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# the freethinker

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## 'Pro-life' rhetoric leads to terrorism and murder

A fanatical 51-year-old anti-abortionist was charged last month with the first-degree murder of American abortion provider Dr George Tiller, who was gunned down on June 2 at the Reformation Lutheran Church, in Wichita, Kansas, where he was serving as an usher.

After the shooting, killer Scott Roeder – speaking from a prison cell to Associated Press – warned that more violence was imminent.

"I know there are many other similar events planned around the country as long as abortion remains legal," he said. He also complained about the "deplorable conditions in solitary," and was worried about catching pneumonia because his cell was cold.

Tiller, 67, one of only three American doctors who performed late abortions on women with deformed fetuses, was gunned down inside his Wichita church as he chatted with a fellow usher about taking his grandkids to Disney World.

He had been targeted for years by anti-abortion protesters and demonised as "Tiller the baby killer" by conservative commentators. He often wore body armour – but not to church.

After Roeder's arrest, the Justice Department opened an investigation into whether Roeder, who had enough money to stalk Tiller for years despite having little or no income, had help from accomplices.

Anyone who played a role in the killing will be prosecuted "to the full extent of federal law," said Loretta King, head of the Justice Department's civil rights division.

Tiller's funeral on June 7 drew large crowds and some protesters but was a mainly peaceful event, despite the presence of some abortion opponents. More than a dozen members of Topeka's Westboro Baptist Church, which have picketed burials around the country, held signs and sang songs a block and a half from the church where the funeral was conducted.

Shirley Phelps-Roper, the demented daughter of pastor Fred Phelps, founder of Westboro Baptist Church, led her supporters in singing "Killing children makes God angry," to the tune of John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads."



Scott Roeder, left, and his victim Dr George Tiller

Across the street, counter-protester Kelly McCormick of Derby yelled, "Blah, blah, blah," back at the Westboro protesters.

At one point, the Rev. John Martin, pastor of College Hill United Methodist Church, approached the Westboro protesters and offered them a white carnation. His church members were distributing the flowers to funeral guests as "a sign of hope and love," Martin said.

Members of the church shouted in Martin's face as he approached, and a police officer warned him to back away from the group. He left.

During the service, each of Tiller's four children shared reflections of their father.

Tiller's eldest child, Jennifer, said her father loved to relay axioms, "pearls of wisdom for how life should be lived."

Baskets in the church lobby held copies of a page marked "Dr Tillerisms" for guests to read and take home.

Commenting on Tiller's murder, Cristina Page – author of *How the Pro-Choice Movement Saved America: Freedom, Politics and the War on Sex*, and spokesperson for **birthcontrolwatch.org**, wrote: "For those who would like to think the murder of Dr George Tiller is an isolated incident, here's the horrifying news:

*Continued on page 4*



# Nuttiness – Jewish-style

## BARRY DUKE ON SABBATH LIGHTING AND OVER-DUE CIRCUMCISIONS

There are days when I really don't know whether to laugh or cry over the sheer idiocy of people bound so tightly to primitive beliefs that they are rendered utterly incapable of interacting with the real world in anything approaching a sane manner.

Take, for example, Dr Dena Coleman, head teacher at an Orthodox Jewish school, and her hubbie Gordon, who hit the headlines last month over a perceived "human rights" violation involving a lighting system in a block of flats in Bournemouth.

When the Orthodox Jewish couple step out of their holiday flat – they actually live in Borehamwood in Hertfordshire where Dr Coleman teaches – they activate a motion sensor which turns on lights in the communal areas. It was installed about seven months ago by the building's management company to save energy and reduce electricity costs.

A small step towards saving the planet, granted, but certainly a move in the right direction. But this cut no ice with the Colemans,

who are whingeing that the system holds them captive in their flat from Friday evening to Saturday night.

How so? Well, Orthodox Judaic law says that no Jew should turn on a light on the Sabbath – and they want a manual override switch installed to enable them to disable the motion sensors.

They offered to pay for the technology, but the management group would have none of it, saying it would set an "unacceptable precedent".

In a letter to the owners of the other flats, the Colemans wrote: "Faced with a situation where we could never again have full use of our flat, we were left with no alternative but to seek legal advice. We consulted solicitors and a caseworker at the Equality and Human Rights Commission and were advised that we had a strong claim."

One resident, who did not want to be named, said that the couple's action has caused "quite a stir", adding: "There has been a meeting about it and many of the residents aren't happy. There's a feeling that things shouldn't be changed just to suit people in one flat when everyone else is happy."

The county court writ against the three directors of Embassy Court Management Company, who all live in the building, accuses them of breaching the couple's rights under the Equality Act 2006 and Human Rights Act 1998.

The company responded by saying: "The directors believe that almost all lessees at Embassy Court support the actions taken by the management company to reduce communal lighting costs. Although other lessees are innocent parties in this legal dispute, in accordance with the lease, expenses reasonably incurred in these legal proceedings will be recoverable from all lessees in the service charge."

The case is due to be heard at Bournemouth County Court later this year.

Leslie Bunder, the editor of the Jewish community website **Somethingjewish.com**, claimed that the Colemans were over-reacting. He said: "As long as they are not physically doing the act of turning the light on, it's actually not against the rules. They should not be putting the onus on their neighbours to change. It's a bit arrogant really. It's an embarrassment, it's giving reasonable Jews a bad name."

But Chanie Alperowitz, the director of Bournemouth Chabad, an Orthodox Jewish group, disagreed: "On the sabbath there are 39 forms of creative activity which are forbidden. Among them is the prohibition

of lighting a fire. When using electricity, one causes a fire as there are sparks created by the electricity. If the light is switched on by someone stepping outside their door, their actions have caused it to happen."

I was tickled to learn that one of the 39 prohibitions was EXTINGUISHING a fire on the sabbath – unless it was life-threatening!

Another example of Orthodox Jewish insanity comes from Israel, where a tense stand-off developed a few weeks back between a devout 87-year-old Iranian-born Jew, replete with black kippa and sporting a long white beard and sidelocks, and his son.

The father, identified only as "Mr S" by the *Jerusalem Post*, was found by his son to have a fully-intact penis. Horrified by the fact that his dad, a stroke victim, had not been circumcised, the son, who made the discovery when he was undressing Mr S, sent for Rabbi Shlomo Mahpoud, "a renowned circumcision expert", who took a peek at the suspect member, and declared: *not kosher!*

The son then enlisted the help of a non-profit organisation called Brit Yosef-Yitzhak, which has provided more than 35,000 *pro-bono* circumcisions since it was founded 20 years ago.

It agreed to foot the bill for Mr S's long-overdue snip, and he was bundled off to hospital. But the last I heard was that the old boy was resisting all attempts to separate him from his foreskin, much to his son's exasperation.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, Matthew Wagner points out "a *brit* (circumcision) is not something that should be delayed. Each day that goes by without cutting the foreskin is a transgression, a rebellion against God's will".

He adds: "How does a God-fearing Jew like S come to terms with the realisation that throughout his entire life he remained uncircumcised, like some primitive pagan? (Or like some civilised Scandinavian, European, South or Central American, Japanese...?) An uncircumcised Jew is fundamentally flawed."

It's hard to tell whether or not there is heavy irony in Wagner's report – but I sure hope there is.

So just how the heck did Mr S avoid being ritually mutilated in the first place? Apparently, when he was born in Isfahan, Iran, the local *mohel* (circumciser) whom, I assume, possessed pretty poor eyesight, decided that baby S had been *born* without a foreskin, and only a token drop of blood was required to be drawn.



**BARRY DUKE**  
FREETHINKER  
EDITOR

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“ We are here to civilise people, to get them to come out of darkness into the beauty of Islam ”

# Relaunch of fanatical Islamic group ends in chaos at Conway Hall

An attempt to relaunch the controversial Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun ended in chaotic scenes last month when the management of Conway Hall cancelled the event because “fundamentalist thugs” had tried to enforce the segregation of men and women at the London venue.

Supporters of the group, which wants sharia law in Britain and has praised the 9/11 terrorists as the “Magnificent 19”, were ordered to leave Conway Hall in Holborn on June 17 when it emerged that Al-Muhajiroun had placed bouncers on the doors and were not letting women onto the main hall.

Speakers who had been invited to share a platform with Anjem Choudary, the group’s leader, accused Al-Muhajiroun of inviting them under false pretences.

Douglas Murray, director of the Centre for Social Cohesion, said the platform of the planned debate was “completely unacceptable”. “I’m perfectly willing to debate Anjem Choudary and Al-Muhajiroun’s ideas,” he said. “His ideas are not difficult. They do not stand up. But it’s very clear that this debate is not neutral. This was a segregated event, policed by

Al-Muhajiroun’s guards.”

He said he had been invited to the event by a student society, Global Issues Society, but the Islamist group had hijacked proceedings.



**Muslim fundamentalist Choudary and some of his cohorts at Conway Hall.**

Photograph: Wesley Johnson/PA

Giles Enders, chairman of the South Place Ethical Society which owns the hall, took to the stage and explained that the terms and conditions of Conway Hall do not permit segregation. He then declared the meeting cancelled.

He was cheered by a small group of women sitting in the balcony, but was heckled by many

of the 100 or so men in the main hall. Loud chanting and scuffles broke out before police arrived.

Choudary, who remained on stage during the scuffles and Enders’ announcement, then grabbed the microphone. He led chants and said in reference to the row over segregation: “Jews and Christians will never make peace with you until you either become like them or adopt their ways.”

As the chanting continued, including loud calls of “sharia for UK”, Enders wrested the microphone away from Choudary and ordered everyone to leave.

Outside, Choudary criticised British society as “dirty” and predicted that, within one or two decades, Muslims would make up the majority. Asked why, if society was so bad, he was living here, he said: “We come here to civilise people, to get them to come out of the darkness and injustice into the beauty of Islam.”

Al-Muhajiroun disbanded in 2004 but was succeeded by the Saviour Sect and Al-Ghura-baa, both of which were banned under the Terrorism Act 2006 for “the glorification” of terrorism. After the meeting there were calls for the government to ban Al-Muhajiroun.

# Gay priest vote leaves Scottish bigots fuming

A DESPICABLE little alliance of Christian bigots called Forward Together is licking its wounds after its spectacular failure to prevent the Church of Scotland voting for a gay priest.

The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland recently voted in support of the Reverend Scott Rennie whose appointment earlier this year to a congregation in Aberdeen sent a tremor of horror through the ranks of Forward Together, which opposes the recognition of gay people in the life, work and ministry of the church.

But the Rev Ian Watson, who heads Forward Together, did his cause no favour when he attempted to equate the Church’s push for inclusiveness with Nazism.

In a sermon which religious leaders and politicians have condemned as “deeply disturbing”, Watson invoked the failure to stand up to the Nazi annexation of the Rhineland in 1938 as a parallel for the refusal of many in the Church of Scotland to join his anti-gay crusade.

The sermon was delivered in May at Kirkmuirhill Church in Lanark and then posted on Watson’s blog.

Forward Together has had to apologise to Rennie after it wrongly claimed that he had left his wife to set up home with his partner.

A range of Church of Scotland ministers had signed a petition calling for a ban on the appointment of gay clergy, and a motion had been put forward saying that the Church should not “train, ordain, admit, readmit, induct or introduce to any ministry of the church anyone involved in a sexual relationship outside of marriage between a man and woman.”

Rennie spent nine years as minister at Brechin Cathedral, before applying for the post at Queen’s Cross parish, where he now serves.

He was elected by 86 per cent of the church’s congregation, a vote ratified by the Presbytery of Aberdeen in January 2009.

After the vote one of Mr Rennie’s sup-



**Rev Scott Rennie**

porters, Brian Kerr, read a statement on the priest’s behalf: “The Church of Scotland is a community of faith gathered around God’s living word, and God calls people of many different hues and colours in to his service. In a broad and national church there is more than enough room for

us all.” And Reverend Sharon Ferguson of the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement, said she was delighted by the news.

“At last there has been some sense that’s been shown here. What we actually have is an upholding of the decision by the Church to appoint somebody because they are the right person for the post, because they are the person that they feel has been called by God.”





# Anti-abortionist violence on the increase

“You are wrong. The pattern is clear and frightening.

“In March 1993, three months into the administration of our first pro-choice President, Bill Clinton, abortion provider Dr David Gunn was murdered in Pensacola, Florida. That was the beginning of what would become a five-fold increase in violence against abortion providers throughout the Clinton years.

“The assassination of Dr Tiller comes five months into the term of our second pro-choice president. For anyone who would like to believe that this is a statistical anomaly, a coincidence that doesn't portend anything, again, you are wrong.

“During the entire Bush administration, from 2000-2008 there were no murders.

“During the Clinton era, between 1994-2000 there were six abortion providers and clinic staff murdered, and 17 attempted murders of abortion providers. There were 12 bombings or arsons during the Clinton years.

“During the Bush administration, not only were there no murders, there were no attempted murders. There was one clinic bombing during the Bush years.

“One can only conclude that, like terrorist sleeper cells, these extremists have now been set in motion. Indeed the evidence is already there. The chatter, the threats, the hate-filled rhetoric are abundant.

“In the last year of the Bush administration there were 396 harassing calls to abortion clinics. In just the first four months of the Obama administration that number has jumped to 1,401.

“And so the execution of Tiller, 67, is not only tragic but ominous. He was born into an era when being an abortion provider meant saving women's lives. And the cold-blooded murder in church and in front of his wife of this stalwart defender of women's rights and beloved physician, comes as a message for others, as well as a tragic *deja vu*.

“Battered women are at greatest danger of being killed by their abusers when they are most strong – that is, when they muster the courage to leave. The same phenomenon may be true in the abusive political abortion debate. The pro-choice movement, specifically our abortion providers, are in the greatest danger of violence when we take power ...

“History has another disturbing lesson for us. The escalation of anti-abortion rhetoric plays a direct role in instigating violence.

When anti-abortion groups ratchet up the rhetoric, they know exactly what they're doing and the results it will have. Even if they maintain deniability, as Operation Rescue recently did – saying, in effect, we wanted Tiller gone, but didn't want him murdered – they have inflamed the rhetoric. And suddenly people like Dr Tiller's murderer become inspired.”

Eleanor Bader, co-author of *Targets of Hatred: Anti-Abortion Terrorism*, warned of an escalation in violence by religious fanatics.



“Immediately after Obama's election, Douglas Johnson, Legislative Director of the National Right to Life Committee, called him a 'hardcore pro-abortion president'. The American Life League dubbed him 'one of the most radical pro-abortion politicians ever', and Father Frank Pavone of Priests for Life warned that Obama will 'force Americans to pay for the killing of innocents'. Americans United for Life, the Family Research Council and Operation Save America

## Slain for drinking 'Muslim' tea

A YOUNG Christian in Pakistan who made the mistake of ordering a cup of tea from a "Muslims only" roadside stall was beaten and stabbed to death by a mob of 15, led by the stall owner. Ishtiaq Masih failed to see a sign warning non-Muslims to declare their religion before being served at the stall, located in Machharkay village, Punjab. The owner and his employees beat Ishtiaq with stones, iron rods and clubs, and stabbed him multiple times with kitchen knives.

quickly joined the chorus.”

Bader interviewed clinic staff – many seeing a direct relationship between the pro-choice victory last November and increased aggression against them and their patients.

Claire Keyes, of Allegheny Reproductive Health in Pittsburgh, explained:

“Right after the election we saw a small upsurge in anti-abortion activity. But since the inauguration, things have gotten measurably worse.”

Page also wrote:

“Many in the pro-choice movement believed that the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances (FACE) law, passed in 1994 in response to Gunn's murder, was responsible for reining in violence against abortion providers. Clearly that is not the case. Based on statistics on violence against abortion providers compiled by the National Abortion Federation, even after the passage of FACE in 1994, there was still considerable violence and threats against clinic personnel, including six murders. As appears clear, the pro-choice movement has looked through rose-coloured glasses, assuming or hoping that legalities can restrain terrorists.

“In fact, it didn't abate after FACE, as we've seen. Only with a comforting anti-abortion president did they calm down and stop the murder, bombing and harassment spree.

“As a result of Bush's policies, recent reportings from clinics suggest that we may be seeing a surge in abortions. That has failed to inspire introspection from anti-abortion groups. That Clinton presided over the most dramatic decline in abortion rates in the recorded history of our country left them unmoved. That Obama has assigned his senior-most staff to the task of finding ways to reduce the need for abortion has not protected clinics nor providers nor Obama. ... The hate-filled rhetoric against Obama from the anti-abortion movement is at unprecedented levels, even for this reflexively inflammatory group. They refer to him as the “Most Pro-Abortion President Ever” ignoring the fact that he is the first to extend an olive branch in hopes that together we can make abortion more rare.

“Anti-abortion groups will put out carefully worded press statements condemning the murder of Dr Tiller, as became routine for them during the Clinton years. But unless the rhetoric they choose from now on becomes careful too, they may be the enablers of murder and terror.”



# Faith schools undermine community cohesion

A new poll, published last month to coincide with the committee stage of the Equality Bill, has revealed the depth of public concern about current faith school practices and policies.

The survey, carried out by YouGov and commissioned by the community schooling coalition Accord, found that 57 percent of respondents "agreed or strongly agreed" that "state funded schools that select students by their religion undermine community cohesion", while only 19 percent "disagreed or strongly disagreed".

The poll also confirmed that 72 percent "agreed or strongly agreed" that "all state funded schools should operate recruitment and employment policies that do not discriminate on grounds of religion or belief", with only 9 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

A further 75 percent "agreed or strongly agreed" that "all state funded schools should teach an objective and balanced syllabus for education about a wide range of religious and non-religious beliefs", with 8 percent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

The poll came just one day before members of the Equality Bill Committee met to hear evidence from "religion and belief" organisations such as the General Synod, the Catholic Bishops' Conference, and the British Humanist Association, which is an Accord Coalition member alongside religious organisations and individuals.

The Accord Coalition and its supporters argue that to live up to its aims, the Bill should examine the loopholes which currently allow faith schools to discriminate in their admissions and employment rules.

Dr Mary Bousted, General Secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: "ATL is pleased with the results of the Accord Coalition survey, which show that 72 percent of individuals polled agreed that state-funded schools should not discriminate in their recruitment and employment on the grounds of religion and belief."

She continued: "As the education union, ATL campaigns for equality of employment opportunities across all state-funded schools, including faith schools. We have strongly opposed recent legislation that extends religious discrimination to support staff in voluntary-aided faith schools and to headship applicants in local authority-funded voluntary-controlled faith schools.

"We now call on those considering the Equality Bill to take note of public opinion and reform the law."

Dr Bousted added: "We know that it is not only our members and teacher colleagues who lose out as a result of these selection practices but also schools and pupils. Research has shown that there is a recruitment problem in faith schools, particularly in relation to headship positions, and this problem will only worsen as the faith school sector expands and increasingly schools, staff, pupils and their parents will lose out."

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain MBE, Chair of the Accord Coalition, said that the poll results are a "stunning indictment" of policies and practices which maintain insularity and exclusivity in some faith schools.

He declared: "It is time for faith schools to open their doors to the fresh air of inter-communal understanding. They must not only serve themselves but be part of the wider community too."

Simon Barrow, co-director of the religion and society think-tank Ekklesia, added: "Together with recent independent research, these poll results make a decisive case for moving away from discrimination and segregation on the grounds of religion in Britain's taxpayer-funded schooling. The government and faith school providers need to recognise that the case for change is clear, positive and backed by the public."

The appeal for an end to discrimination was angrily rebutted by the Rev Jan Ainsworth, who heads up schools work for the Church of England.

But campaigners for reform, who come from a wide cross-section of society say that the C of E must now engage public concerns and independent research rather than try to dismiss them.

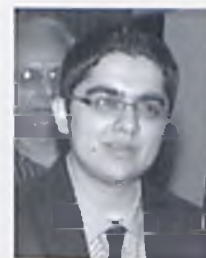
Andrew Copson, Director of Education and Public Affairs at the British Humanist Association, said: "In 2006 the government dropped the proposal to require faith schools to open up their admissions to those of other beliefs and opted instead for a duty on all schools to promote community cohesion.

"The fact that 57 per cent of those polled this week agreed that religious admissions undermine community cohesion suggests that the government made the wrong decision in 2006 – we can only hope that MPs considering the Equality Bill do not make the same mistake."

# Muslim fury over a woman they said was a man

AN ANGRY mob of Muslim parents converged on a school in Blackburn, Lancashire, last month to demand the sacking of a secretary they believed was a man in a hijab.

The target of their outrage was Shifa Patel, whose woes began when photographs of her with short hair and wearing a shirt and trousers were spotted on the social networking site Facebook.



The pictures were then circulated among pupils at Al-Islah Muslim Girls' School by email before it reached parents.

When Fatima Patel, the acting head teacher, heard the gossip, she sent a letter reassuring

parents of Miss Patel's gender.

The secretary even underwent a medical examination to prove she was female and quell the rumours.

But when an angry mob of parents gathered at the school gates, attempting to force their way in and demanding she be sacked, the secretary decided to hand in her resignation and the head also decided to quit in protest.

Miss Patel, who is 28, said: "I will never forgive those who did this to me and spread these lies. I have irrefutable medical evidence that I'm a woman. The people who have done this to me have hurt me so badly."

In some of the pictures Miss Patel is pictured alongside the acting headteacher.

Fatima Patel said: "When some parents approached me I said to them I will take the Koran in my hand and swear to tell the truth. But they were more concerned with getting a GP's certificate for Shifa. What does that say about some people?"

"This incident has affected me and Shifa and it will take a lot to get her confidence back. We must add that some parents have come and supported us."

The private school has nearly 200 students and occupies the first floor of a red-brick mosque in Blackburn.

It was established in 1995 by parents who were concerned about the state school environment and the effect it might have on their children.

Sergeant John Rigby, of Lancashire Constabulary's minority team, said: "Police were called to the school after reports that people were trying to damage school doors. When we arrived a group of 10 to 15 people were outside the school. This is an entirely internal school matter and police were simply there to calm the situation down."



# The Muslim world needs tou

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA'S RECENT ADDRESS TO THE WORLD OF ISLAM PLEASSED MANY

**D**ennis Prager, 63, is nowhere as well known to the British as Muriel Gray. Prager – a New Yorker – is an American syndicated radio talk show host, columnist, author, ethicist, and public speaker. He is noted for his conservative political views, frequently based in religious faith (he, himself, is Jewish) and he has little time for secularism.

Broadcaster and journalist Muriel Gray, on the other hand, is a freethinking expunk rocker, best-selling horror writer – and winner of the Columnist of the Year prize in the 2001 Scottish press awards.

It is doubtful that these two have anything at all in common, but both agreed – in separate articles we chose from the avalanche of commentaries that followed President Obama's address to the Muslim world in June – that his talk should have contained a great deal more toughness, and far less praise.

First, Gray:

"Islam and the West. This was always going to be the tricky one, she wrote in the *Sunday Herald* last month, adding:

"President Obama's action on domestic policies has so far been in line with his pre-election promises, and it's all rather exciting. We forgave him his vagueness about how to deal with Bush's legacy on 'the war on terror' because he needed time to do the big thinking it requires. Well, time's up, and out it came, outlined in his Cairo speech.

"The big idea, unprecedented in any other US administration, is that Obama will end the previously unconditional support for Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands, that America will no longer look the other way when civilians are being slaughtered and human rights abused, and that the Palestinians must have their own state. It was cautiously worded but deeply significant, and about time too, marking an astonishing turnaround for United States policy and a tough, genuine commitment to brokering peace.

"But the rest of the speech? What new creative solutions were on offer to reconcile the directly opposing ideologies that are obedience to Islam and progressive Western democracy? No big thinking of any kind. Actu-

ally, worse than that. A speech so patronising it read as though beamed by some unworldly school chaplain back from Scripture Union camp in the Holy Land.

"Talking from Cairo, the President celebrated that Al-Azhar and Cairo Universities have been 'a source of Egypt's advancement', representing the 'harmony between tradition and progress'.

"I want my money back from the travel



**Two commentators from opposite ends of the political and religious spectrum – American Dennis Prager and Scottish journalist Muriel Gray agreed that Obama's speech to Muslims was 'depressing' and 'sad'**

agent. Because the last time I visited the place that claimed to be Egypt, it was a third-world shambles 'advancing' into mediaevalism, its women hideously oppressed and its people poverty-stricken and under-educated under a corrupt police state. Clearly I was in the wrong country. No matter. Perhaps Obama's disingenuous ego-messaging of his hosts was just part of etiquette. But it didn't stop.

"Obama informed us that, throughout history, 'Islam has demonstrated through words and deeds the possibilities of religious tolerance and racial equality'. Hasn't it just? Darfur was all a silly misunderstanding, and Sunni and Shia Muslims tolerate each other magnificently. Islam also, the President assured us, overlaps and shares common principles with America, namely the 'principles of justice and progress, tolerance and the dignity of all human beings'. Many of these can currently be seen on view in Afghanistan, northern Nigeria, Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Pakistan, to name but a very few.

"There is also 'astonishing progress' in some Islamic states where 'there need not be a contradiction between development and tradi-

tion'. Here the President cites as one shining example the city of Dubai. Would that be the same Dubai as that Babylonian, environmental nightmare, built for the pleasure of those blind to both social justice and aesthetics, on the back of slave labour that makes the pyramid-building pharaohs look like equal opportunity employers?

"Barack Obama is a highly intelligent man. Why such placatory nonsense? Does he think this empty flattery of an Islamic world in turmoil will wash?"

Gray went on to describe as "depressing" Obama's solution to solving fractured communities throughout the world, "pulled apart, as usual, by religion". His solution "is not about humans, our conduct and progress, but about "inter-faith dialogues" and, of course, God.

"America still regards humanity as one big worshipping congregation, who just have to sort out which supernatural being we pray to, and how to best 'respect' each other's various superstitions. This is hardly progress ...

"Surely the boldest way forward is to tell the uncomfortable truth instead of obsequious fawning. In the wake of Bush's vandalism, the West needs to declare its crimes and misdemeanours and make amends, but so too does the Islamic world. Islam must endure the same bumpy reformation that ironed out Christianity's primitive elements, and it will require honesty to support it to do so.

"Many hoped the end of Bush would mean the end of God-dictated foreign policy, and if Obama's religiosity is getting in the way of his finer ideals it would be one of the greatest tragedies of the century, given that he is a good and clever man."

Gray pointed out that Obama finished "this depressingly sycophantic speech" with quotes from the Bible, the Koran and the Torah.

She concluded: "How about one from Nietzsche, Mr President? "Faith means not wanting to know what is true."

**P**rager was less hard-hitting, conceding that the President "made some courageous points, and an honest appraisal of his speech needs to note them. For example, telling an audience in Cairo and presumably hundreds of millions



# ough truths, not sycophancy

ED MANY MUSLIM LEADERS, BUT WESTERN COMMENTATORS WERE LESS THAN IMPRESSED

of Muslims elsewhere that America's "bond is unbreakable" with Israel was courageous and important.

"So the speech was not bad. But it was sad.

"It was extremely sad that it was necessary for anyone, let alone an American President, to tell Muslims that the Holocaust occurred, that 'six million Jews were killed', and that 'denying that fact is baseless, it is ignorant, and it is hateful'.

"There is no other audience on earth to whom that would have to be said.

"It was likewise sad that an American president felt he had to go to Cairo and tell Muslims that Islam has a history of tolerance: 'Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition. I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshipped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country'.

"It was as if the President had to persuade his audience that Islam has been or is, in essence, tolerant. Even President Obama's examples were not convincing.

"Muslim-governed Andalusia in southern Spain, of which Cordoba was the capital city, ceased being tolerant (relative to Christian Europe at the time) by about 1,000. In 1011, there was a Muslim pogrom against the Jews of Cordoba. And even earlier, between AD 850



*A Muslim in America watches President Obama on TV*

and 859, 50 Christians were beheaded in Cordoba for blasphemy against Islam. As for the Indonesia in which the young Barack Obama saw Christians worshipping freely, that country was almost as secular under Suharto as Turkey was under Ataturk. So, the question remains: are there examples in the last 1,000 years of a religious Islamic regime governing a society that was tolerant of non-Muslims or dissenting Muslims? The President provided none.

"Right after the Indonesia citation, the President added: 'That is the spirit we need

today', obviously implying that this spirit of religious tolerance is not present in the Muslim world today. That was quite a statement to make to hundreds of millions of Muslims.

"Yet, despite many objectionable aspects of the President's speech, it was very important for someone of President Obama's stature to tell the Muslim world that there was a Holocaust, that anti-Semitism is evil, that Israel and America have an unbreakable bond, and that religious intolerance in the Muslim world is unacceptable ..."

## IHEU calls for the scrapping of all blasphemy laws

CATHY Buchs, representing the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), last month defended freedom of expression in an address before the 11th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

She urged the General Assembly and the Council to refrain from supporting any defamation of religion statements as these encourage member nations to use blasphemy laws to criminalise freedom of expression even where no incitement of religious hatred is involved.

She said that "any expression of belief can be seen as blasphemy – or defamation of religion" – by followers of opposing faith.

"It is not defamation of religion that undermines the fabric of society but expressions of hatred or violence towards the other – expressions that are already covered under articles 19.3 and 20 of the International Council on Cultural Policy Research (ICCPDR).

"We therefore regret the decision by the Dutch cabinet to maintain the blasphemy law against the wishes of the majority of Dutch MPs; that the Irish parliament is proposing legislation to criminalise blasphemy; and that the latest revision of the Italian Penal Code still contains provisions criminalising blasphemy.

"The evidence is clear from states such as Pakistan where, contrary to international law, blasphemy is still a criminal offence and indeed carries the death penalty, that such laws have a profoundly chilling effect on freedom of expression and are widely abused to attack the innocent for reasons of personal or commercial interest.

She went on to urge all states to abolish laws which criminalise blasphemy and instead address directly the issue of incitement to hatred and violence.

"In line with the recommendation of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, we urge the Council to reject any future resolutions combating defamation of religion, and to focus instead on the Council's mandatory responsibility to protect the human rights of individuals, not the supposed rights of abstract concepts, ideas or beliefs."



## ANALYSIS

# Fully Human

**John Radford** challenges the notion that those who have no interest in the 'transcendent' are not 'fully human'

**T**he Archbishop of Westminster is the senior Roman Catholic cleric in Britain, and what he says is usually news. The former incumbent, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, caused a stir yet again when he said in a BBC interview that "There is something not totally human about people who leave out the transcendent". 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" (the *Freethinker*, June 2009).

This caused annoyance, to say the least, among many who feel they manage to be reasonably human without the Cardinal's ideology. Accusations of lack of humanity sound unconvincing from the man who, in a notorious case, ignored the advice of doctors and therapists that Father Michael Hill was likely to carry on assaulting children, with predictable consequences. They did so most recently after the Ryan Report detailed the horrendous abuse by Roman Catholic communities in Ireland from the 1930s to the 1990s.

But it is worth looking more closely at his remarks. First, what is "transcendent"? The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* gives five meanings, of which two seem relevant. One is "excelling or surpassing", as in "transcendent merit, genius" etc. This is a non-religious definition. The other is "(esp of God) existing apart from, not subject to limitations of, the material universe". This is clearly closer to what the Cardinal means. But the word now seems to be used by writers on religion to mean any kind of being or existence beyond or outside the natural or human world. Note that he says "which I call God". It seems he recognises that other people may call it something different. This is quite surprising from a Roman Catholic cardinal; indeed, it would seem to be not far from heresy, as that Church has always insisted on one and only one God, precisely

defined and named. However, faced with a religiously pluralistic world, many faiths are allowing, to a greater or less extent, that others may share in the truth – perhaps on the principle, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

It is certainly the case that the vast majority of humans have some notion of there being something more than everyday existence. But conceptions of what this is vary greatly. In many religions, ancestors, and/or supernatural beings, are experienced not so much as another sort of reality, but as part of the world which we and they all share. In others, there is another reality, but it is impersonal, a non-describable "something" that is



*Cormac Murphy-O'Connor*

the universal ground for all that exists. Then there are those who find their transcendental meaning in more or less bizarre forms such as astrology, Scientology or the Order of the Solar Temple. Are they more fully human than the more rational? I suppose the Cardinal might answer, "Yes, but they are sadly mistaken". And then, of course, many people simply have no sense of there being anything more than can, in principle, be apprehended by the senses. Such evidence as there is suggests that these are roughly balanced by those who have a very strong belief in a religious form of transcendence. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the ten-

dency to such belief, like most human traits, follows a "bell-shaped" normal distribution. And that its origins are much the same as other traits, a combination of inherited and acquired influences. If humanity was created to pursue a transcendent meaning, it was not done very efficiently. And it seems rather unfair of God to endow some of us with the ability to pursue our divine destiny, while denying it to others.

The Cardinal might say, I suppose, that we all really have the capacity, but some of us are too obdurate, or sinful, to realise it. But this sort of argument, that everything is black, because black is black and white is "really" black, will prove anything.

Then there is the question of what is "fully human". The Cardinal's view is, like so many religious arguments, circular, since he defines humanity as created to seek transcendence, and thus those who do not are not fully human. But given that there is a natural human tendency to seek something that might be called transcendence, which individuals have to a greater or less extent, it is only one of many tendencies.

It can hardly be necessary to pursue them all to be fully human. It would be impossible in practice, as time alone prevents anyone being even moderately good at more than a handful of the thousands of possibilities. And some tendencies are logically contradictory. You cannot be both supremely generous and avaricious, or compassionate and cruel. Or consider some specific examples. It is undeniable that we have a basic tendency to reproduce. Without it the human race would cease to exist. And religions, including the Cardinal's, often stress the importance of it. Roman Catholic teaching specifically forbids contraception and abortion. But priests, monks and nuns of that faith forswear sex and thus having children. Are they therefore not fully human? Indeed, despite the lucrative fictions, there is no evidence that Jesus himself had a wife or children, yet he is often described as a perfect human being. Music seems to be a natural





*The wording accompanying this picture on a religious website declares: "Man was created to enjoy a relationship with God the Holy Spirit ... to be filled with Him, living under His gentle embrace. Human existence was to find its meaning in man living in a functioning union with God, his body the dwelling place of God. The fall of man was essentially a separation from that purpose ... from that adventure ... from that 'great dance' as C. Baxter Kruger would say"*

disposition. We know of no society without it. But it varies widely between individuals. There are some who apparently lack completely any sensitivity to it; it is to them, as a friend told me, "just noise". For many others it is a pleasant addition to life, and for some a lifelong obsession and the source of the highest inspiration. One would hesitate to say that those in the first group are not fully human.

Then there is the faculty of reason. It seems to me that developing this, as far as we are able, is an essential part of what makes us human. No doubt the Cardinal would claim that his religious beliefs are based on, or are at least compatible with, reason. Theologians have spent centuries trying to prove that. But to my mind, they have so far failed. And to me it does not seem rational to think that when a priest says the magic words, "hocus pocus" or whatever, a bit of pastry turns into the flesh, and wine into the blood, of a man who died two thousand years ago, despite there being no indication that any change whatever takes place.

The Cardinal would no doubt argue that seeking transcendence is uniquely important for being human, since that is what we have been created for. But there is no evi-

dence to support this idea. It is simply what he believes.

We are back to fundamental arguments about the basis for religious beliefs.

**Roman Catholic teaching  
specifically forbids  
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and thus having children.  
Are they therefore not fully  
human?**

They appear to me to be entirely self-supporting, so to say. There are no grounds for belief, other than the belief itself.

It is argued, of course, that many people hold the same or similar beliefs. But many do not. And there was a time when probably all people believed the sun went round the earth, but their belief did not make it true.

What it did show is that there is a natural human tendency to take ourselves as the point of reference. Which is what the Cardinal is doing: his view must be right for all. Religious persons are not alone in pronouncing on human behaviour on the sole basis of their own opinion, but they do seem rather to make a speciality of it.

To believe something without a sound basis seems to me less, not more, human. It seems to me that if "transcendence" has meaning with regard to becoming more fully human, it is in the first dictionary sense of excelling or surpassing. But not in any direction. It appears to me that the human race, and human individuals, in favourable circumstances, develop not only knowledge and skills, but greater awareness, rationality, aesthetic sensibility, feeling for the welfare of others, in a word greater wisdom. These are all perfectly natural, not supernatural. No-one can excel in all of these qualities, nor reach a maximum in any of them, so in one sense no-one can be "fully" human. But we can be more so, without reference to any imaginary transcendent being.

• **John Radford is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of East London**



# Blinkered presumption

Bi-polar thinking and the immutability of reality by **JAMES MERRYWEATHER**

Sister Wendy Beckett, the art nun, blithely informed Libby Purves (*Midweek*, BBC Radio 4, 6/05/09), "I think all music is sacred. It's all a different way of praising God". How dare she credit her blasted God with what I do, invariably without any assistance from Him? During the afternoon of the same day, *Choral Evensong* (BBC Radio 3) was dedicated to thanking God for the life and music of Felix Mendelssohn, and his influence on English music. It was Mendelssohn's influence the English absorbed, not God's. No wonder I get fed up with religion.

When I take part in musical concerts where a church is the concert hall, vicars habitually assume responsibility for thanking God for it all. They don't ask whether it's appropriate or wanted or when they may do so. They just do it. Well, I suppose it's their building, but it's the performers and audience who create the concert, and I happen to be of the opinion that God has nothing to do with it, just people. It's incredibly tasteless to barge out in front of an applauding audience, who might be on the brink of cheering for an encore, raise a hand to silence them and pour holy cold water on proceedings by inviting us to prayer:

"Let us give thanks to God for the gift of music."

No! Inspired composers and inventive



arrangers created the pages of dots, skilled craftsmen made the instruments, physics made the medium and we the performers practised and rehearsed for a lifetime in order to bring it all together and make an uplifting and entertaining performance. And he has the nerve to thank somebody else – whose existence is doubtful and absence probable – for the whole shebang, expecting us, who don't believe in his wretched God, to bow our heads and indulge in the barmy practice of prayer!

No, Reverend. We, the musicians, made that concert and, since during its preparation and performance we did not involve your God, He can't claim any part of it,

at all. This presumption is related to what Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006) calls the Argument from Personal Incredulity.

"Imagine that you are watching a really great magic trick. The celebrated conjuring duo Penn and Teller have a routine in which they simultaneously appear to shoot each other with pistols, and each appears to catch the bullet in his teeth. Elaborate precautions are taken to scratch identifying marks on the bullets before they are put in the guns, the whole procedure is witnessed at close range by volunteers from the audience who have experience of firearms, and apparently all possibilities for trickery are eliminated. Teller's marked bullet ends up in Penn's mouth and Penn's marked bullet ends up in Teller's. I [Richard Dawkins] am utterly unable to think of any way in which this could be a trick. The Argument from Personal Incredulity screams from the depths of my prescientific brain centres, and almost compels me to say, 'It must be a miracle. There is no scientific explanation. It's got to be supernatural.'"

We all know that illusionists can do things we can't even figure out, let alone do ourselves, but we don't then presume that God has a hand in it. Well, what about evolution? If you spend your life in the city, cut off from nature, don't study biology and, in consequence, don't understand how the natural world ticks (no fault of yours, you've been busy being an engineer, ice dance champion, theologian etc), nature will seem marvellous and inexplicable. You could take the next apparently rational

## Artist slams 'green' Church of Scotland

SCOTLAND'S most celebrated living artist, Peter Howson, turned to the Church of Scotland (CoS) nine years ago after overcoming drug and alcohol abuse.

Howson now believes that it is the CoS that has lost its way because he thinks the Kirk is too interested in saving the planet rather than in saving souls.

In an interview with CoS magazine *Life and Work*, Howson said: "I think the Church of Scotland is being a bit namby-pamby. I think it needs some sort of revival to get back to its traditional roots. The whole thing with green issues, with saving the planet – that's not the church's job. The church's job is saving souls. To go with the green stuff is a disaster. It's revolting to me."





step and decide that, therefore, it must be miraculous. To the biologist evolution is marvellous, even inexplicable until we investigate, find out more and understand it, but it's not miraculous.

The same applies to music. If you don't play an instrument or sing and have never tried to write a tune or arrange a piece in four-part harmony, you won't be able to appreciate the raw mechanics of music, evident to a musician even in the apparently divinely-inspired works of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or Mendelssohn. Actually, with experience you recognise that a lot of their compositions are potboilers, hurriedly concocted from a hotchpotch of old ideas to satisfy a non-critical paying customer. Great music might well seem to you to be marvellous and inexplicable. So you could take the next apparently rational step and decide that, therefore, it must be miraculous.

Instead of finding out more about conjuring, biology, music or any other topic you haven't studied, or accepting that this is something that can be explained by somebody but you haven't got time or energy to become that specialist, you concoct a wondrous designer and assign to Him all credit for what real skilled or learned people have done. That's a pretty gross insult to your creative fellow humans.

Here's John Sentamu, Archbishop of York, with his own inane presumption (*Songs of Praise*, BBC 1):

"What I think about the English: having lost one empire, they haven't yet rediscovered a big enough vision to sustain this great nation. And I think the bigger vision has to be those wonderful virtues of decency, of truth, of honesty, of fair play and, clearly, believing in God, because if they don't believe in God, I think, they're going to find the place is still empty."

Apparently all the English, whether they realise it or not, actually believe in Sentamu's Christian God and those who don't (note the paradox) will regret their lack of faith when the last trumpet shall sound. Sanctimonious, know-all church leaders seem to be able to present their opinion as consensus, without first reflecting that there are plenty of people who don't agree with them and might be right.

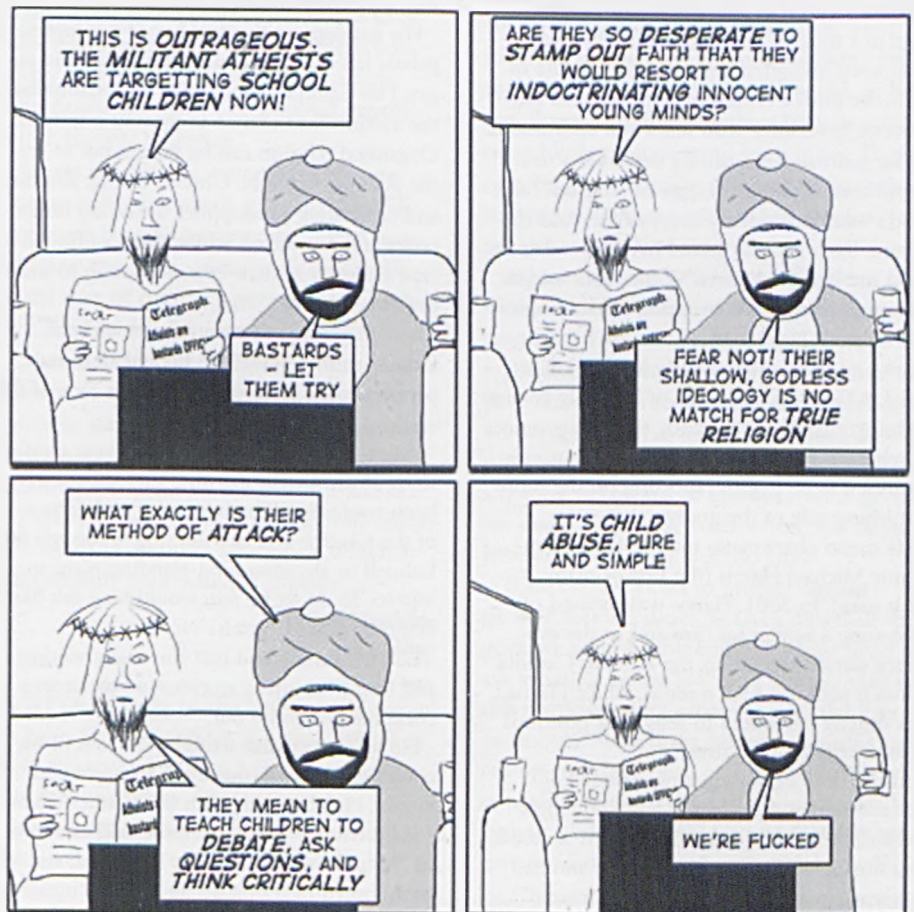
To me it's illogical that, even whilst living among, say, Hindus and expressing their "respect" for the Hindu religion and the Hindu gods, Christians can continue to presume that their god is the one true god. If their God is the unique god, Hindu gods must belong to a lower order of gods or be non-gods, so how can Christians afford them the equal status implicit in their hand-wringing assertions of respect? Of course, as far as Hindus are concerned, it's *vice versa*. Somebody's gotta be right and

somebody (most likely all of them)'s gotta be wrong.

Religious people – Christians in particular – seem to be able to think in two different ways at the same time. That's something that evolutionary psychologists are now showing to be a neurological fact. Some people, those who are susceptible to religious faith, can indeed hold belief in supernatural delusions at the same time as reality offers them in-your-face undeniable contradictions.

So it is not difficult for the faithful to acknowledge the existence of atheists, berating us for our foolishness. They quote Psalm 14:1 at us *ad nauseam*: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God", whilst conveniently forgetting they have been told by no less a figure than Jesus himself that if you call somebody a fool you'll go to Hell (Matt. 5:22.) (Of course, two disparate passages in a holy book are not necessarily related, and I'm not offering this as proper logic, just imitating Christian reasoning.) They also accuse us of innate immorality: How can atheists have a moral code without divine guidance? They only have to assess our behaviour to discover that we are at least as moral, or otherwise, as they are. Meanwhile, they "know" that we are actually all believers "in our heart of hearts".

The patronising implication of all this is that those of us who don't believe don't really mean it and can easily be corrected, and we'll all come to Jesus in the end.



## Jesus & Mo



# A tale of revelation and rebirth

PETER BRIETBART reviews *Losing my Religion: How I Lost My Faith Reporting on Religion in America – and Found Unexpected Peace*, by William Lobdell

Placing across the bright, flood-lit stage, a faith-healer screeches *Alleluiahs* into the microphone, his voice echoing around the packed auditorium. As the offering buckets fill, an elderly man in a wheelchair empties what little money he has, catching the eye of the rock-star priest on stage. The healer bellows: “Brother before this night is over, you’re going to walk out of here!”

As the buckets overflow with desperate donations, the healer proclaims that the gathered faithful are healed of their ailments; cancers cured, diseases remedied, disabilities overcome. And yet, as the fanfares fade and the crowd clears, William Lobdell, religious correspondent for the prestigious *Los Angeles Times*, can’t help thinking about the old man in the wheelchair: poorer, still disabled, and with anguish in his eyes.

This sad encounter – one of many in his role of religious reporter – instilled deep doubts in Lobdell. The once “full-faith Christian” was left with no choice but to acknowledge the corruption, ugliness and dishonesty that marked out the Lord’s workers here on Earth.

Lobdell’s faith begins where faith grows best: in a time of dire need, and when any help, even imagined help, will do. His life in ruins, he finds a crutch in scripture, and embraces Christianity with relief and enthusiasm.

The journalist beautifully describes a new world seen through the eyes of religious faith. God’s work is suddenly everywhere. And the Divine has a plan for him. He believes that he must use his “God-given” journalistic talents to report on religion, bringing stories of glory and hope to his readers. He works hard for years, and then, miraculously, lands a job at the *LA Times* – a clear sign of heavenly favour.

Unfortunately for his faith, the glossy veneer of religious organisations appear increasingly tarnished as he begins reporting on the more disturbing side of the godly.

He meets charismatic man of God, Monsignor Michael Harris (the first of many such men). In 2001, Harris was accused of molesting a boy in his care and, as the evidence started to pile up, the Roman Catholic Church paid out \$5.2 million, whilst Harris was quietly permitted to resign his positions of authority due to “stress”.

At the time of the meeting, Lobdell did not realise that the Church had knowingly hid and protected Harris. He’d been accused of a similar offence 30 years earlier and had received “treatment”. Those who “treated” him concluded that Harris was attracted to



William Lobdell

adolescent boys and, in all likelihood, had probably molested children on several occasions. The Church knew all this and yet they did nothing.

But the scandal did not stop there; it was only the beginning. Lobdell takes us through his time reporting on the Church’s escalating paedophilia scandal, with one revolting revelation following another.

His statistics on the number of paedophile priests left me feeling uncomfortable and angry. The Church would bully and manipulate the victims into silence to prevent a scandal. Organised religion can be vulgar, but to see the Roman Catholic Church aiding, abetting, and facilitating paedophiles in staying undercover and unnoticed whilst they continued to rape children in their care, is enough to make one detest them.

If such an organisation existed without a claim to the divine, the fury of all moral people would erase them from the face of the earth.

Priests – the ones appointed to hear confessions of sin – were the ones that should have been confessing. The hypocrisy and silence of the Church was bewildering – enough for Lobdell to abandon long-standing plans to join it. To do so, he felt, would have felt like a betrayal of the Church’s victims.

Lobdell simply had met too many victims and heard too many stories. And the stories continued to come out.

He tells of a priest standing in front of his congregation with the air of an oppressed victim. He’s been hit with the Church’s new zero-tolerance policy on molesting children, or “boundary violations” as he puts it, and has been forced to resign because of an “incident” many years earlier.

The gathered women and men of God give him a standing ovation as a sign of solidarity, and sympathy with his plight. Lobdell, a proud father of four sons, is horrified by the reaction of the faithful as they applaud, cheer and cry for the frocked offender.

Stephen Weinberg once wrote in the *New York Times*: *With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion.*

In what circumstances other than in a religious setting, where critical thinking is gradually – and often instantly – destroyed by faith, is it possible to conceive of a group of good, ordinary people applauding a child molester?

Lobdell had no answer, and left his job with his faith in tatters. What he now knows to be true destroyed what he so deeply wished to be true: that God was looking out for him, that his life was in His hands, that he had a divine purpose. The corrupt godly, the swindling faith-healers, the rapist priests, the contradictory scripture, and the cold and silent voice of God led him to one conclusion. God was not silent, but imaginary.

This is a story of revelation and rebirth, but not as the Christians would like it. Lobdell damns himself to hell as he realises that there isn’t a hell to be afraid of. His belief in an afterlife evaporates as his temporary, mortal, real life takes on new clarity.

He needed a crutch whilst he was crippled, and Christianity sufficed, but he mistook the crutch for the cure. We all need purpose, but wishing something does not make it so. William’s intelligence allowed him a lucky escape – and he was cured of a delusion no faith-healer could ever fix.

Today, Lobdell is a “reluctant” atheist, running an excellent blog on which he elaborates: “I know one thing, I don’t believe in a God who intervenes in our lives. That seems to me to be the real dividing line: do you believe in a personal God or not? Deism and atheism are on the other side of belief in a personal God. That’s where I am. Though it varies by the day, I estimate that I’m 70 percent sure I’m a reluctant atheist and 30 percent positive that I’m deist (deist meaning that a creator kicked off this whole world but has a hands-off approach).

“The larger point being: I’m 99.99 percent sure that there’s not a god who intervenes in the lives of humankind.”

• Readers can get his excellent book from [Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). No sceptic’s bookshelf should be without a copy.



# points of view...

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

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## THE INCEST DEBATE CONTINUES

I'M delighted my letter on incest (May *Points of View*) has provoked some discussion in the June issue.

I fully take Diesel Balaam's point about only fighting battles we have some hope of winning, and I am well aware that we are some way from that position with regard to abolishing incest. But nevertheless I think it is time that incest was brought out of its taboo-closet and discussed openly and rationally and without its religious accretions.

Diesel's parallel with the attempt by gay activists in the 70s to embrace paedophilia is a bit off the mark. Sex with minors is universally detested, and for very good reasons. I do not believe that permitting adults within the proscribed orders of incest to have sexual relationships is in the same category of unacceptability.

Greg Marshall's letter exemplifies the taboo surrounding the subject. He claims to embrace a morality "not dependent on religion", but then fails to explain why he considers decriminalising incest to imply a "moral ambiguity" (whatever he may mean by that). Rather than being strange bedfellows, as Greg suggests, I would have thought that freedom of speech and freedom of marriage or partnership were quite similar freedoms. Be that as it may, Greg thinks that incest should remain illegal, at least to "protect against genetic abnormalities". Whilst I agree it is desirable that such couples should not take any risk of having genetically abnormal children, I do not think it is reasonable to achieve this by making it illegal for them to have a sexual relationship. It might be arguable (though certainly not by me) that deliberately conceiving children in such circumstances should be illegal, but that is a separate issue. It is in any case quite possible that future advances in applied genetics will in most cases enable such couples to conceive perfectly normal children should they wish to do so. I suspect that this may already be the

case – it would be useful if we could have an authoritative opinion on this.

Where Greg really has a point is on the issue of data. I freely admit to having no proper data on the incidence and variety of incestuous relationships. I wish I had. But taboo subjects are difficult to research. I have, up to now, relied only on hearsay, discussions with a psychotherapist friend, a few personal revelations and the list of articles thrown up by a Google search. A bibliography of academic studies would be another very useful thing to have. I fail to understand Greg's final paragraphs. I think I made my attitudes to sex with minors on the one hand and consenting adult incest on the other, quite clear. His conflation of those issues with adult sexual molestation, slavery and bestiality is worthy of a religious fundamentalist. The implied imputation is, frankly, offensive.

Incest is, I believe, comparatively rare. This probably has much more to do with familiarity breeding contempt – or at least satisfying curiosity – than with any desire on the part of ordinary persons to comply with legal or religious proscription.

Does incest, *per se*, really merit the attentions of the criminal law? I suggest not. It merely serves to enable the religions to hang on to another part of their steadily declining influence in the western world ...

Finally, I look forward to the publication of William Harwood's new book, which I will certainly read when it appears.

**S J (Jim) Hawkins**  
Isle of Man

I WRITE to reply to the letters on incest in the June *Freethinker*. This is a topic which is likely to run and run, so I intend to write only this one letter.

It is all very well to agree that nothing is beyond the scope of reasoned debate, but the language used to dismiss the proposition is sometimes singularly unhelpful.

The "yeeuch" factor Diesel Balaam alludes to is in itself not a reason for avoiding a campaign on incest, unpalatable as many people may find it; there are other issues, usually sexual, which can arouse such a response, and this response is not relevant to whether it should be taken up as a campaign. I would be content to see a campaign for the decriminalisation and legalisation of consensual incest, which would need to be well-prepared and evidence-based, and which would take a long time to bring to fruition, so we'd be in it for the long haul.

It has also been known for child-abuse survivors to describe themselves as incest survivors, thus muddling two quite separate issues.

Where is Diesel Balaam's evidence for the claim that prosecutions for consensual incest are rare? Anyone claiming that they were involved in consensual incest wouldn't help their partner, and would run the risk of being charged themselves; their lawyers would most likely urge them to keep quiet. There may be many couples involved in consensual incest who are undetected, but how can we know how common it is?

Inbreeding can be a serious problem, for instance where cousin-cousin marriages are common. The prevalence of genetic abnormalities is also worrying. However, all of us have deleterious recessive genes which do no particular harm to ourselves, and they do not always do harm to our families: we usually have no means of knowing what genes we share with those with whom we might have children, until it is too late.

If incest law exists to protect against genetic abnormalities, as Greg Marshall suggests, or against inbreeding (and we need to ask whether incest law does indeed exist for this purpose), then where should the line be drawn? Should sex between cousins and cousin marriages also be forbidden? Should everyone be compelled to undergo tests for genetic abnormalities? Should foetuses with genetic abnormalities be always aborted?

**Colin Mills**  
Amersham



# points of view...

## RELIGION: IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

RELIGIOUS, mystical or spiritual experiences are clearly neurological in origin; but to answer the question posed by Prof John Radford (*Points of View*, May): "What is it of?" is tricky because, as he says, they are reported to be inexpressible.

Which is why religious language rejoicing in these experiences is lost in irrationalities. There are no metaphors for emotion either – love is not like a red rose – and so rather than quarry into a quagmire of qualia, a review of the brain might offer a quicker solution. Alleged religious experiences perhaps can be classified into one of two broad categories: There are those that could be called psychotic – of hallucinations from epileptic seizures, schizophrenia, psychotropic substance abuse, self-hypnotizing ritual, trance-dancing and other mind-bending practices and disorders; and more benign experiences of the mind caused by the natural feel-good brain chemicals serotonin, oxytocin, dopamine, cortisol and adrenaline that can subtly effect states of consciousness or awareness with feelings of serenity and the "oceanic" or "peak" experiences described by Abraham Maslow (1970) and by Jesus & Mo's bartender as "inexpressible joy which goes beyond the everyday, when the sense of self seems to dissolve in an ecstasy of awe" (*Freethinker*, May). Deep meditation can stimulate such chemical highs, so can music, marathon running or singing in a mass choir – the last named being the favourite of religionists because belief is reinforced by the comfort of in-group identification.

Hallucination derived beliefs – like those of the OT prophets, or of Mohammed, or of inmates in mental institutions – carry the most conviction. What they are of in their displacement of conscious reality appear from reports to be memory composites skewed by neural malfunction in the area of the brain where they originate – usually the right temporal lobe – with a confabulated cultural spin put on their description. They can be triggered artificially: electrical stimulation of the right temporal lobe can induce intense spiritual experiences and visions of God (V S Ramachandran, 1999: 175), and auditory hallucinations ascribed to God (J Jaynes, 1976: 109).

Religionists spellbound in a numinous afterglow who believe their transcenden-

tal experiences teleport them to God are of course deluding themselves: the trip was taken by zillions of neurons in their brain zapping between synaptic connections along tangled networks of axons at near the speed of light to form – metaphorically speaking – magical holograms in the mind's eye.

Although I haven't answered his question, I'd like to thank Prof Radford – and William Harwood and other exciting contributors – for continually moving atheistic debate forward; and for Barry Duke's stewardship of the *Freethinker*. What else can one say about the new-look magazine but – *it's a cracker!*

**Graham Newbery**  
Southampton

### CHALLENGING DAN BYE

AS A lifelong atheist I take exception to Dan Bye's assertion at the beginning of his article in the June *Freethinker* that most of us are former religionists.

I come from Dagenham in Essex. I sang in the church choir; went to church in order to do so and was pleased to receive half a crown a wedding for my efforts. When I was younger I went to Sunday School once or twice and quickly came to the conclusion that it wasn't for me; the same applied to the scouts. When I asked my parents what I should answer when asked "What was my religion?" I was told "Just say C of E". At the time I don't think I even knew what it meant. I feel quite sure that the bulk of my classmates were in much the same situation. When Edwin Chadwick asked the children of costermongers in East London about their concept of God many had never even been introduced to the idea. Their lives were little better than an animal response to life – a simple matter of survival. Many births and deaths were not registered and marriage was something that concerned people other than the labouring classes. My grandfather was a didicosis and settled in the East End of London as a young man. When I was a child he used to play darts at the Seamen's Mission where the Reverend David Sheppard (well-known cricketer and later bishop) was the priest. My grandfather used to go to the Mission on Sunday for his darts matches and was obliged to listen to the Rev Shep-

pard's sermon in return for the use of the dartboard and facilities. The usual waffle about father, son and holy ghost wasn't even considered as anything other than garbled hogwash but when the Rev Sheppard suggested in his sermon that the congregation pay ten percent of their income to the Mission my grandfather asked "Do you?" I never heard what the answer was but grandfather never went to the Mission again.

As a long-term member of the Leicester Secular Society (30 or 40 years – I can't remember exactly), I would point out that the idea of humanism, though it may be old, was not the motivating force behind secularism in its heyday. Its main objective was the erosion of church privileges and obviously flowed over into politics and patriotism.

Science can't explain the ultimate questions any more than the church can and humanism faces difficulties when we try to define good and bad or holiness and evil.

Can we kill with kindness? What is rationality? I have the feeling Professor Dawkins hasn't quite overcome the idea we need something to replace religion.

Personally I don't think humanism fits the bill because without defining kindness or rationality it's whatever you like, or even an alternative church.

**Dave Ray**  
Leicester

### LESBIAN PRIESTS

THE case of Scott Rennie, the gay minister whose installation has given us so much entertainment at the Church of Scotland's expense, has had me leafing through the Bible.

As far as I can tell – somebody please correct me if I'm wrong – although the Bible states, unequivocally, "If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination" (Leviticus 20:13), it says nothing about a woman lying with womankind as a man doth with a woman.

I wonder if this inconsistency is the real reason the churches have been, and some remain, intransigent in the matter of the ordination of women?





What should really baffle those who rely on holy scripture for their moral code is an outed lesbian clergyperson (hey, it's quite probable some have already been ordained on the quiet).

Ideally she will have an overtly loving partner, preferably properly espoused, installed in the vicarage. Unless the Bible literalists are bigots – Heaven forefend! – they should be unable to devise the customary imperious judgments they impose on homosexual men and will wind up gloriously perplexed. It could and probably will happen soon. Did Synod see this coming, years ago?

**James Merryweather**  
Scotland

## OVER-POPULATION

GRAHAM Vaughan (June *Points of View*) takes issue with my assertion that there is a need for significant human population reduction.

He is probably right that the world has the potential to produce enough food to feed its growing billions. I never asserted otherwise. But feeding the multitude is not the only problem to consider.

Rather, I drew attention to the environmental and other consequences of massive human numbers and activity. Hardly a week goes by without us being reminded of: the relentless pollution of land, sea and air; the depletion of rainforests and fishstocks; the expansion of urban and industrial development on once green land; reducing biodiversity; reducing finite mineral resources; etc. etc. The whole planet is our habitat and we all contribute to its exploitation and demise.

Three billion people (say) will have less impact than (say) seven billion.

In my book *Soliloquies of Concern and Action in a Mixed-up World* I widen the argument and go into greater detail, particularly in two chapters entitled *Population-Habitat Imbalance* and *The Price of Progress and Population Reduction – The First Priority*.

The book can be freely downloaded from [www.getfreeEbooks.com](http://www.getfreeEbooks.com)

**Bob Shayler**  
Cheltenham

## HUMANIST 'CHAPLAINS'

AS far as I am aware there have been three pioneer efforts in Scotland to offer visits to fellow humanists when they are lying alone in hospital beds.

I am sorry to have to report that we still have anti-humanist enemies who won't even allow us to operate this service to our own people.

A former member of the Spiritual Care committee for my own area of Forth Valley

was appointed an honorary (humanist) chaplain. Requests for the cross to be removed from the quiet room (or "chapel" as it still tends to be called) met with unsatisfactory responses.

However, her request, to display (non-conspicuously) our A4-sized "Happy Human" poster on the wall was eventually, agreed to; the A4 poster was supplied, as were leaflets and info.

The symbol was removed within a short time, as were leaflets, including those in a glass container intended for display purposes. A replacement poster met with the same treatment; the employed (Christian) chaplains admitted that it was likely that Christian extremists were responsible, but "didn't see what they could do about it".

**Peter Sutherland**  
Dunblane

## PLEASE JOIN THE SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE CAMPAIGN

FOLLOWING James Merryweather's Stand up, stand up for reason (June *FT*) I thought *Freethinker* readers might be interested in the following.

A friend of mine reported that Emmanuel Church in Wimbledon has a notice outside stating "There Definitely is a God", presumably in the wake of the (quite mild) "There probably is no God" campaign. I went on to the church's website and found it had an enquiry email box. I sent a message asking what evidence they had for that preposterous statement. Two emails from me later I have yet to receive a reply.

Perhaps that is what all we realists should do, demand evidence whenever we can. The expression, heavy with irony when used by a non-believer, is that the Devil is in the detail. Claim virgin births, raising from the dead, walking on water, etc, if you want, but be prepared for people to ask the possible mechanism to explain these things. Abracadabra simply isn't good enough!

**Robert Smith**  
London

## PLEASE JOIN THE SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE CAMPAIGN

I AM writing to appeal to *Freethinker* readers to join in a campaign to support science writer Simon Singh, who is being sued for libel by the British Chiropractic Association.

The use of the English libel laws to silence critical discussion of medical practice and scientific evidence discourages debate, denies the public access to the full picture and encourages use of the courts to silence critics.

On June 4, Simon announced that he was applying to appeal the judge's recent pre-trial ruling in this case. A support campaign was then set up to defend the right of the public to read the views of scientists and writers.

Simon Singh, who co-authored a book on alternative medicine called *Trick or Treatment?* with Professor Edzard Ernst of Exeter University, was sued after writing a piece for the Comment pages of the *Guardian* last year.

In the article, Simon criticised the BCA for claiming that its members could use spinal manipulation to treat children with colic, ear infections, asthma, sleeping and feeding conditions, and prolonged crying. Simon described the treatments as "bogus" and based on insufficient evidence, and criticised the BCA for "happily promoting" them.

At the preliminary hearing held to decide the meaning of the article, Mr Justice Eady ruled that the wording used by Simon implied that the BCA was being consciously dishonest. Simon denies that he intended any such meaning.

Although appealing against the judge's decision, Simon concedes that the courts rarely overturn such rulings. "We think it might be worth it. The ruling is quite extreme and it's our only hope," he said.

The courts could take two months to decide whether it will hear an appeal, Simon's lawyers said. The writer already faces a bill for legal costs in excess of £100,000. If the appeal fails, said Singh, he will take the case to the European courts. "We'll fight this until all the options are exhausted," he said.

In a statement published at the launch of the campaign, over 100 people from the worlds of science, journalism, publishing, comedy, literature and law joined together to express support for Simon and call for an urgent review of the English law of libel.

Supporters include Stephen Fry, Lord Rees of Ludlow, Ricky Gervais, Martin Amis, James Randi, Professor Richard Dawkins, Penn & Teller and Professor Sir David King, former Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK Government.

You can join the campaign by visiting Sense about Science at <http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/project/333/>

**Dave Potter**  
London



# the freethinker

## EVENTS & CONTACTS

**i** information **w** website **e** email

**Birmingham Humanists:** **i** Tova Jones 021454 4692 **w** [www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk](http://www.birminghamhumanists.org.uk). Programme available.

**Brighton & Hove Humanist Society:** **i** 01273 227549/461404. **w** <http://homepage.nflworld.com/robert.stovold/humanist.html>. The Lord Nelson Inn, Trafalgar St, Brighton. Programme available.

**Bromley Humanists:** Meetings on the second Tuesday of the month, 8 pm, at Friends Meeting House, Ravensbourne Road, Bromley. **i** 01959 574691.

**w** [www.sihg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.sihg.adm.freeuk.com)

**Central London Humanist Group:** **i** Chair: Alan Palmer Sec: Josh Kutchinsky. **e** [info@centrallondonhumanists.org](mailto:info@centrallondonhumanists.org). **w** [www.meetup.com/central-london-humanists](http://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](http://www.secularderby.org) **e** [info@cumbria-humanists.org.uk](mailto: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](http://www.secularderby.org)

**Devon Humanists:** **i** Roger McCallister, Tel: 01626 864046 **e** [info@devonhumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@devonhumanists.org.uk)

**w** [www.devonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.devonhumanists.org.uk)

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

**w** [www.dorsethumanists.co.uk](http://www.dorsethumanists.co.uk)

**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, Woodstreet Village, Guildford GU3 3DD.

**w** [www.farnham-humanists.org.uk](http://www.farnham-humanists.org.uk)

**Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association (GALHA):**

1 Gower St, London WC1E 6HD. Tel: 0844 800 3067.

Email: [secretary@galha.org](mailto:secretary@galha.org). **w** [www.galha.org](http://www.galha.org)

**Greater Manchester Humanist Group:** **i** John Coss: 0161 4303463. Monthly meetings (second Wednesday) Friends Meeting House, Mount Street, Manchester. Wed, Aug 12, Public Meeting.

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

**w** [www.hampstead.humanist.org.uk](http://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. July 8th: Daytime outing to Down House in Kent. Non-members welcome. Further details from the Secretary.

**i** Secretary on 0208 907-6124

**w** [www.harrow.humanist.org.uk](http://www.harrow.humanist.org.uk)

**e** Mike Savage at [mfsavagamba@hotmail.com](mailto: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. Aug 6, Stephen Hurd: *Humanist Schools in Uganda.*

**Humani – the Humanist Association of Northern Ireland:** **i** Brian McClinton, 25 Riverside Drive, Lisburn BT27 4HE. Tel: 028 9267 7264 **e** [brianmcclinton@btinternet.com](mailto:brianmcclinton@btinternet.com). **w** [www.nirelandhumanists.net](http://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](mailto:secretary@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Information and events: [info@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:info@humanism-scotland.org.uk) or visit [www.humanism-scotland.org.uk](http://www.humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**uk** Media: [media@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:media@humanism-scotland.org.uk). Education: [education@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:education@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Local Scottish Groups:**

**Aberdeen:** 07010 704778, [aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:aberdeen@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Dundee:** 07017 404778, [dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:dundee@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Edinburgh:** 07010 704775, [edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:edinburgh@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Glasgow:** 07010 704776, [glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:glasgow@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Highland:** 07017 404779, [highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto:highland@humanism-scotland.org.uk).

**Perth:** 07017 404776, [perth@humanism-scotland.org.uk](mailto: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](mailto:jeffgarland@wm.im). **w** [www.iomfreethinkers.org](http://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](mailto: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](mailto: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.

**w** [www.lancashiresecularhumanists.co.uk](http://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](mailto:ian@ianzere.demon.co.uk)

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

**w** [www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk](http://www.leicestersecularsociety.org.uk)

**Lewisham Humanist Group:** **i** Denis Cobell: 020 8690 4645. **w** [www.sihg.adm.freeuk.com](http://www.sihg.adm.freeuk.com)

**Liverpool Humanist Group:** **i** 07814 910 286

**w** [www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/](http://www.liverpoolhumanists.co.uk/)

**e** [lhghumanist@googlemail.com](mailto:lhghumanist@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](http://www.MarchesSecularists.org)

**e** [Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org](mailto:Secretary@MarchesSecularists.org)

**Mid-Wales Humanists:** **i** Maureen Lotmark, 01570 422648 **e** [mlofmark@btinternet.com](mailto:mlofmark@btinternet.com)

**Norfolk Secular and Humanist Group:** **i** Vince Chainey,

4 Mill St, Bradenham, Norfolk IP25 7QN. Tel: 01362 820982.

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

**North East Humanists (Teesside Group):**

**i** C McEwan on 01642 817541.

**North East Humanists (Tyneside Group):**

**i** the Secretary on 01434 632936.

**North London Humanist Group:** Meets third Thursday of

month (ex. August) 8 pm at Ruth Winston House, 190 Green

Lanes, Palmers Green, N13 5UE. Plus social events. Contact

Sec: 01707 653667 **e** [enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk)

**w** [www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](http://www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk)

**e** [enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk)

**w** [www.nlondonhumanists.fsnet.co.uk](http://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. Aug 5: Annual General Meeting.

**South Hampshire Humanists:** Group Secretary, Richard

Hogg. Tel: 02392 370689 **e** [info@southhantshumanists.org.uk](mailto:info@southhantshumanists.org.uk)

**w** [www.southhantshumanists.org.uk](http://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](mailto:library@ethicalsoc.org.uk). Monthly programmes on request.

**Somerset:** Details of South Somerset Humanists' meetings in

Yeovil from Edward Gwinnell on 01935 473263 or

**e** [edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net](mailto:edward.gwinnell@talktalk.net)

**Suffolk Humanists & Secularists:** 5 Hadleigh Road,

Elmsett, Suffolk IP7 6ND. Tel: 01473 658828.

**w** [www.suffolkhands.org.uk](http://www.suffolkhands.org.uk) **e** [mail@suffolkhands.org.uk](mailto:mail@suffolkhands.org.uk)

**Sutton Humanists:** **i** Alan Grandy: 0208 337 9214 **w**

[www.suttonhumanists.org.uk](http://www.suttonhumanists.org.uk)

**Think Humanism:** An independent discussion forum for

anyone interested in humanism, secularism and freethought -

**w** [www.thinkhumanism.com](http://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](mailto:john.dowdle@watford.humanist.org.uk) **w** [www.watford.humanists.org.uk](http://www.watford.humanists.org.uk)

**Welsh Marches Humanist Group:** **i** 01568 770282

**w** [www.wmhumanists.co.uk](http://www.wmhumanists.co.uk) **e** [rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:rocheforts@tiscali.co.uk).

Meetings on the 2nd Tuesday of the month at Ludlow, October

to June.

**West Glamorgan Humanist Group:** **i** 01792 206108 or

01792 296375, or write Julie Norris, 3 Maple Grove, Uplands,

Swansea SA2 0JY.

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

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