely enough, it is. Whoever wrote this Gospel attributes the words to Jesus, in reply to the devil in the wilderness. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, Jesus was "an hungred". And possibly somewhat confused and prone to hallucinations.

The devil suggests that if Jesus is the Son of God, he might change the stones into bread. The verse goes on, "but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God". At one level, it is a purported account of a familiar type of religious experience, which may well have some foundation in fact. It is also a recapitulation of the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 8:3, part of his long speech to the Israelites after their 40 hungry years in the wilderness. The New Testament writers frequently drew parallels with the Old, to justify Jesus as the Messiah. But more generally it is taken to mean that there is more to life than the basic necessities, or even all the material aspects of life, something often given the label "spiritual".

This in turn is often equated with, or linked to, "religious", especially by those of a religious persuasion. This, I think, is an example of a rather common religious ploy, which is to suggest that anything good or admirable must somehow be religious in nature or origin. Thus love, or charity, or aesthetic sublimity, are from God. But bad things of course are not, despite God being the Creator of all that exists (except when he punishes everyone in reach with a tsunami or whatever, in order to teach the sinful a lesson).

There is a problem with the word "spiritual". In the free paper *Metro* small ads, under

"Spiritual", we find numerous gentlemen such as Professor Salif, who with 28 years' experience offers help with "love, family reunions, lost friends, marriage, relationships, sexual problems, court cases, exams and bad luck".

On the other hand, the *OED* tells us it means "Of spirit as opposed to matter; of the soul esp. as acted on by God; of, proceeding from, God; concerned with sacred or religious things", etc. But it also gives "spiritual man" as the "inner nature of man", and again as "having the higher qualities of the mind".

**I don't think that wars
have ever been fought, or
people persecuted or
tortured, over the
relative merits of Mozart
and Mick Jagger, or
courage versus generosity**

Here three different meanings are wrapped up together. One is "non-material", one is "religious", and one is "higher qualities", however these in turn are defined.

There does not seem to be a perfect word in English for the last of these. The indispensable *Rogert* offers half-a-dozen lists, but no one item quite fits the bill. Yet it is not uncommon to hear people say that they consider they, or others, are "spiritual" but not "religious". They may just mean not formally religious. But they may mean by "spiritual" nothing supernatural or related to a deity, but experience of thoughts and emotions that are in some way "higher" and better than the everyday. "Finer feelings" is a common phrase. A

less fashionable term is "virtue". Such terms as benevolence, generosity, selflessness, love, devotion, nobility, may point to the behaviour; and delight, ecstasy, oneness, compassion, humanity, to the experiences.

There are several reasons to separate "spirituality" in this sense from religion. One, as just suggested, is common usage. Another, in line with this, is the observation that many individuals who manifest such finer feelings are not religious in any recognisable sense. They adhere to no doctrine, are members of no church, believe in no deity. Conversely there are those who do have these characteristics, yet appear to score low for feelings one would call finer. They range from the uninvolved conventional church-goer to the extreme religious persecutor or terrorist. Another reason is that these "finer feelings" seem to appear, at least in rudimentary form, in other species. There are many examples of individuals caring for, or being apparently concerned for, others. Mammals, and some other creatures, by their nature care for their young. They can hardly be religious. And empathy seems to appear very early in the development of human infants, long before they could be aware of religion. They are upset if others are distressed, and so on.

It might be argued that they pick up religiously inspired attitudes from their parents, but this would have to be stretched even further to cover the offspring of non-religious parents. It is more plausible to see it as a built-in potential. Again, the religious argument might be that such potentials, and the behaviour of all species, are designed by God. Ultimately, this resolves into the old question of whether one finds a natural explanation, in this case evolution, sufficient, or holds that "there must be something more". A third reason, however, is that statistical analysis of the various traits that make up "religious"



and "spiritual" behaviour and attitudes reveals two dimensions, which are partially correlated but not identical. In other words, an individual can be religious or spiritual or both, to varying degrees. This bears out the observation referred to above.

Both would appear to have a genetic component. Humans are predisposed to be both religious and spiritual, but along dimensions ranging from none or minimal to very strong (one can hardly say there is a theoretical maximum for such traits). It is plausible to argue that some components, at least, of both are or have been conducive to survival. Religions typically offer explanations of natural phenomena, which may be better than nothing in the absence of scientific knowledge. And religious or magical beliefs, and related rituals, frequently get mixed up with technology which actually does work, such as making weapons or tools.

Belief in an after-life, virtually universal in religions, seems a natural counterpart of the drive to exist that must characterise all living things. Individuals in whom such a drive is strong will tend to survive. Similarly for the more "spiritual" aspects, from caring for offspring to devotion to a partner, or looking out for other members of the tribe, animal or human, or sharing and communing with others. These would promote survival, of the group and arguably of the individual, through whom traits are transmitted. Recent research has shown that chimpanzees, our nearest relatives, remember cooperative acts such as grooming, and return them later.

Another recent finding is that displays of altruism or selflessness make humans more attractive to potential mates. Aesthetic ap-

preciation finds its roots possibly in primate behaviour, but certainly in some of the earliest remains of our species. What appear to be beads, and pigments (especially red ochre), have been found in human settlements dating from more than 100,000 years ago. Both may have been used for body decoration, which is extremely widespread. Historically, and still today, it helps to establish both individual identity and group membership. Music and language may have evolved together or separately. Both could serve in courtship and territorial claims, and in group solidarity. All these developments are of course also cultural, and grow eventually to the highest levels of art and aesthetics. These do often serve religious functions, but equally can stand alone as "spiritual" achievements of the highest order.

I suggest also that the "spiritual" is less controversial than the "religious", in two ways. First there is much less argument as to what is better in each case. Religions notoriously disagree, often to the extent of actual warfare, as to which doctrines are right. But on questions of beauty, nobility, generosity and so on, there is wide agreement. I don't think that wars have ever been fought, or people persecuted or tortured, over the relative merits of Mozart and Mick Jagger, or courage versus generosity. Second, there is no agreement as to whether religion as such is a good thing. Some feel it is the most vital and valuable part of human existence, others that it is in general at best a dead end and at worst harmful. But not many would disagree that love is better than hatred, generosity than greed, and courage than cowardice. Indeed, surveys show a great deal of commonality over such values

across all societies. Spirituality, or virtue, or higher values, can and should be fostered. It seems to me (as an educator) that values can be cultivated in at least three ways. One is by precept or instruction. This is commonly used, not least in a religious context, but it is the least effective. Simply telling children (or those of any age) that they should be honest, or appreciate art, or support good causes, may have some effect, especially if society as a whole is supportive (or if there is a general belief that we will end up in hell if we don't). But this may well be short-lived when the instruction or support ceases.

More effective is example. A great deal of fuss is made as to whether stars of sport or entertainment are providing good "role models", which has become a buzz-word. Traditionally, parents, teachers, and group members have been more important. But recent research supports the idea of media personalities (above all in television) functioning in a similar way, although in a one-way relationship.

Better still is practice. In general, the best way to learn is through doing. You really can't become a swimmer by reading a book on the way to the baths. Practice requires opportunity, guidance, feedback and reward. Many families, schools, and other organisations (including religious ones) do provide these more or less systematically, involving young and old in something beyond the individual and the simply material. The Boy Scouts' "good deed for the day" may seem rather old-fashioned now, but it was probably effective. In passing, the view of the present Government in Britain seems clear that education is to prepare for the world of work, and no more (despite at the same time encouraging "faith" schools, which have their own divisive agenda). It is a short-sighted view. All societies, and most individuals, need and generally want some "higher" ideals, even if quite modest ones. Passionate support of a pop group or a football team is better than apathy, so long as it does not lead to violence. But such passion is, as one says, worthy of a better cause. In a hierarchy of causes, atheists will probably put the welfare of humans, of other species, and of our environment, pretty high up. And religious, doctrinaire, repressive or aggressive movements (not all the same thing, of course), low. But whatever the choice, "bread" alone is not enough.

I wrote the above before learning of David Comings' book *Did Man Create God*, reviewed in the *Freethinker* in October 2008. Despite the hostile review, this seems to give extensive consideration to what I have briefly discussed. **FT**

Challenging

An expose of the 'divin

Because of our society's psychotic desire to keep our children innocent by keeping the

It has been a long-held belief by many in the Christian faith that children are innately drawn to God. Tradition has it that not only is a child's mind open to the love and joy found in devotion to God, but children's innocence slides them up the ladder of purity in a manner adults cannot achieve. To attempt separating a child from the Lord is considered a transgression of the worst sorts. There are certainly passages in the Christian faith that instruct followers to bring a child steadfastly up in the Lord. Jesus himself, in Matt. 19:14, says "Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven". But the Bible and other religious texts have yet to prove a special relationship between children and faith. Until such a link is proved, the idea that young children are innately drawn to God should be regarded as myth.

But Sofia Cavalletti, in her book *The Religious Potential of the Child*, outlines three qualities children possess: they are naturally drawn to God; they have mysterious knowledge; and young children can see the invisible. The back cover of her book reads "[this] is not a 'how-to' book, complete with lesson plans and material ideas. Instead it offers a glimpse into the religious life of the atrium, a specially prepared place for children to live out their silent request: 'help me be closer to God by myself'."

These basic claims are also presented in Tobin Hart's *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*. The subtitle of his book reads "The breakthrough discovery that profoundly alters our conventional view of children's mystical experiences". When such audacious claims are made, and directed at the most vulnerable in our society, a closer examination is imperative.

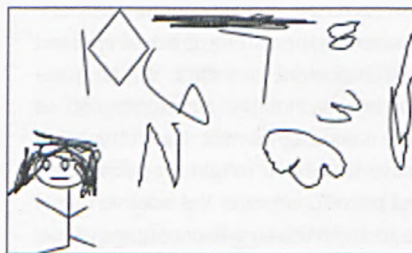
While both of these books focus on the Christian mythology, all major faiths have a set of guidelines for children and religious instruction. Though different faiths will vary in the rituals and traditions taught, a child's divinity has been accepted as true in all the world's major faiths. The ideas presented in Hart and Cavalletti's books should be carefully evaluated and judged, based on the evidence provided, if we are to conclude that children indeed are innately drawn to God.

Examining these claims requires a rational and logical approach to each of three assertions, focusing on the underlying logic that holds these claims together.

Claim 1: Children are innately drawn to God. This claim draws on the belief that the mind and soul of a child is an incubator for the word of God. Should a child possess an unusually strong closeness to faith, they become the model for childhood divinity by the faithful in their community. But, were we to exclude religious texts as an objective source of truth on this matter, what actual proof is there? Cavalletti's book offers Lorenzo's experience as proof.

"Who would believe that a four-year-old child would be capable of metaphysical intuition? Lorenzo belonged to a Catholic family, but he had never had any [religious] instruction, nor had he received any special care in the religious sense. One day his aunt asks him to do a picture of God. Lorenzo drew on the bottom left-hand side of the page – and hence in a secondary position – a human figure with a large head, and then he filled the page with a series of signs in which numbers could be recognized. His aunt asked him the reason for the presence of the numbers, and Lorenzo explained: 'Because there are many'. Lorenzo had the intuition that God is infinite."

Lorenzo's drawing most likely resembled the image below:



Lorenzo was asked to draw a picture of God. His aunt interpreted Lorenzo's picture and comment as evidence of his connection with God. Given the amount of knowledge required to comprehend even the idea of God, coupled with Lorenzo's tender age of four and the little information Cavalletti provides, it is unreasonable to surmise that his thoughts were divinely inspired. It's more likely Lorenzo said the first thing that came

into his mind about a drawing he could scarcely extrapolate when reasonably pressed.

Another child in Cavalletti's book, Charlotte, was drawn to the lord, through an innate connection that no parent fostered. Charlotte, 3, was staying at her aunt's house. When she saw her aunt preparing to leave, she asked her where she was going; the aunt replied that she was going to Mass and the child declared: "I am coming too!" and so it continued for days, without the slightest urging on anyone's part. One day another child came to play with Charlotte and she told her aunt that she would not be going to Mass with her. A moment later she was back again saying, "Stefano can wait, first I'm coming with you!"

What Cavalletti fails to consider is the varying spectrum of reasons why a child does anything. Some children would live in a car if it meant they could get out of the house; while to others a trip almost anywhere is cumbersome and pointless. To narrow the interpretation of Charlotte's actions to "child and God" leaves out the most important, and probably the most significant, connection: Charlotte's relationship with her aunt. When my sister-in-law is in town, my daughters will go anywhere with her. Because she lives so far away, they would happily exchange playing outside for going on a trip with their aunt Sarah.

Had Cavalletti employed her critical thinking skills, she would have considered the following before making her conclusion:

- Why was Lorenzo not asked to explain how "there are many" relates to God?
- The logic behind Charlotte's story is all wrong. The logic says if Charlotte's aunt is going to Mass and Charlotte wants to go, then Charlotte has a divine connection. That's like saying, if I'm going to Midas and my child wants to come too, then my child must have a special connection with mufflers and brake pads.
- How do numbers, randomly placed on a child's drawing, show God's infiniteness?
- Who says Charlotte isn't just an outgoing girl that relishes getting out of the country and going to the city? Perhaps she likes the beautiful architectural designs of churches.

I could go on, but my point by now should be clear. There are so many variables at play in

ing the myth: 'divinity' of the young child

ing them ignorant, we've created a fake reality for our children, says **Be-Asia McKerracher**

the above scenarios. Pinpointing a child's divinity based on a random picture or a clingy disposition is completely devoid of critical thought.

Tobin Hart's interpretation of children being innately spiritual lacks validity as well. In *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Hart describes his daughter's "chat" with the late gospel singer Mahalia Jackson while working on a report for class. Haley, Hart's daughter, comes across many "unique" facts about Ms Jackson in her research. When her father questions her, she "proceeded to tell [him] a wide range of very subtle and personal information about Mahalia Jackson that [Hart] could not find in the materials she had read — [he] checked." When Hart asks Haley how she came across the information, she says "It was easy; I just got relaxed on my bed and asked my angel for help. Then, in my mind, I went to www.mahaliajackson.com, and there she was standing right in front of me. We talked and she told me about her life." This is clear evidence, according to Hart, of how "children [are] open to these depths of consciousness naturally and regularly."

The problem here for Hart, and all that ascribe to the belief that children are divine, is the question of evidence. There are serious questions about the validity of Haley's statement that should shoot into one's mind. Hart doesn't say what materials Haley already had access to, what specific statements were made, and whether or not Mahalia's close friends and family members could validate these statements. To believe anyone with facts as weak as this requires a tremendous leap over common sense.

It would be wrong of me to suggest that everything we've ever experienced can be reduced to a logical conclusion: there are unexplainable phenomena and occurrences that defy our notions of what is plausible. Haley's experience may qualify, but it lacks in the details required for even a basic argument to be made.

Claim 2: Children have mysterious knowledge. The claim that children hold mysterious knowl-



edge is based on a child's ability to know the answer to a question that you didn't expect them to know. Cavaletti's example follows.

"Many years ago I was presenting Baptism to a group of children from four to six years of age, and I was unsure whether or not to speak of the meaning of the imposition of the hands, thinking that it was too difficult for children of that age to understand ... I put a ring in my hand and two or three times I extended my arm, opened my hand, and let the ring fall out, explaining that this is what I would do if I wanted to give them a gift. Then I repeated the gesture without the ring, saying, 'At Baptism, the priest makes this gesture over the child; but you do not see anything fall. Then why does he do it?' The children replied in chorus, as if the question was completely superfluous: 'Because he is giving us the Holy Spirit'."

The fact that the children knew Cavaletti's hand gesture wasn't mysterious; children will amaze you with the things they know about the world;

things you didn't teach them. They get these facts (or false information in many cases) from school, playing outside with friends, logical deduction, drawing conclusions based on what they know to be true and good ol' fashioned guesswork. One night at dinner, my daughter was pouring milk into a glass and we heard a loud splash! When I went into the kitchen, the glass was broken in two, with milk streaming down the cabinet. Asase didn't know how the glass broke. "I took the glass out of the dishwasher, poured the milk in and the glass broke," was her only response. "Do you know why the glass broke, even though you didn't do anything?" I asked her. I was prepared to talk about the mixing of hot and cold when she answered "Oh, so when the cold milk mixed with the hot glass, the glass couldn't figure out if it wanted to be hot or cold, so it broke, right?" It wasn't the most scientific answer, but she was basically right. Now, I didn't expect her to know that; she logically deduced the cause, and she happened to have been right. I didn't sign her up for science camp that summer or proclaim her a future metaphysical genius.

At times, children can display an extraordinary amount of understanding in an area where we as parents or caregivers did not give explicit instruction. This is a wonderful consequence of encouraging your child's critical thinking. Having a young one critically evaluate a situation, decide the best course of action and implement their ideas without your input, is a testament to your child's intellect and your parenting abilities. With guidance, a child will hone and develop this skill through adulthood. Praise and encouragement after an unexpected but sophisticated answer will give young children the confidence to try their hands at subjects once thought out of their reach. Their understanding about the world will grow exponentially. But such instances will not lend credibility to the argument that children have mysterious knowledge.

Claim 3: Children can see invisible beings. This is by far the most fantastical claim made by indi-

Challenging the myth

"viduals asserting the divinity of young children. In *The Secret Spiritual World of Children*, Hart makes the claim that children can see the invisible. He first acknowledges that in our daily lives, "we are encouraged to believe something only after we see it for ourselves ... [we must] suspend our critical thinking ... this does not mean abandoning our critical mind or being a naïve convert to some idea or doctrine; rather, it means turning off our critical judgment for a moment in order to open up to possibility".

What's astonishing about Hart's statement is the idea of turning off critical judgment to become open-minded – a glaring oxymoron. Critical judgment is the only way to distinguish open-mindedness from absolute stupidity, and Hart's education and training seem to have failed him in this respect. If we want our children to make good choices as they mature, it is imperative that we teach them to know the difference between something that is plausible and someone trying to take advantage of their ignorance.

So, Hart gives us a pre-teen girl named Llael to show us "proof" of the claim that children can see the invisible. Llael has three invisible "guides" that give her support and protection in life: one is a wolf that protects her, another is a Native American man who instructs her in the art of healing, and the third is a spirit whose job it is to help Llael gather all the children of the world together in harmony. Hart is a psychologist, and he describes Llael as a "psychologically healthy and well-adjusted girl". He cites the "quality of her as a person and the quality of her answers" as evidence of credibility. Hart believes her guides are real.

I take issue with the foundations of his reasoning, on two fronts. First, the psychological well-being of a person should have no bearing on the reality of things that cannot be seen. I'm a psychologically healthy 30-year-old woman and right now, I'm looking at an 11-foot tall pink rabbit. He has blue polka dots and a red ribbon around his neck. This rabbit, Gunter, helps me realize and display love and affection to my family. Gunter is not real, though – I made him up sitting in this coffee shop, while staring out the window; psychologically healthy people can see things that aren't real, too.

This leads to another truism: society has a subjective response to the imperceptible. We are willing to accept invisible beings who are good and do good deeds, but we tend to dismiss invisible beings that cause harm or do negative things. There are many Christians who have explained to me their belief in God, who is all righteous. But those same Christians adamantly deny the existence of the devil, who is said to be evil incarnate.

Similarly, parents tell children that the boogie monster isn't real, because he is said to hide in closets and under beds with malice in his heart. These same parents, however, persist in filling our children with the reality of the tooth fairy, Santa, and other "nice" invisible folk.

Psychologists, like Hart, are also quite willing to tell a schizophrenic to dismiss the non-existent people that can cause them harm; but are nevertheless willing to tell pretty 12-year-old girls with "guides" that we believe them wholly. In truth, if people can see imaginary beings, then they should see all the imaginary beings equally; goodness shouldn't be a determining factor in whether or not they exist.

Cavaletti, in her book, also has a child that can connect with the paranormal. Cavaletti discusses Bianca's divine powers here:

"Bianca (five-and-a-half-years-old) was mixing flour with yeast, as an exercise relating to the parable that compares the Kingdom of God to the yeast that leavens the dough. The [teacher] asked her to explain to a woman who had come to visit the center what she was doing; Bianca responded "I am watching how the Kingdom of God grows."

The author goes on to assert that Bianca can literally see the Kingdom of God growing in the clumps of flour and water that she's mixing. The reasoning used to justify this claim is almost as bad as watching that 80's movie, *Poltergeist*, and actually believing that young children should stay away from the TV (because the character Carol Anne's innocence and openness is the reason she was sucked into the TV). In the end, the claim that children can see things that others cannot, with no evidence that can stand the test of scientific scrutiny, is simply wishful thinking. In no way is Bianca's combination of flour and water evidence of her ability to see the Kingdom of God, or any other mythical place.

But we live in a world that encourages children to see things that aren't real on a daily basis. From the time a child starts losing teeth until they realize they're being duped, we convince them, for example, that a little fairy has a tooth addiction and pays in quarters, nickels and dimes to support her habit. We also unabashedly convince our children that there exists an anti-social, morbidly obese guy who wears red and white, uses special reindeer to fly (one with a light bulb for a nose) and breaks into their house to give them presents and eat their food – but only if they're good all year.

Because of our society's psychotic desire to keep our children innocent by keeping them ignorant, we've created a fake reality for them. They watch TV shows with talking animals, moons that read stories, dragons that can adjust

the space-time continuum and backpacks that speak both English and Spanish. We teach them that because Jesus rose from the dead, a giant rabbit will leave them a basket full of chocolate eggs. And anytime a concerned adult makes an attempt to tell the truth, they are hailed a sourpuss, a Grinch, or a robber of childhood innocence. Is it any wonder that it is easy to convince a child that they see and hear things that nobody else can?

In the end, the three reasons traditionally given for the divinity of young children are based on subjective assumptions and a complete lack of critical analysis. Both Cavaletti and Hart fail to consider the level of objectivity and critical thought necessary to sustain such bold assumptions regarding the nature of children.

Children do not beg to be closer to God; nor do they possess mystical traits that align them with the divine. Children are individuals trying to grow and learn, trying to find their place in this world through trial and error – the scientific method in its purest form. Our job as parents, aunts, uncles and other valued members of society is to support them in this endeavour, to give them the skills they need to explore the world in a safe and healthy way.

Separating a child from religion is not an immoral exercise. To allow a person to be influenced by a worldview that they do not have the ability to fully comprehend or critically evaluate undermines our basic objective as parents. Chiefly, parents are responsible for the dissemination of information, universal values and the basic ethical principles needed to help young ones create a world view that encompasses their understanding of the world.

Children should only interact with organized religion when they have the critical thinking skills to analyze and make a judgment on what is pitched in their direction. Until that time, parents must ensure that their child is religiously literate, open-minded and shielded from unvalidated assertions that pit a child's miniscule understanding of the natural world against those of claims made by theologians of millennia ago. **FT**

Be-Asia McKerracher is a wife and mother of two children, ages 7 and 8. She teaches high school English, and is a guest columnist for the *The Star* in Kansas City, Missouri. Be-Asia also runs a blog on Secular Parenting (www.secularparenting.blogspot.com)



'My ancestors wrote the Bible'

Helen Suzman, who fought a long, often lonely, battle against apartheid during a distinguished parliamentary career, died on January 1, 2009, at the age of 91. **Graham Livingstone**, a former member of her constituency association, remembers a remarkable woman.

Helen Suzman was Jewish, but resisted all rabbinical approaches to claim her as their own, saying: "I just don't believe any of that religious stuff." But, according to the *Sunday Times* (January 4, 2009) that didn't stop her using her heritage to score points.

In the 1970s she was asked her opinion of the far-right Afrikaner woman's organisation, the Kappie Kommando, an association of dour Calvinist women resembling a cross between Mary Whitehouse's Festival of Light and the Ku Klux Klan.

She responded: "They really belong to the days of witch burning." This provoked a furious letter from the KK leader who said its members were "proud of their old-fashioned ideas" and she wished to remind Helen that "my ancestors took the Bible across the mountains to the savages on the other side ... And what were your ancestors doing at that time, Mrs Suzman?"

This had a clear anti-semitic edge, for Suzman's Jewish roots were well known. She simply wrote back: "Dear Mrs Van Zyl: my ancestors were busy writing the Bible."

Whether Suzman was indeed an atheist or agnostic I simply do not know, but as the sole voice of the downtrodden Blacks and a lone fighter for civil liberties for 13 of the 36 years during which she represented the all-White, but relatively liberal, Johannesburg seat of Houghton in the South African parliament, she may well have felt that she had enough on her plate without courting religious controversy as well.

Suzman was born Helen Gavronsky on Nov. 17, 1917, in Germiston, a gold-mining town outside Johannesburg, a descendant of Lithuanian Jews who had emigrated to South Africa. Her father arrived in South Africa with his brother, virtually penniless and unable to speak any of the languages widely spoken there. He was enterprising, hard working and rose to become a very wealthy man.

Educated at a Roman Catholic school in Johannesburg, she married Mosie Suzman, a doctor, in 1937.

Suzman said years later that she had inherited four things from her father: great stamina, a love for animals, a liking for whisky – and a substantial inheritance!

Suzman initially joined Jan Smuts' United Party but soon discovered that the name United Party was laughable, considering the bitter divisions within it. The party was easily as racist as the ruling National party.

Matters finally came to a head at the United Party's 1959 congress, when a reactionary motion betraying Blacks on the question of land allocation was approved by a large majority. Suzman and a number of her colleagues resigned from the party almost immediately and formed the Progressive Party.

A snap election was then held in 1961, at which all the Progs, with the

exception of Helen herself, were defeated. I was about 14 years old at the time and well remember hearing the announcement on the 7.30am radio news bulletin the next day: "Biggest surprise of the election was Mrs Suzman of the Progressive Party wresting the seat of Houghton from the United Party," and running to my parents' room to give them the news.

Suzman was re-elected in 1966 and again in 1970 but was the only

Progressive to win a seat again until 1974. She was therefore the only liberal in a parliament of about 166 members for 13 years. For six of those years she was the only woman MP as well.

All those years she continued a titanic struggle against assaults on Black rights, civil liberties, the erosion of the rule of law – often, indeed more often than not, given the cowardice of the United Party "official opposition", being the ONLY MP to vote against detention without trial, draconian security legislation – insanity after insanity. The list is endless.

She was sent hate mail, received obscene phone calls and was attacked across the floor of the house in the most bitter and vitriolic terms, being told to go "back" to Moscow or to "return" to Lithuania. Nationalist MPs also accused her of being "unpatriotic, a "sickly humanist" and a dangerous subversive".

Worse, she was practically accused of treason. Memorably, P W Botha, later to become

Prime Minister and State President, said she was complicit in the assassination of the mad architect of the Bantustan policy, Hendrik Verwoerd.

But she never wavered in her steadfast determination, never compromised her iron-clad principles.

Her prestige knew no limits – she was enormously popular among the oppressed non-White peoples, from Nelson Mandela, who she frequently visited during his long imprisonment, to humble workers. The enthusiasm she generated among liberal Whites was nothing short of electrifying.

I remember attending a packed meeting in a hall in the suburb of Lyndhurst, part of her constituency, during the 1980s. We had heard two very powerful speeches by senior leaders of the party before Helen, who spoke first in a different meeting in a nearby constituency, arrived. A bunch of us hotheads at the back of the hall tried unsuccessfully to engineer standing ovations for the earlier speakers.

But, as soon as Suzman entered the room, the entire audience of several hundred people leapt to their feet as one. It was as if a five-star general had entered a room full of private soldiers, such was the speed and spontaneity of their reaction. And the applause was prolonged and thunderous.

I'll conclude with these unoriginal but nevertheless highly appropriate words: We shall not see her like again. **FT**



points of view...

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



ATHEIST BUS CAMPAIGN

If the Atheist Bus Campaign has taught us one thing, it is this: given the right cause, non-believers will enthusiastically rally behind it, and make their muscle – and their generosity – felt.

The ABC has provided a wonderful platform upon which we ought to be constructing powerful new atheist initiatives, and we should not let the opportunity simply fall by the wayside through indifference.

May I suggest that the immediate next target be the BBC. Despite all the evidence pointing to the fact that people want LESS, not more religion on radio and TV, the corporation not only insists on shovelling more of this manure into its schedules, it is also prepared to blatantly distort programmes to suit its religious agenda.

Most recent example of this was the way it edited the Radio 2 programme, *What Do You Believe*.

Dr Dorothy Rowe, a clinical psychologist who writes on depression and mental health, was recently a guest on the programme, and despite the fact that she rubbished religion, the broadcast gave the impression that she was in favour of it.

The programme, she said, “sounded like I am giving unqualified praise to religious belief. There is no mention of what I talked about at length, that religious belief can cause immense misery. I often summarise this with ‘The church keeps me in business’.

The BBC was forced to apologise for the distortion thus: “The BBC’s religion and ethics department acknowledged that extracts from an interview with Dorothy Rowe ... misrepresented her views on religion and has apologised to her.”

Surely now is the time to make our feelings felt by piling the pressure on the BBC to stop pandering to a religious minority, and to purge its schedules of ALL religious propaganda.

Philip Jacobs
London

IGNORANCE CAN BE BLISS

SURELY James Merryweather’s assertion that ‘Ignorance jolly well isn’t bliss’ (*Freethinker*, December) flies in the face of facts as we know them. Who would wish to know the exact hour of his demise – or even what is happening when the kids are quarrelling in the next room? Here, ignorance is certainly bliss. “The contentment of knowledge”, stridently plugged by Merryweather as the *sine qua non*, is in these cases conspicuously absent; knowledge here is more angst-provoking than blissful.

Indeed, I would maintain that a healthy state of ignorance is essential to the average man’s well-being. How does it further happiness to

know that millions are dying in misery every day, that one is full of cancerous matter, and to pursue knowledge “like a sinking star”?

Such Faustian discontent merely makes one miserable, so that in the end one is terrified by the vast totality of existence, either becoming an evangelist or like Tamburlaine “a fiery quister after certainty”. And we all know what mayhem he caused. No, the pious hopes of Jefferson for so-called “enlightenment” is mere pie in the sky. “Tyranny and oppressions of body and mind” will never vanish from this earth and only a simple-minded idealist like Jefferson could believe that it would.

David James
Wiltshire

MYTHOLOGICAL GAIA

IN “The Climate Crisis” (*FT* Jan 2009) Edwin Salter says “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 ...”

This leads me to infer that the Gaia hypothesis is the “unfortunate superstition”. Yes, it was unfortunate that Lovelock allowed himself to be persuaded by William Golding to use the mythological name Gaia, opening the way for the New Age nuttery that Salter deplures, but Lovelock himself was not so naïve:

“A frequent misunderstanding of my vision of Gaia is that I champion complacency, that I claim feedback will always protect the environment from any serious harm that humans might do. It is sometimes more crudely put as ‘Lovelock’s Gaia gives industry the green light to pollute at will’. The truth is almost diametrically opposite. Gaia, as I see her, is no doting mother tolerant of misdemeanours, nor is she some fragile and delicate damsel in danger from brutal mankind. She is stern and tough, always keeping the world warm and comfortable

for those who obey the rules, but ruthless in her destruction of those who transgress. Her unconscious goal is a planet fit for life. If humans stand in the way of this, we shall be eliminated with as little pity as would be shown by the micro-brain of an inter-continental ballistic nuclear missile in full flight to its target.” (*The Ages of Gaia*, James Lovelock, OUP 1989, page 212.)

It is a warning to be sparing of poetic metaphor in hard science. But then, “Gaia” is less of a mouthful than “whole-earth climatic, biological and geophysical feedback system”.

And what can Salter mean by “our final evolution”?

Barry Thorpe
Cheadle

CHILDREN AND GOD

THE proclaimed finding by Oxford academic Justin Barrett that young children are predisposed to believe in a teleological creator has no bearing on the vindication of such beliefs. Indeed, since they are apparently characteristic of the immature and uneducated, what does that say about people who cling to them throughout life? The word “retarded” comes to mind.

Barbara Smoker
Bromley



PARAPSYCHOLOGY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

WHETHER or not it's true that "you can't keep a good man down", it's certainly true that you can't keep a good sham down.

Judaism was never able to eradicate paganism; Christianity to evangelise Judaism; Islam to conquer Christianity; atheism to destroy theism; rationalism to supplant irrationalism; physics to supersede metaphysics; astronomy to abolish astrology; evolution to replace creationism; psychology to rout parapsychology. Otherwise sensible freethinkers regularly pop up in this august journal trumpeting the last craze, which has no theoretical or practical legs to stand on.

Science is based on statistical and intrinsic probabilities, repeatability, objectivity and Ockham's Razor (selection of the simplest interpretation of findings), ultimately leading to a consensus among scientists. Thus it is possible to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that parapsychology – the 20th-century offspring of Spiritualism and Christian Science – is based entirely on flawed or fraudulent experiments (with many flaws and frauds actually detected by impartial observers on the spot), statistical manipulation, untestable "veridical" evidence (mere assertions of someone's occult experiences) and mutually contradictory or nonsensical theories. Detailed examples and reasons for these conclusions are given in my long essay "Parapsychology" in *The Plain View* (Winter, 1962).

From an evolutionary standpoint, the unpredictable, bizarre and disturbing nature of psi would have no survival value. Only belief in it survives. To the faithful, this pseudoscience is non-falsifiable.

If an experiment yields the desired result by whatever means, there's evidence of psi. If it doesn't there's evidence of "negative vibrations" or anti-psi. Ignoring games theory and chance occurrences (to say nothing of flaws or frauds), Richard A Batchelor, *Points of View*, December 2008) manages to see significance in "only one experiment out of thousands". Clearly nothing will shake his faith. Secular humanists may well echo my conclusion in Parapsychology: "What, we may ask, of genuine insight into the nature of the universe or the improvement of human relations has, or is likely to come from, never-ending party tricks with cards and dice?"

David Tribe
Australia

THE chance of winning Canada's Super Seven lottery is one in seventy million. Consequently a Believer who wins such a prize, right after praying to do so, is likely to conclude that "the odds against chance are millions to one." But that winner is part of a universe of millions of ticket buyers, and the probability of one of them eventually winning is 100 percent. CSICOP would be delighted to find the single replicable positive result that would prove the reality of "psi" beyond dispute. Decades of searching has ascertained that all positive results claimed by parapsychologists have been the result of sloppy protocols, including statistical incompetence, that allow for a non-paranormal explanation. If parapsychology was real, a competent researcher – a term that does not include anyone connected with

parapsychology journals that exist for the sole purpose of publishing claims that legitimate journals reject as inadequately controlled – would have proven it by now. My reading of Barbara Smoker's defence of osteopathy is that osteopaths (as do chiropractors) use some of the same techniques as physiotherapists, and of course those practices achieve useful results. That does not change the reality that both of those forms of pseudomedicine claim to be adjusting mislocated vertebral subluxations that medical doctors and x-ray technicians agree do not exist. I am reminded of the witch doctor whose treatment included chanting, dancing, burning incense and, as a sop to the white man's superstition, 200 units of penicillin.

William Harwood
Canada

RATHER than C A M Aitchison relentlessly relating his life history whenever he makes a point of view, the latest installment as a quarrelsome challenge (*Points of View*, January), instead may I suggest he publish his memoirs and purge his letters of anecdotal irrelevance.

My mentioning (*PoV* November, 08) the horrific death toll of seamen in the North Atlantic in 1941 was to draw comparison to the utter insignificance of Mr Aitchison's shipmate's burnt wrist, accidentally self-inflicted in that same year, that he thought worthy of describing at inordinate, heroic length even though its treatment was not, nor sensibly could be, homeopathic.

Each argument that Mr Aitchison has presented in his persistent advocacy of homeopathy has been equally incoherent, and all have been scuttled by learned critics, not least Dr Stephen Moreton, to whom he should listen and not insult.

Mr Aitchison rightly recognises that I haven't sailed the seven seas, but I have flown over most of them, having lived and

travelled widely – besides London and seven English counties – in Canada, Australia, mainland Europe, New Zealand, and West Cork, along the way experiencing many situations that might shiver even his stalwart timbers. To mention a minor one (ref David C Flint's *PoV* January):

In 1987, in Auckland, on the recommendation of a doctor, I visited a chiropractor to ease chronic neck stiffness (I was in denial of its cause: an instinctive reaction to hostility and threats of violence).

An hour later, at home, the phone rang; reaching down, my spine suddenly locked-up with a terrifying brittle bone-scraping sensation. When panic subsided and, days later, mobility returned, I phoned an earful to the idiot chiropractor.

Never again would I contemplate an alternative therapy, and until or if I have to fend another broadside from an argumentative old sea-dog, I'll return to debunking irrationality in all its guises.

Graham Newbery
Southampton

“ I liked the article about the Christian Crusader character of the US armed forces (*Freethinker*, January). Perhaps the FT could do something on the UK armed forces. A year or so ago Sir Richard Dannatt (boss of the army) described it as essentially Judaeo-Christian in nature. He remarked that without his belief in the resurrection he couldn't send young men and woman to fight and die, and that he'd rather have a padre than a surgeon on the battlefield! ”

Tim Boyce - Stoke-on-Trent

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>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, Feb 4, 8pm. Darwin Anniversary meeting. James Williams: *Charles Darwin and the Evolution of a Theory*.
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.
Cumbria Humanist Group: **i** Tel. 01228 810592. Christine Allen **w** www.secularderby.org **e** info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk.
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.
Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, Woodstreet Village, Guildford GU3 3DD.
w www.farnham-humanists.org.uk
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.
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. February 11. Mike Howgate on "Tackling Creationism", **i** Secretary on

0208 907-6124 **w** www.clarencewilson.cwc.net/hhs.htm
e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com
Havering & District Humanist Society: **i** Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgore Cres, Gidea Park. Thurs Feb 5, 8pm. Maryla Hart: *The Rain Forest and Bio Fuels*.
Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland: **i** Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** brianmccclinton@btinternet.com.
w www.nirelandhumanists.net
Humanist Association Dorset: Information and programme 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. Information and events: info@humanism-scotland.org.uk or visit www.humanism-scotland.org.uk Media: media@humanism-scotland.org.uk. Education: education@humanism-scotland.org.uk. **Local Scottish Groups:**
Aberdeen: 07010 704778, aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk.
Dundee: 07017 404778, 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. Tues Feb 10: *Richard Parker – Neo-Darwinism – Darwinism plus Genetics*.
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/>
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, Wavecrest, 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.
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. Feb 19, Graham Smith: *Republic – Do we need one, and how do we get one?*
Liverpool Humanist Group: **i** 07814 910 286.
w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/
e lhghumanist@googlemail.com. Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.
Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens: Tel: 07811870215.
Marches Secularists: **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 **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. February 4, Rob Murfin: *Was Darwin Right?*
South Hampshire Humanists: Group Secretary, Richard Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689 **e** 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.gwinnell@talktalk.net
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 **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.

Listing & Event Deadlines

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.