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“ When you put on your Jesus glasses, you can't see the truth ”

US Teacher loses law suit after calling creationism 'superstition'

California history teacher Dr James Corbett violated the First Amendment by disparaging Christians during a classroom lecture, a federal judge ruled last month. Corbett, who has taught at Capistrano Valley High School, referred to creationism as "religious, superstitious nonsense" during a 2007 classroom lecture, thereby "denigrating" a pupil, Chad Farnan.

The decision was the culmination of a 16-month legal battle between Corbett and Farnan – a conflict the judge said should remind teachers of their legal "boundaries" as public school employees.

"Corbett states an unequivocal belief that creationism is 'superstitious nonsense'," US District Court Judge James Selna said in a 37-page ruling released from his Santa Ana courtroom. "The court cannot discern a legitimate secular purpose in this statement, even when considered in context."

In a December 2007 lawsuit, Farnan, then a sophomore, accused Corbett of repeatedly promoting hostility toward Christians in class and advocating "irreligion over religion" in violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause.

The establishment clause prohibits the government from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion" and has been interpreted by US courts to also prohibit government employees from displaying religious hostility.



"We are thrilled with the judge's ruling and feel it sets great precedent," said Farnan's attorney, Jennifer Monk, who works for the Christian legal group Advocates for Faith & Freedom in Murrieta. "Hopefully, teachers in the future, including Dr Corbett, will think about what they're saying and attempt to ensure they're not violating the establishment clause as Dr Corbett

has done."

Chad Farnan and his parents released a prepared statement through their attorney, saying "We are proud of Chad's courageous stand and thrilled with the judge's ruling. It is a vindication of his constitutional rights."

Farnan's original lawsuit asked for damages and attorney's fees. These issues – plus a possible court injunction prohibiting Corbett from making hostile remarks about religion – will be considered in court at a future, undetermined date, Monk said.

Farnan's lawsuit accused the teacher of making more than 20 "inflammatory" statements, including "Conservatives don't want women to avoid pregnancies – that's interfering with God's work" and "When you pray for divine intervention, you're hoping that the spaghetti monster will help you get what you want."

He was also accused of saying: "When you put on your Jesus glasses, you can't see the truth."

With regard to another statement – in which Corbett was accused of saying religion was "invented when the first con man met the first fool" – the judge ruled in Corbett's favor, arguing Corbett may have been simply attempting to quote American author Mark Twain.

Corbett's full statement was, "What was it Mark Twain said? 'Religion was invented when the first con man met the first fool.'"

Corbett remains in his teaching position at Capistrano Valley High. Farnan, who dropped out of Corbett's class after filing the lawsuit, is now a junior at the school.

"The court's ruling reflects the constitutionally permissible need for expansive discussion even if a given topic may be offensive to a particular religion or if a particular religion takes one side of a historical debate," Judge Selna said in his written decision.

"The decision also reflects that there are boundaries. ... The ruling protects Farnan, but also protects teachers like Corbett in carrying out their teaching duties."

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Turning back the clock in Ireland

BARRY DUKE ON THE MAD IRISH PLAN FOR A 'BLASPHEMY' LAW

Was I shocked by the recent news that Ireland was contemplating introducing a crime of "blasphemous libel"? Oh yes – despite the fact that the country still appears to be up to its cerebellum in crazy Catholic crap.

The announcement by Justice Minister Dermott Ahern of plans to introduce the new law coincided with a grand tour of Ireland by what has become known in sceptical circles as the "Holy Skeleton".

What's left of St Thérèse of Lisieux resides in France – but periodically her bits and bobs are trundled over to Ireland where she is given a spectacular outing – and, on this occasion, full military honours in Kildare. *Full military honours for a nun?* What the feck was that all about? Well, both Thérèse's grandfathers were military men, so it makes perfect sense – that is, if you still happen to be mesmerised by grisly Catholic jiggy-pokery.

The remains of Thérèse, a Carmelite who snuffed it at the age of 24 in 1897, arrived in

Ireland on March 1. They then began a tour of many churches not previously visited during their last visit in 2001. The tour culminated with a celebration of the StThérèse National Day at Knock on May 4 – a public holiday in Ireland. "Knock! Knock!" "Who's there?" "Thérèse." "Thérèse who?" "Thérèse a jolly good fellow!". (My thanks to someone called BarrieJohn who posted that response on the *Freethinker* website.)

One Catholic priest, Father J Linus Ryan, was ecstatic over the saint's return to the Emerald Isle. "It is marvellous to have the relics of St Thérèse back in Ireland again," he burred, adding: "As it happens, it coincides with a low period in the Irish psyche. We hadn't planned it that way, but maybe Thérèse planned to be with us at a difficult moment."

"An awful lot of people are falling into unemployment. The recession is biting in so many new ways – a generation of people who never saw want, now find themselves out of jobs, out of money and even the horrible prospect of having to emigrate."

He continued: "The theme of the visit is taken from a poem of St Thérèse called *Living on Love* and in that she talks about her own life – sowing peace and joy in every heart."

During her visit in 2001, Thérèse had the opportunity of "sowing peace and joy in every heart" among inmates at the 150-year-old Mountjoy prison which houses almost 700 prisoners. A website dedicated to the saint described her visit thus: "With meticulous planning and a notable air of reverence and dignity, St Thérèse revealed her most human qualities, those which endeared her most to the people."

"A team of prison officers and officials placed the 400lb casket upon a specially acquired machine which slowly raised her to a higher level to adequately accommodate her entry into the beautifully prepared church, adorned with flowers and candleholders made that very week by the prison inmates."

"A steady stream of both staff and prisoners visited the Church to venerate the relics and it is estimated that the entire male contingent went at some point during the course of the day."

If some deranged parts of the Irish community want to mess around with hanks of "sacred" hair and pieces of "holy" bone – not to mention the occasional scrap of "divine" desiccated dermis – fine by me; but the very idea that a new, nonsensical law of "blasphemy" should be foisted on the entire Irish population leaves me both puzzled and offended.

I am by no means the only one annoyed

by Ahern's suggestion. Atheist Ireland – an advocacy group "that promotes reason and atheism over superstition and supernaturalism, and campaigns for an ethical and secular Ireland where state does not support or fund or give special treatment to any religion" – immediately set up a website (<http://blasphemy.ie/>) to muster opposition to the proposed new law, saying: "If passed, this [legislation] would revive an old crime of blasphemy that the Supreme Court had found to be unenforceable."

The website was created by Atheists Ireland as part of a campaign against the proposed new law. It includes analysis and news items about blasphemy and free speech, and examples of material that could be illegal in Ireland if the new law is passed.

So why has Ahern suddenly got the hot for a "blasphemous libel" law which will carry a fine of up to 100,000 euros (or a mere 1,000 euros if Labour's gets its way)? Gardai will also be given powers to enter premises and seize the offending material.

The Justice Minister claims that legislation is necessary as article 40.6.1.i of the Constitution "imposes an obligation to implement the constitutional offence of blasphemy". "Blasphemous matter" is to be defined as anything "that is grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion, thereby causing outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion; and he or she intends, by the publication of the matter concerned, to cause such outrage".

The only alternative, the Irish are being told, is for the country to hold a referendum removing that clause from the constitution – an option the minister is resisting on cost grounds. The *Irish Examiner* pointed out that "the minister had not offered a single concrete example of what he has in mind to ban; nor has he been able to define a religion. There is a point of principle here. Is it always wrong to inspire hatred of any and all religions? Satanists, witchdoctors, Scientologists: must criticism of them be protected by law?"

I can't help feeling that Ahern must now be rueing the day he ever came up with this cock-eyed idea. Ever since mooted his plan, he has been mercilessly derided from one end of Ireland to another – and has attracted criticism from commentators much further afield, all wondering whether Ireland hasn't got more important things to deal with than "blasphemy".



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'Three stooges' guilty of *Jewel of Medina* attack

Three Muslims miffed over a perceived insult to the "prophet" Mohammed have been found guilty

at Croydon Crown Court of recklessly damaging property and endangering life.

The three stooges, Ali Beheshti, 41, Abrar Mirza, 23, and Abbas Taj, 31, conspired to firebomb the house of publisher Martin

Rynja after Rynja's Gibson Square Books had announced plans to publish the burqa-ripper novel, *The Jewel of Medina* – a semi-fictional account of the inventor of Islam's relationship with his child bride, Aisha, written by US author Shelley Jones.

The trio decided to punish the publisher by pouring diesel through his letterbox and trying to set fire to it.

Fortunately – and perhaps unsurprisingly – the three were incompetent, and had been under police surveillance for days. Taj, a driver, tried to plead not guilty, claiming that he had just given his mates a lift without any idea of what they were up to. The jury were not convinced.

An old hand in the art of holy war, Beheshti had been involved in the Mooton protests in 2006 when he burned himself attempting to set fire to a picture of George Bush. This may explain why they decided to use diesel in the Gibson Square operation – they might have hurt themselves if they had used petrol.

Calling himself Abu Jihad, Beheshti – unemployed, from Ilford, East London – also took his 20-month old daughter, dressed in an "I love al-Qaeda" hat, to the protests against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in 2006.

Taj, a trustee of the Muslim Prisoner Support Group, said he had met Beheshti when the pair ran market stalls in Whitechapel Market in East London.

Despite their efforts, *The Jewel of Medina* will be published in October.

The men were under surveillance by police who had warned Martin Rynja, 43, and his partner, to move out of their four-storey townhouse, which had an office in the basement.

Taj's car, a Honda Accord, had been bugged by officers and their conversation was recorded as they drove to the square.

Beheshti was heard asking Taj: "You wanna be the emir [leader], yeh?" and Taj replied: "That would be you."

"You know what we gotta do, anyway, in-nit?" Beheshti added.

In the early hours of September 27 last year the three men were observed driving twice through the square in Islington before Beheshti and Mir-

za approached the front door with a petrol can in a white plastic bag, poured diesel fuel through the letter box and used a disposable lighter to set it on fire.

It was alleged that Taj, who was born in Somalia, East Africa, but moved to Britain at the age of 15, was acting as the getaway driver. As armed police swooped, his car was stopped near the Angel tube station not far away.

The book has been criticised for inaccuracy, sex and violence by academics, and the publisher Random House, which produced Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, withdrew from the project, fearing a backlash from the Muslim community.



Beheshti, Mirza and Taj

Atheists 'not fully human' says crazy Catholic cleric

ATHEISTS and secularists have "an impoverished understanding of what it is to be human" says Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, recently retired head of the Roman Catholic Church in England.

Asked in an interview by the BBC's Roger Bolton whether atheists and secularists "might find this a bit offensive", O'Connor, who is likely to be elevated to the House of Lords, said: "I think what I said was true. There is something not totally human about people who leave out the transcendent."

He claimed that people were "created to search for a transcendent meaning which I call God. This, I believe, is the way humanity is directed. If you leave that out, you are not fully human."

Curiously, although embryos cannot possibly have a sense of the "transcendent", Catholics insist they are "fully human", hence their hostility towards abortion

'Christian bulwark' is about to collapse

FOR centuries the Hebridean island of Lewis has shut down on a Sunday, the last stronghold of Sabbatarianism in Britain. But that is all about to end. Within a few months ferries will start sailing from the mainland on a Sunday, ending the island's isolation from the modern world.

Last month, in a long-expected announcement, the ferry operator Caledonian MacBrayne confirmed it had decided finally to begin sailings from Ullapool to the Western Isles every day of the week, after lawyers warned it was illegal to ban Sunday sailings.

Lewis's staunchly Calvinist Protestant community has campaigned vigorously to retain Sundays as a day of rest: many refuse to work, play sports, watch television, read anything other than the Bible or even drive a car except to reach church.

Councillors have refused to allow the island's sports centre and swimming pool to open on a Sunday, to the dismay of local doctors who worry about the islanders' health, while golf clubs are unable to open their courses and clubhouses.

The ferry company's executives revealed that their lawyers had warned it was illegal to prevent Sunday sailings. Peter Timmis, CalMac's chairman, said the company had been warned by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission that it was at risk of being sued and fined if it failed to have seven-day sailings.

"Our hands appear to be tied legally," he said. "We don't want to be operating any longer illegally than we have to."

Some of the island's Sabbatarians admit privately that Sunday sailings were inevitable: air services have landed at Stornoway on Sundays for some years, while Sunday ferry services began from the largely Catholic islands of Barra and the Uists to Harris, which makes up the lower half of Lewis, last year.

However, 4,000 people signed a petition last year organised by the Lord's Day Observance Society (LDOS) opposing Sunday sailings and John Roberts, the director of the LDOS, warned there would be angry protests.

"The Western Isles are unique and are a Christian bulwark," he said.

"Sunday sailing will shatter the uniqueness of the islands and cause unnecessary work. People will not lie down if the company plans to put profit before the law of God and break the Sabbath."



'Teachers must challenge myths'

When the suit was first filed against Corbett, Advocates for Faith and Freedom accused the teacher of "causing students who hold religious beliefs to feel like second-class citizens because of their protected religious expression, beliefs, and conduct."

"In addition to expressing his viewpoint regarding the Christian faith, Dr Corbett has made derogatory remarks about Christian viewpoints regarding homosexuality, Viagra, birth control, and sexual activities of teenagers."

The group added: "The blatant disregard for relevant topics of what can and should be discussed in a high school history class goes beyond moral reasoning. Students come to class to learn, not to be forced to listen to the personal, demoralizing rantings of their teacher."

After the ruling, Corbett drew the *Freethinker's* attention to his response to the case, published on Open Salon, an online social networking site. He wrote:

"Over 2,000 years ago Socrates faced a court for refusing to recognize the gods acknowledged by the state, importing strange divinities and corrupting the young. The judges sent Socrates to his death. He accepted the sentence of the court and committed suicide by drinking a cup of hemlock.

"The only virtue for Socrates was 'knowledge'. He reached it by questioning the most deeply held beliefs of his students, by which I mean all of Athens and ultimately all of us. What troubled the Athenians about Socrates, however, was not listed in the charges. His crime was that he prompted people to think.

"His provocations exposed the Athenians' shallowness of belief and mindless deference to myth. Socrates was judged because he was successful in provoking his students "examine their lives." [his words] Those who guard the myths must try and strike down any who teach young people to think and question, because myths often shrink in the light of reason, draining power from those in authority who benefit from belief.

"There are thousands of teachers who agree with Socrates that, '[t]he unexamined life is not worth living'. Every teacher who makes a student think takes the risk that he will be attacked by parents and others who see themselves as guardians of cherished political and religious myth. The teachers willing to take that risk should be rewarded, not punished. After the verdict, the Athenian



Chad Farnan

court asked Socrates what his punishment should be. He responded that he should get free meals at the Pyrataneum, a celebration hall for Olympian athletes. Socrates went on to explain that those who passed judgment were not harming him, but rather themselves. He said, by killing him they corrupted their own souls and revealed the weakness of their own belief. A true believer does not fear that a few questions can undo years of parental teaching. Those who would "protect" students from self-examination have little faith and great fear.

"Chad Farnan, the boy who sued me, was an average student, who admitted under oath that he did not do the required reading for the class. If Chad's lawyers, the 'Advocates for Faith and Freedom', and his parents were actually concerned with protecting the boy, why didn't they simply come to me and ask me to explain my comments? Neither they nor the Farnans ever expressed concerns to me nor to any administrators before they came to school with attorneys and reporters in tow to drop a lawsuit on the desk of Tom Ressler, our principal. Perhaps more importantly, the Farnans were aware long before Chad took my class that I go out of my way to be provocative. ...

"Every teacher in California (this was a federal case after all) now works with the knowledge that any student, at any time, and in violation of California law, can sneak a tape-recorder into a classroom, record the teacher and use an out-of-context five second comment as a bludgeon to threaten, to intimidate and, ultimately, to destroy the teacher's career and good name.

"Challenging myths is dangerous, but it is the essence of getting students to think for themselves. The Athenian judges, like some parents today, would have students accept

myth without question, because myth is the foundation of their parental, political and/or religious authority. Ms Farnan objected to my challenging the myth of the Puritans as a pious people who fled religious intolerance to found America. As Ms Farnan sees them, the Puritans are quaint, pious people with buckles on their hats and shoes as portrayed in the national mythology, but they may also be seen as intolerant, misogynistic and homophobic religious bigots who hanged Mary Dyer, a Quaker girl, for preaching something other than Puritan doctrine and several other women for the crime of "witchcraft".

"Questioning may make students and parents uncomfortable, but students have a right to think for themselves. It is not 'bullying' to demand that students think.

"Ms Farnan also objected to my challenge of another national myth, that the United States was founded as a 'Christian' nation. There is some truth to that notion, but embracing that myth and excluding other views can be used to unfairly gain political advantage. Another view of the founding fathers can be seen in the writings of Thomas Jefferson, the man who authored the Declaration of Independence. He translated the Bible. The last words of the Jeffersonian Bible might shake Ms Farnan's faith: 'There laid they Jesus, and rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulcher, and departed.' There was no resurrection for Jefferson, he rejected all the Biblical miracles, as contrary to reason. I doubt that his view would be called 'Christian' by Ms Farnan or anyone else .. We respect the guardians and their myths at our peril because history (and science) changes and improves with knowledge, but the same force damages myth based on belief. That's why the guardians fear the knowledge begat by questioning. For them, 'knowledge' is gained in rote memory of approved truth. They chant in the school, temple, church or mosque, and fool themselves into thinking they've acquired knowledge.

"All those teachers, and there are many of us, who understand the value of questioning sacred myths serve this nation as faithfully as other patriots. What is true will be strengthened. What is false will be destroyed, as it should be. Such teachers should be honored. There is no greater gift teachers can give to students than to teach them to think. Don't sue them for it. Try taking them to the Pyrataneum for dinner, conversation and a cup of coffee, no hemlock."

“The fresh ‘convert’ does not hesitate to explain to the Pope not only what he must do, but also what he must believe!”

Blair ridiculed for trying to recreate Catholicism in his own image

Good news. The wheels are coming off the Tony Blair Faith Foundation following his demands for wholesale changes in Catholic belief and practice.

Writing last month in the *Guardian*, Hugh O’Shaughnessy pointed out that Blair, his wife Cherie and the Foundation “were firmly rebuffed in Rome at a meeting of the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences where he was compared to Cromwell and his good faith impugned”.

Said O’Shaughnessy: “As architect, with George Bush Junior, of the invasion of Iraq and the consequent death of more than a million Iraqis, the man unwilling to condemn the Israelis’ invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and the destruction wreaked in Gaza this year, he has lost credibility among Arabs. He is under attack for failure to achieve progress on Middle Eastern peace as representative of the UN, the EU, the US and Russia.”

And Jerusalem-born Dr Ghada Karmi of Exeter University said: “He is – at best – a total irrelevancy.”

Blair’s newly created foundation is losing its director of policy, William Chapman, a 57-year-old Anglican who worked in Number 10 on appointments in the Church of England. He is leaving to become secretary to Ian Luder, the Lord Mayor of London.



The Tablet, a Catholic weekly, quoted Stephen Pound, Labour MP for Ealing North and himself a Catholic, correctly forecasting that Blair’s hubristic attitude would damage him among Catholics, Muslims and Jews.

“It is extremely counterproductive. Entrance to the Vatican is only gained through a series of iron-clad, hermetically sealed, heavily padlocked and bolted doors, and I can hear them creaking shut as we speak.” Pound warned Blair against “dictating to the Pope through the media”.

Much worse news came this month from the Vatican where the couple came under sustained fire at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, a group of scholars which includes the economist and Nobel Prize winner Joseph

Stiglitz and Hans Tietmeyer, former head of the German central bank. The meeting, convened by the Pope, was organised by Roland Minnerath, once Vatican diplomat, now archbishop of Dijon.

The attack was spearheaded by Professor Michel Schooyans of the Catholic University of Louvain, a specialist in anthropology and political philosophy. Speaking uncompromisingly, Schooyans accused Blair and his wife of supporting a messianic US plan for world domination.

“One of the aims of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation will be that of remaking the major religions, just as his colleague Barack Obama will remake global society. With this purpose, the foundation in question will try to expand the ‘new rights’, using the world religions for this end and adapting these for their new duties.

“The religions will have to be reduced to the same common denominator, which means stripping them of their identity ...

“This project threatens to set us back to an age in which political power was ascribed the mission of promoting a religious confession, or of changing it. In the case of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation, this is also a matter of promoting one and only one religious confession, which a universal, global political power would impose on the entire world.”

The Belgian all but ridiculed the former prime minister. “The fresh ‘convert’ does not hesitate to explain to the Pope not only what he must do, but also what he must believe! Is he a Catholic? ... So now we are back in the time of Hobbes, if not of Cromwell: it’s civil power that defines what one must believe.”

Said O’Shaughnessy: “Given the hostility expressed towards Blair in Rome he will be lucky to recruit the outgoing archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor, to the foundation as he promised. The hostility – and ridicule – that the Blairs and their associates stir up mean he is increasingly unlikely to achieve his ambition of becoming president of the EU.”

A *Guardian* reader was prompted to comment thus on O’Shaughnessy’s piece: “Funny how Tony Blair’s god is a kind of NuLab let’s-tear-up-clause-4 god while the Pope’s one shares the sort of prejudices you would expect of an octogenarian rural Bavarian. Anyone would think that gods are actually made in the minds of people.”

‘Blasphemous’ poet James Kirkup dies at the age of 91

JAMES Kirkup, the British poet who was reluctantly catapulted to notoriety in the 1970s after his poem about a Roman centurion’s love for Jesus landed *Gay News* and its editor, Denis Lemon, in the dock for “blasphemous” libel, died at his home in Andorra last month.

He was 91 – the same age Christian prodnose Mary Whitehouse was when she died in 2001.

It was Whitehouse, of course, who brought the successful private prosecution against *Gay News* and Lemon, for publishing the poem.

Apart from her role as the self-appointed Nanny to the Nation, Whitehouse was an infamous homophobe and bigot.

According to *The Times*, “her fear of homosexuals was visceral. She claimed that homosexuality was caused by abnormal parental sex ‘during pregnancy or just after’. Being gay was like having acne: ‘Psychiatric literature proves that 60 per cent of homosexuals who go for treatment get completely cured’. It was with this sort of nonsense (in her first book, *Whatever Happened to Sex?*) that she was ushered into the Establishment in the 1970s and permitted to pray in the Old Bailey corridors for the conviction of *Gay News*.



'Stand up, stand

JAMES MERRYWEATHER HAS A CUNNING PLAN TO CHALLENGE

If you ever attend church or listen to religious broadcasts you will be all too aware how much utter drivel is spoken by all present. It's bad enough that congregations – who seem to be unable to function unless they have reassigned all personal authority to a dictatorial leader – corporately chant muddled, meaningless, self-contradictory prayers, scriptures, versicles and responses. The words of the hymns they sing without a thought are frequently appalling nonsense: "Ye worms of earth arise, ye creatures of the day" or "Where are ye all, ye virgins wise, The bridegroom comes in sight, Raise high your torches bright" or "Crown him with many crowns, the lamb upon the throne". A trinity should need only three, not many. And what's a lamb doing, sitting on the throne? I thought He was supposed to be the shepherd.

The clergy – professional philosophers and carers who take upon themselves responsibility for the well-being and general sanity of their flocks – routinely utter, it seems without intellectual reference to what they are saying, the most awful rot. The Methodist minister presiding over my mother's funeral certainly did. She opened her homily with the preposterous: "I believe in Heaven, and I believe our sister Lilian is in Heaven." My brain was privately screaming, "Why do you have to say that? If it's true, it's true, and if it's really true, then it doesn't need you to say so because it will be blinkin' obvious. But it's neither true nor obvious, so you have to try to justify your irrational belief by saying it out loud in front of other people. Bah! Get on with it!"

But of course I kept *schtum*.

Nobody interrupts, interrogates or contradicts the priest. I suppose I would have upset certain family members and Mum's friends if I'd spoken my mind, and I'd have got a *James, really!* dig in the ribs from my sister. But our "caring pastor" presumed everybody would insidiously accept her daft monologue and didn't give a damn about the intellectual dignity of those present who actually thought for themselves and might, for well thought-out reasons, not agree.

Priests generally don't pull themselves up with a jolt of realisation that something they just said was really crass. The gullible faithful swallow it all without question and, anyway, they dare not contradict them, or even consider that they could. Codswallop, no matter

how primitive, infantile or downright barmy, becomes truth if they just say it, denying it access to the brain.

Reader: "This is the Word of the Lord." Congregation: "Thanks be to God".

No it isn't! Don't be absurd. What has just been read is a snippet from an old foreign book that, because of some traditions you haven't bothered to think about or contradict, you happen to hold sacred. The only reason to think it's the word of the Lord is because it says so inside. Are you not embarrassed by such sloppy logic? If I were in your shoes I'd be mightily ashamed.

When non-believing philosophers point out the silliness of such behaviour they are reviled for stridency, disrespect, rudeness, even ignorance, which, the faithful could discover if they actually read the books of Russell, Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, Grayling *et al*, properly if at all, is untrue. These authors just speak out frankly, presenting measured arguments, but some people simply don't like what they say and their reactions are knee-jerk.

I have a cunning plan. We non-believers should unobtrusively infiltrate church congregations. Each time the vicar or minister or priest or pastor or preacher says something daft (as they surely will), we should muster our courage, raise a hand, be recognised, stand up and politely ask him or her to justify or explain it. Of course, the congregation will gasp at the effrontery of it. They will turn and stare in disbelief and outrage. But we must stand our ground and not be intimidated by the implicit demand that we should, like them, pay respect to the cloth through dumb, unquestioning silence.

Why should the clergy not take responsibility for what they say and do? They have got away with universal obedient respect for too long. They used to frighten or beat it into people, but now they don't need to. As Daniel Dennett has shown in *Breaking the Spell*, many religious sects are self-propelling, with believers kow-towing habitually and voluntarily because of tradition: they do it because it's what they do and only a general organising convener is required to maintain their ritualistic activities.

If what the clergy teach is correct, justifying it will present these trained professionals with no difficulties. If it's not, shouldn't they be exposed and obliged to retract their ba-

nal utterances? All other professionals have to defend the positions they take. The politician routinely confronts vigorous grilling from journalists and the electorate, the comedian must entertain his/her audience or be booed off the stage and the career of the scientist stands or falls on approval by squadrons of hypercritical peers. The law is dependent upon the rigorous application of evidence and logical discussion to protect us from miscarriages of justice, and medicine fails if rigour is not applied at every stage in the research and application of drugs, surgery and even placebo treatment, and doctors who kill their patients are soon found out and kicked out.

But the church stands on a foundation of total baloney and not only gets away with it, but is applauded (silently, for clapping in church is a heinous transgression). Vicars can talk drivel and teach boloney and carry on regardless. Though many of them are tireless carers for people (a calling for which religion is not a requirement), they can, if they choose, spend an entire career labelling their beetle collections or playing with model trains and declaiming gibberish in church one day a week. It can be an easy life and it's a shameful state of affairs.

We often hear about the "moderate" church, which I suspect, doesn't exist. There may be some deeply reflective theologians who take a moderate, modernistic view of their scriptures, but if you listen to, say, *Sunday Worship* on BBC Radio 4 with a critical ear you will soon

"I think that individuals should be entitled to see any reason why somebody, because he prof imaginary friend rather than another one, should of society.

"When talking to a politician, you would demand evidence for what they say, but suddenly, when talking to a clergyman, you will don't have to provide all that evidence because to take seriously somebody who says, 'I believe believe it'.

In any other walk of life you would say, 'You tell me the evidence.' In the case of a clergyman you clergyman. Right. In that case I respect that. You it.' I don't think that will do.

nd up for reason!

CHALLENGE ALL THAT BALONEY SPOUTED IN THE NAME OF RELIGION

discover the worshippers there take the Bible and the liturgy as literally as any fundamentalist. They happily chant in chorus a load of top award-winning, twenty-four carat trumpety moonshine. They confidently claim to believe in the virgin birth and resurrection, both of which are biologically impossible, and accept the stories in the Bible as true narrative, rather than a self-contradictory, outmoded muddle of history, poetry, folklore, poor remembrance, ignorance and wishful thinking.

Children are habitually taught about the creation as described in Genesis by a Bronze Age desert tribesman who had no way of knowing what really happened, the story of naughty Adam and Eve and a talking serpent, and of a physically impossible world-wide flood that, if true (there are hundreds of simple arguments to show it is not), would turn scientific fact on its head. They are told about a really nice man who convinced people he once walked across the surface of a lake, could apparently quell storms when he might actually have applied a little meteorological knowledge and perfect timing to the problem, and could do simple conjuring tricks that were reported, much later, by people who weren't present, as miracles.

Rarely are children told that these stories are just stories, and of course, in many churches they are told emphatically that they are absolutely ("gospel") true. Rarely are they encouraged to consider that, rather than being a baffling

mystery when Jesus apparently fed five thousand people on a few scraps of bread and fish, the point of the story might be that the generosity of a small boy shamed a selfish crowd into sharing the lunch they intended to keep for themselves, or that the story might not actually have been true but was a rather good morality fable.

Why is it so many children ask the adult-challenging question, "What's a virgin?" How many worshippers really ponder upon the ghastliness of crucifixion, done by people to other people, and the unfeasibility of resurrection? Why don't they treat with healthy scepticism an Almighty God who, stretching his suspiciously human-like imagination, had to have himself, in the form of a man (or so it is written), horribly murdered in order to forgive us for a catalogue of unspecified sins allegedly committed by our fictitious ancestors? Why, if the teacher knows a lesson is based on dubious material, is there any point in teaching it, except perhaps for its literary or entertainment value? Much of what the clergy teach is plainly untrue.

We potential bold contradictors can pick on these apocrypha and many other inconsistencies (syn. nonsense), and challenge the vicar to clarify the truth of the matter, and if s/he can't, s/he should be encouraged to talk about something more meaningful.

When the congregation is invited to recite the prayer Our Lord taught us, we should politely ask the vicar first to review Matthew 6: 5-9.

5 And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

6 But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.

7 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. 8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. 9 After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, etc.



TODAY'S READING IS MATTHEW 10:30 ...
"BUT THE VERY HAIRS OF YOUR HEAD ARE ALL ...
ER ... NUMBERED"

That should stop him in his tracks.

If minister or Bible reader bleats on about the creation according to Genesis, take the side of evolution (first make sure you know the science, the Bible and creationist pseudo-arguments). If he's a moderate who has accepted the scientific fact but has mindlessly gone into biblical auto-run, he ought to be embarrassed when challenged and hopefully will pull himself together. If he's a rabid creationist, prepare to enjoy a right old ding-dong, but don't get over excited. Conduct yourself with dignity and stand firm but fair in the authority of knowledge, intellect and reason. Don't argue. Let him do the talking. He'll soon tie himself in knots or trot out nuggets of familiar creationist misinformation about evolution that you can then tackle with a swift academic blow. If you can counter his bogus version of evolution concisely and with authoritative confidence (it's quite easy really because they have only a few pat items of utter codswallop) you can sustain your gentle interrogation. Calmly but persistently ask questions to oblige him to deal with the science: "Why do you think that?" – "Is that what Darwin/Dawkins/Ridley says?" – "Are you certain that's right?" as you reveal the established biological facts of which he has, inevitably, produced the usual false versions. But be prepared: even if you keep cool, the preacher and his flock might not and you could get thrown out. So why not have a press photographer in attendance?

Well, it's a dream scenario and I'm not sure I have the courage to practise what I've just preached, well not on my own. Meanwhile, let us sing Hymn 666, "Stand Up, Stand Up For Reason".

ed to have their say in public life, but I don't
he professes a certain faith in a particular
e, should be given some kind of privileged ear

ld

you will let all that fall aside and say, 'Oh you
because it's faith'. There's absolutely no reason
believe it because I

, "You believe it? Why do you believe it? Give
man you drop that and you say, 'Oh, you're a
hat. You believe it simply because you believe

– Richard Dawkins in
conversation with John Humphrys
on Today, BBC Radio 4, 09-05-08

REAL LIFE

'I thought I was an atheist'

Dan Bye reflects on A N Wilson's predictable return to the Church

Freethinkers should be used to people changing their minds; it happens a lot. Most of us are former religionists, and a few of us will inevitably return to religion. The traffic has always been two-way, and always will be, and yet like snow it always seems to come as a shock to some people.

But like unexpected snowfall, we should learn from it. What's interesting about recent prominent cases like those of Antony Flew and A N Wilson, is how they have been used by Christian apologists. Flew's adoption of a deistic position appeared to be genuine, but his subsequent (dreadful) book was heavily and obviously ghost-written and muddled the waters. A N. Wilson's position was always an ambivalent one – he seems to have been emotionally anti-religious for a while, without ever committing to a full-blooded atheistic humanism – yet now that he has re-embraced orthodox Christianity his non-believing period is being retrofitted for apologetic exploitation. Instead of sticking out like a sore thumb in rationalist company, the spin is that Wilson was straightforwardly and militantly one of us.

When A N Wilson's *CounterBlasts* pamphlet *Against Religion* was published in 1991, feathers were widely ruffled. It began, uncompromisingly, "It is said in the Bible that the love of money is the root of all evil. It might be truer to say that the love of God is the root of all evil." Even Richard Dawkins has dissociated himself from such a simplistic position; reviewers in the secular humanist press at the time pointed out that Wilson had gone further than most atheists would. A lengthy pre-publication extract from *Against Religion* was given prominent space in the *Observer* (May 26, 1991), and in response the paper received what it called "one of our biggest postbags in recent years". I still have the cuttings. Wilson had garnered headlines, at a time when secular humanist publications were usually ignored.

Against Religion was strongly worded, but the fierce rhetoric failed to mask the tension at the heart of Wilson's position. De-



A N Wilson

spite denouncing religion as "cruel", Wilson nevertheless admitted to being "someone who recognises strong religious impulses within himself". Wrote Wilson: "I am still of a strongly religious temperament. I can never walk by the sea-shore, nor read Wordsworth, nor listen to Beethoven, without feeling that 'there are more things in heaven and earth' than are dreamt of in a purely materialist view of things."

Wilson also had little time for the Enlightenment: "The Enlightenment supposed that it was conquering superstition, but it actually replaced old superstitions with new ones. The Encyclopaedists thought that they could conquer all that was least desirable in human nature and human society by the pursuit of Reason, and plunged France and most of Europe into the Terror – an unparalleled period of unreason and anarchy."

Nor did Wilson see any hope "for a society in which formal organised religion dies out". Thoughtful atheists might have agreed with Wilson about some or all of this, but it wasn't what you'd expect from an angry anti-religious polemicist. Religion kept leak-

ing through. Interestingly, nowhere in *Against Religion* does Wilson describe himself as an atheist.

Reviewing *Against Religion* for the *Freethinker*, the late Nicolas Walter observed that the fuss over the pamphlet's publication had presented the freethought movement (which Wilson never joined, and appeared to view negatively) with a welcome opportunity to get its own message across, even though Wilson's book "isn't so much a reasoned argument as a series of rhetorical insults". Walter also pointed out that in his 1985 book defending orthodox Christianity, *How Can We Know?*, Wilson had said, "I am not a particularly rational person, and I am easily swayed by my emotions." Walter suggested that in writing the pamphlet, Wilson was indeed "swayed by emotional rather than rational factors – especially the *Satanic Verses* affair."

In 1992, Wilson published a study of Jesus, in many respects a popularisation of the work of Geza Vermes. It tried to reconstruct the historical facts, undermining the traditional Christian story. Explaining his own position, Wilson identified his discovery of the historical facts behind the Jesus legend as the cause of his unbelief. Note how this differs from other accounts of his loss of faith, particularly the "born again" conversion experience related in the *New Statesman*:

"It was a slow, and in my case, as it happens, painful process, to discard a belief in Christianity; and when I did so, I did not feel it was honest to continue to call myself a Christian, to attend churches which addressed Jesus as if he was alive, to recite creeds which acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Judge of the world."

But the break was never complete. In a 1996 article for *New Humanist* magazine, Wilson said: "As religious belief ebbed out of my mind like water from a leaking pot, I found myself loving the Prayer Book and the old Church of England with an increasing passion, so that anything which is done to injure it fills me with anger or dismay. If I am accused of sentimentality, I plead guilty. If I am accused of irrationality, I plead guilty."

Although Richard Dawkins has expressed

his fondness for the language of the Bible (he also respects Jesus as an ethical leader), and a cultural attachment to the Church is not unheard of among atheists and agnostics (Philip Larkin, for example), Wilson's stance put him at some distance from the "rationalism" he claims to have once embraced but has now abandoned.

In 1999, Wilson published *God's Funeral*, a history of Victorian doubt. Jim Herrick's review of the book perceptively noted that "AN Wilson witnesses the wake of the deity but gives the impression that he would prefer to be at the resurrection." Herrick noted Wilson's tendency to be "waspyish – especially towards 'bigoted atheism'", and observed that the book was "riven with regrets and nostalgia." He concluded, "I think if he starts by saying 'Goodbye' to God, by the end he is ready to say 'Hello' again." Terry Sanderson, reviewing *God's Funeral* in the *Freethinker*, observed that "It is difficult to know where Wilson himself stands." According to Sanderson: "I get the distinct impression that, although he has contemplated the deed, Wilson has not yet managed to slay the God in his own head. But I can't say for certain, for there is a feeling about this book that Wilson is mischievously and deliberately hiding himself from us ... Once he was a pillar of the Anglican church, but then he became disillusioned and transformed himself into one of its fiercest critics ... Now he describes himself as an agnostic, unable to take the final leap into full-scale atheism ... His comments on Anglican affairs can be vicious or even crude, and yet there still remains a distinct affection for the Church of England."

Sanderson concluded (remember this was written a decade ago) that: "Mr Wilson seems to be on a journey of discovery ... I have a strong suspicion that he is travelling on a return ticket and that eventually he'll be back in the Christian fold. There will be no funeral for God *chez* Wilson."

Hints that Wilson was indeed switching sides appeared elsewhere at the same time. In a 1999 interview about *God's Funeral*, Wilson said, "I feel much closer to the Christian fold. I feel more like a Christian fellow traveller and indeed do go to church and worship in church on an occasional basis." By 2002, in an article for the *Yorkshire Post* on the succession to the position of Archbishop of Canterbury (January 11), Wilson was admitting that, "for all my sins and all its faults, I could never entirely abandon the Church of England – or, come to that, Christianity." He refers to himself as one of the "pious fellow-travellers" who "do not believe in the conventional

sense" but "do not want the Church to die".

When Wilson went public about returning to faith, in an interview for Joan Bakewell's BBC Radio 3 series *Belief*, first broadcast on December 30, 2008, nobody seemed to notice. Then Wilson told his story in an article published in the *New Statesman* in April this year, and this time it was seized upon by the anti-atheist squad. The article is a curious and contradictory piece. In it, Wilson describes his conversion to atheism, and how it gave him "the inner glow of complete certainty, the heady sense of being at one with the great tide of fellow non-believers". Using the language of belief so common when opponents of atheism seek to portray unbelief as "just another faith", Wilson depicts himself as "a born-again atheist". Take, for example, his

'As religious belief ebbed
out of my mind like water
from a leaking pot, I found
myself loving the Prayer
Book and the old Church
of England with an
increasing passion'

account of meeting Christopher Hitchens: "Hitchens was excited to greet a new convert to his non-creed and put me through a catechism before uncorking some stupendous claret.

"So – absolutely no God? 'Nope,' I was able to say with Moonie-zeal. 'No future life, nothing out there?' 'No,' I obediently replied."

But this conflicts not only with what we already know about Wilson's position, but also with his admission that he was a "very unconvincing atheist. And unconvicted." Whenever he caught himself "wavering" – and one gets the impression that this happened quite often – he says: "I would return to Hume in order to pull myself together, rather as a Catholic having doubts might return to the shrine of a particular saint to sustain them while the springs of faith ran dry."

It seems Wilson was most troubled by the discovery that the people he admired most were all believers: "A life like Gandhi's, which was focused on God so deeply, reminded me of all the human qualities that have to be

denied if you embrace the bleak, muddled creed of a materialist atheist."

He was also disturbed by the deaths of his mother and several of his close friends, which caused him to question "materialist 'explanations'" of "our mysterious human existence". Finally, comments by a "materialist Darwinian" (of course!) led Wilson to the belief that the existence of language (oh, and music, and love) proves that human beings are "very much more than collections of meat". The "whole grammatical mystery" has, bafflingly, convinced Wilson that "we are spiritual beings, and that the religion of the incarnation, asserting that God made humanity in His image, and continually restores humanity in His image, is simply true." Wow.

Wilson goes on to admit that his conversion to atheism was "a bit of middle-aged madness" (he resisted this conclusion for "a few years"), and that although he still has "moments of unbelief", they don't matter: "If you return to a practice of the faith, faith will return". He thinks that atheists are missing out on something fundamental about human beings, "like people who have no ear for music, or who have never been in love". There is, in short, something wrong with the non-religious. This is an interesting point to pick at. First of all, some people are converts in one direction or another – sometimes more than once (like Wilson). Does that mean it is possible for one's religious sensibility to oscillate (love can, I guess, and perhaps so can an ear for music)? Secondly, if some people are naturally religious and other people are naturally not, doesn't that present something of a theological problem? (It does: check out J L Schellenberg on "divine hiddenness" and Theodore Drange on "the argument from non-belief").

In a thoroughly unpleasant and tendentious screed published in the *Daily Mail* (April 11), Wilson displayed a vicious side rather at odds with the milk-and-water persona on show in the *New Statesman*. He clearly knows how to play to his audience. Wilson describes Polly Toynbee as "The *Guardian's* fanatical feminist in chief ...", and attacks the usual *Daily Mail* targets: "smug, tieless architects of so much television output", "self-satisfied TV presenters such as Jonathan Ross and Jo Brand" (neither very prominent rationalist activists, so far as I'm aware), the "liberalism" of the "bishops of the Church of England", "liberal clever-clogs", and, of course, the "vast majority of media pundits and intelligentsia... fervent in their hatred of religion".

Here, Wilson puts his anti-religious

One for every occasion

NEIL BLEWITT expresses sympathy for a deity who has to stay awake around the clock to hear the incessant prayers of the faithful

In addition to the more familiar “Hello, playmates!” and “I-thang-you!” the late Arthur Askey had another catch-phrase which he would often use after joking about a matter of current interest. As the laughter died down, he would say in mock self-praise: “One for every occasion!”

Rather like the *Book of Common Prayer* in fact, where one will find prayers for use at baptisms, marriages and deaths (where petitions for the sick have fallen on deaf ears); prayers for use in time of war, drought, famine and flood; and prayers for the monarch, the nobility, MPs, magistrates, the clergy and the laity. That Uncle Tom Cobleigh is absent need cause no concern: he is one of the laity.

Most of the prayers in the BCP are prescribed for use in church, although there are biblical precedents for communing with the Almighty at a variety of venues. Peter prayed in Tabitha’s bedroom, Paul in prison, his companions on the sea-shore, Isaac in a field, Moses in a wilderness and Jonah from the belly of a fish. Jonah’s choice of environment is not recommended in the BCP; it is bound to be uncomfortable and a position that is rather easier to get into than out of.

As for Jesus, he advised his audience at the Sermon on the Mount simply to enter

into their closet and shut the door when they wished to pray. The only objection to this would seem to be that one’s closet at the time may be occupied; in which case it must be supposed that the supplicant should either wait until it is vacant or use somebody else’s – provided, of course, that that is unoccupied. Perhaps it should be noted that although St Chrysostom spoke of two or three being gathered together to pray there is no indication that he had a closet in mind for this purpose.

As to when one should pray, the Psalmist states that morning, noon or night are equally propitious for, as he reveals, “The Lord shall neither slumber nor sleep”. The hymnist John Etherington points out “The sun that bids us rest is waking our brethren ‘neath’ the western sky” and that, therefore, “the voice of prayer is never silent.”

And even the atheist must feel some sympathy for the Christian god in these circumstances – that he has permanently to stay awake and, as well as attending to his duties in the many mansions of heaven, listen to a torrent of prayers ascending to him in every known language and, in the case of the charismatics, one or two unknown ones as well. One is reminded of Sir John Squire’s quatrain:

God heard the embattled nations sing and shout

“Gott strafe England!” and “God save the king!”

God this, God that and God the other thing; “Good God,” said God, “I’ve got my work cut out!”

As to the purpose of prayers, they are largely a means of asking God to intervene in matters of interest to supplicants. This is, perhaps, not surprising, for what else can one say to the Almighty? One cannot call him up like Don Camillo to say “I’ve had a very trying day, Lord.” Nor could one converse with him in Wilfred Pickles’ engaging manner with contestants on his *Have a Go* programme of many years ago – “‘ow are you? ‘ave you ever ‘ad an embarrassing moment?” They hardly seem quite the thing and one wonders what such familiarity would lead to. One can visualise the collection plate being passed round in church and a voice crying out: “Give ‘im the money, Barney!”

No. Prayers are a means by which supplicants request aid from God and thank him when they feel their petitions have been dealt with satisfactorily. There is a section in the BCP headed “Thanksgivings” for the latter purpose. But it must be said that the authors of the BCP were remiss in not including a section headed “Complaints” which supplicants could use when they feel that their requests have been ignored or answered in an unacceptable manner.

Most of the prayers in the BCP follow what appears to be a set of general principles.

First, God must be addressed by titles that are commensurate with his status, designed to attract his attention and relevant to the nature of the prayer. Hence “O Most Mighty God and Merciful Father” in the Communion as a prelude to a request for pardon for trespasses committed; and “O Most Powerful and Glorious Lord that rulest and commandest all things” when a request is made by sailors for success in an impending battle. It is most important that supplicants are aware of the difference in consequence between themselves and the Almighty, and they should demonstrate this, if only privately, by recalling various terms of abasement scattered throughout the BCP such as worm, monster, dust, vanity, outcast and vile earth. In the General Confession they will describe themselves as miserable offenders publicly; in the Litany

‘I thought I was an atheist’

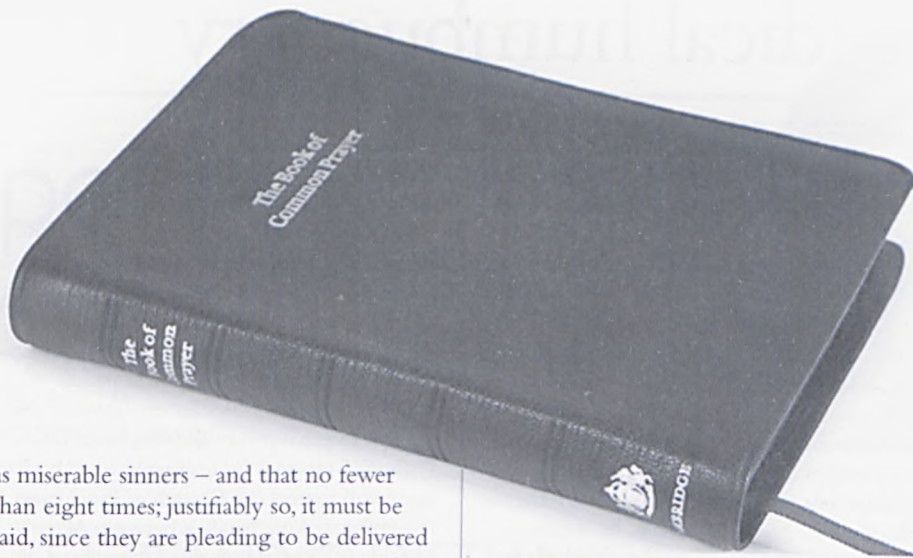
period down to feeling “at some visceral level that being religious was unsexy.” This is ironic, coming from someone with such a foggish image. It also contradicts the statements he made during his time in the spiritual wilderness, as well as the *New Statesman* article, in which it is the writing of his biography of C. S. Lewis that was the watershed.

Madeleine Bunting, in her latest anti-atheist rant in the *Guardian* (April 6), stated that Wilson has “apostated, abandoning his fellow atheists”. But in an online question-and-answer session on the *New Statesman* website, Wilson uses the phrase, “I thought I was an atheist”, which implies that really he was no such thing.

So who is A. N. Wilson? Is he the *New Statesman*’s reluctant skeptic rediscovering a simple, moderate and doubting faith, or the mock-

ing materialist turned aggressive evangelical of the *Daily Mail*? I don’t think either tells the real story. Wilson was, really, too hesitant as an “atheist”, too fond of the Church, and too emotionally wedded to a religious view of the world to be an impressive backslider from atheism, and there is something dishonest and distasteful about the attempt to make his emotional realignment into a more dramatic homily for our times by falsely portraying him as a former acolyte of Richard Dawkinsesque atheistic “materialism” (whatever that is), a typical pro-Enlightenment Church-mocking rationalist who has seen the light and spectacularly recanted.

“Will Dawkins be next?”, wonder the apologists. Well, he might be; but if he is, I bet his reasons would be more interesting than Wilson’s disingenuous self-caricature and irrational yo-yoing.



as miserable sinners – and that no fewer than eight times; justifiably so, it must be said, since they are pleading to be delivered from a multiplicity of situations too awful almost to contemplate including fornication, schism, sedition, sudden death and the assaults of the devil.

Second, one must remind God tactfully of a precedent for his intervention – as in the prayer for use in time of famine: “O God, merciful Father, who in the time of Elisha didst suddenly in Samaria turn great scarcity into plenty, have mercy upon us that we may likewise find seasonable relief.” In the prayer recommended for use in times of drought, God is reminded that he has promised all things necessary for bodily sustenance before the request for relief is made. It is a point of interest in this case that God is asked only for moderate rain – perhaps a diplomatic way of asking him not to overdo his response. But if he does send more than a sufficiency of rain, supplicants will find that a prayer for fine weather has thoughtfully been provided in the BCP. In this, God is reminded that he has the power to submerge the earth as he did in the time of Noah and, although the supplicants may well merit similar treatment, he is nevertheless requested to send fair weather so that the fruits of the earth may be delivered in due season.

The Consoler

One puzzling aspect of divinity
Is what's this third bit of the Trinity?
When should we expect to meet
This thing they call the Paraclete?

In paintings, there it is above
The scene, depicted as a dove.
What sort of daft religion
Stoops to worshipping a pigeon?

This Comforter – I'd like to meet;
I wonder what he likes to eat.
Do you think the Holy Ghost
Eats wafers – and then swigs the Host?
Denys Drower

Third, there is the *quid pro quo*. If God accedes to the requests made, he is informed of exactly how the petitioners will repay him; for example, in the prayer for use in times of war, when supplicants promise “that we may be preserved to glorify thee”; and in a prayer in the marriage service that the couple may be fruitful in procreation of children “that they may live together in godly honesty and see their children Christianly brought up to thy praise and honour.” “What God,” Thomas Cranmer may have mused, “could possibly refuse?”

Fourth, prayer should generally terminate with a reference to Jesus, usually “through Jesus Christ our Lord” but sometimes “for

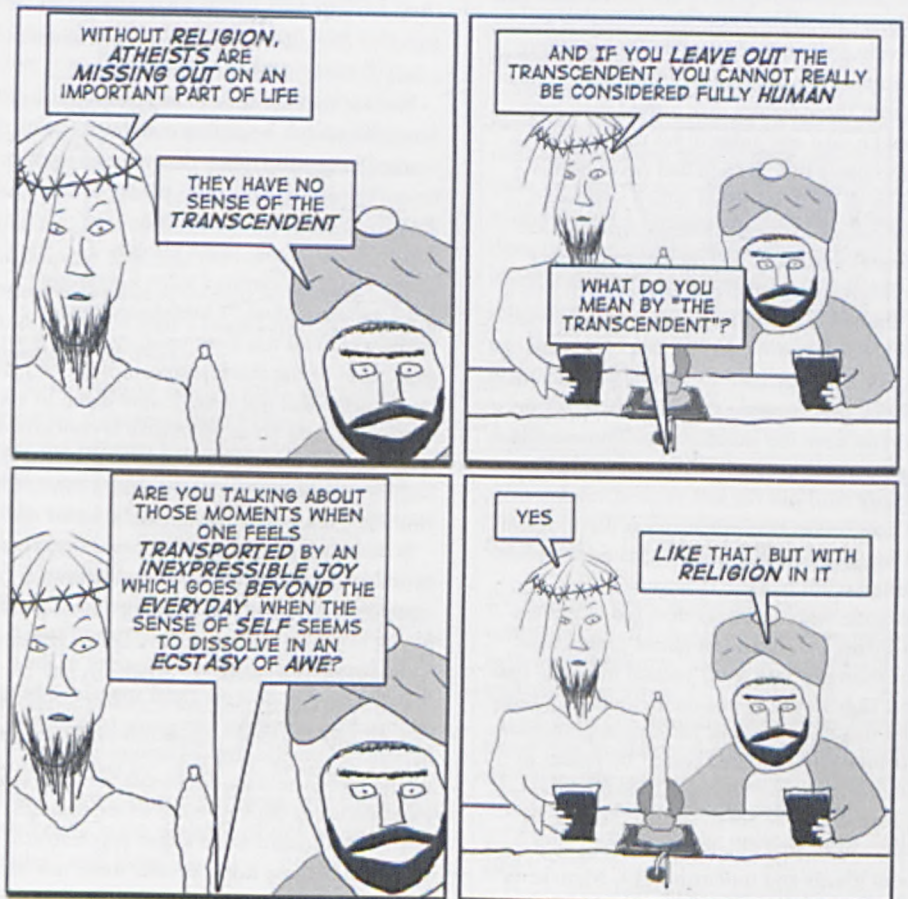
the honour (or merit or love) of Jesus Christ” and, occasionally, “for Christ's sake.” It should be noted that the last of these phrases must be uttered with reverence and not in exasperation.

Last of all, it will be remarked that provision is made both for the answering and the apparent non-answering of prayers. As to the former, it has already been shown that there are thanksgivings prescribed for use when requests have been favourably dealt with by God; and promises to praise, honour, glorify and magnify him.

But if supplicants feel aggrieved that God has not answered their petitions made at Morning or Evening Prayer, they should recollect that the prayer of St Chrysostom, prescribed for us at both of these services, contains the words: “Fulfil now, O Lord, the desires and petitions of thy servants as may be most expedient for them.” A similar provision for disappointment occurs in some other prayers – “... nevertheless not as I will, O Lord, but as thou wilt.” Unfortunately, there is no note in the BCP to draw one's attention to these caveats.

The language of the BCP has been much praised down the centuries even to the point where those without a Christian faith are said to admire it. That may be so but, personally, I prefer Arthur Askey.

Jesus & Mo



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Pseudo-medical humbuggery

WILLIAM HARWOOD reviews *Psychiatry: The Science of Lies* by Thomas Szasz

Imagine George W Bush being tried for murdering the 4,000-plus American servicemen who would be alive today but for his Big Lie that America had a more legitimate reason for invading Iraq than winning him a place in history as a conquering hero comparable with George Washington.

Imagine the Pope being tried for murdering the 40-million humans whose deaths can be attributed to his opposition to condoms for overpopulation control and disease control. Or imagine Charles Manson being tried for ordering the murder of a handful of human beings simply because he damn well felt like it.

Now imagine the defence calling as an expert witness an astrologer who testified that any or all of the foregoing was not guilty by reason of being star-beamed, since on the nights that the atrocities were authorized, the planet Beetlejuice was in superior conjunction with the astrological warlord Ares, and therefore as subjects of Beetlejuice the accused were not responsible for the homicides that their star-beamed condition compelled them to perpetrate. Imagine further that the prosecution then called its own expert astrologer who testified that the accused was not, in fact, star-beamed.

Ignore the absurdity of the claim that an individual was not responsible for his actions because he was afflicted with the ability to commit those actions. Ask instead how long would it take any judge in his right mind to recognize that, if there had never been a case in all legal history in which astrologers were called as expert witnesses, in which the defence's astrologer and the prosecution's astrologer did not flatly contradict each other on absolutely everything, then not only were those specific astrologers incompetent fantasizers, but astrology itself was incompetent fantasy.

Now substitute psychiatrists for astrologers, and you have the situation that Thomas Szasz has been trying to tell the world for half a century. And still the self-evident validity of his conclusion that psychiatry is pseudomedical humbuggery has not penetrated the brain-washed skulls of True Believers. To this day, everyone who watches television is assailed on a daily basis by commercial propaganda that touts the reality of "mental illnesses" that exist only in the eye of the beholder, and implies that such thought patterns as pessimism ("depression") can be "cured" by priests of the religion of psychiatry. As Szasz writes in *Psychiatry: The Science of Lies*, "Being an expert in mental illness is like being an expert about ghosts and unicorns." H L Mencken's description of theology is equally applicable to psychiatry: A blind man in a dark room

searching for a black cat that is not there – and finding it.

Szasz contrasts medical illnesses with alleged mental illnesses: "Today, medical healing is regarded as a form of applied science, the very opposite of faith healing, which is dismissed as hocus pocus. *Mutatis mutandis*, the medical profession defines imaginary illnesses as real illnesses, in effect abolishing the notion of pretended illness. Malingering has become a disease 'just as real' as melanoma." On the role of psychiatry in the courts, he writes: "The legal system recognizes the elementary distinction between innocence and guilt. The psychiatric system does not: it proudly rejects the concept of personal responsibility ... those differences, together with the notion of mental illness, are the two great lies and injustices that undergird the psychiatric enterprise."

Szasz points out that, in "diagnosing" alcoholism and road rage as diseases, "we speak of the medicalization of homelessness and racism but do not speak of the medicalization of malaria or melanoma." He describes an attempt by David Rosenhan to investigate whether psychiatrists could distinguish the sane from the insane, even though "He knew that the terms sane and insane are value judgments, like beautiful and ugly, not biological states, like alive and dead."

Szasz's conclusion is that "mental illness stands in the same relation to bodily illness as a fake Renoir stands to a real Renoir."

Not for the first time (*The Therapeutic State*), Szasz describes a hoax that could not have worked in any discipline that was not itself a hoax. A postal worker who, posing as a psychiatrist, lectured a world congress of psychiatrists in 2007, wrote in his published account of the incident (*Playing Doctor: Confessions of a Confidence Man*), "I introduced disease terms which do not even exist, eg the bipolar depression of the third degree, in front of 120 psychiatrists and not a single one dared to ask a question ... As far as psychiatry is concerned it can be said that if you're able to perform linguistic acrobatics you can make a career for yourself. That is what psychiatry is based on."

Is there any possibility whatsoever that a pretender posing as an oncologist before a seminar of physicians and surgeons could have fooled his entire audience by lecturing that, "The hyper-ionization of cholesterol in the hypothalamic endocrine canal appears to be an endopathic catalyst for iatrogenic transmuted hypodermic melanoma"? Genuine doctors would recognize such doubletalk for what it is. Psychiatrists in contrast failed to see through what they thought was a fellow psychiatrist's gibberish because it was neither more nor less contentless than their own gibberish.

In drawing attention to the parallel between

psychiatry and religion, Szasz quotes Lord Acton's letter to a Catholic bishop after Pius IX pronounced himself infallible: "I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men. ... Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely." He points out that "Most people who quote Lord Acton's 'dictum' are unaware that it refers to papal power and was made by a Catholic." He goes on to suggest that "It takes no ill will toward the Church of Psychiatry to see the striking parallels between Acton's critique of Vatican-sponsored mendacity and my critique of APA-sponsored mendacity."

Perhaps it does not. Nonetheless I do feel the same animosity toward the priests of psychiatry that I feel toward priests of Mother Goose or her male equivalent, God, as well as priests of UFOlogy, astrology, the paranormal, and all other superstitions.

Let me point out, however, that neither I nor Szasz endorse Scientology's rejection of a medical doctor's ability to diagnose a neurological disorder and prescribe appropriate medication, simply because he (also) happens to be a psychiatrist.

Szasz provides far more information about the fantasizers and humbugs, from Mesmer and Freud to the present, who invented and developed the credo that sympathetic listening is not therapeutic when a bartender does it, but is a legitimate branch of medicine when a self-styled psychotherapist does it, than I ever wanted to know. That does not mean that such information is not useful. My book, *Mythology's Last Gods*, contains far more information about the origin and evolution of religion than readers seeking only proof that religion is a product of the human imagination feel a need to know. But to anyone wondering how such an unmitigated fraud as psychiatry could have come into existence, Szasz provides the answer. Indeed, the absence of such details may have contributed to the fact that psychoquackery continues to exist. That inadequacy has now been corrected.

Ever since taking my first psychology course as an education student, I have recognized the truth of Szasz's conclusion that "Psychiatrists are physicians who impersonate physicians: they possess legitimate medical credentials but neither know real medicine nor practice as real medical doctors." (Szasz's emphasis.) I have long recognized that the only good mind-sucking parasite is a dead one. That is true whether the parasite is a lying missionary (tautology), a lying "psychic" (tautology), or a lying psychiatrist (tautology).

• *Psychiatry: The Science of Lies*, Thomas Szasz, 2008, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse NY 13244-5160, ISBN 978-0-8156-0910-0, 164 pp, ppb, \$19.95.

points of view..

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

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SLEAZE AND CHRISTIANITY

TODAY as I write, we have been swamped by a tsunami of details of the plundering of the public purse by government Ministers. These are not the major thieves such as Mugabi, nor the repellent crypto Roman Catholics such as Blair hiding his intentions while funnelling our taxes into faith schools until leaving office.

This bunch are the sad, whining, sanctimonious Ministers sucking up every last penny, including the buying of a bath-plug or claiming maximum costs twice or three times for a small flat near Parliament.

Gordon Brown paid his brother "more than £6,700 for cleaning services" and Jack Straw had to repay money he over-claimed in Council Tax. Alistair Darling changed his "second home" designation four times in four years and Peter (now a Lord) Mandelson, who already had form, claimed thousands of pounds after saying he would quit as an MP.

Harriet Harman, red-faced, sweating and panic stricken, produces the irritating mantra that "We did no wrong; it was all within the rules." These rules were produced by her government, overseen by her government, and every effort was made by her government to thwart the Freedom of Information legislation so that we would not know the moral sewers in which our political leaders now swim.

There is a religious issue in all this sleaze: this readiness to help themselves to whatever they are able to lay their corrupt fingers on; this tawdry attempt to squeeze every last penny from the public purse even down to claiming for a bath-plug or a carrier-bag. This is a government led, and influenced by Christians: Tony Blair is a Roman Catholic; Gordon Brown is a "son of the Manse" and a Christian; and

Jack Straw is a Christian. These are the people who set the moral standards; who support faith schools and who turn away from any attempt to open sceptical debate on the BBC, including its banal and often bigoted *Thought for the Day*. These are the people happy to support the continuation of bishops in the House of Lords. And it is these people who have so far stymied any attempt to bring Blair and his co-liars before a Court of Inquiry to explain his fantasy Weapons of Mass Destruction.

Hazel Blears, ambushed by reporters, her face pasty with terror and twisted in a rictus of panic, decided to cut and run and dive into her ministerial limousine like a rat up a drainpipe. And perhaps the most painful or satisfying sight – depending on your point of view – the Immigration Minister, Phil Woolas, being hunted by Joanna Lumley from studio to studio as he attempted to shake off his pursuer. In the end Mr Woolas appeared so witless, hapless and confused that I began to feel a trace of sympathy for him.

Now, Gordon Brown says, the rules must be tightened, and Harriet Harman says the process has started and the changes will soon be enforced. None of this will help very much. What we need is a system that produces politicians who are able to distinguish between keeping to rules created and supervised by themselves and what is morally acceptable.

At the moment we seem to have attracted a political and religious detritus, endlessly on the make, and led and heavily infiltrated by "good" Christians. That is at the core of the problem, and until we overcome it no amount of tinkering with "rules" will help.

Denis Watkins
Pembrokeshire

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

I'D like to thank Graham Newbery and Douglas Harding for their kind remarks about my piece in the April *Freethinker*. Graham's letter reminds me that in writing of the "cause" of religious experiences, I was mixing up two different things.

First, the origins of such experiences, in the species and in the individual. It is the former on which he gives a very interesting perspective. I think linguists would query the idea that any extant language can be called "primitive", but such must have existed at some stage. Steven Mithen (*The Singing Neanderthals*, 2005) speculates as to what a proto-language may have been like, and briefly how it could relate to religion. It is relevant to note that mystical experiences are often said to be inexpressible in language. How the present-day individual comes to have religious experiences is a further question.

Second, what I was really referring to, however, was the question of the nature of the experience itself. Those who have such an experience often say they know it is of God, or Ultimate Reality, etc. If one does not accept this, then what is it of? Is it some form of hallucination, or a deep emotion which is interpreted as awareness of God, etc? I have not so far found much light shed on this.

I agree with Douglas's letter, especially the last two paragraphs.

John Radford
London

KISSING IT BETTER

IN *Analysis*, April, William Harwood compares belief in homeopathy to an infant's belief that Mummy "kissing it better" will make pain go away.

This is an unfortunate comparison. Dentists know that trouble in the mouth heals quickly with the patient's saliva, and animals lick their wounds and the wounds of their young.

"Kissing it better" may indeed have a similar effect.

Mary Rogers
Leicester

points of view...

PICKING FIGHTS THAT WE HAVE A CHANCE OF WINNING

CONGRATULATIONS, once again, on another fine edition of the new-look *Freethinker*. However, it struck me that two of the May contributions highlight the pressing need for secularists to start combining reason with a sense of strategy.

Editor Barry Duke's timely piece (when wouldn't it be timely?) on assisted dying hit several nails squarely on the head, not least the need to shunt aside religious interests in order to achieve a rational and humane law, here in the UK, one that incorporates all the obvious safeguards. With 80 percent or more of the general population broadly in favour, this is a winning ticket for secularists. In fact, I don't think I know a single person in my varied social sphere who doesn't support some degree of personal choice in determining the time and manner of one's own demise.

Jim Hawkin's letter, asking whether or not it is time to review the law prohibiting incest, is quite another matter. Most people's reaction to such a suggestion, mine included, would be "Yeeeeuch!" But once we get over the involuntary retching, Jim does advance some reasoned arguments in favour of the proposition. No topic is beyond the remit of sophisticated secularists to debate, but some topics need not – and should not – be worked up into campaigns that could only damage our cause (to be fair, I'm not sure if Jim was actually suggesting we should do this). Unlike the right to die with dignity, without distress or pain, incest is a somewhat specialist concern and prosecutions for consensual incest are rare. By all means, let's use the *Freethinker* as a Petri dish for new and controversial ideas, but there is nothing to be gained by addressing this unpalatable topic more widely.

To draw a parallel, it was common, in the 1970s, for radical gay rights activists to invite advocates for paedophilia into their broad alliance of oppressed sexual minorities. This was done more out of a naïve conviction that universal sexual liberation would make people happy, kind and compassionate, rather than any sinister predatory agenda. Incredible as it may seem now, even 20 years ago, many mainstream gay activists still regarded consent laws as an arbitrary tool of oppression, thwarting the nascent sexual expression of pubescents and an imposition on the

adults who wanted sex with them. The idea that these adults' sexual motivations might be exploitative, harmful, or just plain wrong, was brushed aside – lest it cast an unwelcome shadow of censure on the big gay party. Consent laws and child sexuality remain legitimate topics of debate, but no savvy gay activist or secularist would touch this topic with a bargepole in the public arena today.

You may also remember, how, almost eighteen months ago, the NSS blundered into a row about nativity plays in schools. In spite of taking a liberal line, saying that those schools wishing to stage traditional nativity plays should be free to do so, by lending its support to those who wanted to stage some kind of multicultural mish-mash instead, on radio and TV, the NSS came across as hostile to one of those cherished rites of passage that mark the lives of most British parents and their young children, regardless of race, ethnicity, or belief. With the NSS president, Terry Sanderson, looking like a rabbit caught in the headlights on the GMTV sofa, even the twittering Fiona Phillips was able to run rings around him, articulating the fury of an outraged and baffled Middle England. The result? Over 90% of the programme's respondents in a 'phone poll told "that secular bloke" where to stick his

multicultural alternative, leaving secularism looking shabby and aligned with out-of-touch leftist cranks.

My point is, we should only pick fights that matter and fights we can win. There is much that is blowing in the wind that we can harness in favour of secular humanism. With assisted dying, the abolition of the blasphemy law, hostility to faith school expansion, defending freedom of expression, demands for stricter immigration controls and our resistance to belligerent Catholicism and creepy Islam, we are pushing at an open door with most of the general population. Yet on many of these subjects, the NSS leadership is surprisingly demure, if not altogether mute. It often seems it would rather nit-pick over cultural ephemera like Radio 4's platitudinous *Thought for the Day* than sally forth with the bold campaign initiatives we need for a sane, humane and secular 21st-century Britain. Reason is hobbled without the strategies to implement it. It's time to ditch the dead-end baggage of counter-cultural contrariness and other "revolutionary" twaddle, be it sexual, or socialist. Let's focus on the big public policy reforms that we can win – and need to win.

Diesel Balaam
London

MORE THOUGHTS ON INCEST ...

My current book, *God, Jesus and the Bible*, devotes a whole chapter to incest. Basically, the concept was invented at a time when nobody was marrying anyone but a sibling, circa 2500 BCE. Fathers whose children were all of the same sex were keeping them unmarried in order to marry them to opposite-sex siblings who either were never born or failed to live to mating age. As a consequence, whole families were dying out. Since merely permitting marriage outside of the family would not have rectified the situation, it was necessary to make it compulsory by prohibiting the alternative. Sibling marriage was declared a sacred taboo (tautology). Marrying a sibling was more than hubris. It was a declaration of equality with the gods that would bring down the thunderbolts of Zeus on the offenders. The taboo universalized, and today

religions justify a purely religious teaching by citing consequences of intensive inbreeding that were totally unknown to the generation that invented the taboo.

William Harwood
Canada

AS a fairly outgoing atheist I have entered into numerous debates with religious folk, resulting with me usually being told that my life has no purpose and that I am immoral. If I felt my protestations would fall on anything other than deaf ears, I would point out that morality is not dependent on religion. So it is because of this morality – that surprisingly as an atheist, I do possess! – that I feel compelled to write in regarding Mr S J Hawkins letter supporting incest.

From the off, I am surprised and slightly disturbed that Mr Hawkins compares the



rightly recognised “monumental parliamentary success of abolishing the nonsense of blasphemy” to the laws ruling against incestuous affairs. Surely no stranger bedfellows can exist (the laws rather than the relatives!), with one rightly set out to protect man’s freedom of speech and the other to protect against – amongst other things – genetic abnormalities in relationships that are morally ambiguous at best! Speaking of ambiguity, Mr Hawkins refers to “more or less closely related persons” in his letter. Whilst his argument may have a point if discussing a relationship between third cousins twice removed, the implication that blood relatives fall into the same category is worrying.

Mr Hawkins’ letter almost dismisses “the unfortunate consequences of inbreeding” and implies that “supporters of the legal prohibition” continue to emphasise this as if they have just the singular objection to this “absurd and archaic law”! Even if this was

true, what an objection! Leaving the moral argument alone for a second, in a world where genetic diseases and abnormalities do unfortunately exist, it would be unparalleled irresponsible parenting to conceive a child that has a very high probability of either.

Mr Hawkins has already, of course, addressed this concern stating “With contraception widespread, incest is almost never committed with the intention of achieving procreation”. My only concerns are: Where does he get his data? Which carefully conducted study supports that most incest committed is “casual incest”?! Also does Mr Hawkins expect us to believe that in the world of incestuous loving relationships, the majority of couples automatically dismiss the notion of starting a family?

Mr Hawkins goes on to pre-empt any rebuttal using Herr Fritz as an example, and though I agree with him that this is an extreme case, I do not agree that the incest involved should not be acknowledged and

punished additionally to the other offences. Would Mr Hawkins argue that paedophilia should incur no more taboo or punishment than an adult sexual molestation case?

I am the first to admit that the Bible and other religious texts have many antiquated views across many subjects including homosexuality, sexual equality, slavery etc, but I will not concede that incest falls into that category. In fact, I would go as far as to state that religion has no relevance to the average person’s objection to incest, at all! So I again put forward Mr Hawkins question “What do others think?” in the hope that I am not in the minority here, and to Mr Hawkins I ask that as the book of Exodus in the Bible is clearly anti-bestiality and nothing seems too taboo here, is sex with animals alright?

Greg Marshall
Brighton

... AND ON ASSISTED SUICIDE

RESPONDING to Barry Duke’s article on attempts to reform the English law on assisted suicide (May FT), I maintain that the proposals put forward fall far short of what is realistically needed.

Lord Joffe’s Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill was well-meaning and would certainly have been a step in the right direction – but very often a partial reform of the law only holds up more radical legislation.

Firstly, many patients are incapable of assisted suicide: it may be physically impossible for them to take hold of barbiturates or to swallow them. In that case, it should be legal for a doctor to administer the drug by injection.

Secondly, why restrict such help to the terminally ill? People suffering from an intolerable illness or disability that is incurable but not terminal are more in need of release than the terminally ill, whose days of suffering are at least numbered by nature. The only rational requirements for euthanasia are that it should be genuinely voluntary and that the patient’s condition is serious, physical, and currently incurable.

As for attempts to make it legal for a friend or close relative to accompany a euthanasia candidate to another country where euthanasia, or at least assisted suicide, is available, it is utterly monstrous that patients should be deported for this purpose – apart from the iniquitous financial cost involved. Any reform of the law of this country should apply in this country itself, not hide behind the more enlightened laws of other countries.

Barbara Smoker
Bromley

INCENSED BY ROMAN CATHOLIC INSENSITIVITY

IN the very same week that the Irish Child Abuse Commission exposed systematic abuse of youngsters at the hands of cruel Catholic institutions over many decades in Ireland, we were treated to the sickening sight of fanfares and celebrations as the new Archbishop of Westminster was anointed.

I for one was incensed. Instead of celebrating, these self-serving maggots should have been on their knees, begging to their victims for forgiveness.

I was outraged even further by the fact that both the outgoing Archbishop, Connor Murphy O’Connor and his successor, Vincent Nichols, used the occasion to demonise atheists. O’Connor’s views were the most

obnoxious. Not content with having recently described atheists as “not fully human”, he had the temerity to describe “lack of faith” as “the greatest of all evils.”

And just before being “crowned” new Archbishop of Westminster, Nichols said that the Commission report “should not overshadow all of the good work that institutions such as the Christian Brothers and the Sisters of Mercy had done”.

The ultimate insult will come if the O’Connor creature is elevated to the House of Lords. We must do everything in our power to prevent this from happening.

Peter Wickford
Kent

‘DIVINE’ SWINE

THE news that because of swine-flu the Egyptian authorities, no doubt under pressure from Islam, are to destroy their entire population of pigs, speaks of something more than the irrational, more than horror of the “unclean”.

In *The Golden Bough*, page 472, Sir James Frazer says of the Jews “we must conclude that, originally, at least, the pig was revered rather than abhorred by the Israelites ... down to the time of Isaiah some of the Jews used ... to eat the flesh of swine and mice as a religious rite ... the reason for them not eating them [otherwise] was because they were divine”.

W K Harper
Stone on Trent

OVER-POPULATION MYTH

BOB Shayler continues the myth that the world is overpopulated. Third world countries fail to feed themselves due to war, corruption and poor management.

Africa, for example, is a sparsely populated continent needing more people and technological advancement, allowing more land to be brought into efficient agricultural use. It has the potential to feed itself many times over, thereby raising living standards, driving social change and taking millions out of poverty.

If we need more energy I suggest we generate it and stop the cosmetic and useless (feel good) exercises of banning 100w light bulbs and switching off the telly.

Graham Vaughan
Dumfries

the freethinker

EVENTS & CONTACTS

i information w website e email

Birmingham Humanists: i Tova Jones 021454 4692 w www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk.

Brighton & Hove Humanist Society: i 01273

227549/461404 w http://homepage.ntlworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Wed, June 3, 8pm. David Powell: *Thomas Paine. The Greatest Exile*. Wed, July 1, 8pm. AGM.

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 Chair: Alan Palmer. Sec: Josh Kutchinsky. e info@centrallondonhumanists.org. w www.meetup.com/central-london-humanists

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 i 01268 785295.

Farnham Humanists: 10 New House, Farm Lane, Wood-street Village, Guildford GU3 3DD. w www.farnhamhumanists.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 Coss: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. June 10, 7.30pm. Jonathan Redfern: *Peak Oil*. July 8, 7.30pm. Annette Pinner: *Vegetarianism, Ethical and Environmental Perspectives*.

Hampstead Humanist Society: i N I Barnes, 10 Stevenson House, Boundary Road, London NW8 0HP. Tel: 0207 328 4431.

w www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk

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. i Secretary on 0208 907-6124

w www.harrow.humanist.org.uk

e Mike Savage at mfsavagamba@hotmail.com

Humanists of Havering: i Jean Condon 01708 473597. Friends Meeting House, 7 Balgores Cres, Gidea Park. Meetings on first Thursday of the month, 8pm. June 4, Bernard Halter: *Christian Origins, the Unauthorised Version*.

Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland: i Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 e brianmcclinton@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.

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

Humanists4Science: A group of humanists interested in science who discuss, and promote, both.

w http://humanists4science.blogspot.com/

Discussion group: http://groups.yahoo.com/group/humanists4science/

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-Fylde, Lancashire FY6 0AZ 01253 812308 e ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk

Leicester Secular Society: Secular Hall, 75 Humberstone Gate, Leicester LE1 1WB. Tel. 07598 971420.

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. June 18, David Porter, *Physics and Mystification*.

Liverpool Humanist Group: i 07814 910 286

w www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/

e lghhumanist@googlemail.com. Meetings on the second Wednesday of each month.

Lynn Humanists, W Norfolk & Fens: i Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Marches Secularists: w www.MarchesSecularists.org e Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org

Mid-Wales Humanists: i Maureen Lolmark, 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.

Peterborough Humanists: i Edwin Salter Tel: 07818870215.

Sheffield Humanist Society: i 0114 2309754. The SADACCA Building, Wicker, S2. Public Meeting first Wednesday of the month, 7.30pm. June 3. Michael Granville: *Finances of the Catholic Church*.

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 Gwinnett on 01935 473263 or

e edward.gwinnett@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 Alan Grandy: 0208 337 9214 w www.suttonhumanists.co.uk

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

Watford Area Humanists: Meet on the third Tuesday of each month (except August and December) at 7.30 pm at Watford Town and Country Club, Watford. i 01923-252013 e john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk w www.watford.humanists.org.uk

Welsh Marches Humanist Group: i 01568 770282

w www.wmhumanists.co.uk e rocheforts@iscali.co.uk. Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October to June.

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

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

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